

## Chapter 1

The conversation which took place in the hall of Queensfield Primary School that afternoon in late September was to change Julia's life in ways she could not have imagined as she stood in front of Derek O'Rourke, head teacher, idiot, bully and whatever other epithets Julia chose to apply to him depending on their latest encounter.

Today, he was haranguing her about her meeting yesterday with Hazel, the Registered Inspector in charge of the team which was currently inspecting the school. He seemed unaware of the fact that the hall was full of pupils, rapidly devouring school dinners, scuffling, chatting, seemingly unaware of the two of them. If they had glanced across, what would they have seen? Their deputy head teacher, Mrs Chambers, average height and build, short, dark brown hair, green eyes, wide with disbelief at that moment, and their head teacher, Mr O'Rourke, towering over her. These days, Julia found herself feeling more and more remote from these everyday commotions. Sometimes it worried her but, on the other hand, she thought that maybe it was a defence mechanism devised by her mind to cushion her when things got too depressing. It had kicked in again now and she found herself noticing the man's dark hair,

beginning to thin and the extremely annoyed expression on his red face, inclined to puffiness, she thought. Too much lager, perhaps?

But at the same time, she was fully aware of the words spilling from him.

"I have just had a meeting with Hazel and she is concerned that you are portraying a negative image of the school. You told her that you don't feel you can do your Special Needs co-ordinator work properly because you don't get any time out of class to observe pupils!"

"Well, that's true, isn't it? You don't give me any non-contact time, so how am I supposed to observe children with learning problems in classes other than mine if I can't see them during class time? But do you really think it is professional to have this conversation here in front of half the school?"

The words came pouring out in spite of herself, and, with them, all the pent up anger and frustration which had been building up over the weeks and months since Derek had become head teacher of the suburban primary school where Julia had taught and been deputy head for the past 8 years.

Derek glared at her. "Listen, I want a good OFSTED report for this school and I'm not going to get it if I'm

being undermined by you!"

"You want a good OFSTED? What about the rest of us? Do you think none of us want that? Do you think I don't want that? And, while we're on the subject of being undermined, don't you think I deserve more support from you?"

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and walked out of the hall, holding her head high, fighting to control her inner trembling.

A few of the children glanced at her as she passed and then continued with their own conversations, unsuspecting of the turmoil within her as she walked out of the hall.

As she passed through the foyer, Mrs Jones, the Year 6 teacher, glanced up at her and smiled but Julia didn't notice. The smile turned to a puzzled frown and then a shrug of the shoulders as Penny Jones opened the staffroom door and went in.

"Julia looks in a state about something," was the remark she made as she went in. The others, already eating sandwiches or marking books, made no comment. Deputy heads have problems the rest of us don't need to worry about, was the unspoken thought that passed through their collective minds. The older among them felt a sense of relief at this thought, the younger looked forward to when it would be

they who were wrestling with management issues, certain, as only the young can be, in the belief that they would do it with so much more success.

"I think she might have had words with Derek," Penny Jones persisted, still mulling over her brief contact with Julia. She liked Julia as a colleague and as a friend and was aware that Julia often 'had words' with Derek O'Rourke on behalf of others on the staff, herself included. Half of her wished she could stand up to Derek as Julia did but the other half reminded her that, being within three years of retirement, she had no desire to muddy the pool of reasonable contentment in which she had surrounded herself in the ever-changing, ever more demanding world of modern education.

Meanwhile, Julia continued on her way into her classroom where a small knot of children were trying to delay the inevitable foray into the cold outdoor play area.

"Come on, everyone, you should be outside by now." She chided the children automatically, her thoughts elsewhere. She made her way to the stock cupboard and took out her bag and coat, searching in the pocket for her car keys.

"You going out, Miss?" asked one of the more observant

boys.

Julia smiled at him but didn't answer as she walked out of the room, leaving the group of children to be chivvied outside by the lunchtime supervisor.

From the classroom she made her way to the front door. Derek, who had just come to the door of his office, caught sight of her.

"Going out, Mrs Chambers?"

Again no answer as she opened the front door and stepped out into the crisp autumn air. Children were scuffling through the newly fallen leaves, playing football, talking in small groups, heads together, shoulders hunched against the autumn chill. The lunchtime supervisors were strolling around, keeping a watchful eye on the children, knowing that this week they needed to be seen to do their job. Around the perimeter of the playground, one of the inspectors was pacing purposefully, searching for evidence of the school 'ethos.' Julia saw all this, mentally registered it with that peculiar detachment she had developed and kept on going towards the car park and her red Honda Accord, key in hand. Once in the car, she turned the key in the ignition and switched on the CD player. The sound of Dusty Springfield singing "Going Back"

suddenly filled the car. Julia smiled grimly to herself as she swung the car round and headed out through the gateway. The inspector in the playground paused briefly in his tracks, looked at his watch and wondered where the deputy head could possibly be going at 1.10p.m. when the afternoon bell would be going in 5 minutes.

In fact, the afternoon bell, in spite of it being OFSTED week, did not ring until 1.25pm. Ringing it was one of the deputy head's jobs and it took some time for the staff and the head teacher to realise that the deputy head really had left the premises and showed no sign of making an imminent return. When he did come to this realisation, Derek hurriedly rang the bell, despatched one of the support staff to cover Julia's class and turned to Hazel, the inspection team leader to try and explain Julia's unexpected disappearance.

Julia drove carefully through the winding roads that made up the housing estate which surrounded the school. It was a pleasant residential area, home to a mix of families, professional and blue collar. The houses, mostly privately owned looked well cared for with their neatly mown lawns

and venetian blinds sheltering their occupants from curious passing gazes. The head teacher who had been at the school when Julia first went to work there had commented on the difference between this and other, less affluent areas.

"They all have their problems, but the difference is that, whereas downtown, the parents will be slugging it out on your doorstep and won't care who knows about it, here, they keep it all behind their lace curtains, so you have no idea why little Johnny is having behaviour problems."

Julia had smiled, thinking that maybe he was exaggerating, but, in fact she had found his observations to be true on several occasions. She remembered the conversation as she passed the houses and eventually came to the access road to the motorway. She wasn't sure how or when, but she had already decided that she wasn't going home. Home meant a house empty of children, making polite conversation with a husband who had gradually become a stranger. Some people who knew them both wondered why they had ever married in the first place and marvelled that the marriage had lasted so long. Paul was an academic whose life and interests revolved around the university where he worked and often around the undergraduates in his classes. There had been brief affairs from time to time over the

years. Julia had usually been aware of them but they had passed, although with each one, her love and respect for Paul had diminished until now, they lived almost separate lives. Julia had quietly and gradually moved into one of the spare rooms when their daughter Kate had gone off to university and Paul had said nothing. Julia felt that he was almost relieved and, although she was glad there had been no protestations, no arguments or rows, it saddened her that this marriage, in which she had invested 25 years, now meant so little to them both.

"Why don't you leave, Mum?" Kate had demanded on the occasions when she had found her mother in tears. "You should get out and make a life of your own. You're just miserable here."

Privately Julia agreed but time passed and she made no attempt to leave. Deep within, she knew she lacked the courage to start again in another house, another area, having to get to know new people, make new friends. She knew this was what she needed, but the familiar, unsatisfactory as it was, kept her bound to the routines and the life that she knew. When the previous head teacher of her school had retired and Derek had taken his place, life had become even worse. Derek was a brash and arrogant



man, who had come into the school determined to make his mark and move onwards and upwards. Such men in positions of authority, do not notice or value people like Julia, who still regarded teaching as a way of life more than a job. They fail to see their investment of time, energy and interest quite unrelated to the financial remuneration. They see only a middle aged woman who has been there too long and must now have little more to offer. Julia was only too aware of this. Satisfaction in teaching comes mainly from interaction with the pupils, getting to know them, to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses, to celebrate their progress with them and, if you are especially lucky, to be remembered and appreciated by them for your influence in their lives when they have grown older and moved on. Little support comes from colleagues or management, not always because of lack of appreciation but because there isn't the time in the day to think of such things. Teaching can still be a lonely job and Julia felt she was beginning to lose her professional confidence. At times she felt as if she were drifting in a sea of constant professional change and ever increasing demands on her time and professionalism. When she got up in the morning, she no longer looked forward to the day as she had through all her

previous years of teaching.

These thoughts coursed through her mind as she drove. She was now on the motorway but, alarmingly, had no recollection of getting there. The traffic was sparse, which was unusual for the M57 but Julia was glad of it. It meant she could drive on automatic pilot. Again she had that feeling of being an observer of her own life, standing outside it and looking in. She was aware that by leaving school in the middle of the day, she had done something which was going to have consequences later, but this didn't worry her. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she felt she had made the right decision although she would have to deal with the outcome some time in the future. She didn't have any idea yet of what she was going to do or where she was going, only that she couldn't have borne to stay in school a moment longer. It was as if some unexplained force was driving her she knew not where and she could no more fight it than fly. It mattered not a jot to her what the reactions of her colleagues would be, who would take over her class, what effect her action would have on the inspection and certainly she had no thought of how her husband would react.

The Dusty Springfield CD had now given way to Enya's haunting melodies. Kate often professed horror at her mother's choice of music and Julia retaliated by asserting that there was no decent music in existence since the sixties, but in fact, her taste was eclectic, if not up to the minute, and ever changing and currently, she was enjoying what she called the 'Irish influence.' But the words of Dusty Springfield's song 'Going Back' had sparked a train of thought. Was it ever a good idea to go back to one's past haunts? Maybe it was a sign of weakness, an acceptance that, by so doing, you were running away from the present.

"But that is what I am doing, running away," she thought. "There is no 'going back' now, not yet anyway, maybe not ever."

Far from worrying her, this thought seemed to bring her some comfort. She still had no idea where she was going or what she would do when she got there, but the fact that, by walking out of school she had made a decision by default, suddenly made her feel stronger.

Money was not a problem. Julia had her own bank

account, in a healthy state, so she was not going to be destitute. She would be able to find somewhere to stay if necessary. She wondered about going to her mother's or her daughter's but quickly decided against either. Going to visit her mother would mean subjecting herself to detailed questioning and little support. Her mother was traditional in her approach to marriage. Widowed for the past 10 years, her attitude would be, 'You've made your bed, now lie in it.' She had some idea of Julia's problems with Paul's womanising but not in any great detail as she lived some distance from them and, as she got older, was less inclined to visit. Over the years since her dad had died, Paul had gradually excused himself from any family visits to his mother-in-law - another sign of the way they had grown apart, Julia reflected.

So, what about going to her daughter's in Tewkesbury? She briefly considered the idea and then abandoned it. Kate was supportive and the two were closer than many other mothers and daughters, but Julia felt that, by taking refuge with her, she would be forcing her to take sides and she didn't want that. In any case, she didn't feel like having to explain to anyone why she had walked out of her

job; she wasn't sure she could explain it to herself. She only felt conscious of a new and strange sense of freedom. Admittedly, her actions had been entirely unplanned and were perhaps not those of a rational person, but Julia felt like someone from whom a huge weight had been lifted. For the first time since she could remember, she felt carefree and even happy. She smiled to herself, straightened her shoulders, threw her head back and started to sing along with the music filling the car.

She had been driving for about an hour when her mobile phone began to ring in her bag behind the seat. The sound startled Julia and recalled her to reality. It would be either someone from school or her husband, who, by now, could have been told what she had done. She ignored the sound and eventually it rang off, only to begin again moments later. By now, she had passed the exit for the M6 and was continuing along the M62. She passed a sign for the next Services stop and decided to pull off and have a coffee. As she sat sipping her coffee, Julia reflected on the events of the past few hours. She needed to decide on a plan of action. One thing she was sure of, she didn't want to go back home. So now she had to decide what she did want

to do and that was much more difficult. She felt slightly guilty that people would be worrying about her, wondering where she was and if she was safe and well, but, much as she would like to reassure them and tell them not to worry, she definitely did not want to be found. That meant thinking carefully about covering her tracks. She looked around the cafe. It was mid afternoon on an autumn day so most of the people around her looked like business people or commercial travellers. A few feet away, she noticed an impossibly thin woman, probably in her thirties, absent-mindedly spooning strawberries out of a dish as she stared at the keyboard of her laptop and tapped a couple of keys every now and then. Julia looked at her. She had always enjoyed 'people watching' and she wondered about the young woman. Was she married? She couldn't see a ring on the woman's finger but, these days, that didn't really mean anything. Perhaps she lived alone, with her own apartment and even her own business. Julia sighed. She had always wanted to be a wife and mother and loved her daughter dearly, but she did sometimes wonder what it would be like to live on her own, to be independent, to be able to please herself what she did and when she did it. Or would it be unbearably lonely? Now was her chance to find out, she

thought suddenly. She was going to find somewhere to live her own life. Maybe she could get a job - not teaching, she'd had enough of that for now. One day she might miss it and want to go back to it, but not now.

But what about her family? If she didn't make contact, they would report her as a missing person, and she wanted to avoid that. She wanted somehow, to let everyone know she was safe but at the same time make sure they couldn't track her down. She finished her coffee and pushed the cup away from her. Her phone rang again. Julia tried to ignore it but she was conscious of the sideway glances of people at nearby tables. She opened her bag and switched the phone off without looking to see who the call was from, then she stood up and made her way out of the cafeteria. As she walked towards her car, she passed a rubbish bin. Without stopping, she pulled the mobile out of her bag and tossed it into the bin. Then she carried on towards the car. Within minutes, she was pulling out of the car park and heading back onto the motorway. The traffic was getting heavier now. Julia eased into the middle lane to overtake a tanker ahead of her.

She still hadn't decided where she was heading but she

had to find somewhere for the night at least. She didn't fancy the idea of sleeping in the car. On an impulse, she took the next exit off the motorway and drove down the road. The sign told her she was approaching Cleckheaton. She had never been in this area before but decided it would be as good a place as any to stop. The sky had become overcast now and it looked as though it would soon begin to rain. Julia drove along streets of stone-walled terraced houses and shops until, eventually she came to a small hotel which looked as though it might also have rooms to let. She pulled into the small car park and got out of the car. It occurred to her that her lack of luggage might cause suspicion but she shrugged this thought aside.

She pushed open the door of the hotel. Inside, it was gloomy and it took her eyes a few moments to adjust. She made her way across to the bar where a middle aged woman with short, gelled hair was leaning on the bar talking to two elderly men. When she saw Julia approach, she turned to her with a smile.

"What can I get you, love?" she asked.

"Well, actually," said Julia, "I was wondering if you might have a room to let for tonight."

The woman looked at her. "Well, we have but it's



usually the commercial travellers who stop here. You don't look much like one of them."

Julia felt herself becoming flustered under the woman's gaze. In her present state of mind, she mistook curiosity for suspicion.

"Well yes, or at least no, I'm not really ...." She suddenly had a brainwave. "I'm on my way to a conference in ...Harrogate, but I seem to have got a bit lost. Anyway, I don't need to be there till tomorrow and I was getting tired so I thought I would stop for the night and carry on tomorrow."

Her voice tailed off. She was conscious of talking too much and the barmaid seemed to have lost interest.

"So do you want a room, then? Evening meal and breakfast in the morning, OK?"

Julia nodded. She suddenly felt incredibly tired. She was aware that the barmaid was handing her a key. "Up the stairs and first on the left, number 3," she was saying. "Have you got some luggage?"

"I'll bring it in later," said Julia quickly. She took the key and climbed the stairs.

The door to room number 3 opened onto a medium sized room, light and airy for its size. Julia quickly glanced

round, taking in the low double bed, covered in a light blue flowery quilt, the basic bedside cabinet, small wardrobe and the door which led to a tiny en-suite toilet and shower. Looking at the bed, she was suddenly overcome by an intense weariness. Kicking off her shoes, she flopped onto the welcoming softness.

"Now what?" she asked herself aloud but she had no answers. Her mind drifted back to the row with Derek O'Rourke.

"Pompous idiot that he is," she muttered to herself, and then she grinned. "Talking to yourself, already!"

All the same, perhaps, on reflection, it was not the most sensible thing she had ever done in her life. She was aware of a tiny knot of anxiety in her stomach. She stretched her legs and flexed her toes, trying to banish the tension in her body.

All the same, she thought. What would have happened if I hadn't walked out?

She knew the answer to that one. Derek would have stalked out of the hall, leaving her feeling tense and angry, as she always did after one of their altercations. She would have gone back to class, the afternoon would have

dragged on and eventually, after more of the many irritations and problems which seemed increasingly prevalent in her working life these days, she would have driven home to a lonely evening marking children's books and preparing for yet another similar day. She would have spent the night in restless sleep, her mind turning over the events of the day and worrying about what the next day might bring. She pictured herself in the house that she had called home for the last twenty five years, no longer a place of comfort and refuge, but simply a place where she slept, ate and put in evening and week-end hours on the work which spilled over from the hours she spent at school. No companionship, no sharing of the day's events, little conversation of any kind in fact during the past few years. She was suddenly shocked at how joyless and barren her life had become. How had it got to this stage without her being aware of it?

Not going there now, she told herself firmly as she turned on her side and drew her knees up in an effort to quell the fluttering anxiety in her stomach.

When she awoke, three hours later, the room was darkening. For a moment, Julia struggled to make sense of

her unfamiliar surroundings and then the memories of the eventful afternoon came flooding back. She sat up and pushed her hair off her brow. She could feel a slight headache coming on. She thought she had some painkillers in her bag. Better take some now rather than let the headache develop into a migraine. Her bag had slipped to the floor when she had lain down on the bed. She picked it up and scrabbled through it for the painkillers. Once she had found them, she went into the tiny bathroom and filled the glass on the wash basin pedestal with water from the cold tap. She wasn't sure it if was drinking water, but she didn't particularly care just at this moment. The cold water revived her somewhat and she began to feel hungry. It was 7.30 now so she would be able to get something to eat downstairs. Her trousers and jacket were looking a bit creased from lying in them. Julia shrugged her shoulders as she slipped her feet back into her shoes. There was nothing she could do about that now and she didn't think anyone would notice anyway. Making her way downstairs, she could hear the hum of conversation in the bar. The light in there was cosy and welcoming and it was filled with groups of people, standing at the bar, huddled in conversation or sitting at the tables but no-one else was alone. Usually,

Julia would have felt awkward going into a room full of strangers on her own, but tonight, it didn't seem to matter. She still had that strange feeling of observing herself from somewhere outside. She went up to the bar to order a drink and look at the menu. The food on offer was basic but varied. Julia hadn't eaten meat for years, so she plumped for a redcurrant and brie tart with salad and red wine to drink and went to sit at a table near the wall to wait for her order. The couple at the next table looked across at her and smiled but Julia didn't notice. Her mind was racing through the events of the day. She needed to decide what she was going to do next. She pushed her hair off her forehead as she turned the options over in her mind. She had already decided she didn't want to go to her mother's or to Kate's.

Did she really not want to go to Kate's? She pictured in her mind the flat on the top floor of the large 18th century house which had been home to Kate ever since she had qualified as a solicitor two years ago. There were two bedrooms and Kate lived there alone but it was not a large flat and she often invited friends to stay. Besides, her boyfriend, Joe spent more time there than in his own flat.

So, lack of privacy and peace could be a problem, Julia decided, although she would have welcomed the companionship of her daughter. It was about six months since they had last seen each other, mainly due to Kate's hectic lifestyle. Julia smiled to herself. Her daughter was well known for living her life to the full, trying to fit a quart into a pint pot, as Julia's mother often described it.

If she was not going to Kate's, Julia reflected, she certainly wasn't going to her mother's. Angela Moore was a retired doctor, widowed for the past ten years and still living in Bath, where she had lived with her surgeon husband, Julia's father, throughout their married life. Julia, an only child, had grown up in the shadow of their relentless pursuit of career excellence. Both were continually either at work or at conferences and when at home, were usually to be found at their typewriters, composing papers for the latest medical publications or getting ready to go out to dinners and parties, doing what these days would be called networking. Now seventy-six and long retired, Angela's mind was as sharp as ever and as a lifelong Catholic, Julia knew she would get little sympathy

if her mother suspected that she was leaving Paul for good. Unusually for such an independent thinker, she professed unquestioning allegiance to the Church's teaching so her attitude, Julia knew, would be that marriage was for life and you have to be prepared to take the rough with the smooth, and that included dealing with infidelities. She sighed. She wasn't yet ready to look at her marriage, much less be quizzed on it by her mother, as she knew she would be so going to mum's would not be a good idea, at least, not at present.

As these thoughts were going through her mind, her food arrived. Julia sipped her wine and gazed at the plate unseeingly. After a few moments, she began to eat and as she did so, realised how hungry she was. She hadn't eaten since breakfast at seven that morning, so it was no wonder she was ready for her meal now. Because of her empty stomach the wine was making her light headed. She tried to focus her mind once more on the problem of where to go from here and what to do, but instead, she kept thinking about incidents in the past. Her mind trawled through events which had led to yesterday's outburst with Derek O'Rourke. She relived the times when she had suddenly had to take

assemblies or staff meetings because he was at a meeting he'd forgotten to tell her about, the occasions when she had made decisions which were within her remit as deputy head, only to have them countermanded by him, and most of all, she remembered the times she had had to support colleagues, upset by his high-handed manner, trying to smooth things over diplomatically whilst not appearing to be disloyal to him as head teacher.

"He didn't deserve my loyalty," she mused, unaware that she had spoken aloud until the couple on the neighbouring table turned to look at her. She lowered her head, embarrassed and tackled her meal once more.

At a table further away, she noticed two couples had just sat down. They seemed like an older couple out for a meal with their daughter and son-in-law. The girl was plump with streaked blond hair pulled back roughly in a comb and heavy eye make-up, a younger version of her mother, Julia noticed, but without the air of weariness evident in the older woman's face. The older man had obviously been drinking beforehand. He spoke in that slightly louder, aggressive way that some men adopt when they have been drinking. Julia found herself feeling embarrassed for his



family but they seemed oblivious. After a few moments, the man decided that he had been waiting too long for his meal and dispatched his wife to the bar to complain, which she did. Julia watched her standing at the bar, round-shouldered, apologetic, waiting for someone to notice her. On her return to the table, her husband was becoming markedly agitated.

"Oh, shut up moaning, Dad," said the girl, exasperated.

Amazingly to Julia, this sparked a remonstrance from her mother and the four of them were soon engaged in a squabble.

The voices were not over loud but Julia caught snatches of the conversation.

"... always the same, you." "Every time we come out....."

".....not standing for this much longer....."

Eventually, their meals were brought and the angry voices were silenced as the four of them began to eat. Julia was left wondering about the older woman. What was her life like? Did she mind that her husband embarrassed her when they went out? Did she mind when he drank too

much? And if she did, had experience taught her that it was unwise to remonstrate with him?

After eating, she sauntered back upstairs to take refuge in her room. She noticed a small television on a wall bracket above the dressing table and switched it on. She flicked through the channels until she found a natural history programme and lay back on the bed to watch it but, although she had intended it to divert her mind from immediate problems, she soon found herself immersed in memories again.

It was January 1979 the famous 'Winter of Discontent' when unemployment had reached new heights, the dead were left unburied, rubbish left spilling out of unemptied bins and constantly there seemed to be the threat of yet another strike. Added to that, it was a cold, bleak winter. Julia could clearly remember the sense of desolation she had felt that year. Kate was a toddler and she was pregnant again but, whereas, during her pregnancy with Kate, she had been well and happy, if often tired, this time was different. She was constantly sick, weary and lacking in any energy or enthusiasm to do anything more than the necessary to keep

the household ticking over and Kate looked after. Paul had been of little support. He was one of those men who have no understanding or sympathy with what he called 'women's ills' and suggested more than once that her sickness was 'in the mind' rather than real and debilitating, as Julia assured him it was. To make matters worse, he was not good with toddlers and small children and Kate was a strong-willed child who needed patient handling, so although Kate adored her father and constantly sought him out whenever he was at home, he was quick to show his impatience with her and hand her back to her mother. Julia remembered her soul searching. Was it her fault that Paul had changed from the romantic, eager lover he had been before they had married? When had the change begun and why? She had not been able to answer those questions then and still could not but, whereas at that time she had pushed these unwelcome thoughts to the back of her mind, now, she felt more able to consider them and, more importantly, to confront the implications. She still didn't know what had sparked the change, although she did remember a lack of enthusiasm on his part when she had announced her first pregnancy. She suspected that he had begun to show a more than professional interest in one of his students around the

time of Kate's birth, the first of several more to come. The suspicions had haunted her, scared her, made her stomach curl up in knots and the only way she could deal with this was to pretend nothing was wrong. And so she developed blinkers, looking straight ahead, never daring to glance to the side, for fear of being made aware of that which she wouldn't, couldn't acknowledge. While this strategy worked on the surface, on a deeper level, it wreaked havoc with her emotions. Maybe it was this pressure which was responsible for the miscarriage that January. She remembered waking in the early hours of the winter morning, stomach gripped with cramping pains, a sensation of wetness between her legs. Terrified, she shook Paul awake. The rest of the night was a blur of activity, pain and fear. She was rushed to hospital where, at six in the morning, the struggle to maintain this new life within her finally came to an end.

"So sorry, Mrs Chambers," a young doctor was saying to her, "I'm afraid we did all we could but we were unable to save the baby."

She looked at him. He only looked about 16. How many times had he had to break similar news to women, she wondered. Maybe this was his first time. He did look upset

and she could see no trace of the professional veneer with which medics protect themselves when faced with life's tragedies on a daily basis. She found herself momentarily feeling some sympathy for him and then his words sank into her deepest being and she was overwhelmed by a feeling of utter helplessness and grief for her lost baby, another daughter, they told her later, but this one she would never know.

She had vague recollections, in the days that followed, of visits from Paul, awkward, unsure of how to handle the pain of loss and her subsequent lapse into depression. A few days after the miscarriage, he had brought Kate with him and she had hugged the toddler, burying her face in her baby curls, crying as if her heart would break. Paul had prized her away in the end, telling her the child would be frightened but her only thought was of the child she had lost and of her determination not to lose this one.

"You have to pull yourself together," Paul had said. "You're not the only woman in the world to lose a baby."

If Paul had not been enthusiastic about her first pregnancy, he had been even less so the second time, yet in

her more charitable moments, she believed that these words had come from his own unhappiness and loss. But this reaction and his subsequent unwillingness to talk about what had happened, caused an awkwardness between them which did not diminish. There were times when she longed to talk about their lost baby, to feel some comfort, but each time she tried to reach out, there was no response. Eventually, she had stopped trying. In the meantime, for Kate's sake, she tried to shut down her feelings of sadness and despair and carry on with her daily life.

As if she were reliving the experience, Julia again felt tears on her cheeks and the same sense of desolation. She opened her eyes to see that the natural history programme, of which she had seen barely anything, had finished and the final credits were rolling. She reached for the remote control and silenced the T.V. Hastily taking off her outer clothes, she pulled back the flowered duvet and burrowed into its comforting darkness, to give herself up to wave upon wave of sobbing such as she hadn't allowed herself to experience for years. Finally, emotionally exhausted, she fell asleep.

## Chapter 2

Morning dawned bright and sunny. Julia awoke at eight o'clock as the sun streamed in through the open curtains. She sat up in the bed and looked around her. Surprisingly, the night had passed in sound and dreamless sleep and she felt calm and positive as she swung her legs out of bed, stood up and stretched. Normally she did a few stretching exercises and sit-ups when she got up, but this morning, she contented herself with one long, slow stretch before padding barefoot to the bathroom. The warm jet from the shower felt invigorating. She would have liked to wash her hair too, but remembering that she had no shampoo or hairdryer with her, contented herself with a shower, before towelling herself vigorously and dressing in the clothes she had so hurriedly taken off the night before.

I must do some shopping today, she thought I need toiletries, underwear, and a change of clothes. But most important is somewhere to stay. I'll have to get myself sorted out quickly.

She went downstairs. The barmaid with the spiked hair

was there again. Julie ordered coffee and toast.

"You must work long hours," she said, to make conversation. The woman shrugged. "It's not too bad," she said offhandedly. "I get my days off."

Julia, sensing the woman was not in the mood to talk, smiled and went to sit down in the corner by the window. She seemed to have been the only guest last night; there was no-one else in the room. She stared out of the window. The street was bathed in the morning light, people were hurrying past, leaves scrunching under their feet, heads bent and shoulders hunched against the wind.

"Must be colder out there than it looks," she thought and was glad she had a coat with her.

Julia paid her bill after breakfast and walked out to her car. She sat inside, put the key in the ignition but didn't turn it. She stared at the steering wheel in front of her.

Now what? she thought.

It occurred to her that she should at least ring Kate and let her know she was all-right. Kate was sure to have heard of her disappearance by now and would be worried. Now was a good time to ring, before she left for her office.



Julia felt for her mobile and then groaned as she remembered she had thrown it away the day before. Starting the engine, she put the car into gear and swung out of the car park and down the street. She was looking for a phone box. Surprisingly, she found one only a few yards away. She parked at the kerb and got out of the car, rummaging in her bag for some change. Hurriedly she dialled Kate's number and stood waiting for her to pick up at the other end. After a few seconds, she heard Kate's voice. "Mum!" she yelled, when she realised who was on the phone, "Where are you? We've been worried sick. Oh, it's so good to hear from you."

"I'm fine," said Julia when she could get a word in. "But I don't want to tell you where I am just yet. I need a break, Kate."

"But Dad's worried too, you've got to tell us where you are. What's all this about? Have you left him?"

"I - I'm not sure yet, I haven't thought that far ahead."

Briefly she told Kate about the events of the previous afternoon.

"So, you see, I just felt I had to get out and that means getting away from everything. I am going to find

somewhere to stay for a while and decide what to do. You understand why I don't want to tell you where I am yet? Your father would come storming over to bring me home and I don't want that. I have to make my own decisions and I want them to be the right ones. To do that, I need time."

Her voice was beginning to wobble. She paused to steady herself and realised Kate was speaking again, more quietly this time.

"O.K. Mum," she was saying, "You're the boss. I'll tell Dad I've heard from you. But you take care, won't you?" Now her voice was trembling and Julia was sure she must be close to tears. She felt a pang of guilt but she must stick to her guns.

"I will. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine and I'll ring you again soon. I haven't got my mobile any more, but I'll ring you, promise."

As she put the receiver down, Julia was conscious of a feeling of emptiness, then she pushed open the door of the kiosk and walked back to the car.

She drove back to the motorway and eventually found herself on the M67 going towards Glossop. She remembered driving over Snake Pass years ago on her way to a teachers'

conference in Sheffield. It had been early summer then and as she recalled the beauty of the Peak District, she felt a sudden desire to see the area again, to be back in that soul-healing emptiness and dramatic scenery,

At the end of the M67, she skirted the Denton roundabout and drove on, eventually taking the A57 towards Glossop. Traffic was heavy as people made their way to work. Cars streamed endlessly along the road, each with its single occupant, looking straight ahead, hands gripping the steering wheel, like lemmings rushing headlong to their fate, to be incarcerated in some anonymous workplace from which they would not emerge for the next eight hours. Julia felt more purposeful now that she had decided on a destination and before she knew it, she was driving down the main street of Glossop, searching for a car park. Eventually she found one down a little side street. Quickly she made the turn, found a parking space and switched off the engine. Grabbing her bag and shrugging on her coat, she made her way back to the main street in search of an estate agents' office. She wasn't yet sure what she was going to do, but in her mind she held a picture of an isolated cottage on the edge of the moor. She did remember

a house at the foot of the rise to Snake Pass which she had admired at the time. "If ever I have enough money, I'm going to buy somewhere like that." The thought had popped into her mind and then vanished again through the years, until today. She must go and look for that house again. She turned back to the car park, almost running in her eagerness to check out the memory with reality. Within minutes, she was driving up the main street, around the bend at the top, and there ahead was the house of her memories. She pulled in to the side of the road, scarcely able to believe what she saw before her. Not only was the house standing there, just as she remembered it, if perhaps a little neglected, but what had caught Julia's attention was the 'to let' sign in the garden. It looked as if it had been there for some time, and it occurred to Julia that the house must have been empty for months. That gave her an idea. Taking note of the name of the letting agent on the board, she got back in the car, turned it round and set off back into Glossop. In a short time, she had found the estate agent's offices and was walking in, her low heels sinking into the carpet.

"Good morning," she said brightly to the harassed looking girl scrabbling through the avalanche of papers on

her desk.

The girl smiled briefly and motioned to Julia to sit down on the chair opposite.

"Won't keep you a moment," she said, with a professional brightness in her voice that belied her anxious look as her gaze darted over the desk. Left to herself, Julia looked around the office at the information sheets and photos of local properties for sale. Suddenly the girl seemed to have found what she wanted. She pounced on a sheet of paper, turned and charged through the doorway behind her. Julia could hear muffled voices from within the room and then the girl emerged, smiling genuinely this time. Julia noticed her blond, shoulder length hair in need of a shampoo and the hole in her black tights. The girl flicked her hair and sat down behind her desk.

"Now," she said, "Can I help you?" Her accent denoted Manchester origins, her unlikely looking tan, definitely not the product of local sun, Julia decided. Kate always used to refer to the girls in her school who overused the sunbeds as the orange brigade. This girl would certainly fit into that category, Julia decided, with amusement, yet she seemed a pleasant enough girl, maybe not very organised, but friendly.

"I was interested in the house for rent just outside the town," she said.

"Oh, yes," said the girl. "It's been on our books for a few months now." She paused and shook her head impatiently, as if chastising herself. "Ooh, I shouldn't have said that!" she exclaimed. "Are you wanting to have a look round it?"

"Yes, I think I am." Julia suddenly made up her mind. Just at this moment, she longed to be wandering through those deserted, desolate rooms, looking through the windows out towards Snake Pass and she wanted to be doing it alone.

"Would I be able to take the key and look over the property on my own?" she enquired expecting a flood of objections.

"Oh yes," was the reply. "I'm afraid that's the only way you will be able to see it this morning. Mrs Smith left suddenly last week and we haven't had anyone to take her place yet." Her voice died away uncertainly. "Anyway, here's the key. If you could just give me your address and phone number, as security."

Julia thought quickly. She didn't want to give her own address, so she wrote down Kate's address and then added her mobile number. Even though she no longer had the phone,

no-one in this office would need to ring her. She wasn't going to run off with the key, after all. She took the key from the girl.

"I'll bring it back in about an hour," she said. The girl nodded, her mind already on other tasks awaiting her.

As the car swung out of the car park for a second time that morning, Julia's mind was racing. She couldn't wait to stand inside that house, to gaze out of the front windows at the magnificent view she knew would be spread before her. Hurriedly she drove back up the hill.

The front gates were half closed, so, rather than get out to open them and waste precious viewing time, she decided to park on the verge. She noticed the peeling green paint on the gates as she pushed them open and walked up the short drive to the front door. The key slipped smoothly into the lock and, before she knew it, Julia was in the square hall, gazing around, her eyes taking in the elegant coving, the wrought iron bannisters leading up the curved staircase to the first floor and the leaded lights over the front door. She walked through the first doorway into the spacious front room. The walls were painted the palest shade of yellow and Julia loved it. It seemed to be fully

furnished, heavy, old fashioned stuff, admittedly, but she could live with that. She caught the thought in her head and smiled to herself. Pushing things a bit, wasn't she? She didn't yet know if she would be able to rent it, but the thought of making her home in this long empty house delighted her. With a new purpose in her step, she inspected the rest of the house. The views from the front windows were spectacular in the autumn sunshine. Julia's gaze took in the rolling stretches of greens and hazy blues and purples before her, the white blobs that were sheep dotted about the slopes, the perfect pale blue of the sky, tinged here and there with the wispiest of cloud-white. She sighed and felt at peace with herself as she hadn't for many long years. She must try to rent this house. She felt that time spent here, however short, would be the healing therapy she needed, the chance to 'recreate' her inner self and maybe, to face the future and make decisions about how she would live her life. For one thing she was becoming more and more certain of, she was not going to continue the life of the last few years. She had read somewhere that the middle years of life are often a time when a woman becomes infused with new energy, giving her the strength to re-evaluate her life and possibly make radical changes and



meet new challenges. She liked the idea of this. Fifty-three years old last birthday, she knew she didn't want to grow old in a rut; she wanted changes, challenges and yes, happiness. Why not? Maybe, at a subconscious level, these thoughts were what had spurred her to act as she had the previous day. Whatever the truth of the matter, she was feeling increasingly confident that she was not going back.

As she emerged through the front door once more, Julia turned back for a last look at the hall before locking up and walking back to the car. Within ten minutes, she was back in the estate agency. This time, there was a plump, grey haired man in the office with the young girl. He seemed to be the manager and greeted Julia before inviting her to sit down. Julia explained that she was interested in a short term let and he listened without interrupting. The old Julia would have been overwhelmed by doubts, would probably have convinced herself that her idea would never be accepted but this new Julia, brought into being within the last twenty four hours, was impressive in her confidence, a confidence which proved to be well-placed, for Mr Groves, the office manager, agreed to contact the owner of the property and suggest the short let to him.

"He inherited the house from his aunt who died about six months ago," he said. "He isn't interested in living there himself, he lives and works just outside Manchester, a schoolteacher, I think."

Julia left the matter in his hands and went off to do some shopping, having agreed to return by four in the afternoon to learn the owner's decision. Her drives through the centre of Glossop had shown that an absence of larger shops meant that she would need to go further afield for clothes, which meant a trip to the Trafford Centre, the large new shopping mall a few miles back. Julia did not have an extensive wardrobe but she looked forward to a few hours wandering around the shops of the Trafford Centre with the prospect of buying a few clothes to keep her going. All she had were the clothes she stood up in so she was going to need a range of basics. She drove back the way she had come, a list building in her mind of what she would need, so that by the time she parked in the enormous car park at the Centre, she had a fair idea of what she would buy.

After three hours, she emerged, laden with bags

containing underwear, dressing gown, slippers, three T shirts, two pairs of cords, several jumpers and tops, shoes, trainers, boots and an all-weather three in one anorak, for her tramps out in the countryside. She had also bought a toothbrush and toothpaste, other toiletries and make up and some towels and bedlinen. She was sure there were things she had forgotten but she had enough for now. The few hours she had spent wandering round the shops had taken her mind off her immediate concerns and now, as she walked back to the car, she had a feeling that her tenancy offer would be accepted. She stowed the bags in her car boot and then another thought occurred to her. She turned and went back into the shopping centre, making her way to a shop she had noticed before which sold mobile phones. Fifteen minutes later, she was walking out of the shop carrying a small bag in which was her new 'pay as you go' phone. No monthly rental agreement, she would buy minutes on the phone as and when she needed to. Feeling pleased with herself, she set off back to Glossop and the estate agents. Now that she was coming back for a decision, her new-found confidence began to desert her. As she pushed open the door, Mr Groves looked up and smiled in greeting.

"I've spoken to the house owner, and he has decided to accept your offer. He will agree to a tenancy of up to three months, which will take us into the new year, when he hopes the housing market will pick up and he will be able to find a buyer. How does that suit you, Mrs Chambers? Of course," he continued, without waiting for a reply, "We will need references and a deposit as well as the first month's rent in advance, so that will take about a week to complete before you can move in."

Julia was startled. In all her planning, it had not occurred to her that there would be a delay before she could move in to the house, but of course, now that she thought about it, it wasn't likely that the house owner was going to let a total stranger move into his house before checking her credentials. She could have cried. Instead, she nodded her head.

"Yes, of course, I'll arrange for the references and the deposit tomorrow. But is there any chance of completing in less than a week? I, er I'm between properties at the moment, and I'll have to find somewhere to stay while this goes through."

Mr Groves looked uncertain. "Well, I suppose if you

can get your side of things sorted out, the house owner will have no objections. After all, it's better to have the house occupied than empty." He gave her a copy of the house details and contact details for the agency and opened the door for her.

So Julia came out into the chilly evening air with two problems buzzing in her head. First, she now had to find somewhere to stay for a couple of nights, second was the more difficult problem of providing two references as soon as possible. She thought Kate might be able to help her on that one. She stood on the pavement for a moment, undecided, and then she turned to go back towards the car park. On the other side of the road, she noticed a typical Yorkshire stone pub, smaller than the hotel she had stayed in the night before. "Here goes nothing," she said to herself and, crossing the road quickly, she pushed open the door and stood blinking in the light. Having booked her room for the night, she went across to fetch the car and parked it in the pub car park. This time, she had bags to carry upstairs with her and a couple of novels which she remembered she had in the boot of the car, bought last summer for holiday reading that she somehow had not managed

to find the time for. She felt ridiculously cheerful at the idea of having a whole evening to herself with nothing to do but read and maybe watch television, a welcome change from the endless marking and planning for the next school-day which usually occupied her time. After her meal, she settled down in her room and took out her night things and toiletries. Then she remembered her new mobile phone and plugged it in to charge the battery. If she was going to ring Kate that evening, she would have to use a public phone. She thought she remembered seeing one downstairs, so, taking some change out of her purse, she went to look for it.

As she dialled Kate's number, she found herself hoping that Kate would actually be in. It was only 7.30 so even if she had plans to go out, she would probably only be getting ready. She heard the ring tone at the other end and waited until, after a few seconds, it was answered. By the end of the phone call, Julia had arranged for Kate to use her connections to obtain two references to be faxed to the estate agency in the morning and had managed to persuade her daughter that she was fine but still did not want anyone to know where she was. Kate was obviously perplexed

at her mother's insistence of privacy but promised to respect her wishes and also to let a couple of her colleagues from school know that she was O.K.

"I will let you know when I'm ready, and then we can meet up," Julia assured her and with that Kate had to be content.

With that done, Julia felt she could relax for the evening and she went slowly back up the stairs to her room, to run a bath and then relax with her novels and the television. Her mood this evening was far more positive and upbeat. She reflected on the events of the day and felt a million miles away in time and space from her day to day life with all its stresses and unhappiness. Gradually, as she relaxed into the pillows on the bed, she slipped into a pensive, half dreaming state and her mind drifted back into the realms of memory.

July 1970, the weather was hot and sunny and she was on the train travelling from her college in Leeds back home to Bath. She had finished her three year teacher training course and her feelings were a mixture of sadness at leaving the college where she had enjoyed most of her time

and the pleasure of two unstructured months stretching before her, time to relax, meet up with her old school friends and prepare for her first teaching job in a primary school in Runcorn.

That summer was a blur of distant memories now but she did remember one evening quite clearly. In her mind's eye she could see a photo of herself wearing a top and skirt bought on holiday in France. She was sitting on a low stool in her room at home, hands clasped around her knees, happy and confident in anticipation of a future full of possibilities. Around the room were three of her friends, smiling and laughing. She could see the three of them as clearly as if the photo were right in front of her. On the chair opposite the bed was April, blond, shoulder length hair flipped up at the ends, legs crossed at the ankle, hand on chin. April was always the clown of the group. Her father owned a chain of garages and so they were quite well off. When she had left the sixth form, she had gone into banking. An only child, April was always very hard to please where boyfriends were concerned, Julia remembered. On the bed were the other two members of the quartet, Lorna, short and plump with red hair and sometimes the



temper to go with it, although generally she was fairly easy going. She had gone off to university in Reading to do a degree in geography. She intended to become a secondary teacher. Next to her was dark haired, dark eyed Valerie, generally recognised as the one with the looks. All the boys wanted to go out with Valerie but she had been 'going steady' with her boyfriend, Tom, plump and cuddly, since 5th form. She was going in for primary teaching like Julia, but, unlike Julia, who wanted to stretch her wings and go to college far from her home, Valerie's father had been very ill when she was doing her A levels, so she had taken the decision to stay at home and go as a day student to the college in Bath so that she could help her mother take care of her father when he became bedridden. Sadly, he had died soon afterwards and within months, Valerie had finished with steady, dependable Tom and taken up with Jack, one of the rebels who had left school at sixteen and was working his way through a succession of dead-end jobs. Julia remembered how astonished she and the others had been when that had happened but, although ill-suited, they had seemed happy together,

But that evening, in Julia's home, they were all girls

together, updating each other on what they had been doing since their last meeting, making plans and looking forward to their future. Her father had come in unannounced with his camera and snapped them as they laughed and chattered, perhaps realising himself that this was a watershed moment. Julia experienced once more the uplifting sensation of having a future full of hope and expectation before her, with the confidence of that comes with youth that she had the power to tackle anything and to make anything happen.

That was the last time they had all been together. Lorna got a job in Cornwall, Valerie locally and Julia herself settled in Runcorn and within a couple of years had met and married Paul.

"Where are they all now?" she wondered to herself. "What are they doing?" Paul had been the type of husband who didn't expect his wife to have her own friends and had never made it easy for her even to go down to Bath to visit her parents, and soon the years began to hurtle by, and contact, made tenuous by the passing of time, was eventually broken altogether. Julia suddenly realised that, although she had colleagues whom she liked and respected,

she could no longer say she had friends, and this realisation saddened her. "Does it happen to all women when they get married and are busy bringing up their children and living their lives?" she questioned, but she knew the answer already. The room was dark now, only the television screen flickered in the corner, and once more, Julia pulled the quilt over her and buried her head in the pillows in an attempt to find comfort.

## Chapter 3

Julia awoke next morning to a grey, overcast sky and the sound of rain on the window panes. She sat on the side of the bed and pushed her hair off her face. She felt as if she had slept too heavily and was struggling to feel awake and alert as she wanted to feel. Her mind skimmed over the events of the previous day. Today was going to be a day in limbo. She couldn't do anything about the house as it would take the day for Kate to contact the people who would be acting as her referees and for the references to be faxed to the estate agent. Then it all had to be forwarded to the house owner so she would be lucky if it was all sorted out by the week-end. Her bank balance was healthy but she didn't really want to be spending money staying in hotels or a B and B. Truth to tell, she didn't want to be staying anywhere except in the house. She decided the best thing to do was to get out for the day, away from Glossop, and use the time to do some sightseeing around the area. Dressed and ready, she picked up her bag and went downstairs. She ordered breakfast and booked a further night's stay and then sat down to wait to be served. The view from the window overlooked the main street and once again she

watched people passing up and down the road, all walking purposefully as if they had somewhere to go, a routine in their lives. In a strange way, she felt almost envious. It was rather like the feeling she used to have as a child walking past uncurtained windows in the winter. The lights would be on and she would be able to see into the bright interior, although she used to pretend she wasn't really looking, always worried that those inside would look out and catch her looking in. Sometimes she would catch a glimpse of children playing or a family clustered around the television, or maybe sitting round a table at their evening meal. Once she remembered looking towards a window for her gaze to be met by a face looking out at her - an old man, grey hair straggling, cheeks furrowed. In the split second that their eyes met before she turned away in embarrassment at having been caught out, she had thought she saw tears on his cheeks, but he had smiled at her and in that instant it seemed as though they reached out to each other and shared the moment. Strange to be feeling like this. After all, the reason she was here was because she had wanted to escape from routine, or the routine that she had anyway. She supposed it was part of human nature to seek routine in one's life. It was comforting to have a

structure to one's day, scary to have the whole day ahead and not to know what to do with it. But, look at it positively, she said to herself. No school, no-one to please, no-one to argue with or to avoid. In fact, I have a blank canvas and I can paint anything I like! She smiled to herself at the thought. The day stretched before her and she felt she should make the most of it. She went back to her room and collected her anorak. If she was going out in the countryside, she would need to be dressed for the weather. She was not very familiar with this area but she knew the weather could be very changeable.

It was the last week of September. The autumn until now had been dry and sunny for the most part. It was one of the times of the year that Julia loved. The heat of the summer had long become a more bearable warmth and now there was just a hint of sharpness in the early morning that foretold of frosty times to come. But today the all pervading layer of cloud did nothing to lighten Julia's mood as she got into the car and drove off up the hill towards Snake Pass. She remembered that clouds in the town often meant mist and even fog up on the moors and that it would be several degrees colder. She was dressed for

walking, well for strolling at least. She wasn't a real hill walker but she felt ready for some exercise and fresh air. The road zig-zagged higher and higher and now that the cloud was beginning to thin, she could see to the left across acres of bracken and to the right, endless open countryside stretching across towards Manchester. The higher she got, the more her mood lightened. She passed sheep grazing on the hilly grass beside the road, sometimes perched precariously on a boulder. To her right, the rolling stretches of green gave way to acres of trees before opening out to reveal a smooth stretch of water. She had reached the reservoir. She drove on a little further to find a parking space, got out of the car and stood motionless for a moment, breathing in the fresh air, her gaze taking in the view. She looked past the glassy surface of the reservoir at the trees behind, glorious in their already yellow-orange leaves. This was a popular area for walkers but today she had the place to herself. Stowing her bag under the front seat, she locked the car and set off up the slope behind. As she walked, some train of thought led her back to those first days of teaching in the little primary school in Runcorn.

She remembered the weather that autumn as being glorious, a real Indian summer. Whether or not it really was, she didn't know. Maybe it was her mood at the time that had coloured her memories. She had wanted to be a teacher as long as she could remember and now, twenty two years old and newly trained, she had the job she had looked forward to during her three years of training. She had been lucky to get that job. The year that she came out of college was the beginning of a slump in demand for teachers. She knew several of her friends at college who had not been so lucky and would be starting their career on supply work, called on by their local authorities to fill in when permanent teachers were off ill or on courses. It was not an ideal start to a teaching career and Julia was so pleased that she had a permanent position with her own class of six year olds and a regular salary, small though it was. She had not wanted to go back to Bath to teach and in any case, jobs there were even harder to come by than in the north west. She had a few college friends from Liverpool and the surrounding areas so she decided the north west was as good a place as any. To begin with, she had shared a house with three of them but very soon, they had gone their separate ways and Julia had managed to find



herself a small first floor flat. She preferred living alone to sharing. It gave her the freedom to do as she wanted when she wanted and also freed her from the compulsion to tidy up after the others! Unlike most students, she had always preferred order to chaos - she sometimes thought it had been a way of seeking approval from her ever-busy parents when she was growing up. There had been times in the shared house when she had felt like screaming at the constant pile of unwashed dishes, the piles of dirty washing or un-ironed clothes left lying around and the general disorder and mess that didn't seem to bother the others at all. At times, when she could stand it no longer, she would tackle it herself and then they would laugh at her and call her Mother Hen. No, although she got on well with her friends, it was a relief to move out into her own little place. Then she was really happy with her life. She devoted long hours at school and earned the approval of the head teacher and the older staff there and soon became well liked and respected by the parents. Not like these days, she thought ruefully. Then, the parents were supportive. If you had to chastise their child, they backed you up, they didn't come storming in, shouting that the fault couldn't possibly lie with their

precious offspring.

Boyfriends had passed through her life but nobody serious, nobody, that is, until one day in early May when she had been invited to a party. She hadn't really wanted to go; she wasn't a party person, but her friend Sandra had said it would be good and she wanted a companion to go with so Julia had let herself be persuaded. It was in a large private house, belonging to someone that Sandra's brother knew and when they arrived, it seemed already full to bursting point. It was there that she had met Paul.

She had no idea how long she had walked, careful to keep the road in sight so that she wouldn't get lost, but when she glanced at her watch, she was surprised to find that it was already mid afternoon. As she walked, the sky had gradually lightened and the cloud dispersed so that now there was even a hint of afternoon sunshine bravely struggling through. Julia suddenly realised that she was hungry. She had had nothing to eat or drink since breakfast and she knew there was nothing in the car except a stale bottle of water. She decided she had better retrace her steps and quickly if she wanted to call into the estate

agent's before they closed. Hurriedly she made her way back towards the car and drove back the way she had come that morning, past 'her house' as she was already thinking of it and into Glossop. A pleasant surprise awaited her in the estate agent's. The faxes had arrived that morning so all was in place for her to pay her deposit and she would be able to move in the next day. Julia was delighted to know that she had only one more night in the pub before she could move in to the house.

"It is fully furnished," said Mr Groves, "The owner has obviously removed all personal effects but he's happy for you to use the household linen, cooking utensils etc as it is a short let." Julia nodded inwardly smiling at the estate agent's use of such old fashioned terms. She felt as excited as a child before Christmas with the anticipation of moving into the house the next day.

"Nice lady," commented Mr Groves to his office assistant as Julia went out. "You'd have thought I had told her she'd won the lottery!" The blond girl nodded absent-mindedly, her thoughts taken up with the letters she had still to type before she could go home this evening.

So, one more night and then I can move in. This time tomorrow, I'll be settled in. The thought comforted her. Something was drawing her to that house and she felt that, in a strange way, she would be more at peace with herself once she was settled there. It was odd how the memory of it, perched alone at the foot of Snake Pass, had stayed with her through the years. She had been attracted to it when she first saw it and now the dream was to become reality.

The evening passed quite quickly. Julia had popped into a newsagent's on the main road for a bar of chocolate and a paper after leaving the estate agent but by seven o'clock, she was feeling ravenous.

She went downstairs to look at the bar menu. The previous evening, she had found it difficult to relax and could barely even remember what she had eaten. This evening, now that life seemed more organised, she was in a more positive frame of mind. She ordered a glass of house red at the bar and, instead of choosing to sit away from others, this time she stayed at the bar while waiting for her order. She looked around her. The place was busy but

not overcrowded yet. A feeling of the approaching week-end was in the air, people were greeting each other, laughing, chatting, perhaps making plans for their two days of freedom from the routine of work. In recent years, Julia had envied those whose jobs are restricted to the hours spent in their place of work. The endless cycle of teaching, followed by evenings and week-ends spent in school-related tasks had long since ceased to enthuse. Now, she looked around her and wondered what some these people did for a living. She began to amuse herself by trying to guess but within a few moments, her meal was ready and she moved to a table in a quieter area of the pub. This time, she had her newspaper to read as she ate and so was oblivious to curious glances from some of the locals around her. She felt no desire to engage in conversation with strangers and as soon as she had finished her meal, she went back upstairs to her room.

That night, tired as she was from the walking, she found it difficult to sleep. After what seemed like hours of tossing and turning, she eventually fell into a disturbed sleep but it brought no comfort. Instead the night seemed to be one long succession of dreams. Julia

rarely remembered her dreams but tonight, one of them seemed so real that she woke up in the early hours still haunted by its dark, brooding atmosphere.

She was walking down a dark, winding road searching for a house. Because there were no street lights, she couldn't see the house numbers. None of the houses had lights in the windows and Julia couldn't see if their curtains were open or closed. She felt that, once she had found the house, she would also find someone in the house who was tremendously important in her life but she had no idea who it was. On and on she walked, a solitary figure in the deserted road. Strangely, she did not feel nervous, as she would certainly have done in real life, but she was feeling increasingly agitated as her search continued. At last she reached the end of the road and discovered it was a cul de sac but the house she was searching was there at the very end, the front door ajar, as if she was expected.

Julia walked uncertainly up the path, past dark bushes casting sinister shadows across the ground in front of her. She reached the front door and stood uncertainly, trying to peer through the thick darkness inside. There was

no sound. She stepped inside and immediately became aware of a faint background light which enabled her to make out shadows of furniture around the hall and doorways, three to her right and one directly ahead at the end of the hall. Something drove her forward, and, ignoring the doors at the side, she walked carefully towards the one in front of her. Opening that door, she found herself in what seemed like a Victorian school dormitory. There were rows of beds down each side of a long, narrow room but, as she looked, she could see that they were all empty. She had the feeling that the person she was looking for was not in this room but there was another door at the far end so she walked towards it, her steps quickening as a feeling of urgency overtook her and urged her on. As she pushed this door open, she found herself at the foot of a winding staircase. Without pausing, she hurried up the bare wooden steps to a door at the top. This door had stained glass panels, through which a yellow light was glowing. Once on the other side of this door, Julia stopped in astonishment. She was in what seemed to be a small chapel. At the far end was an altar, covered with a cloth and bearing a brass lectern and open bible or prayer book. The red glow of the altar lamp to the side was a sign to Julia that this must be a

Catholic chapel but there were branches and leaves strewn across the altar and over the floor. The baptismal font, to the right at the back of the chapel was dressed with sprays of pine and ferns. On the high window-sills there were displays of fruit and vegetables, as if it had been decorated for a harvest festival celebration, but as Julia looked more closely, she noticed with horror that the produce was rotting and covered with cobwebs, each with hairy, black spiders in the centre. She felt a noiseless scream in her throat as she turned and ran the way she had come. As she ran, she knew she was screaming with all her might, yet she could make no sound which terrified her more. Just as she felt she could run no further, she woke up. Sitting up in bed, trying to force her mind back to reality, the feeling of looking for someone still haunted her yet she had no idea who it was. Eventually, she calmed down sufficiently to lie back on the pillows and drift into a restless sleep.



## Chapter 4

Morning found her struggling to wake up. As she opened her eyes, she plumped up the pillows behind her and sank back into them. The events of the dream and the mood that came with it were very real to her and she still couldn't think who it could be that she had been searching for. Eventually, she decided to get up and put it all to the back of her mind. The strong jet of water from the shower revitalised her and she felt the gloomy mood of her dream lift. She stepped out of the shower, the rough, white bath towel wrapped around her and glanced at her reflection in the mirror over the wash basin, noticing the darkness under her eyes, the result of the night's disturbed sleep. The face that looked back at her didn't look bad for her age, she decided, except for the few grey hairs now visible around the hairline. Time for a visit to the hairdresser! Slowly, she dried herself and began to get dressed. She smoothed her moisturising cream over her face and thought about the day ahead, her mind already planning her move into the house. Not that she had much in the way of belongings, but, in her imagination, she was already planning how she would arrange the furniture. She could see

herself there already, in the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil, looking out over the unkempt garden, curled up in bed in the airy front bedroom, the autumn sun streaming in from the moors. She smiled at the thought.

"And best of all," she said aloud to her reflection, "No-one but myself to please."

The daydreaming galvanised her into action. Quickly, she dressed and packed up her things ready to leave straight after breakfast.

If anyone had been watching the estate agent's office that morning, they would probably not have noticed the middle aged woman, casually dressed, opening the door and going in. They may not have noticed her coming out again half an hour later, a broad smile on her face and a bunch of keys in her hand, or been at all aware of the spring in her step as she crossed back to the pub car-park, got into her car and drove off up the road towards the moors. Julia, for her part, would not have known whether anyone had noticed her or not. For her, all that mattered was that she now had the keys to the house which would be her home for the next three months, providing her with a breathing space, an opportunity to take stock of her life and decide

in which direction it was going to go.

"The first day of the rest of my life" was the hackneyed phrase which popped into her head as she steered the car round the bend just before reaching the house.

Moving in was quick and simple. Julia had only the things she had bought on her shopping trip the day she first came to Glossop. Carrying it in only took two trips and she was finished. She was now the proud tenant of this lovely, desolate, neglected house and she felt more satisfaction and pleasure at this thought than she had known for a long time. She stood for several minutes in the hallway, looking around her, up the stairs, then through the open doorway into the living room. She knew the tenancy agreement did not allow her to change the décor, but, maybe a few new cushions on the sofa, some pictures of her choice on the walls and even some different curtains and the place would really begin to feel like her own.

Within the next few days, she had spring-cleaned the house, arranged for the phone to be reconnected and even started tidying up the garden. Julia had never been much of

a gardener and had never really had the time to do much more than mowing the lawn now and then but here she found she was enjoying it. The physical exercise, combined with the fresh autumn air, helped her sleep soundly at night and wake up refreshed and renewed in the mornings. In the evenings, she passed the time with her novels, the television and her laptop computer, which had been in the car the day she had walked out of school. At home, she had had broadband connection. Here, she could only use a dial up connection through the phone socket but she wasn't worried about that. She used it to check her emails and communicate with Kate. It was easier to email her rather than speak to her on the phone and fend off the unwelcome questions about making decisions.

It is often only long afterwards that we ponder on the train of events that have led us to the situation we find ourselves in. A decision made in seconds, a thoughtless word, an unexpected event can be the catalyst for life changes never before conceived of. In time to come, Julia would often reflect on how her life had changed so dramatically and wonder at how seemingly innocuous choices could lead to experiences that she would previously never

have dreamt of.

One evening, she switched on the laptop, connected to the internet and, inspired by a programme she had just watched on television about people being reunited with friends from their youth, she idly typed the name of her old school into the search engine. To her surprise, she found a link to a website for past pupils. Intrigued, she clicked onto the link and signed up for membership. She typed in a few non-committal sentences which didn't tell anyone too much about what she was doing and then she began to trawl through the list of names for her year at the school. She remembered most of the names, although she struggled to put faces to many of them. Some of the girls who had been her closest friends were there but others were missing. Valerie's name wasn't there, but Lorna's was and so was Angela's. She clicked on Lorna's notes and read that she was unmarried and Head of Geography at a High school outside Bath. Angela was still in banking in a large branch in Bristol and was also unmarried. Julia was surprised that both of them were still close to their roots, especially as they were not married and so had no family ties. She wondered where Valerie was now and what she was doing. After a few moments thought, she clicked on the email for

each in turn and wrote:

Hi, Julia here. Just signed up and noticed your names were already there. It seems so long since we last saw each other. I'm.."

She stopped and thought again. What was she going to tell them? After a while, she began typing again.

"I have a daughter, Kate, who is now a solicitor in Tewkesbury and, at the moment, I am living in a house near Snake Pass outside Glossop. I'd love to hear from you to catch up with your news. I still visit Mum in Bath from time to time so maybe we could meet up some time."

After a moment's further reflection, she deleted the last sentence. She wouldn't be going to Bath in the near future and she didn't want anyone to know where she was. If they replied, maybe they could meet up somewhere neutral. Julia signed off and closed her computer. She yawned and stretched. Time for bed. This country air was certainly helping her sleep better than she had in years.

The next morning dawned bright and sunny but with a hint of frost in the air. Julia shivered and pulled the quilt up over her shoulders. She would have to check the settings on the central heating. Winter was fast approaching. Once up and dressed, she went into the kitchen, switched on the kettle and put two slices of toast into the toaster. She spooned coffee into a mug and looked around for the central heating controls. She found them inside a cupboard and set the heating as she wanted it. By then the toast was ready, so she buttered it, finished making her coffee and wandered into the living room. Her laptop was still on the coffee table where she had left it the night before and the sight of it reminded her of the website she had signed up to. She wondered if anyone had seen her profile yet. Not likely, she thought, within the space of a few hours but she might have a couple of emails, so she powered it up and logged on. There was an email from Kate telling her that she had contacted school on her behalf and told them that Julia would not be in for the foreseeable future.

"If you can get a doctor's note," she had written,  
"You can go on sick leave and still be paid. Otherwise, I

think you will be at risk of losing your job. The Head said something about having a governor's meeting about you."

Julia read the email without emotion. She really didn't care what the school did about her absence but, on the other hand, she was going to need her salary if she was going to be away for long. Right now she didn't feel she would ever want to go back, but at least being on sick leave would give her some breathing space. The problem was, who would she get the sick note from? She could see no way round it but to make an appointment to see her own doctor back in Runcorn and explain matters to him. She had known him for years and he was not Paul's doctor, so there would be no danger of running into Paul during her visit. With that thought, she picked up the phone and rang the surgery. Amazingly, she managed to get a cancellation for that day, at half past one, which would give her time to get ready and get there without too much of a rush. The internet was forgotten as Julia closed down the computer and went upstairs to get ready.

She arrived at the surgery in plenty of time. It felt strange to be back on home ground. After all that had



happened over the last few days, it seemed like another life to her now. The receptionist called her name and she went into the consultation room. Dr. Steele looked up as she entered and smiled. He knew she was a teacher and was sympathetic to the demands of the job as some of his own family were teachers. She thought he was probably a little younger than her but he'd been in the practice for years. Tall and almost skeletally thin, he leaned back in his chair and pressed his long fingers together.

"Well now, Mrs Chambers, what can I do for you?" he asked. Julia began her tale, but to her horror, as if all the emotions of the past couple of weeks joined with the pressures of the last few years climaxed inside her, she felt tears coursing down her cheeks. She searched in vain in her bag and pockets for a tissue but Dr. Steele was already holding out a box towards her. Thankfully she grabbed a handful and blew her nose.

"I'm so sorry, I really didn't mean to do that," she stammered.

"No problem, take your time," he said by way of reply. "What has brought you to this state?"

Haltingly, she told him if the events which had led to

her walking out of school.

"Things aren't good at home, either," she added. "My husband and I don't really communicate any more. We live separate lives and it's getting to the stage where I don't want to be there any more."

She felt that to tell him about Paul's attitude and periodic infidelities would be disloyal but she explained that she had found somewhere to rent on a short term basis to give herself the chance to evaluate her life and make decisions for the future. The doctor nodded. He saw many women sitting in front of him wondering what their lives had been about up to now and what the future held for them just as Julia was and often wondered what the catalyst was that suddenly caused them to decide enough was enough. Sometimes, he was amazed that they had stuck with it as long as they had. He began to write, his pen held awkwardly in his left hand.

"I'm signing you off work for six weeks," he said, "but I want you to come back in five and we'll see whether you need further time off at that stage."

Julia nodded. She felt as though a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders, not because of the sick note but because, at last, another professional being had looked at her and recognised the torment she had been going through in her life. Her mind went back to Paul's latest reaction when she had come home complaining about Derek O'Rourke's attitude a few weeks ago.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, Julia. I'm fed up with hearing about all this, If you don't like it, just leave. We don't really need your salary anyway."

This outburst had confirmed what she had long suspected, that, as far as Paul was concerned, her career didn't matter, and worse, neither did her happiness. She thought now that this had been the beginning of the end.

"Thank you, Doctor," she said and stood up to leave. He stood up to open the door for her, as he always did. "Take care," he said as she went out and she nodded.

She drove back to Glossop and arrived home as it was getting dark. She had never liked the winter months and

hated the dark evenings but tonight all she wanted was to be inside the house, curtains pulled to shut out the dark, hidden away from everyone. She unlocked the front door and switched on the hall light. Then she went through and switched on the kitchen and living room lights, the television and the kettle. Now, the house felt comfortable and as if it belonged to her. She felt relaxed and at ease with herself. Quickly she went upstairs and changed into a sweater and jeans and then went back to the kitchen to make a cup of tea and decide what she would eat that evening. Her stock of food was meagre as she hadn't bothered to shop for much more than the basics so she plumped for cheese on toast. She had never been very interested in cooking and was always happy with something simple and easy to prepare.

It was later that evening when, bored with television and not feeling in the mood to read, Julia remembered about the website for her old school and decided to check the past pupils section to see if anyone had responded to her email. She pulled the laptop onto her knee, switched on and logged on to the internet. She noticed that she had a couple of emails. The first one was from one of her colleagues at work, Anna, the teacher in the class next to

hers.

"I didn't know how to contact you," she had written, "but then I remembered I had your email address. We are all concerned about you but Derek said this morning that you are off sick indefinitely. I hope you are O.K. Please get in touch soon."

Julia read the email and then hit the delete button. She liked Anna but she was not ready to contact anyone at school at the moment. There didn't seem to be any answer to her emails to Lorna and Angela, but as she noticed this, a pop-up message flashed up in the corner of the screen indicating that she had just received another email. She navigated back to her inbox. There was an email waiting for her, from Alan Edwards, care of the school website. For a few seconds she stared at the name. She didn't think she knew anyone by that name, yet it seemed vaguely familiar. She clicked on the icon to open it.

"I remember you." she read, "You were very elegant and hard-working."

She stared at it. In an instant, memories flooded back. Alan Edwards, a tall, dark haired boy in her first class in Grammar school She thought he had also been in the

same primary school but wasn't sure. She couldn't picture his face, she just had a vague memory of him, fairly nondescript, not one of the high profile characters. She felt absurdly flattered at the compliment. She switched back to the website and clicked on his name to view his profile.

"I did a degree in Physics after leaving school and have taught in various parts of the country. I am married with three children, now grown up and living their own lives and am now living outside Manchester, where I am Head of Lower School in a city centre High School and looking forward to the day I can retire!"

She read it through again. Not much information there but she noted that he too, did not seem to be enjoying teaching any more. She felt disappointed that there had been no message from the friends she had tried to contact and wondered whether to ignore the email from Alan. It would be rude not to respond, though, she supposed. Slowly, she clicked on 'Reply' and began to type.

"Thanks for your email and the compliments! Yes, I

remember you too though not very well, I'm afraid. You sound as if, like me, you have had enough of teaching."

She went on to explain that she had just rented a house outside Glossop for a few months as she was off sick with stress. She didn't know why she told him that but she felt that, being in the profession, he would probably understand better than most. After skimming through what she had written she clicked on the 'send' button and then went back to surfing the internet.

Just then her mobile phone rang. She picked it up and looked to see who was ringing although she knew that the only people with this new number were Kate and the estate agent. It was Kate, a rather agitated Kate.

"Look, Mum," she began without any preamble, "Dad is absolutely furious that you have disappeared without a trace. He is leaning on me for information, which I haven't got anyway, but it's putting me in an awkward position. I sympathise with you but I really don't want to be playing pig in the middle between you two."

She paused for breath. There was silence between them while Julia wondered how to respond to this. She had every sympathy with Kate. She didn't want to put her in an awkward position with her father either but she was adamant that she didn't want Paul to know where she was. She said all this to Kate and was relieved when her daughter responded in her normal tone.

"O.K Mum," she said at last. "Sorry for flying off the handle at you but I am worried about you, you know, and I don't like Dad thinking that I have got information that he hasn't."

"I understand that," Julia replied, "and that's why I am not telling you where I am. The only information that you have is this phone number and I really hope you won't give that to him. I have been to the doctor and been signed off work for six weeks, so it's all official now as far as the school is concerned. I am sending them the sick note today."

They left it at that and Julia felt they had parted on good terms, considering the situation.



"I'll keep ringing you to let you know how I am, " she promised and with this Kate had to be content.

## Chapter 5

For the next few days, Julia settled into a routine of shopping, when necessary, walking on the moors, doing whatever housework she felt necessary and pottering in the garden. She had never been very interested in gardening and knew little about it but she found it a soothing activity. She pulled up plants that she thought were probably weeds, although she wasn't really sure, cut back the rose bushes and generally tidied up. She felt it was beginning to look more cared for, except for the lawn which badly needed mowing. At the bottom of the long back garden was a derelict looking shed, which looked a likely place to house a lawnmower. The door was padlocked but Julia found the key in one of the kitchen drawers. Inside, the shed was gloomy and cobwebby. Julia hated spiders but she was determined to find a lawnmower, so, tiptoeing in, making sure not to brush against the walls, she waited for her eyes to become accustomed to the gloom and carefully looked all around her. Finally, underneath a piece of old sacking, she saw what looked like the shape of a lawnmower underneath. Pulling gingerly at the sacking in case of any mini-beasts lurking in its folds, she discovered that it

was indeed a lawnmower. After ten minutes of struggling, she managed to manhandle it over to the doorway and push it onto the lawn. She was less than impressed to discover that it was an old fashioned one. The only power that was going to get this moving was woman power! Groaning, she pulled it to the corner of the lawn and began the battle against the unkempt grass.

Two hours later, dirty, dishevelled and exhausted but with a pleasant feeling of satisfaction which only comes with physical labour, Julia stopped for a breather and looked around her. The lawn was still not finished but she had managed to do about half of it and with that she had to be content. She had no energy left to do any more and the light was beginning to go in any case. She would have to finish it tomorrow. She dragged it back to the shed and stuck it just inside the door. She didn't need to lock it again, she thought. It wasn't likely that anyone was going to break into that shed anyway. Suddenly, she felt hungry and she was dying for a cup of tea. Inside the house, once the lights were on, it felt homely. In fact she was pleasantly surprised at how much at ease she felt here. Since her first night in the house, she had felt as if she

belonged here and she was sleeping better than she had in years too.

She sat down on the sofa and flipped through the channels on the television, searching for something she felt in the mood to watch, but found nothing. Her gaze turned towards the laptop. Would there be any emails for her today? She'd been so busy with other things, she hadn't bothered to check for the last few days. Quickly she switched it on and waited for it to boot up. Once on the internet, she noticed she did indeed have a few emails. She trawled through the names - all adverts from firms with whom she had shopped online in the past, then she saw Alan Edwards' name again. She clicked on the email to open it.

"Sorry I haven't replied sooner," he wrote, "but I've been on a course in London for the past two days so didn't have access to my computer."

There followed some mundane details about the course and how useless he had found it. He was bemoaning the fact that the sparkle had gone out of the job for him and he

really wanted to be able to retire. Join the club! thought Julia as she read his words. She clicked on 'Reply' and began to compose her email. She told him about the scene at school when she had walked out and a brief resume of what had happened since. As she typed, she wondered to herself why she was unloading all this onto someone she had not set eyes on for more than thirty years. It didn't make sense and yet she felt again that, being a teacher himself, he would understand. She finished the email and without bothering to read it through, clicked on 'send.' Without thinking any more about it, she looked at the other emails in her inbox and quickly deleted them. She looked at the news online and then, just as she was about to log off, she glanced at the bottom of the screen.

"You have received a message from Alan Edwards" she read. Surprised, she opened it. More mundane chat and commiserations for her recent experiences, and then,

"Can't help noticing, you haven't made any mention of your husband."

She took her hands away from the keyboard and stared at the words, wondering how to respond. How could she talk

about her marriage to someone who was essentially a stranger, even if she wanted to? But she didn't really. Although she no longer thought that Paul deserved her loyalty, she felt she would demean herself by discussing either him or her marriage. She decided she couldn't respond to this tonight. She was too tired and she would need to reflect on how she was going to reply.

In the morning, Julia avoided the computer and instead went straight into the garden after breakfast to try and finish the mammoth task of mowing the lawn. She hadn't realised what an enormous job it was. It was years since she had used a mower that wasn't electrically powered and while she appreciated the work-out, she did find it exhausting. After a couple of hours, she had finished it to her satisfaction and decided to have a break and some lunch. She was determined to get the front lawn done today as well, and, as it was a much smaller area, she didn't anticipate that it would take too long. She just had to be disciplined and get on with it.

It was as she was trundling the lawnmower round to the front of the house that she became aware of a maroon Rover

pulling up outside the gate. Her first reaction was one of interest as she noticed that the Rover, although an older model, was well looked after and gleaming like a much newer car. Her second thought was one of surprise, as the man who got out of the car, was opening the gate, obviously intending to come in. She couldn't imagine who would be visiting her here. After all, no-one knew he was here apart from Mr Groves the estate agent, and it certainly wasn't him. The visitor came towards her slowly. He was taller than her, grey hair curling slightly above the colour of his suede jacket and he was smiling.

"Good afternoon - Mrs Chambers is it?" She nodded without speaking. He seemed strangely amused at her puzzled expression but not in the least anxious to explain his presence in her front garden.

"Can I help you?" she enquired politely and took off one gardening glove to shake hands.

"I think you already have," he replied. His voice was soft and cultured and there was no trace of a northern accent, she noticed. She waited for him to continue. He

looked at her more closely, as if searching for something and then smiled again as if satisfied.

"You don't know who I am, do you?" he said finally. "Er, well," Julia began, completely at a loss and beginning to be concerned that she had a customer of the local 'Care in the Community' scheme on her hands. But the man didn't let her finish.

"I'd better explain and put you out of your misery," he laughed. "I am the owner of this house."

"Oh, I see," said Julia, relieved. As the estate agency was handling the letting of the house, she had not needed to be informed of the owner's name as all her dealings were through them.

"Well, you'd better come in, then," she continued, "I'm sorry I didn't know who you were but I wasn't told you were coming."

"Don't worry about that," was the reply, "but I'd better introduce myself. I have the advantage, you see. I know exactly who you are but you still haven't recognised me, have you?"

Julia stared at him, not knowing what to say. How



could this stranger know who she was. They couldn't even have any mutual friends or acquaintances, as she had only just moved to this area and, as yet, knew no-one. He laughed at her discomfort.

"I think I'd better explain. My name is Alan Edwards," he said. Still Julia did not understand. She had been emailing Alan Edwards whom she had been at school with, but..... then things began to fall into place in her mind.

"So you realised from my email that I was your new tenant! Well, what an amazing coincidence. I can't believe it!"

She shook her head as though doing so would make everything fall into place. They walked slowly up the path and into the house. Julia put the kettle on and set out two mugs for coffee. Meanwhile Alan sat down at the kitchen table and looked around.

"It's a few months since I've been in here," he said. "My aunt and uncle died one after the other and as they had no children, I inherited the place.

"But didn't you think of moving here yourself?" asked Julia incredulously. "It's in such beautiful surroundings. I've fallen in love with it already." And she told Alan how she had noticed it all those years ago and taken a liking to it even then, but Alan was shaking his head.

"Not practical," he said. "The weather can be bad here in winter which could make it difficult for me to get to school. Traffic's heavy too in rush hour. I'm not one for sitting in traffic jams. My working day is long enough." He laughed. "Mind you," he added, "I wouldn't have minded keeping it as a weekend and holiday retreat, but, being practical, it's better to rent or sell it. As the housing market is rather quiet at the moment, it seemed more sensible to rent for now. If I'd kept it for myself, the upkeep would start getting expensive and it seemed a shame for it to be empty most of the year."

He sounded regretful and Julia felt some sympathy for him.

"Anyway," she said, "What have you been up to since those dim and distant school days?"

For the next half hour, they exchanged memories of far distant school days and mutual acquaintances. Julia told Alan about her father dying ten years ago and Alan reminisced about his parents' deaths and his marriage while still at university.

"I was always very shy with girls," he said. "I always wanted to ask you out in the sixth form but I never had the courage. You seemed so...unapproachable, I suppose."

"But I did go out with some boys in the sixth form," protested Julia. "Do you remember Jack Hughes? He asked me out but, actually, although I said yes at the time, I thought better of it and stood him up! We did go out later though. He was very forgiving." They both laughed.

"So, is your wife a teacher too?" asked Julia tentatively. She wasn't sure about broaching this subject as she had been so unwilling to give information on her own marriage only the previous evening.

"No," replied Alan, "and she's my ex-wife. She still lives quite near me but - she has her life and I have mine." He didn't continue so Julia said, "Do you mind my

asking what happened?"

He didn't answer immediately and she began to think she shouldn't have asked. Just as she was about to change the subject to cover the awkwardness, he spoke again. He was looking away from her at the wall opposite. "I was unfaithful," he said baldly. Julia was astonished. She looked at him expectantly but he was still not looking at her and still not speaking.

"I see," she said finally, not seeing at all.

"Yes," he said. He looked at her. "I don't feel proud of it, but, in my favour, things hadn't been right between us for a couple of years. She's a very independent woman, you know, my wife; likes to live her own life. I...I didn't get talked to, I suppose, didn't get taken any notice of and gradually we grew apart, lived our own lives and then I met someone at work, several years younger than me. She was married too. It didn't last and she decided to stay with her husband. He never found out, so I suppose there is that to be thankful for. One less person hurt." He fell silent again and sat, head bowed, nursing his empty coffee mug.

The Julia of a few weeks ago would have taken a sceptical view of Alan's version of events as well as being somewhat shocked at his behaviour. The new Julia, however, took the revelations in her stride. She surprised herself at her reaction, but in fact, she actually felt some sympathy, probably because of the similarities of their situations. Her husband had had 'flings' during their marriage. Whilst usually of short duration and not in any way full blown affairs, they had still had a damaging effect on the relationship between them over the years. How could they not? And now, wasn't she living through the end result? She knew in her heart that she would never go back to Paul although she had no intention yet of sharing that knowledge with the rest of her family.

In the moments that these thoughts went through her mind, Julia got up from her chair, picked up the two coffee mugs and took them over to the sink. To give herself more time, she placed them in the sink and ran the cold water tap to rinse them. Finally she turned round.

"I'm sorry," she said simply.

"No need," he replied. "We make our own decisions in

life, don't we?" He smiled at her. "I don't regret the ending of my marriage, although I do regret the way it happened. I feel guilty that I caused my wife and the girl I had the affair with more suffering than necessary."

"But you were not the only one to blame," reasoned Julia. "You were all adults, you all made your own choices so you certainly shouldn't take on the responsibility of theirs as well as your own. We're not responsible for other people's happiness."

As she said this, Julia felt convinced of its truth. One day, these words would come back to haunt her. But for now, she only wanted to offer support to someone who had obviously undergone upheavals in his life that she in part understood. She was aware that Alan was speaking again.

"It's very kind of you to be so sympathetic," he said, "but I seem to remember you always were a very nice person." Again, the teasing smile. She felt herself becoming embarrassed and indicated that they should go through to the living room but he didn't move. He was still looking at her consideringly.

"So, what about you?" he asked quietly. "I get the impression you have been through the mill too. I did notice that you ignored my question in the email about your

husband. If I'm being too nosey, just tell me to shut up."

"No, of course you're not," she protested quickly and then realised that he had led her into the very territory she had wanted to avoid. She sighed.

"Actually," she said, "when I walked out of school that afternoon, I also walked out of my marriage, although I didn't even think about that at the time." She paused. "You're the only person I've actually told," she said, surprised at the realisation. "But now that I've actually said it aloud, I feel much better about it. And I know it's the right decision," she added firmly. "Although it's not going to be easy."

He won't give in without a fight, she reflected, but this thought she did not share.

Alan had noticed the time on the clock in the living room. "Time I was off," he said suddenly. "I have a lot of marking that I have to get done tonight. Bet that's something you're not missing!" Julia laughed in agreement and walked with him to the front door. "Well," she said, "Maybe you'll call in again sometime - just to check I'm not wrecking the house?"

"I certainly will," Alan assured her, "and in the

meantime, we can keep in touch by email, can't we?"

He looked at her, seeming to need her reassurance that they would indeed keep in touch. She smiled and nodded.

"Of course we can."

He walked down the path and turned to wave to her at the gate. Julia watched the maroon Rover turn in the road outside, tyres scrunching, and then glide out of sight up the road towards Glossop. She turned to go back into the house, musing on the conversation. From what she remembered of Alan at school, she was surprised at his admission. She would have thought he was the type to stay happily married, faithful and the proud owner of a little semi somewhere in suburbia.

Just shows, she thought, you never really know other people.

And after all, they had never really been friends at school so she couldn't claim to have known him all that well anyway.



## Chapter 6

The days passed uneventfully, almost merging into one another. Julia was amazed at how quickly she had settled into what was, in essence, a very mundane routine, but she was happy in it. Her days were filled and she went to bed tired and slept peacefully. She remembered the old adage, "Work expands to fit the time allotted to it." Something like that had happened in her daily life. When she remembered what her daily routine used to be, she had difficulty believing how much she had managed to cram into every twenty four hours, but she was very relieved not to be on that treadmill any more.

She had just had some lunch one day and was intending to go back in the garden to do some more tidying up before winter set in when the phone rang. Julia went to answer it, thinking it would be Kate. It was Paul. She stood for a moment, frozen, not knowing what to say and then,

"How did you get my phone number?" she asked. She couldn't believe Kate had given it to him.

"From the Local Education Authority," he said smoothly. "I rang and told them I was your husband and had mislaid your new phone number. What the hell do you think

you're playing at?"

The voice was low but the anger was evident.

"I needed a break," stammered Julia. She must pull herself together, she thought. "I am on extended sick leave and I felt I needed to get right away from everything."

"Including me?"

"Yes, including you. You know how difficult things have been getting between us. I couldn't carry on much longer."

"And you didn't think we might talk about it first, before you ran off and worried us all to death, wondering what had become of you?" he enquired, voice still dangerously low and contained.

"Talk!" she cried, "Do you think I haven't tried again and again to tell you how I felt? I'm not happy with you, Paul. I haven't been happy for a long, long time. I can't bear to live like this any longer. It's not living, it's existing. There has to be more to life than that!"

She stopped and waited for the backlash she knew must come. Instead, there was a short silence and then,

"Very well. You have made your decision, but don't bother to come back here when you change your mind, when

things get difficult - and they will! Don't come back, do you hear?"

The phone went dead and Julia stood rigidly, staring at the phone in her hand. Her mind was racing. Paul had been able to obtain her phone number from the Local Education Authority. She remembered giving the school her new details when she sent in her sick note, so they must have passed those details on to the LEA, which, of course, they would have to, but why would the Authority give him her number? She picked up her diary with all her phone numbers in and flicked through the pages looking for the LEA's phone number. She asked for Personnel and was eventually put through to 'Human Resources.' By now she was angry and wasted no time communicating that fact to the personnel officer at the other end.

"But Mrs Chambers," was the reply when Julia finally drew breath, "Your husband gave us to understand that he had simply mislaid your number and that you were away for a few days recuperating. We didn't, of course, give him your address. We had nothing on your record to say that you didn't want your number to be given to anyone."

Julia was silent, realising the logic of the woman's words. How could they know she didn't want to be found?

"O.K. I accept that," she said finally, "but I would like it put on my record as from now that I don't want my details to be given out to anyone at all."

She felt a little calmer as she put the phone down but then she began to worry again. What if Paul was able to get her address from her phone number? She picked up the phone again and rang Kate at work, hoping she would be able to talk. Kate answered.

"No, mum," she said in answer to Julia's query, "I'm sure you can't get someone's address just from knowing their phone number. Don't worry about it. What's more important is for you to sort out what you are going to do with yourself. How are you getting on?"

"Fine," Julia responded mechanically, her mind still on the recent conversation with Paul. "I'm getting the garden into shape now. In fact, I'm quite enjoying the exercise and fresh air. I've probably pulled out a good few plants instead of weeds, but it's looking better." Her voice tailed off. Her life was so uneventful now that she

really had nothing more to tell, except about meeting Alan, of course, but about that, she said nothing.

They chatted for a few more minutes and then Kate was called away. Julia went to make a cup of tea and to think. She sat at the kitchen table, hands cupping the mug of tea, absent-mindedly aware of the sound of birdsong in the garden. It was now late autumn but a dry, cold day. The air was hanging motionless, as it often does in autumn on the moors but Julia was scarcely aware of all this. Her mind was far away, reliving that night at the party when she had first met Paul.

She had always been a bit of a wallflower at parties, not because she was anti-social but because she was shy and lacking in self-confidence, something which, fortunately, became less of a problem as she got older. This party was full of people she didn't know and didn't seem to want to know her, she thought, gripping a plastic glass of wine in one hand and a paper plate with the other. The challenge of the moment was to navigate to the table in the corner of the large dining room to put some food on her plate without, in the meantime spilling wine on herself or, much

worse, on anyone else. She had managed it almost to the table when suddenly, her elbow was jogged from behind and an arc of wine shot out of the glass and onto the expensive-looking beige carpet.

"Lucky it was white wine and not red!" said a cheery voice over her shoulder. "Sorry about that. Not looking where I was going, as usual."

Julia turned to find herself face to face with a tall, good looking man who looked about her own age but far more self assured. She mentally registered the finely chiselled features and the long, slim fingers holding his own glass. She had never seen such elegant hands on a man. Hmm, not bad looking either, very easy on the eye, in fact! Her gaze took in the dark, wiry hair, and the amused expression in the blue eyes. As these thoughts were passing through her mind, she was in turn apologising and feeling more embarrassed at being on the receiving end of this attention than she previously had at being ignored. But Paul, as he quickly made himself known to her, seemed oblivious to her embarrassment and gave the impression of being delighted to have bumped into her.

"I've never seen you at these parties before!" he exclaimed, taking her plate and steering her towards the food-laden table. Before long they were talking as if they had known each other for years. Paul had completed a degree in English Literature at Liverpool university and was now doing an M.A. and teaching part time, to make ends meet, as he said. He was renting a flat in Runcorn because, after three years as a student in Liverpool, he had had enough of the city. He enjoyed the theatre and was in an amateur dramatic society. He told her hilarious tales of his acting experiences and Julia thought she had never met anyone so fascinating. Amazingly, he seemed to feel the same about her. Living in her parents' shadow while she was growing up, she had never considered herself to be clever or interesting, but Paul's attentions persuaded her that perhaps she was both.

Within six months, they had married and Julia felt happy and content for the first time in her life. When had that feeling started to dissipate? Looking back across the intervening years, she thought it was probably when he finished his M.A. and got a job lecturing at the

university. Until then, she had always felt they shared things, funny or annoying things that happened at work in particular, but now, she increasingly felt excluded. He gradually stopped talking about work and disappeared into the study to work in the evenings. Previously, they had always worked together in the dining room, marking, planning, exchanging comments about their work and Julia had always enjoyed these times. Now, she felt lonely, shut out of part of Paul's life but, sensing that he would think she was making an unnecessary fuss, she said nothing.

She stood up and looked out of the window at the garden. She didn't want to start thinking about what had gone wrong, not at the moment. She pulled on her trainers and went to get her anorak, gloves and scarf. She needed to get out in the open, blow away the cobwebs. It was getting dark now, so, rather than go out towards Snake Pass, she turned the other way and started walking down towards Glossop. The lights in the streets and shops were starting to come on and Julia hurried towards them, as if seeking company and human contact. She passed houses where people were sitting in their front rooms, watching television, eating, being together. For the first time



since moving out here, she was feeling slightly lonely. She had no family to look after, no regular routine of work and leisure and so, in some way, she felt almost outside society. She wasn't rushing around making preparations for Christmas, arguing about who would or wouldn't be invited, she wasn't going to work every day with the social interaction it brought and, most of all, she wasn't curling up with someone on the sofa at night, sharing the day's events, loving and caring for someone. But then, that was something she hadn't experienced for years. Until now, she had compensated by throwing herself into her job until, gradually, that too had begun to lose its attraction. Was she going to be left with nothing in her life? What did she have to look forward to? What was she going to do with the rest of her life? She had spent the last quarter of a century living her life according to other people's rules and demands, always Paul's wife, Kate's mother, in latter years, Queensfield's deputy head teacher and part of her had continually chafed against the restrictions, the lack of opportunity to be just herself, to do what she wanted to do. Every bit of her life had been consumed by meeting the demands of others and now, at last, when she had the chance to be a free agent, to make her own choices, she found

herself unsure of what to do with this unfamiliar freedom. Slowly, she turned around and began to make her way back home.

She carried her evening meal into the living room on a tray and switched on the television. Idly she watched the news but as there was nothing to interest her, she switched on her computer and logged on to check her email messages. She had been doing this every evening and had received a few banal emails from Alan to which she had replied in the same vein. Tonight, there was his name again. She clicked on the message:

"Hi, Julia, it's Friday tomorrow and the weather forecast for the weekend is good so I wondered if you would like to come out walking in Derbyshire. We can break up the day with lunch at a little place I know called 'The Bird's Nest.' Make sure you wear something warm. If you are interested, let me know and I will pick you up at 10 o'clock on Saturday. Alan."

She read through the message twice and then sat back. He gave the impression of being pretty sure she would come.

'Make sure you wear something warm' he had said. Well, it couldn't do any harm and the day out would do her good. Hadn't she just been feeling sorry for herself because she had no-one to talk to and do things with? She tapped out a message accepting the invitation and clicked to send it.

## Chapter 7

Saturday dawned, as forecast, bright and sunny. There was a chill in the air and hoar frost on the lawn and on the branches of the bushes in the garden, but the sky was blue and cloudless and Julia felt her mood lightening as she finished her breakfast. She had dressed warmly, as instructed, and was now ready to be picked up. On the stroke of 10 o'clock, she heard the doorbell ring. She checked her reflection in the hall mirror as she went to answer the door.

"Good morning," Alan said as she opened the door. She was slightly amused to see that he had proper hill-walking boots on and was wearing his trousers tucked into heavy green socks.

"Oh, I'm afraid I've only got trainers," she exclaimed, "I didn't realise this was serious stuff!"

"No, it's not. It's just that I find these boots more comfortable to walk in. Don't worry, we won't go far off the beaten track. I'm not planning on taking you rock climbing!" He smiled and she noticed how his face lit up. "Well," he continued, "If you're ready, we'll get going."

Together they walked down the path and Alan opened

the passenger door for her to get into the car. The seats were leather and very comfortable. She clipped her seatbelt on and settled down. It was quite some time since she had been driven by someone else and she was looking forward to relaxing and having a chance to look at her surroundings as they drove.

They drove off up the winding road towards Snake Pass. Julia sat back in her seat and revelled in the blue, cloudless sky and the view into the valley on the right. On the left they passed numerous sheep grazing in what appeared to her to be the most inaccessible and uncomfortable places. She smiled to herself. Alan glanced briefly at her.

"What are you smiling at? If it's not private, of course."

"It's not private at all. Looking at the sheep perched up there reminded me of a tale my daughter, Kate told me. One of her friends at uni was very gullible and Kate managed to convince her that sheep who live most of their lives on hillsides develop longer legs on one side of their bodies to help them stay upright!"

Alan laughed delightedly and Julia was struck by how

attractive he was. Funny that she'd never taken any notice of him back in their school days. Maybe he'd improved with age.

The journey to Sheffield took about an hour but Alan turned off before they got to the outskirts and the route after that was not familiar to her. As they drove, Alan told her something of his job. His was a large High school and he was Head of the lower school as well as teaching for part of the week.

"I didn't really intend going into teaching but I didn't do very well in my 'A' levels so old Roper said I'd better cut my losses and try for Teacher training."

Julia smiled at the memory of their head teacher, My Roper. "I bet he wasn't very impressed with you. He must have been expecting better things."

Alan made a face. "He was furious. What annoyed him more than anything was the fact that I just hadn't done any revision."

Julia was curious. "Why was that?"

"Laziness, I suppose. I trusted to luck and hoped to scrape by but I nearly didn't. I always have been lazy." He smiled at her as if expecting her to protest.

"It's a boy thing," she said. "Girls work hard because

they are brought up with the desire to please those in authority. Boys tend to be confident in doing their own thing. They work well when they are motivated, when they are really interested in what they are doing."

"Well, that's me. I spent hours tinkering with old motor bike and car engines. I was forever at the scrapyards, begging bits of this and that. We had a big old shed at the bottom of the garden and I used to practically live down there in the summer holidays."

"On your own? I don't remember who you used to go around with at school."

"Mostly, . I was a bit of a loner, I'm afraid. Still am." He shrugged.

"But you don't still tinker with engines?" Julia enquired.

Alan laughed. "No, not any more. I moved on to playing the violin and hill walking."

As they talked, the years since their own school days fell away. It was as if they had never lost contact and before they knew it, Alan was pulling up in a little car park somewhere in the Peak district.

"Where are we?" asked Julia.

"Just a little place I come to sometimes. I have a few

favourite places for walking and this is one of them. I thought you would like it too."

Julia got out of the car and looked around her. The only sound that broke the silence around them was of birdsong. It was unbelievably peaceful. She sighed contentedly.

"It's wonderful," was all she said. Alan seemed pleased at her reaction.

"I'm glad you like it. Now, are you ready for some walking?"

The first part of their walk was uphill. Julia had thought she was fairly fit but she struggled to keep up with Alan. He had a small rucksack on his back and, seeing that she was struggling a little, he slowed down and took out a bottle of water. He took off the cap and offered it to her. She drank some water and then handed it back.

"I needed that," she said. "I thought I was fitter than this!"

"You'll have to come out with me more often," he said, smiling.

She was silent. She hadn't thought about this long



term. Did she want to make a habit of going out with Alan?

"Why not?" she asked herself. "After all, it's only walking. We're two mature adults." She smiled to herself. Alan, looking sideways at her, noticed but said nothing. They walked and talked for an hour and a half until Alan finally looked at his watch and Julia suddenly realised she was starving.

"Time to go back to the car and find some lunch, I think," he said.

Back in the car, Alan swung out of the car park and set off towards the pub where they were to have lunch. It was an attractive building, long and low with a thatched roof and inside, a cosy log fire. Alan had booked a table and they were soon shown to their seats. The warm, welcoming atmosphere of the pub and the red wine she was drinking made Julia feel relaxed.

"You're so lucky to live near such lovely countryside. I expect you come out here quite a lot, do you?"

"Whenever I have time, which is fairly often, I suppose. Apart from work commitments, there's nothing much else in my life." He saw that Julia looked incredulous and continued.

"I meant what I said before about being a loner. I still don't really have any friends, you know. I live quite a lonely life."

"Oh but you have," she replied impulsively, "You have me now!"

He smiled, leaned forward and took her hand in his. "Thanks for that," he said, "It means a lot to me."

Again, she felt awkward but at the same time there was a tiny bubble of excitement deep within her. She was pleased that he valued her friendship. It seemed ages since she had been aware of anyone being appreciative of her company.

Sad woman! she told herself.

Gently, she pulled her hand away and picked up her knife and fork to start eating. Their conversation returned to everyday matters and the atmosphere returned to normal.

Later, when they were driving back to Julia's house, she reflected on the day and was surprised at how much she had enjoyed it. They had talked themselves hoarse and Julia found herself hoping that Alan would suggest another outing soon. He pulled up outside the house and switched off the

engine. It was already beginning to get dark and they could see the lights of Glossop twinkling in the distance below them.

"I did enjoy the day," Julia said. "Thank you so much. It was such a lovely change."

She was aware that she was being a little too effusive but she had enjoyed the day and it had been a pleasant change to have company.

Alan smiled. "I enjoyed it too, more than you know."

Julia squeezed his hand and started to open the car door but Alan stopped her.

"Maybe we could do something together again soon?"

"Yes, I'd like that," she replied, her hand still on the door.

"I'll be in touch," he promised as she got out of the car. "Give me your mobile number and I can ring you or text you during the week."

She gave him her number and closed the car door. She smiled and waved as he started the engine and drove off down the road. Then she turned and felt in her pocket for her door key. She walked slowly up the path and let herself in, switching on all the downstairs lights, as was now her

habit. Peeling off her outdoor clothes, she wandered into the kitchen, filled the kettle and then stood by the window, gazing out at the garden in the rapidly fading light. Once again, she was in that place of observing herself. She let her mind trawl through the day's events and marvelled at herself and her reactions during the day. It had felt so natural, those hours with Alan. No, natural wasn't strong enough - joyous, she thought, that described it better. Being with someone who was so easy to talk to, who could relate to her experiences and feelings and share his own so easily. How long had it been since she had felt accepted like that? She had grown so used to having to think carefully about what she said in case it caused conflict with Paul and she suddenly realised how years of his judgemental attitude towards her had moulded her into an insecure middle aged woman with little confidence whose main aim in life was to get through each day without having to endure his sarcasm and put-downs. Today she had felt like a real person, dammit, she had felt happy!

She spent the rest of the evening catching up with the ironing, reading and watching television before turning in for the night an hour earlier than usual, probably, she

supposed, as a result of all the fresh air and exercise. She slept soundly and dreamlessly and awoke in the morning refreshed and full of energy. Throwing the quilt back, she got out of bed and pulled on her dressing gown and slippers. Since she had been in this house, she had made it a rule not to breakfast before she had showered and dressed, otherwise she felt she would get into a habit of sitting around in her night clothes for half the day, and she wanted to avoid that but today, she felt impelled to go straight down to the kitchen and make herself a cup of tea before getting ready for the day. After all, it was Sunday, a day of rest, as were all her days at present. She had taken to having the daily paper delivered and, as she was waiting for the kettle to boil, she heard it plop through the letter box onto the mat. She padded out to retrieve it and sat at the kitchen table to glance through it while she drank her tea. There seemed to be little of interest to her, so she carried her tea into the living room, intending to go online but as she crossed the room, she noticed her mobile phone on the coffee table and switched it on, as she always did in each morning. To her surprise, she heard the beep that told her she had a message. Picking up the phone, she was surprised to see on its screen that she had no

fewer than 5 messages, all from Alan. Intrigued, she opened the first one.

"It is very late and I can't sleep. I want to talk but your phone is off."

The time of this message was 1.30am. She opened each of the other four in turn.

"Wake up, wake up, wake up".

Each message was the same and had been sent at half hourly intervals. Julia sat down suddenly on the sofa. What on earth was she to make of that? Suddenly, she felt excited, like a sixteen year old instead of the sensible, mature 53 year old she was supposed to be. She looked again at the phone, still in her hand and scrolled through all the messages again, reading each one, as though she might have imagined them the first time. But no, they were still there. She wasn't dreaming or imagining things. She sat back on the sofa, staring at the phone in her hand. So now what?

She plonked the phone back on the coffee table and went to get showered and dressed. As she was drying her hair, she thought again of the messages and again wondered what to do. The ball seemed definitely to be in her court. How was she going to handle it? How did she want to handle

it? Being totally honest with herself, the text messages had thrilled her and she was dying to reply to them. So, why not? She was still married, true, but the marriage was over in all but name and had been for several years, if the truth were told. Alan had already told her he was divorced, so what was stopping her? Nothing, she told herself. Let's do it! She ran downstairs and grabbed her phone. Ten o'clock on a Sunday morning was probably not the best time to ring someone. She'd better text him.

So sorry I had switched my phone off. Ring me when you wake up.

## Chapter 8

Julia decided to pass the time by walking into Glossop to buy some milk. She had taken to doing this since she had been here. Walking down to the shops gave her some exercise and fresh air as well as providing a focus for the walk. She loved going out on the moors to walk, but sometimes, being on her own, it lost its appeal; it was just walking for the sake of walking. Not that she was getting bored with her new life. On the contrary, she had established a pleasant, leisurely routine which filled the day surprisingly well and she loved having the time to observe autumn as it gradually transformed into winter. Alan had mentioned that winter here could be severe, but she wasn't concerned about that. She didn't think she would get snowed in and she was within walking distance of Glossop if it got too bad for driving.

She suddenly realised that she had come out without her mobile phone so she quickened her steps, clutching the carton of milk. Back home, she went to the coffee table and picked up the phone which was still lying where she had left it. She noticed it was showing the message icon and opened it up. It was from Alan, as she expected.



"Can I call and see you at 12.30? We can go for some lunch and then, maybe for a walk. Alan x"

She noticed the kiss with mixed emotions. Was it just a friendly symbol that didn't really mean anything much? On reflection, she thought it probably was. Was that a flicker of disappointment she felt at this thought? She didn't want to consider that question yet. She glanced at her watch. It was already mid-day, so she had better hurry up and get ready. If they were walking after lunch, she needed to change into something practical.

At 12.30 on the dot, the door bell rang and Julia went to answer it.

"Good morning," said Alan cheerfully as the door opened. "How are you today?"

"Puzzled," Julia said, not knowing what to make of this friendly cheeriness after the text messages of the previous night. "I, er, I got your text messages this morning. So you weren't sleeping last night?" Her voice tailed off. Alan was looking at her intently.

"I am sorry I wasn't awake," she said impulsively, "I would love to have talked to you if you couldn't sleep. I'll keep my phone on all night in future." She laughed.

"I'm sorry about that. The result of a bit too much wine during the evening. I just felt very lonely and wanted to talk to you. I do enjoy talking to you."

He took her hand in both of his and looked down at her. The moment was suddenly shattered by the landline phone ringing shrilly, startling them both. Julia went to answer it. It was Kate.

"Just thought I'd ring to see how you were," she said.

"I'm fine, but I'm er, I'm just about to go out for a walk."

Instinctively, she felt she didn't want to tell Kate about Alan just yet.

"Oh, well in that case, I'll let you go." Julia could tell she was puzzled that her mother didn't want to stay and talk. Well, she would have to make it up to her later.

Over lunch, they talked about anything and everything but what was at the forefront of Julia's mind. Then suddenly,

"I meant what I said. I do love talking to you," said Alan.

"I have loved talking to you too," Julia replied. "It

feels as if we have we have known each other ever since our school days without a break. Thirty-five years of living totally separate lives have vanished without a trace. And it's all the more strange because, when we were at school, we didn't even know each other particularly well."

"Yes, it is strange, but those thirty-five years have passed and they have shaped our lives one way and another."

Julia was intrigued. "What do you mean? Obviously you're right but why should that influence us now?"

Alan explained. "I have suffered depression for the last few years as a result of the guilt I felt over my marriage break-up."

"Oh," She felt suddenly deflated. "So you do regret it, although the other day you said you didn't."

"No." Alan hastened to reassure her. "I don't but the fact remains that I caused suffering to my wife and the girl I had the affair with and also to my children. They found it very hard to come to terms with my affair. They still do."

"Well in the first place," said Julia, "marriage break-ups and divorces happen all the time and children cope with it and, anyway, your children are adults, so surely they have their own lives to lead." She felt a sense

of disappointment at what she saw as Alan's backtracking.

"Yes," said Alan briskly, "You are quite right."

"And anyway," Julia continued, "If anyone should be feeling guilty it's me, as I am officially still married. At least you are divorced and so you are a free agent."

She suddenly realised where this conversation could be leading and fell silent.

Alan spoke quietly. "But that's the other reason why I feel I have to tread carefully. You have only just left your marriage, so you are still in a vulnerable position and I don't want to be seen as taking advantage of that."

"Oh, you're not!" Julia assured him. "My marriage has been over in essence for several years now. The only reason I didn't leave long ago was because I was a coward. I suppose you could say it was fear of the unknown. I'm not the most self confident person in the world and I suppose I was afraid of taking the plunge and making a mess of things and then having to go crawling back. When I did leave, it was on the spur of the moment - the straw that broke the camel's back."

Alan smiled and then he took both her hands in his.

"You don't know how much it means to me, to have your friendship and your support," he said. He was looking at

her intently and she looked down at their joined hands, suddenly embarrassed.

"Let's go for that walk," she said briskly and stood up.

Together they walked out of the pub and down the road. Alan took her hand and held it as they walked past the mix of small shops and houses that made up the further end of the High Street. The sun and blue sky of the morning had given way to cloud and now the light was beginning to go.

"Soon it will be the shortest day," Alan remarked. The thought took Julia by surprise.

As she was no longer working, the days were slipping by unlabelled and unremembered. Since her last appointment with her doctor in the first week of November, she couldn't have told anyone the date if they had asked her.

"When does term finish?" she asked.

"Only another couple of weeks now. But there's so much to get through before then."

"Yes. That's what always spoiled the weeks before Christmas for me when I was at school. There is so much to get through before you can look forward to Christmas and then, there are all the preparations at home to get

through too."

"What are your plans for Christmas?" he asked.

"I'm really not sure. I think I will have to play it by ear. It depends on what Kate is doing and what my mother expects of me. Believe it or not, I still haven't been in contact with her since I ran away. Kate has explained to her what has happened of course, but I think she is finding it difficult to come to terms with what I have done. She believes marriage is for life."

"So she's not going to make it easy for you, then," Alan observed as they crossed the road to avoid a gang of youngsters crowded on the narrow pavement.

"No, and I have to be careful not to put Kate in an awkward position. What about your plans?"

"I am already committed to going to my daughter's. She's married and lives in Dorset. They have two small boys, so it won't exactly be peaceful and quiet!"

He laughed. "Still, I have to do my duty as grandfather and it is a few months since I last saw them."

"So you have a girl and two boys?" As Julia asked the question she realised that, in all their hours of talking, he had said nothing about his children. All she knew was what she had read on their old school website.

"Yes, that's right. Dawn is the eldest, twenty eight now. She married early, too early in my opinion but it's what she wanted. Tom is twenty three and works in banking in Scotland. He has a good job and I think there are a few girlfriends in his life but he's too young to settle down yet."

"And what about the youngest?" prompted Julia.

"Damian? He's nineteen and at university in Manchester. He'll be finishing for Christmas very soon. Long holidays at uni!" He laughed.

"So, where does he live?" Julia asked. She thought she already knew the answer to this.

"Oh, he divides his time between Helen and myself, but mostly he lives with me. I'm afraid Helen irritates him these days. He feels she still treats him as a kid, tries to control his life, you know the sort of thing."

Julia said nothing. By common consent, they turned at the next side road and retraced their steps. Suddenly it was dusk and the street lights were lit up along the road as far as they could see. Julia shivered. It was getting cold.

"Better get you back home," said Alan, quickening his

steps. "Let's get back to the car and get warm."

Back at the house, Alan walked her up the path and stood at the front door.

"Come in and I'll make us a cup of tea," Julia suggested, but Alan shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said regretfully, "I can't. I play the violin in a quartet and Sunday night is our practice night. We are taking part in a concert a week from now, so I can't afford to miss any practices. I'll be in touch, but before I go, can I have a hug?"

Julia was taken by surprise. "Of course," she said and felt his arms around her shoulders. As Alan released her, he planted a light kiss on her cheek and then he was gone, walking swiftly back to his car. Julia watched as he quickly turned the car round and sped off up the road, brake lights winking in the darkness. She turned and went into the house, not quite knowing what to make of the afternoon's events.



## Chapter 9

Julia didn't ring Kate that evening but at about eight o'clock, the phone rang and it was her mother.

"At last!" she exclaimed, hearing the sound of Julia's voice. "How long was I going to have to wait before you decided to call me?"

"Mum." Julia felt her heart sink. She really didn't feel in the mood to do battle with her mother tonight. "How are you?"

"How do you expect me to be? Worried sick over you, of course! What on earth do you think you are playing at? Kate rang me to tell me what you had done weeks ago. I must say, I did expect you to contact me before now."

"So how did you get the number?" Julia asked, when she could get a word in, although she knew the answer already.

"I rang Paul and he said he had got your number from the LEA. He said he had tried to talk to you but you weren't being reasonable. He is very worried about you, you know, Julia. I don't think you realise how much of an upheaval you have caused."

"Don't you think you should listen to my side of the story before making judgements?" Julia said acidly, but

the tone of voice was lost on her mother.

"I know you've had some difficult times at school, but running away never solved anything, you know."

"Look, Mum," Julia interrupted, "I know you're trying to help but you have no idea what things have been like for the past few years, at school and at home. I can't carry on with my life as it was any more and that's the truth. I didn't take the decision lightly to leave my marriage, or my job, for that matter."

She was beginning to feel close to tears but she didn't want her mother to hear her crying on the phone.

"Look, Mum, I'm sorry, I don't feel ready to talk about this. You'll have to give me more time. Bye."

Quickly she put the phone down and sat rigidly on the sofa. She could feel the muscles in her stomach tightening as they always did when she was upset or worried. She went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. She must calm herself down or she wouldn't sleep tonight. Trust Paul to give her mother her phone number. And trust her mother to ring up, not to support her, like other mothers would, but to criticise her.

The kettle boiled and she made the tea, stirred in the

milk and sat at the table to drink it. She had always found it difficult to stand up to her parents and even now, it did not come easily to her to argue with her mother. She had to stand firm by the decision she had made, for she admitted to herself now that she had made a decision. Whatever happened about her job, she was determined that, having now made the break, she was not going back to Paul.

I have one life, she thought, and I am not going to waste the rest of it being somewhere I don't want to be.

Eventually, she went to bed and slept, but woke suddenly at 2.30 in the morning. She lay in bed, staring at the ceiling then she switched the clock radio on by the bed. Radio 4 had given way to the World Service a couple of hours ago. She usually put the radio on if she couldn't sleep and generally, it relaxed her and enabled her to doze off again, but not tonight. She knew she wouldn't get back to sleep in a hurry tonight. The nerves in her stomach seemed to be in knots. After half an hour, she gave up the struggle and got up. She put on the radio downstairs and picked up a book. Maybe a spell of reading would relax her. Then she remembered that she had some herbal relaxation tablets in her bag. She had bought them weeks ago, before

the OFSTED inspection, another time when she was finding it impossible to sleep, but she had only taken them a couple of times. She thought they might help her tonight, in the absence of anything else, so she scrabbled in her bag to find them. As she took them out of her bag, a small card fell out onto the floor. When she picked it up, she saw that it was the appointment card from the doctor's and the date on it was only two days away. She looked at it, astonished. Had those weeks since her last visit to the doctor's really gone by already? What was she going to tell him this time? She had already had her original sick leave extended but the thought of having to go back to work left her cold. She could feel herself tensing up again.

She went back to the living room and switched on the television. Maybe that would be more effective at sending her to sleep. Eventually, she did indeed fall asleep, curled up on the sofa, half a mug of cold tea on the coffee table and the television screen flickering quietly in the corner.

Morning dawned, grey and overcast. Julia opened her eyes at half past eight. Why wasn't she in bed? Then she

remembered her sleep-disturbed night. She must have finally fallen asleep on the sofa instead of going back to bed. She propped herself up on her elbow. The television was still on in the corner so she turned up the sound to hear the morning news. Struggling to her feet, she took the half empty mug into the kitchen, rinsed it out and refilled the kettle. While she was waiting for it to boil, she stood at the kitchen window, looking out at the drizzly day outside. Not the sort of day to lighten her mood, she thought. Maybe, a trip to the Trafford Centre was in order today. After all, she had done no Christmas shopping yet. In fact, she hadn't even got any Christmas cards. Yes, retail therapy was definitely called for today and at that thought, she felt more cheerful already.

Two hours later, showered, dressed and driving towards the Trafford Centre, Julia was wondering what presents she was going to buy, but also, who she was going to buy them for. Kate certainly, her mother, she supposed, Paul? No, it would give him the impression that she might come back, and she knew she never would. What about Alan? Within a very short time, he had become part of her life. Yes, she should definitely buy something for him. The question was, what?

She hoped to find inspiration somewhere within the assortment of shops inside the shopping centre. She wandered through the walkways, passing young mothers pushing babies and toddlers in buggies or clutching toddlers' hands as they steered their way through the crowds. In the background, the usual selection of Christmas music was playing. Some of the young children in tow must have been for their visit to Santa as they were clutching goody bags emblazoned with the name of one of the main department stores. There were a lot of older people around too as well as others dressed for work, obviously snatching half an hour's shopping during their lunch break. Julia hated shopping in crowds but, although busy, the centre was bearable and, in any case, she had made up her mind to do her Christmas shopping today and now she was here, she was determined to make a good attempt. Eventually, she found an elegant watch for Kate and some gold earrings for her mother in the style that she knew she liked. There were one or two small presents to buy for colleagues at school and then the only one left was Alan. What would she choose for him? They had only renewed acquaintance a few weeks ago, so she felt it should be a token present rather than anything expensive but she didn't know much about his taste in

reading or films. Music was different. They had talked about music after she had commented on the Queen CD he was playing in the car one day. She knew he loved most music from the 60's as well as a range of classical music so eventually she picked a couple of CDs that she felt he would enjoy. Now she only needed wrapping paper and Christmas cards and she was done. As she was thinking this, she was passing a shop which had a magnificent display of decorations in the window. She stopped to look. Standing there in front of the window, she felt like a small child again. The background music had changed now to Christmas carols and at that moment, the pure, simple notes of 'Silent Night' were to be heard all around. In the window was a snowy countryside scene, white-roofed cottages in the distance, trees bowed down with their snowy burden and silhouetted against the deep blue, star speckled sky, Santa's sleigh, pulled by his team of reindeer, led, of course, by Rudolph, resplendent with his glowing nose.

For a brief moment, she was no longer in the shopping centre but in a different place and time, seven years old, at home in the early hours of Christmas morning, pretending to be asleep and, in reality, peeping out from the

bedclothes at her mother who had just crept into her room with a pillow-case full of presents. As she watched, trembling with excitement and fear in case her mother should notice that she was awake, she saw her place a little black toy cat, tail in the air, on top of the pillow-case. Julia must have moved just then, because her mother turned and looked towards the bed, but instead of being cross, as Julia had feared, she smiled, put her finger on her lips and placed the soft, fluffy cat in Julia's arms. Then she turned and tiptoed out of the room. Within seconds Julia was asleep again. In the morning, she hadn't been sure that the incident had really happened, until she looked down to see the black cat still in her arms.

Julia shook her head as if to dispel the memory. It was one of the few times she remembered her mother being gentle with her and that thought saddened her. She looked at her watch. Time to head back home, she decided. But first, she went inside the shop and bought some baubles, tinsel and other small decorations - no tree though, she was going to have a real tree from one of the local shops in Glossop. It seemed right to have a real tree now that



she was living out in the country.

That evening, while watching television, her mobile phone beeped to tell her she had a text message. Julia reached over and picked it up.

"Tomorrow I have no lessons so I am officially working at home instead of going into school. Would you like to meet up? Alan x"

Again there was the kiss. Julia selected Alan's mobile number to ring him back. She thought it was a waste of time and energy to be texting instead of talking, but to her surprise, the phone was switched off. She thought it odd that he would have switched his phone off immediately after texting her, but then she reasoned that he might have been on his way out or had work to get on with and didn't want to be distracted. So she texted a reply:

Good idea. How about a walk and then coffee? Say 10a.m.?

There was a film on television that she had wanted to see for some time and as she became engrossed in it, she quickly forgot about the text message.

The next morning, Julia woke up early and padded over to the bedroom window to check on the weather. She was pleased to find that the day was beginning bright and clear. The sun was shining and there was a powdering of frost on the lawn. She went to the bathroom to get ready and then downstairs to the kitchen to have breakfast. By ten o'clock she was ready and waiting for the ring at the door, which came, as if on cue.

"I thought we could drive over to Ladybower Reservoir today and do some walking in the area," said Alan as he waited for her to lock the front door.

"Sounds lovely," said Julia, and she got into the front seat of the car, once more relishing the comfortable softness of the leather.

"By the way," she added, "I did try to ring you to answer your text message but your phone was off."

"Oh, er, yes, I had a pile of marking to do and, to be honest, I don't keep it on unless I am expecting a call."

"Well," smiled Julia, "I thought you would have been as you had just asked me a question."

But Alan did not reply, concentrating his efforts on pulling out onto the road. Again, Julia was puzzled but she

said nothing and soon forgot the conversation as she relaxed into the seat and let herself be seduced by the view from her window.

"You know," Alan said as they walked away from the parked car a little later, "You haven't really told me what happened to make you leave your marriage. Or maybe you don't want to talk about it. Tell me to back off if you feel I'm being too nosey."

Julia laughed. "Not at all. I didn't want to talk about it till now, but I feel we have got to know each other well enough and you are so easy to talk to I feel you would understand."

She told Alan about the early days of her marriage, the birth of Kate and her subsequent discovery that, while she had been in hospital with their new baby, Alan had been entertaining himself with one of his students.

"It was a very brief fling. I only got to know about it from a remark that one of his colleagues made. I put two and two together and when I challenged Paul, he admitted it. He was so apologetic and swore it had never happened

before and never would again, only it did. Several times over the years."

Her voice was low and she was staring into the distance, not seeming to have any awareness of Alan beside her, listening to her. She went on to tell him about the baby that she had lost, Paul's apparently uncaring attitude and how, imperceptibly, they grew apart, living their own lives. She told him about how, once Kate was away at university, she had channelled her energies into her job until that, too, became a disappointment.

"It all came to a head during the OFSTED inspection," she said, "when Derek O'Rourke was hounding me about what I had or hadn't said to the inspectors in my interviews with them. I just felt I couldn't take any more, and the rest you know." Her voice tailed off and she waited for his response.

"So you feel that Paul doesn't love you any more?" he asked. She considered how to answer the question.

"No, I don't think he does," she answered, surprising herself, as if, by saying it, she was making it finally, unarguably true.

"He must be mad," Alan said gently and, pulling her

towards him, he kissed her. Without thinking, she found herself returning his kiss, then quickly pulled back.

"I can't do this," she said, "I'm still married, whether I want to be or not."

But she knew she was saying the words without meaning them and turned back to Alan, her face uplifted. The kiss marked the opening of a new stage in their friendship. They continued on their walk, more slowly now, hands joined, looking each other now and then and smiling, oblivious to everything around them. Now there was no need for words. Julia felt happier than she had for years. Suddenly, there was someone she could talk to, share her most private thoughts with, someone who valued her company, wanted to be with her, wanted to be close to her. After so many years of feeling betrayed, living with someone who seemed ever more indifferent to her, she felt she was in heaven. As if reading her thoughts, she heard Alan say, "You have no idea how happy I am that we found each other."

"I think I have," she smiled.

Later, over lunch in one of the pubs they had discovered on their walk, he talked to her about his school and how one of his jobs was to look after the primary

school pupils when they came for their visit prior to starting High school in the autumn. He told her of some of the stories he would tell them during their visit and she was amazed and impressed by his imagination. "You should write these and get them published," she said.

He shook his head.

"No," he said, "They're not for a wider audience."

"What about your music?" she asked. "You said you played in a quartet. Do you ever play in concerts?"

"Oh yes," Alan replied, "In fact, we are playing in a carol concert at the Trafford Centre next week, You must come. You would enjoy it."

"I'd love to," she exclaimed, intrigued at the prospect of observing him in a different setting.

"Good, that's settled then. I'll give you the details nearer the time."

Later, they drove back to the house and Alan dropped her off, saying he had to get back for another music rehearsal.

"I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed being with you today," he said, as he reached over to kiss her again.

"Me too," said Julia. "I'll talk to you soon," she

added, getting out of the car.

She stood watching the tail lights as the car disappeared round the bend in the road. She still didn't move when the car had gone, but remained in the same position, lost in thought until, suddenly, she shivered in the cold air and turned to go indoors. She felt as if the events of the day had happened to someone else. Things like that just didn't happen to average, conformist, middle aged women like her surely. But they had. Alan had kissed her, she had kissed him back and now their relationship felt different. They weren't just friends any more.

"Hold on," she said to herself sternly, "Steady on, don't assume. That kiss might have meant nothing to him. Don't jump the gun, whatever you do."

And with that warning in her head, she went to get her evening meal ready.

She distracted herself for a couple of hours by watching some television, then she had a long, leisurely bath, washed and dried her hair and gave herself an manicure. When all that was done, she logged on to her laptop to check her emails. There was another one from

Anna, wondering if Julia had received her first one as she had not replied to it. Julia's first thought was to send it the way of the first one, then she reflected that Anna was only emailing because she was concerned about her, so she clicked on 'Reply' and wrote:

"Sorry about the delay in replying. I am feeling much better than I was a few weeks ago but I have to go back to the doctor tomorrow, so I don't know when I will be back in school. Thanks for worrying about me but there's no need. I am looking after myself! Julia."

She clicked on 'Send' and just at that moment, a box popped up in the corner of the screen:

"Alan has invited you to join him on Instant Messenger. Do you want to reply?"

Wondering why he had chosen Instant Messenger rather than just pick up the phone and ring her, she clicked on yes to accept.

Alan: How are you feeling now?

Julia: Fine, very happy. How about you?

Alan: Can't tell you how happy I am feeling tonight.

Julia: Oh, because your rehearsal went well? :)

Alan: Yes, but I think you know the real reason!

Julia: Yes, just teasing! Today was wonderful. But



it's left me wondering...

Alan: What?

Julia: Where we go from here.

Alan: I think I'm in love with you.

Julia sat back and stared at the computer screen. Her heart was thumping as she slowly typed back.

"You have no idea how happy I am to know that!"

Alan: But I am still not sure whether I should be telling you that.

Julia: Why on earth not?

Alan: As I said before, you are still in a vulnerable position and I don't want to take advantage of you. Also, as you know, I still have a lot of baggage from my past, a lot of guilt to deal with, so...

Julia: I still don't understand why you feel so guilty but in any case, as I said before, you have no need to worry about me. I can make my own decisions about my life and I am more than happy about the way things are going between us.

Alan: Well, if you're sure. I must go now. i can hear Damian coming in. I'll be in touch tomorrow. Bye for now

xxx

Julia: Bye xxx

Once Alan was offline, Julia sat back staring into the distance, smiling, her mind going over the events of the day yet again. She suddenly felt exhausted. Time for bed, then she remembered she had her doctor's appointment tomorrow. She went slowly up the stairs, still smiling.

## Chapter 10

Julia's appointment with the doctor was at 11 o'clock so she had plenty of time to get ready and drive over to Runcorn. She felt apprehensive about the appointment. Would the doctor feel that she was ready to go back to school after Christmas? She herself didn't feel she was. The mere thought of having to go back made knots in her stomach. She hoped that in time, this would change, but at present, she would rather stack shelves in a supermarket than go back to the world of teaching.

The drive to Runcorn was uneventful. The roads were quiet and Julia had plenty of time to think. Again, she thought about the online conversation with Alan and wondered why he hadn't wanted to talk on the phone. Then she remembered the end of the conversation. He had said that he had to finish because his son had come in, but his son was an adult. Surely he wouldn't object to Alan having a conversation with a female friend? It seemed strange, but she was sure he would have a perfectly reasonable explanation. She made up her mind to sound him out next time they spoke. Meanwhile, she had to face the doctor.

"How are you feeling now, Mrs Chambers?" asked Dr. Steele, looking up as she entered his consultation room.

"Better than before, but still not right. I start to feel panicky when I think of going back to work." She outlined to Dr. Steele how she was spending her time and he nodded in approval.

"You were totally exhausted," he commented, "so it will take some time to get back to normal. I think you will need a few more weeks yet before we think about letting you go back to work. You are obviously taking care of yourself, so I think I'll sign you off for another six weeks and we'll see how you are then."

"So that will take me to the end of January. It seems a long time but I can't believe how quickly the last six weeks have passed."

Dr Steele nodded in agreement as he filled in the sick note for Julia to send in to school.

"Well," he said, standing up to show her out, "Enjoy your Christmas, continue to rest and take good care of yourself. You are doing well. Lots of people would have needed anti-depressants as well as time off work. I'll see you in January."

Outside, Julia felt relieved. So at least she didn't need to worry about going back to work again till well after Christmas. Strangely, she still didn't miss work or anyone at school. At times, it was almost as if she had never been part of that life. She went back to the car and set off for home, stopping for a few groceries in the local shops once she reached Glossop. That was another thing she was enjoying. All her life she had lived in built up areas but now, for the first time, she was living in a much smaller place and she liked it. Everything was within walking distance if necessary, She was beginning to be on nodding terms with some of the locals and to be known in some of the shops. Back home, she caught up with some washing and housework and was just about to switch on the vacuum cleaner upstairs when her mobile phone rang. It was Alan ringing from school.

"Don't you ever teach?"

He chuckled. "Free period for admin. work."

"Lucky you. We in primary education don't have that luxury. We have to fit in our admin. work as and where we can."

"With the result that you are now off on sick leave," came the reply. "You are still on sick leave, I take it?"

The doctor has signed you off again?"

"Yes, and I am relieved, I must admit. I didn't relish going back yet."

"That's because you're not ready. How about dinner tonight? About 7 o'clock? "

"Lovely. Where do you want to meet?"

"I'll pick you up and we'll go somewhere fairly local. See you then."

Julia continued with the vacuuming and dusting. She wondered what to wear that evening. If she was staying here for much longer, she would have to buy some more clothes. Over the weeks, she had bought a few more things as and when she needed them but she had very little for going out. It would have to be the sleeveless black top and long skirt again, she decided. Once ready, she looked at herself carefully in the bedroom mirror. Looking back at her was a slim, fifty three year old with brown hair, finely shaped eyebrows and remarkably smooth skin. Closer observation revealed those faint traces of grey hair she had noticed before, one or two wrinkles were appearing on the neck and while there were a few laughter lines around the outer corners, a haunted look in the eyes

betrayed a lack of self assurance unusual in a mature professional woman. Julia, however, noticed only the superficial details, the wrinkles on her neck and the grey hairs. Her hair was growing longer and becoming straggly as she had not been to a hairdresser since moving over here. She decided again that she would have to make an appointment soon and get her hair smartened up. Meanwhile, she'd better finish getting ready. Alan would soon be arriving.

He arrived on time, as usual and they kissed. Julia delighted in the feel of his arms around her.

"Come on," he said, "let's go or we'll be late."

This time he took her to a little restaurant on the outskirts of Manchester. She was surprised as he had mentioned that they would be going somewhere local. They were shown to a table in a quiet corner, where they sat down and looked at each other. Alan was smiling as he took her hand and Julia felt her heart thumping.

"You know, we've only been in contact such a short time but I feel as if I have known you all my life," he said.

"Me too," Julia replied. "You know, it is a pity we didn't get to know each other better at school."

"I wanted to know you better."

"What a shame you were so backward at coming forward!"

"I wasn't very good with girls in those days. I didn't think I would stand a chance with you."

"Maybe you were right," Julia mused, "I was very shy in those days, especially with boys. I only had a couple of boyfriends until I met Paul and I suppose I was bowled over that someone like him was taking such an interest in me."

"Same here with Helen," he replied. "I was in love with her then, or so I thought, but we married much too quickly and too young. Dawn was on the way, and that made the decision for us, I suppose. Helen was very keen to get married and I got carried along with the flow."

Julia studied the menu to give herself time to calm her thoughts. What would have happened if they had got together in school, she wondered. How different would her life have been? She couldn't go down that route now. Alan poured her wine and she sipped it gratefully. The wine was good and the meal too and before she knew it, it was



getting late and time to go home. Alan had only had half a glass of wine as he was driving but Julia was feeling relaxed and sleepy as the car pulled out of the car park and turned towards her home. It had been raining earlier and the pavements and roads were glistening with the wetness and the reflections of the street lamps and car headlights. The scene reminded Julia of a poem about rainy nights which she remembered seeing in one of the poetry books in school. She tried to recall some of the lines but couldn't. There was music by Clannad playing on the car stereo, which added to the relaxing atmosphere and Julia felt her eyes grow heavy. She struggled to stay awake.

She wondered if she was dreaming when Alan spoke.

"I would like us to go away somewhere for a weekend. Would you like to?"

Instantly, she was alert.

"Yes, I think I would," she replied. "Where were you thinking of?"

"Not sure yet," was the answer, "but if I arrange something for next weekend, would that suit you?"

She nodded happily. "What a wonderful surprise. Thank you," she said.

Alan laughed, "You certainly don't need to thank me,"

he said. "I think we both deserve a break and we deserve to spend it with each other!"

They arrived back at the house just as it started to rain again. Alan refused her invitation to come in, saying he had a full day's teaching the next day and needed a good night's sleep.

"Full day's teaching eh?" teased Julia. "Poor you!"

She reached up and kissed him. It was the first time she had made the first move but he responded by pulling her to him. She felt his hand caress her neck, his fingers entwine in her hair and she was aware of the smell of him which made her want to keep his body close to hers. Alan pulled back to look at her. His left hand reached up and stroked her cheek tenderly.

"You are so lovely," he murmured. The words should have sounded trite, but from him, they served only to intensify her feelings for him.

Eventually, they broke apart and Alan set off down the path, Julia watching his retreating figure and feeling that the time before their next meeting would hang heavy. She had never expected to feel this way about any man again and

it was unbelievably wonderful. She felt like a teenager, but this time, a teenager with the confidence to make the most of this second chance of happiness which seemed to be coming her way. She went into the house, flung her bag and coat onto a chair and flopped onto the sofa as if in a dream. Within minutes, she had dozed off.

She awoke in the early hours, cold and stiff, wondering, for a moment, where on earth she was, until she remembered. She had come in, stretched out on the sofa and that was the last she knew. How on earth had she slept all that time on the sofa? She struggled to her feet and switched the gas fire on. Then she went into the kitchen and made a cup of hot chocolate to warm her up a bit. She put the television on and sat for a few minutes watching one of those inane, time-filling programmes that pass for entertainment during the small hours. Eventually, she decided to make her way to bed. The thought crossed her mind that if Alan decided to text her tonight, she would be able to reply straight away, but her phone remained silent and, once in bed, she slept soundly.

## Chapter 11

It was nine o'clock when she woke up again. It was light outside, but a grey, dreary morning which threatened yet more rain. Julia sat up in bed and was surprised to find that her head felt heavy and achey and her throat was dry. She felt her forehead. She had that strange combination of heat and chill which was usually the sign that she had a temperature, but as she had no thermometer, there was no way of knowing. Still, she certainly did not feel well and was relieved that she didn't need to get up just yet. Lying down again, she dozed off until eleven o'clock, when she woke up again, feeling worse if anything. She had a glass of water on her bedside table and drank most of it in an attempt to soothe her throat, which now felt like sandpaper. She ought to take some paracetamol, she thought, but, again, that was something she had not thought to buy since she had been here. Again, she dozed off. The radio was on and, half asleep as she was, the content of the programmes merged with her thoughts to create strange, surreal dreams in her head, so that she wasn't quite sure where the dream ended and reality began. Eventually, what seemed to be the screeching of a fire engine in her dreams, took on the reality of the ringing of

her phone. She struggled back to full consciousness and picked it up. It was Alan.

"I have just finished a department meeting and now I have a free period so I thought I would give you a ring," he began. "How are you today? Not changed your mind about the week-end?"

"No," said, Julia, "I'm actually still in bed, believe it or not. I woke up this morning feeling lousy and I've been sleeping all day."

Alan was concerned. "Is there anything you need?"

"No, or at least..."

"Yes? What?"

"Well, I haven't any paracetamol. I feel as if I have a temperature and they would probably help, but you can't come all the way over here just to bring me paracetamol."

"Watch me. I'll be able to leave in about half an hour. I'll pick them up and be with you in about an hour or so."

And before she could protest, he had rung off. She turned over and went back to sleep, to be woken some time later by the doorbell ringing. She went down the stairs, slipping her dressing gown on as she went and opened the

front door, to be greeted by the sight of Paul on the doorstep. It took her a moment to register that it was Paul standing there and not Alan as she had expected and this was followed by the anxiety of knowing that Alan would in fact soon appear also. As these thoughts were running through her mind, Paul pushed his way past her into the hall. The look on his face told her he was furious.

"What are you doing here? How did you find me?" she exclaimed.

She could feel herself beginning to tremble but whether from being ill or from nervousness, she wasn't sure.

"Don't you think I should be asking you that?" was the cold reply.

"I want to know how you found me. Her voice was rising with her anger. "No-one knows I'm here. Have you had me followed?"

"Never mind about that. I want to know what you think you're up to. How could you do this to us? What do you think people have been saying and thinking?"

If there was one thing guaranteed to infuriate Julia, it was the question of what other people thought of her actions. She could feel herself becoming more incensed.

"As if I give a damn about what other people think about the way I am living my life! And in any case, who is 'we'?"

"Kate and myself, of course." he roared back.

"Kate is an adult living her own life. She is not a child! The only person you're concerned about is you, as usual!"

She suddenly felt she must sit down but to do so would put her at the mercy of Paul towering over her and while, in all their married life, he had never been violent towards her, she wanted to be able to move quickly if necessary. Paul's tone suddenly changed.

"Come on, get your things together. You're coming home with me."

"Like hell I am." She was suddenly infused with new energy. "I am never coming home with you again. I have finished with you, Paul. Our marriage is a sham. Even you must admit that. I am not prepared to live like that any longer."

"So what will you do?" Paul enquired icily. He smirked. "You have more or less sabotaged your career. Weeks off work due to stress won't look good on your c.v."

you know. How are you going to live? Don't expect any support from me."

"That's the last thing I would want. I am perfectly able to get a job of some sort and take care of myself. I want a divorce, Paul. I want to make a new start and live my life as I want to."

She paused for breath and waited for Paul's reaction. She expected further outbursts of fury and was surprised when none were forthcoming. She looked at him. Was there a hint of relief in those eyes? Her imagination surely. Finally he spoke.

"Well, if that's your decision, there's nothing more to say, but don't expect anything from me. You're on your own."

He turned to go just as the doorbell rang again. Julia had been fervently hoping that Alan wouldn't arrive before Paul left but her wish, it appeared, had not been granted. She didn't move. Paul looked at her.

"Aren't you going to answer the door" he enquired. "I thought you said no-one knew you were here."

There was nothing else for it. Julia went to open the door. Alan smiled and then his smile faded as he saw the expression on her face.



"What's the matter?" he asked. "Are you feeling worse?" He made to come in but Julia stopped him.

"Go, quickly," she whispered. "Paul is here."

But as she spoke, she was aware that Paul was already in the hall behind her.

"And who the hell is this?" he hissed, striding forward until he was face to face with Alan. Julia put out her hand to stop him but he brushed her aside.

"I don't think we've been introduced, but you obviously know my slut of a wife!"

Julia gasped and Alan moved forward and then stopped.

"Then let me introduce myself. I am Alan Edwards, owner of this house and I am letting it to your wife. We discovered a few weeks ago that we had been at school together, so we have kept in touch. I am here with some paracetamol for Julia as she was ill today and couldn't go out to get some herself."

"And I bet that's not all you're giving her."

Julia groaned but Alan showed no sign of having heard the last comment. Ignoring Paul, he turned to Julia and handed her a small package."

There are paracetamol tablets and some throat lozenges for you. Now, shall I put the kettle on and make you some

tea? You look as if you need it." He turned to Paul. "Are you staying for a cup too?"

The look on Paul's face changed from anger to uncertainty and finally to complete incomprehension. Julia felt a wild desire to burst out laughing but knew she must avoid that at all cost. He opened his mouth to say something and then apparently thought better of it. He turned to Julia.

"You'll hear from my solicitor very soon."

He let himself out through the front door and they heard his footsteps receding into the distance. Julia and Alan looked at each other.

Julia sat down, feeling suddenly shaky.

"I'm so sorry about that, Alan, I have no idea how he found out I was here. He just arrived on the doorstep. I thought it was you."

She suddenly felt an urge to burst into tears. She went into the living room, sat on the sofa and took a deep breath.

"I think I could do with that cup of tea," she said.

Alan went into the kitchen and came back a few minutes later with a tray bearing 2 mugs of tea and a plate of

biscuits.

"I don't suppose you've eaten all day, either," he commented. He placed the tray on the coffee table and sat down on the sofa beside her, taking her hands in his and kissing her on the forehead. The effect of this display of sympathy and concern was to open the floodgates and, before she knew it, Julia was in his arms crying as if she'd never stop. Alan held her, kissed her head and waited.

"It's all-right," he murmured. "Let it all out. You've had a shock today as well as not being well. Take your time."

At last, the tears ran out and Julia sat up and looked at him.

"I don't know what to say. I feel so awful about what happened with Paul. You handled him amazingly. I don't think he knew what had hit him!"

They both laughed and Julia was aware that hysteria was not far below the surface. She leaned back on the sofa.

"Well, there's one thing," she said. "I am feeling a lot better now, better than I felt for most of the day."

Alan smiled and put his arm round her shoulders.

"I'm glad to hear it."

He gently drew her towards him and kissed her, then he stood up and pulled her up with him. Wrapped in his arms, Julia felt a shudder pass through her body as they kissed and then Alan began to walk her towards the living room door and up the stairs to her bedroom. He paused at the doorway.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked. "It's not too soon?"

Julia smiled, took his hand and walked towards the bed.

## Chapter 12

Julia woke up suddenly, It was dark. She reached over to look at the time on the clock radio. It was 11.30. She turned over to look at Alan, still asleep beside her. She traced the contour of his face with her finger as if to imprint his image on her mind. He didn't stir. She lay down again beside him, delighting in the feel of his skin against hers. They stayed unmoving for a further ten minutes before Alan stirred and raised himself up on one elbow. He glanced at the clock radio and then at Julia, lying there smiling up at him. He bent to kiss her again and she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him towards her.

"I do love you" he said.

"I love you too," said Julia and realised the truth of the words as she spoke them.

"Time I wasn't here," he said finally.

"I thought maybe you would stay the night."

"I would love to but I can't I'm afraid. It's a really busy day tomorrow and I have to be in school early. You know how hectic it gets towards the end of term before Christmas."

Julia sat up too and reached for her dressing gown.

She pulled it around her and watched as Alan searched for his clothes, admiring his smooth, taut body.

"Would you like something to eat before you go?"

"No thanks, darling. I'll be fine."

He hadn't called her darling before and she revelled in the warmth of his voice.

"Don't worry. I'll phone you tomorrow when I'm in school."

She felt disappointed but smiled at him.

"Love you," he said.

"I'll see you out, then."

They were in the hall now and Julia put her hand on Alan's arm.

"You, er - you weren't disappointed?" she said tentatively. "It's been a long time, you know."

He pulled her towards him and kissed her passionately.

"Don't even think such a thing," he said, "it was the most wonderful experience ever!"

She sighed and relaxed in his arms.

After seeing Alan out, Julia went back to bed. She stretched out luxuriously, burying her feet in the still warm place where Alan had been lying such a short time

before and, surprisingly, since her head was buzzing with all that had happened that evening, she fell asleep almost at once.

The morning light through the bedroom curtains woke her and she got up quickly and went to shower and get dressed. She had made up her mind to try and get a hairdressing appointment today. While sitting at the table, eating toast, she leafed through the Yellow Pages in search of an available hairdresser. She went in search of the phone and started ringing round. Eventually, she found someone who had a cancellation to offer at two o'clock that afternoon.

The hairdresser seemed to know instinctively what Julia was looking for and two hours later, she emerged from the salon with an up to date style several shades lighter than her usual colour. The new hairdo gave her a real energy boost too and she decided that her next port of call would be the Trafford Centre, as she had decided she needed to buy some new underwear. She spent an hour happily choosing bras, knickers and slips as well as a luxurious-looking cream silky dressing gown. Only then did she head

for home. Alan hadn't rung yet but he had said he would be having a busy day at school so she didn't worry. She was trying on her purchases in the bedroom when her mobile phone rang. It was Alan calling from school.

"Terribly sorry, darling, I intended phoning you earlier but it's been non-stop all day. How are you feeling today?"

"Much better, thanks. My sore throat has almost gone. I've been to the hairdressers and I've done some shopping. How about you?"

"Missing you dreadfully! Can I see you this evening?"

"Of course you can, if you're not too tired. Would you like me to drive over to you for a change?"

"No, no, I'll come to you. Damien will be in tonight so we wouldn't have the place to ourselves."

"It would be a chance for me to meet him, maybe."

"Er, no, not just yet." She heard the hesitation in his voice. "I want you all to myself for a while yet."

"Well, then, how about I do a meal for us here, then you can relax in comfort."

"Great idea! See you about 7 o'clock." And he was gone before she could reply.

"Right, I'd better get cracking then," she said to



herself, and went back into the kitchen to search her kitchen shelves and fridge. She was not one of those people who take pleasure in producing perfect meals. Indeed, slaving over a kitchen stove for hours producing a meal which was then demolished in minutes had never seemed to be a good use of her time. She decided on a vegetarian pasta dish with a bottle of Chablis, which, as luck would have it, she had treated herself to some weeks ago and never opened. She took care over setting the table and put on the side lights. The room looked cosy and inviting, just right for a relaxing evening.

The meal was almost ready when the doorbell rang. Alan came in carrying a small spray of red roses. She exclaimed with pleasure,

"Oh, how lovely! But where did you manage to find these at this time of year?"

He smiled at her. "With a little difficulty but I knew you would like them. Roses are one of your favourite flowers, I remember you telling me."

She had indeed. It had been on one of their walks a couple of weeks previously but she was surprised that he had remembered.

He looked at her consideringly.

"Love the hair," he said finally. She felt ridiculously pleased.

Over their meal, Alan led the conversation back to the previous evening.

"How do you think Paul found out where you were living?" he asked.

"I really have no idea," Julia confessed, "unless it was the LEA again. I did make it very clear that I did not want my address given to anyone after they told him my phone number. I think I'll ring in the morning and check. But you were magnificent the way you handled him. I was afraid he would lose his temper and lash out." She smiled at the memory. "It certainly wasn't funny at the time, but the look on your face when you asked him if he'd like a cup of tea was quite something!"

They both laughed. Alan said,

"Has he ever lashed out at you?"

"No," said Julia, "but he seemed so furious yesterday. But you know, I think he was more worried about how my disappearance makes him look. I don't think he is really all that bothered about getting me back home otherwise."

Alan nodded. "I got that feeling too. Which makes your situation easier. If you file for divorce, he is not likely to contest it."

"No, but I think he will do his best to avoid giving me anything."

"He can't do that. The court will decide who should get what. As Kate is an adult now, I'd imagine they will order a 50/50 split."

The conversation moved to other things and they went into the living room. Julia put a Debussy CD on and they sat side by side on the sofa, Alan's arm around her shoulders, listening to the music and relaxing in each other's company. She felt his hand gently pull her chin towards him to kiss her. He looked at her, his gaze travelling slowly over her face as if he wanted to memorise it then he traced the contours of her nose and chin with one finger, gently, soothingly, murmuring words of love as he did so. He stood up, pulling her to her feet as he did so. Pressed against him, she felt a tremor through her body, then they turned without speaking to go upstairs.

Much later, she awoke and reached out her hand in the darkness to touch him, as if to reassure herself that he

was still there. She leaned up on one elbow, her eyes becoming accustomed to the gloom and looked down at his face. He was sleeping on his back, oblivious of her attention. Gazing at him, she knew she was falling in love with him and wondered how that could have happened in such a short time. Could she really trust her emotions at this time in her life? As Alan had said, she was vulnerable at the moment. Her marriage was now over, she had walked out on her career, how could she trust any of her feelings? But she knew that being with Alan these last few weeks had made her happy, happier than she had been for years. Maybe that was enough for now. Maybe she should learn to live for the moment and not worry about the future. All her life she had lived in the future. When she was at school, she wanted to be at college. When she was at college, she couldn't wait to start her teaching career, she had looked forward to her marriage, to being a mother, and so she had gone on, always reaching out to the future when she should have been taking more notice of the present. As her mind was wandering through these thoughts, she was aware of Alan stirring. Still asleep, he frowned and began to mutter and then to fidget.

He must be dreaming, she thought and shook his

shoulder to wake him. It took him several seconds to wake up out of the dream, whatever it was and a couple of minutes more before Julia felt he was really back in reality.

"Does that happen often?" she asked, alarmed.

"Now and again. I was on anti-depressants for a couple of years when my marriage was in trouble and I had a hard time coming off them. These dreams are a relic of that. I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to get up for a while. I can't go straight back to sleep yet."

He got up and Julia lent him her heavy dressing gown as he was shivering. She put the fire on in the living room and switched the television on. Then she made them both a cup of tea and they sat together, the television on, neither of them watching it. Julia held his hand and stroked his arm, as if comforting a child.

"What were you dreaming about? Can you remember?"

"No, I never remember the dreams but the horrible, depressed feeling stays with me for a while after I wake up."

They stayed there, without speaking for a further half hour, until, at last, Alan said he was ready to go back to bed.

"I'm so sorry to have disturbed your night too," he said.

Julia smiled. "No problem and anyway, I can sleep in in the morning, You will have to be up early to get over to Manchester."

"Well, actually, no. I'm supposed to be on a two day residential course," he said.

"So that means you missed last night to stay here?"

"Yes, but I can make today's session all-right. It's only in Sheffield. I'll just say I couldn't get away yesterday."

Julia was too tired to remonstrate and they went back to bed and slept again until the alarm went off for Alan to get up. While he was in the bathroom, Julia was in the kitchen making coffee and toast for them both. She delighted in the fact that they were sharing this time together. Alan looked across the table at her as she was buttering her toast.

"You look so lovely," he said.

"Rubbish," she said, embarrassed. "Nobody looks lovely first thing in the morning before they're even washed!"

"You do," he said simply.

"So, are you going back home tonight?" she enquired

tentatively.

"Yes, but I'll pop in to see you, seeing as I'm passing the door."

She felt disappointed that he did not suggest staying the night again but was wary of suggesting it herself in case he thought she was pushing things too fast. Maybe it would just happen, she thought, like last night.

They kissed good-bye and Julia went upstairs intending to have a shower, but, once upstairs, she suddenly felt so tired, she decided to go back to bed for an extra half hour.

When she finally got up properly, Julia remembered the conversation about divorce that she had had with Paul. It would be prudent of her to find a solicitor. She searched the Yellow Pages for some local firms and after ringing two, found a Mrs Brown of Waters and Son who could see her that afternoon at 2p.m. Mrs Brown was a forty something in an untidy office piled high with paperwork, but contrary to appearances, she seemed a very capable, efficient solicitor. She gave Julia a list of the documents she would need from her, including her birth and marriage

certificate. Julia was dismayed. How could she get hold of those as they were still in Runcorn.

On her way home, she decided to ring Kate and see if she could help. There was certainly no point expecting Paul to be accommodating. She rang Kate as soon as she got home and asked her if she would go over to Runcorn that weekend and pick up the documents and a few other belongings. To her relief, Kate agreed. She didn't seem at all surprised that divorce was now on the cards.

"I suppose your dad told you," Julia said.

"Yes, he rang last night. He also told me you had a man there when he called to see you."

"He's a friend that I went to school with and coincidentally, he also owns the house I'm renting. We've had a few meals together and been out walking," Julia explained. She wasn't intending to say more but Kate was.

"Don't you think it's a bit early for another relationship?"

"He's a friend, like I said," repeated Julia and after a few minutes of desultory conversation, the call ended. Julia felt a little guilty at deceiving Kate but, strictly speaking, there wasn't much else to tell, she reasoned.



At seven o'clock, the door bell rang. Alan had arrived.

"Will you stay for a meal?" asked Julia. "It won't take long to do something."

"Yes, I'd like that," he said. He followed her into the kitchen and started to lay the table while she put some pasta on to cook. Half an hour later, sitting at the dining table, Julia noticed that Alan wasn't eating but was staring at his plate, fork in hand.

"Hey, I know I'm not a wonderful cook but I didn't think it was that bad."

He didn't smile. She began to feel worried. What was going on?

"I need to talk to you, darling," he said at last. "I should have said all this before but everything was going so well, I didn't want to spoil things for us, but, now, I think I may have done just that."

A cold feeling crept round her heart.

"What do you mean?" she said in a low voice, "Tell me. Please."

He reached over and grasped her hand.

"I have a confession to make," he said. "Helen and I are not actually divorced."

She opened her mouth to speak but he went on, "Our marriage is similar to yours. It was over in all but name long ago. We still live in the same house but we each have our own half and we live our own lives."

"So that's why you texted me instead of phoning. That's why you didn't want me to come to your house, why you didn't stay all of that first night." It was almost as if Julia was talking to herself. Then she looked across the table at him.

"It's also why I didn't want to seem as if I was taking advantage of you, if you remember," he said softly. She did not smile.

"It's more of a shock to find this out now than if you had been honest with me from the start," she said. "You didn't give me the chance to make up my own mind about us. I don't know how I feel about that."

Alan looked startled.

"Please don't let it spoil things," he begged. "I'm sorry. I realise now that I should have been straight with you but it never seemed to be the right moment. I really am sorry. The last thing I would ever want to do is hurt you, but, if you remember, I did say soon after we met that we have lived for thirty-five years since we last knew each

other. Everyone makes mistakes in their lives. Helen and I should never have married. I know that now, but hindsight is a wonderful thing."

"So, there is no longer anything between you and her?"

"Absolutely nothing. As I said, the house is divided into two separate areas. I live my life and she lives hers."

"But I still don't understand why you said you were divorced. In fact, why have you never filed for divorce?"

"I thought I wouldn't stand a chance with you if you thought I wasn't a free agent and I suppose I have just never gone for divorce because I couldn't face all the hassle. I'd have to move, Helen would sue for half my income and my pension when the time comes. She has no income of her own, you see. But since meeting you, I have decided that must be my next step."

Julia thought for a moment. "Well, strictly speaking, you aren't a free agent, are you?"

"Neither are you," he reminded her, squeezing her hand.

"Touche! So we are in the same boat, then. I accept that. We've both been unhappy, I suppose, but.....you keep saying you feel guilty about your marriage break-up."

"Yes, I suppose I do. Things hadn't been right for years. That's why I had the affair I told you about. Since then, Helen has been a sad and bitter woman. She can't seem to move on, so it's been like being stuck in limbo for years. I didn't feel entitled to make a new life for myself unless she does."

"So where does that leave us?" She wasn't sure whether she wanted an answer to that one or not.

"Meeting you and falling in love with you has made me realise that you are what I want. We should be together. You only get one life. I can't let you go."

Julia smiled slowly. "I can't let you go either."

Much later, in the dark stillness of the bedroom, Julia lay awake, curled up on her side, careful not to move in case of disturbing Alan. She could just see the contours of his face as he slept peacefully. She gazed at his broad forehead, the grey hairs amid the brown, the long, thin nose and dimpled chin. She thought over the conversation they had had earlier downstairs. Initially she had been shocked at the fact that he had told her that he was divorced when, in fact, he was only separated, and she only had his word for that. He had assured her that he and Helen

had long ago begun to lead separate lives even though they still lived in the same house. It was possible, she knew. After all, she and Paul had done it themselves for long enough. The thought that he might even now be lying to her did not bear thinking about and she tried to dismiss it from her mind even as it occurred to her. She had felt so amazingly happy during these last few weeks. She had begun to feel like a real person again, loved and cherished by someone that she loved and cherished in return. If anything were to happen to destroy that, she didn't know how she would cope. Suddenly, without warning, she felt her cheeks wet with tears. She leaned over Alan's sleeping form and gently stroked his face with her forefinger. One of her tears fell onto his cheek. He stirred and sighed but did not wake. Julia reached over for a tissue and dried her eyes.

What had she told herself about living in the present and not worrying about the future?

"Take each day as it comes," she thought as she closed her eyes against the dark of the night.

## Chapter 13

In times to come, Julia would scarcely believe that within a few short weeks, she had metamorphosed from a predictable, middle aged married teacher to a separated ex-teacher sleeping with a childhood friend, also married. But at present, nothing seemed to matter except her relationship with Alan. That weekend Alan took her away as planned. She didn't ask what he had said at home to explain his absence. He picked her up on Friday evening after school.

"Where are we going?" she asked as she got into the car. I hope I've packed the right clothes!"

"We're going to York. I've booked us in at a hotel I found on the internet."

The journey across to York passed quickly and soon, they were checking in at the hotel. Alan carried their bags up to their room and switched on the kettle in the corner. Julia looked round. The room was large and airy with a view across the city centre. She stood at the window, staring at the panorama of lights below. Alan came and stood behind her, his arms around her.

"Lovely. You're lovely." She laughed and he turned her round to face him and bent to kiss her.

"I have so looked forward to this week-end," he said.  
He took off his tie and untied his shoelaces.

"We'd better get ready for dinner.

Julia had brought a new dress with her. She went into the bathroom to get ready. She took time applying her make-up and doing her hair, then she stepped into the dress and zipped it up. Looking at herself in the mirror, she only had a head and shoulders view but what she saw pleased her. She opened the door and stepped back into the bedroom to get her shoes. She was aware of admiration in Alan's eyes.

His voice was husky as he spoke.

"You look beautiful in that dress.

She smiled at him.

"You don't look so bad yourself."

While she had been in the bathroom, Alan had also been getting ready. He had changed his shirt for a white one and had put on a fresh tie. She smoothed his hair back and kissed him. Together they went downstairs to the dining room. Julia was reminded of the night she had spent in the little hotel in Cleckheaton, after running away. She remembered walking into the restaurant area for her evening meal, alone. She glanced at Alan and reached out to hold his hand.

Their table was in a quiet part of the busy dining room, so it was a while before the waiter attended to them. Julia looked around at the tables of other couples and a few larger groups, all talking and laughing. She smiled at Alan.

"I love people watching. You know, when you observe people and wonder what is going on in their lives, and then you imagine what might be happening. It's like taking a snapshot of their lives. You're never going to see them again, but just for those few moments, your paths cross and it's almost as if you are part of their lives."

Alan nodded. "I know what you mean. I have done it myself on occasion." He looked down at the menu, "What would you like to order?"

After their meal, they Alan suggested a walk. It was a cold, frosty night but they didn't notice the cold, so engrossed were they in each other. The stars seemed brighter and more sparkling than ever before to Julia, the people they passed seemed happier and friendlier, the world seemed a wonderful place to be. She clutched Alan's arm as they walked along past tiny shops hidden away in narrow, winding back streets.



"Isn't this wonderful!" she exclaimed. He looked down at her and laughed at her excitement.

"It certainly is."

Once back at the hotel and after a drink in the bar, they sauntered upstairs to their room.

Julia was awakened in the morning by Alan sitting on her side of the bed with a cup of tea in his hand. She smiled and sat up against the pillows. He leaned forward and kissed her gently.

"Thank you for a wonderful night," he whispered.

"Ditto," she replied.

Once they had finished their tea, Julia swung her legs out of bed and pulled on her wrap. Taking Alan by the hand, she led him into the bathroom. She turned the taps on full and ran some bubble bath into the water. When it was ready, she let her wrap drop to the floor and leaned over to take undo Alan's dressing gown and slip it off his shoulders. She motioned him to get into the bath and then got in at the opposite end herself. They giggled like small children as they washed each other and then as Julia splashed water at Alan. He made as if to splash her back and as she covered her face with her hands, he grabbed her hands,

forced them down and reached forward to kiss her.

"This is the first time I have ever shared my bath," she said, as they were drying each other afterwards. "I don't know what's come over me."

Alan wrapped his towel around her and drew her to him to kiss her once again.

"Neither do I, you wicked woman."

That day was one of their happiest. They spent the whole day doing what Alan called 'the tourist thing.' By the time they had finished visiting all the main attractions that York has to offer, Julia felt as if her feet were on fire.

"I'll have to sit down somewhere," she protested. They found a seat on the river bank and huddled together in the cold, watching the steady stream of people passing, people carrying shopping bags, mothers with buggies and small children, older people, wrapped up in shapeless coats, shoulders hunched against the cold.

"We need to think about the future," Julia said suddenly, "or at least, I need to think about my future." She looked at Alan for his reaction.

"Yes, I agree," he said finally. "I really want to be

with you, you know."

"I sense there's a 'but' coming."

"But, I want you to be sure it's what you want too, after all you've been through lately."

"I am more sure of this than of anything in my life before. Does that make sense or is it completely insane?" They laughed.

"The other thing, of course," said Alan, "is our children. Your daughter and my children know nothing about all this. I need to approach it carefully with Damian in particular..... after the last time, you know."

His voice tailed off. Julia looked at him, not knowing what to make of his sudden hesitation.

"Well, it will come as a surprise to Kate, I suppose, but she's an adult, living her own life. I'm sure it will be a nine day wonder, Don't you think it'll be the same with Damian? He is an adult too."

"Yes, I expect you're right, but I'd prefer to leave it until after Christmas to tell my children, if you don't mind."

She felt a pang of disappointment.

"Yes, of course," she said lightly. She looked at her watch. "I suppose we'd better get back to the hotel. I'm

starving."

That night, Julia looked at Alan sleeping beside her. Was it a man thing not wanting to tackle difficult subjects, she wondered. Or did it mean that Alan was weak and indecisive? She rejected that thought out of hand, surprised that it had even occurred to her. She loved him, more than she'd ever loved anyone. But then, loving someone didn't mean being blind to their faults and everyone has faults. She leaned over and kissed his forehead and then lay down again and closed her eyes. She still didn't understand Alan's way of handling things but she had to leave it to him. To try and rush him into decisions he was not ready to make would not help their relationship. That was the sensible option so why did she not feel comforted by it? She fell asleep at last and dreamed of Alan and herself walking over endless hills, him striding out and her trying desperately to keep up with him, calling to him to wait for her, to no avail. When she woke up in the morning, the feeling of this dream was still with her. Alan noticed her preoccupation.

"Are you all-right? You seem a bit preoccupied."

"Yes, I'm fine. I was dreaming before I woke up and it

was a bit - well, depressing I suppose."

Want to talk about it?"

"No, not really. I think I'd prefer to forget about it."

They bathed together again and Julia revelled in their closeness. She had probably over-reacted to Alan's policy of taking things gradually. She always did have a 'bull at a gate' attitude. She remembered her father telling her that often when she was growing up.

After breakfast, they went down to the river again and were just in time for a boat cruise. Julia watched the ducks swimming, diving for morsels of food that only they could see, squabbling with each other and seeming completely unaware of the humans watching them from nearby. The rest of the morning passed quickly and after stopping for lunch at a restaurant in one of the cobbled side streets that Julia loved, it was time to get ready for their homeward journey.

"I have enjoyed this week end so much," Julia said as they pulled up outside her home.

"So have I. It has been wonderful. I won't come in. I need to get home and get ready for work tomorrow. I still

have a pile of marking to do. Not too much longer till the end of term, anyway. We finish on Wednesday."

Julia nodded her agreement and put her arms round his neck to kiss him.

She waved as the car pulled away and then carried her overnight bag into the house. It seemed cold and gloomy at first. The heating was on but the day had grown cold and damp. She lit the gas fire in the living room to warm herself and went to make herself a cup of tea. She had had such a lovely week-end, it seemed an anti-climax now to be back home, alone. She wondered when Alan would feel able to 'go public' with his family. She sighed. Here she was trying to rush things again.

You'd think I would be more cautious after the way my marriage turned out, she told herself. But she knew that this was very different, it felt so right between herself and Alan. She went to bed that night feeling no further forward.

## Chapter 14

The next week went by uneventfully. For the next three days, Alan came straight to the house from school for their evening meal and to spend a few hours together and then term was finished and Christmas was nearly upon them. They met on December 23rd to exchange presents. Alan was off to his daughter's the following day and Julia was spending Christmas day with Kate. The rest of the holiday she would be on her own but, strangely, she was rather looking forward to that. She had walks in the country and shopping in the sales planned. She gave Alan his CDs and he unwrapped them.

"I love them," he said. He kissed Julia and then gave her a small, square parcel, beautifully wrapped in silver paper. She looked at it and then at him.

"Go on, open it," he urged. She did. Inside was a crystal cube enclosing a delicate crystal glass rose. Julia gasped when she saw it. Carefully, she picked it up out of the box and held it in her hand. The light shone on it, making it sparkle.

"It's so lovely," she said at last. "I don't know what to say. I love it. I love you."

"I saw it in Manchester, and straight away, I knew it

was perfect for you, my love."

Saying good-bye for the next few days was hard. When Alan had driven away, Julia went to sit in the living room, holding the crystal rose in her hand. She turned it this way and that so that the light reflected from it. She was overcome by his thoughtfulness. In all the years they had been together, Paul had only ever given her money and told her to get something nice for herself. At last, she placed it on the old-fashioned mantelpiece and began to get ready to go to bed.

The next morning Julia dutifully set off for Tewkesbury and Kate's flat. It wasn't that she didn't want to visit her daughter, she did. It had been weeks since they had last met and she was looking forward to seeing her again, but at the back of her mind was the nagging suspicion that she would spend the next few days fending off unwelcome questions about her relationship with Alan.

Kate met her on the doorstep and hugged her.

"I'm so glad you've come, Mum. Come on in. I'll put the kettle on and we can have a chat."



Julia carried her bags into Kate's spare bedroom. She loved coming to Tewkesbury, she enjoyed walking around the town and by the riverside. Once, in the summer, she had been in time for one of the boat cruises down the river. She looked through the bedroom window at the people hurrying along the street. The flat was quite near the town centre so there was plenty of activity to observe. She stayed there, arms resting on the window-sill, watching the people below until, finally, she heard Kate's voice calling her for a cup of tea. Reluctantly, she turned to go into the kitchen but, as she did so, she heard the message tone from her mobile. It could only be Alan. Quickly she unearthed it from her bag and opened up the message:

"Hope you arrived safely. I am on my way to Dawn's.  
The roads are busy. Love you. Alan xxx"

She read the message twice and then saved it. She had saved all Alan's messages. Sometimes she read them over again. They were proof that their developing relationship was real and not a figment of her imagination, as she sometimes feared. Kate called again, more impatiently this time and Julia hurried into the kitchen. Kate's boyfriend, Joe was there. He and Kate seemed to be having what Julia would call 'an animated conversation', in other words, they

were arguing. It seemed that Joe was telling Kate that he had arranged to meet up with a couple of friends for a drink that evening.

"But you knew Mum was coming and I asked you to keep the evening free."

"Never mind," said Julia, soothingly, when appealed to by Kate. "You and I can go for a meal somewhere or even cook something here, open a bottle of wine and maybe Joe will join us later."

Her suggestion seemed to calm Kate down and she apologised to Joe, then put her arms round his neck and kissed him. Julia felt a sense of accomplishment that she had helped to avert a full blown row between them. It must be a result of her happiness with Alan that she felt she wanted everyone to share in it. After a few minutes Joe left them and Kate began to prepare the evening meal. Julia realised she must have decided that they were staying in this evening.

"Have you tried these mange tout, Mum?" asked Kate suddenly. "They're very nice."

Julia felt that Kate was on edge, but surely not simply because Joe out with his friends.

The evening passed pleasantly, a chance to catch up on

Kate's news until at 10.30 Joe came in. He slumped into a chair. Julia looked at him. She thought he looked worn out. Kate put her arms around him and gave him a kiss. He responded half heartedly and then yawned.

"Got a glass of wine for me?" he asked. Kate poured one out and passed it to him.

Julia, sensed that they needed to be left alone.

"Well, I'm really tired so I think I'll go to bed if you don't mind."

The others nodded.

Kate went over to kiss her cheek.

"Good night, Mum. Give me a shout if you need anything."

In the spare room, Julia got ready for bed and switched on the radio. She picked up her mobile phone. Alan should be in Dorset by now. She began to tap the keys to text a message to him.

"Good-night, my love. Hope you had a good journey.  
Love you. xxx"

Then she lay down, turned the radio low and closed her eyes.

Christmas day dawned and Julia woke early. She got out

of bed and went over to the window. It was still dark but it smelt cold. She looked out. By the light of the street lamps, she could see snow on the pavements and road below. Snow on Christmas Day! The last time she remembered that happening had been when she was eight years old. She felt a sudden desire to be out there in the snow. Quickly she got dressed, pulled on her boots and her warm anorak and gloves and crept out of her room and down the steep staircase. She let herself out of the front door and crept down to the front gate. There was a children's playground opposite the house. She walked over to it and through the gateway, her feet crunching in the crisp snow. She looked back at her footprints and then ahead at the trees, bowed under the weight of the snow. Snow on Christmas Day! It was magical. She walked round the playground until she came to the swings. Julia had always loved swings. As a child she had had one in the garden and spent hours on it, daydreaming as she swung back and forth. She looked around. There was no one in sight so she went over to one of the swings and brushed the snow off it with her gloved hand. Then she sat down, gingerly at first, wanting to make sure the swing would bear the weight of an adult. She pushed her legs back and then forwards, remembering from her childhood how to

make the swing move. It swung, slowly at first, then gaining speed and momentum as she swung her legs backwards and forwards with increasing force. She began to swing higher, then slowed down, afraid that the swing would not, after all, bear her weight. On and on she went, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, eyes fixed on the panorama before her.

When does Christmas stop being magical, she wondered. But she knew the answer - when you stop believing in Santa Claus. It comes back when your children are little, and then, as they grow older, it disappears again. She remembered Kate's Christmases when she was young, the excitement of creeping into her room in the early hours to deposit her presents by her bed, the mince pies and sherry left with a note for Father Christmas, the shrieks of delight as she opened her presents on Christmas morning. Yes, all those memories were there. How quickly the years had passed since then. Suddenly, she was the mother, not of an excited little girl, but of a confident, professional adult who didn't need her any more and who didn't hesitate to pass judgement on her life. Where do the years go, she wondered, and yet, how was it, that in spite of the passing

of all these years, she herself still felt like a teenager? It was almost as if she was the child and Kate the mother. Suddenly, she felt the cold penetrate through her clothes and she shivered. Time to go back to Kate's.

"Where on earth have you been, Mum?" Kate asked as she came through the door. "You look dishevelled, to say the least!" She smiled at her mother as if at a small child. Julia smiled back.

"I found the play area and went on the swing. I was thinking about how Christmas used to be when you were little. That's the best time, you know, when your child still believes in Santa and all the magic. When you realised that it was us putting the presents in your room during the night, it didn't seem quite the same any more. You need children for Christmas."

She sat down on the kitchen chair and pulled off her boots.

"Yes, I know what you mean," Said Kate. "Last year, when we went to Joe's sister's. It was wonderful to see her children's faces on Christmas morning when they were opening all their presents. Almost made me want to have children myself!"

They laughed. Kate had always insisted that she did not want to 'tie herself down with kids' as she put it. Julia found it hard to understand. She had always loved being a mother and, precious as her daughter was to her, there was a part of her that still mourned the child she had lost all those years ago.

"Do you remember the year I got my first bike?" Kate interrupted her thoughts.

"Yes, and within half an hour, you were riding round the garden without the stabilisers," laughed Julia remembering.

That year, Paul had been in the throes of one of his flings. She could always tell. He made an effort to be more attentive and loving towards her, usually buying her flowers and surprise presents. She had always assumed that he did this to assuage his conscience. She never got to know who was the object of his attentions and she didn't really want to. It was as if, by closing her mind to the details, she could pretend it wasn't happening. Oh, the first time she had realised there was something going on, she had created a storm, demanding to know who the girl was, threatening to confront her, to report him to his

superiors. But all the crying, shouting, protesting and threatening had had little effect on him. He had quietly and consistently denied that anything was going on and had been adamant that his colleague's wife, who had told her about the affair, was lying. In the end, exhausted by emotion, she had agreed to believe that this was indeed the case, but in her heart, she knew and the knowledge became a knot of hurt which was the beginning of the death of her love for him.

She was suddenly aware that Kate was speaking to her.

"I said, would you like to make a start on the potatoes, Mum," she was saying. "It's no good pretending to be deaf when there's work to be done." She laughed and Julia, laughing with her, and went over to the sink.

Christmas Day passed uneventfully. After a large, delicious lunch, the three of them collapsed in front of the television, where Julia at least, dozed for most of the afternoon. In the evening, some of Kate's friends appeared, bearing presents and bottles of wine. Some time after midnight, Julia became aware that she had expended all her energy and conviviality and needed to go to bed to



recharge her batteries, so she said good night and went into her room, relishing the peaceful darkness. Before she fell asleep, she picked up her mobile and tapped out a text message to Alan:

Had a lovely, peaceful Christmas day. Hope you enjoyed it too. Love you and miss you. xxx

Julia stayed at Kate's two more days, two days of hilarity with her friends, eating and drinking too much and shopping too much in the sales. By the end of the day after Boxing Day, although she had enjoyed her time with Kate, she was now more than ready for the peace and quiet of her house. Kate was back at work the next day.

"But there's no reason why you shouldn't stay on for a few more days," she suggested.

"It's nice of you to ask me, but, to tell the truth, I think I need to get back to my quiet life again."

Kate looked at her.

"Don't get too used to a life of solitude, Mum. You're too young to vegetate in the country for the rest of your life."

Julia smiled.

"Thanks for the compliment, and no, I won't but at the moment, it's what I need."

Over New Year, Kate was going to be in Runcorn at Paul's, and Julia's conscience told her that she should really go and spend a few days with her mother. She tried to ignore it as the last way she wanted to spend her time just now was in being quizzed by her. She placated her conscience by ringing her. She had spoken to her on Christmas day of course, but Kate had been at hand then to take over the phone.

Mrs Moore answered the phone after only two rings.

"Hello?" she said briskly.

"It's me, Mum," said Julia. "Just ringing to see how you are after Christmas .Did you enjoy it?"

"Oh, it was all-right. I spent the day with James and Lorna Holt as usual. We had a very nice lunch and then spent the afternoon snoozing. Terrible waste of time. I was quite disappointed with myself."

Mrs Moore, although well into her seventies, prided herself on still being as active as people twenty years her junior. They chatted for a few more moments and then Julia said, "I'll come and see you soon, Mum, but I'm not sure when yet. I'm not ready yet." She hadn't meant to say that,

she'd meant to make some excuse but to her surprise, her mother didn't argue but simply said,

"That's all-right, Julia. Come when you're ready."

Back home, Julia revelled in the solitude. After she'd unpacked her bag and put her laundry into the washing machine, she got ready to go out for a walk. She went out into the remains of a frosty but sunny day striding along quickly to keep the cold at bay, her body delighting in the exercise after the past few days of over-indulgence. Back home again, she ran herself a hot bath, emptied half a bottle of bubble bath into it and lay there, relaxing and savouring the moment. As she was towelling herself dry, she heard her phone ring. She hurriedly wrapped the towel round her and went to answer it. It was Alan, as she had hoped.

"Hello, my darling. I've just popped out to do some shopping for Dawn, so I thought I would give you a ring to see if you were back at home."

"Yes, I just got back today. How are things down in Dorset?"

"OK. I'm here until January 1st and travelling back up on the 2nd. I'm dying to see you again. I do miss you. Can we meet up in the 2nd? I can come round that way and be

there at about 3 o'clock all being well."

"That would be wonderful. I have missed you too, you know. I'm glad things are going well anyway."

She was interrupted suddenly.

"Got to go, darling. I'm driving and I'm getting into some heavy traffic now. See you on the 2nd. Love you. Bye."

The phone went silent and Julia was left with mixed feelings of pleasure and exasperation.

## Chapter 15

Julia saw Alan coming up the garden path before he noticed her peeping through the window at him. When he did, he smiled and waved and quickened his step. She ran to the front door and, flinging it open, ran to meet him. As she reached him, she stopped, feeling suddenly awkward, but he hugged her close to him and kissed her hard. She relaxed in the feel of his arms around her and the smell of his aftershave, the one that she had told him she liked so much. She couldn't stop smiling.

"I have missed you so much," she said breathlessly.

"Me too," he replied before he kissed her again.

Arms around each other, they walked into the house and shut the door on the outside world, oblivious to everything but each other.

"I forgot to wish you a happy new year," he said much later as they were lying side by side.

"Happy new year to both of us," laughed Julia. "And it should be. I heard from my solicitor just after Christmas. The divorce papers are going through so, hopefully, it should go soon be sorted without too much hassle. This year will be our year, won't it?"

"Of course it will."

"So, where do you see us this time next year?"

"I'm not too sure."

"I think what I'm trying to say is that if you were to ask me to share your life, I would consider myself the happiest woman in the world."

She stopped, afraid that she had said too much. Why was she always so impatient to move things on? But Alan was smiling at her.

"Then maybe I had better ask you just that," he said, "but I want you to be really sure that this is what you want."

Julia put her finger over his lips to silence him.

"I am," she whispered.

Later again, she said, "So what sort of time scale are we looking at for this life-sharing?"

This time Alan did not smile.

"We have to think about our respective children."

Julia sank back onto the pillows.

"We seem to have had this conversation before. Our children are all grown up. Why should it be such a big deal?"

He didn't answer straight away and then,

"I'll have a word with Damian soon, I promise. But, in my case, I also have Helen to deal with. I would have to give her some time to get used to the idea that I was moving out."

Julia was silent. Amazingly, she had forgotten about Helen.

"But it won't come as a great surprise to her, as you are already living separate lives?"

"No, but I can't rush things, I'm afraid."

He took her hands in his.

"Don't worry, darling, we'll get there. It's just that I can't rush things."

Julia smiled but she was plagued by a faint sense of unease, which she tried in vain to shake off. By now it was nearly midnight and Alan soon fell asleep. Julia, however, lay awake, wondering what the new year would bring. She looked at Alan lying beside her. Reaching out, she traced the contours of his face with her finger and then kissed his forehead, overcome by a feeling of tenderness.

She woke up suddenly in the morning puzzled by the unusual brightness coming from the window. She looked at the clock radio. It was only 7.30. She got out of bed

carefully, so as not to disturb Alan, tiptoed to the window and pulled the curtain back to look out. She gasped with surprise and pleasure at the winter wonderland outside. The front garden and the hills as far as she could see were covered with crisp, glistening snow. Forgetting that she hadn't wanted to disturb Alan, she cried,

"Look at this! It's been snowing. Come and look."

Alan grunted and turned over on his back, then he opened his eyes and looked over at her.

"What did you say?"

"It's been snowing. Come and see how beautiful it looks."

At that, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and padded over to join her at the window, kissing the nape of her neck as he stood behind her, looking out.

"You're right," he said, "It does look beautiful."

"We have to go out," said Julia, pulling on some clothes. "We can't let that lovely snow go to waste. Come on."

She threw his trousers over to him. "Hurry up, we're wasting precious time!"

Alan laughed at her enthusiasm and began to dress. Ten minutes later, they were in their outdoor clothes and ready



to set forth into the white wilderness.

Julia was almost running in her eagerness to experience the snow covered landscape and Alan grabbed her hand to slow her down. They set off down the road towards the bend which signalled the beginning of Snake Pass. No cars passed them, they saw no other people; it was as if they were alone in the world. On they went, up into the deserted countryside where the only other living beings were sheep dotted about on the slopes, apparently oblivious to the sudden onslaught of winter. Julia's legs were beginning to ache now. Walking through the snow was far more difficult, rather like walking on soft sand on a beach. She stopped to get her breath and turned to look back the way they had come. Her gaze travelled over the panorama before her, open countryside which seemed to stretch almost as far as Manchester in the distance. She stood there, soaking in the beauty of the snow and the complete silence all around her. It was almost desolation. She could feel a sensation of emptiness in the pit of her stomach, yet it was not unpleasant, but rather a feeling of being outside the world, looking in. She looked away, suddenly aware that she was being fanciful. Alan had caught

up with her and was standing behind her now. He put his arms around her shoulders, sharing the view with her.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Beautiful, peaceful, empty, desolate, re-creative!" Julia answered, trying to communicate the myriad feelings within her. He kissed her hair and she felt he understood.

"Go on or go back?" he asked.

She was suddenly aware that, unlike her, Alan was only wearing his shoes. She looked at his feet. Snow had penetrated over the top of them and his socks were soaked. She laughed and pointed to them.

"I think maybe we'd better go back and dry you out."

The walk home was easier but slower. This time they walked together, hands joined. Julia felt happy and at peace. This was what she had been searching for all her life, it seemed. She wanted it never to end.

At five o'clock, Alan decided he would have to start the journey home. It had started to snow again, but lightly. The roads had been gritted during the day, but he wanted to get home before the snow began to cover the surfaces again. Julia would have liked him to stay, but didn't suggest it. She didn't want him to feel she was

being clingy. After all, she reflected, everyone needs their own space sometimes, including me. But tonight, she would have liked not to be alone. She wondered, after Alan had gone, about this new year stretching ahead. Soon she would have to come to a decision about her job. Her current sick note would soon run out yet she couldn't imagine herself going back to that school. But if she didn't, what would she do instead? She had some savings and she would get her share of the house when it was sold, although that could take months. Maybe she could do supply teaching, or possibly something else altogether. That train of thought led her to think about Alan. When they were both free, would they perhaps move to a different area altogether? Alan had talked about being able to retire in a couple of years. He'd talked about his dream of moving to the country. Her mobile phone was buzzing. She picked it up and saw there was a message on it, from Alan of course.

"Just got back. Journey not too bad. I loved being with you today. I'll ring you tomorrow."

Hmm, she thought - no 'darling', no kisses, and she still didn't understand why he texted her instead of

ringing. She had an overwhelming urge to ring him back. Would he think she was being too pushy? Without stopping to reflect further, she selected his number and listened for the ringtone. His phone was switched off. Disappointment overwhelmed her. She knew she was idiotic to feel like this. He had told her he loved her, they had talked about their future together. She should be feeling deliriously happy, and she was, really, but with just a tiny knot of unease deep inside her. Maybe it was more a sign of her own insecurity, she told herself. She needed to get out of herself a bit, stop being so introspective.

The next morning the phone rang. She ran to pick it up but, instead of Alan, it was Kate.

"I need to talk to you, Mum," she said without preamble.

"What is it? Is there something wrong?"

"Oh, not with me, no. You know I went to Dad's over New Year? Well, I found out that he's got someone else; it's been going on for months, apparently."

"Another of his students, I suppose," interrupted Julia before she could stop herself. She wasn't sure how much Kate knew about her father's affairs.

"Oh no, not a student. It's one of his colleagues. She's about fifteen years younger than him but not married." She hesitated and then, "The thing is, it seems to be serious, so I think Dad will want to get the divorce sorted out as quickly as possible. That should make things easier for you really, shouldn't it?" Her voice tailed off uncertainly.

Julia remembered Paul's surprise visit to the house. So she hadn't imagined the look of relief in his eyes when she had announced that she wanted a divorce. It said much for the growing distance between them over the past months that, this time, she had missed the tell-tale signs that Paul had embarked on yet another affair, but she felt curiously detached, quite unable to feel any sense of betrayal or even disappointment.

"I see," she said at last. "Yes, you are right, It will make things easier, for both of us."

"I'm so sorry, Mum," Kate said.

"I can't say it's a surprise," Julia answered, "And really, it's probably just as well. It will get him off my back and, hopefully, the divorce will go through smoothly. It's not altogether a new situation for me you know."

There was a short silence at the other end.

"Yes, I know. The last few years, I've begun to have some idea of what was going on. I never realised before. I'm sorry."

"Of course you didn't," Julia hastened to reassure her. "And I wouldn't expect you to. It was my problem, not yours. You know, I don't want you to feel you have to take sides. Your dad is still your dad, always will be."

She had said this before and she meant it.

"I know."

The call ended with Julia feeling slightly dissatisfied and wondering just how well she had handled the situation.

Our children are always children to us, she reflected, but of course, Kate was not a child, she was an intelligent, worldly wise young woman who had probably seen far worse marital situations in her work as a solicitor. But when the situation is personal, can intellectual understanding override emotional reaction? She didn't think so. Kate would be feeling like any other child who has recently learnt that her parents are never going to share their life again.

The next morning she rang Kate at work. She normally avoided doing this but she needed a sounding board.

"I'm thinking of resigning and getting supply work around here."

"Are you, Mum? Where did this come from? If you wanted to do that, you could come and live round here."

No, I think I'd rather stay in this area. I really can't face going back to work with Derek again. It was bad enough before, it would be unbearable now. I need a change, Kate and I really like this area. Besides...."

"Yes?"

"You know I told you that the owner of this house is someone I once went to school with....Alan."

"Yes."

"Well, we have been getting on really well, in fact, I suppose you could say we have grown quite close over the last few weeks and we think that, in time, there might be a future for us together."

There was a low whistle at the other end of the phone.

"Wow! You don't waste any time, do you?"

"It wasn't like that, Kate. It just happened. We get on so well, we make each other very happy."

Julia felt as if she was trying to justify herself and fell silent.

"Well, good luck to you," said Kate.

"Just one thing, though. You won't say anything to Dad, will you?

"'Course not. It's your business, not mine."

They talked for a few more minutes before Kate was called away and Julia put the phone down not quite sure whether Kate approved or not. Youngsters, she thought, they don't believe anyone else has a life!

That evening, when Alan rang, Julia told him about her thoughts on resigning. He seemed non-committal.

"You do whatever feels right for you," he said.

"Well, I can't bear the thought of working with Derek again," said Julia. "I could get enough supply work around here to live on and I have some savings as well. I think supply work would be less stressful too."

"You're probably right," said Alan. He sounded preoccupied.

"Everything all-right?" asked Julia.

"Yes, of course, darling. Just Damian is thinking of jacking his course in. He's so damned lazy, that boy. Being



the youngest, he's been spoiled. I am trying to talk him into sticking with it and not doing something he might regret."

"Well, I had a word with Kate," Julia said, "and she's fine about us." She wasn't a hundred percent sure of this but hoped that saying it might make it true.

"So, when are we meeting up again?" she asked lightly.

"I'm not sure. I do need to try and sort things out with Damian, but I'll ring you tomorrow."

At the end of the conversation, Julia's knot of unease felt as if it had grown. She had a persistent feeling that something wasn't right, but what? This business with Damian - he's an adult, as she had pointed out to Alan several times, so he was going to make his own decision no matter what Alan said or did. Was this an excuse for something else? She firmly closed down that avenue of thought. She didn't want to go there just now. She made some hot chocolate. She didn't usually drink it but tonight, she felt in need of a little cosseting. She went to bed at her usual time and took some of her herbal tablets as she felt she was going to have difficulty sleeping. But the tablets worked their magic and she didn't stir again until eight the next morning.

## Chapter 16

Julia busied herself for most of the morning with various jobs around the house that she needed to catch up with after the Christmas break before going out to do some shopping. The snow on the way into Glossop was now a dirty mess of slush and Julia felt it matched her present mood. That walk in the newly fallen snow had been uplifting, the day had seemed full of promise for the future but now, there was a nagging feeling of uncertainty, a feeling that things were not quite right. Was it because she had talked about their future together? She had to talk to Alan. Back home, after doing her shopping, she dialled his mobile number. It rang briefly and then cut off. She tried to ring again but this time, her call was transferred to the voicemail centre and she was informed that her call could not be taken and would she like to leave a message? With a growing sense of unease, she left a message, telling Alan she had tried to call him and would he please ring her back. She realised that he had never given her his landline number and although she had his address, she never been to his home. For the next half hour, Julia tried repeatedly to make contact with Alan but each time, the phone remained switched off. She tried to reason with herself. How could

there suddenly be a problem when things had been going so well between them? Alan had probably had to go out. Maybe he'd been called into school for something, or he could be having problems with Damian. His phone could be switched off for dozens of reasons. Then she had an idea. She could see if he was online. Quickly she switched on her laptop and waited impatiently for it to boot up. She checked her emails first. Nothing from Alan but another one from Anna, which she disregarded. She checked if he was online. He wasn't, so she decided to send him an email. What would be the best way to word it? It certainly wouldn't do to let him know she was panicking about not being able to contact him. Finally, she began type:

"Hello, darling. I just wondered how you are today. I did try to phone you but your phone was switched off. Any plans for today? Love you, Julia xxx"

She clicked on 'send' and sat back. That was all she could do for now. She made herself a coffee and went out into the garden. She wandered around, looking at the plants, most of them now dormant under the winter snow, creating a feeling of desolation. She felt empty and

lonely. Turning abruptly, she went back into the house and picked up her phone again. She thought there might be at least a text message from Alan. There was. Hurriedly, she opened it:

"I'm afraid I'm not answering the phone today."

She stared at it unbelievably. Quickly, she sent a reply:

"What on earth do you mean? What's going on?"

Again she tried to ring Alan's mobile and again it was switched off. A few minutes later, a tinkling sound told her she had a new message. She grabbed the phone to access it.

"I can't do this any more, I'm afraid."

With a growing sense of unreality, she tried his number again. It rang once and then was switched off again. A feeling of annoyance was beginning to take over. Why was Alan doing this? Why was he playing stupid games? She texted back:

"I have no idea what you are talking about. Stop hiding and have the guts to ring me and talk to me. You can't mean what you are saying."

She sent the message and then sat holding the phone in her hands, willing it to ring. After five minutes, it did.

She answered it immediately.

"Hello, Alan?"

"Yes, it's me." His voice sounded flat and impersonal, with no trace of the eager caressing tone she normally heard when he spoke to her.

"What is going on?" she asked, feeling herself on the verge of hysteria. She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself.

"I can't do this any more. You want commitment from me that I can't give at the moment."

She sat motionless, staring at the fireplace in front of her. Part of her was seeing the crystal rose, Alan's Christmas present. She remembered her feeling of happiness when she had unwrapped it - in another world, another time.

She said, "I don't understand. Yesterday we were talking about a life together, now you're telling me you don't want to know? How can things change so suddenly? Don't you love me any more?" She felt herself sounding pathetic with this last question.

"Not as much as I thought."

She felt as if someone had hit her.

"I have been talking to Helen. I had to because of

the problems Damian is having. She wants us to give our marriage another go. I think she still loves me."

"And you still love her?"

"I think I owe it to her to try again."

"And what about me? Does it matter that you have ruined my life?"

"You once said that we were each responsible for our own happiness," he said.

So what will you do? You're staying in the marriage for the sake of Helen. How will you be happy?"

The silence that followed this question told her all she needed to know. She had no words to persuade, to cajole, to plead. She felt empty of words and of emotion. She pressed the button to end the call and slowly put the phone back on the coffee table before she felt the tears begin to flow. She slid from the sofa onto the floor, curled up in a foetal position, whimpering like a wounded animal, totally oblivious to everything but the avalanche of misery which was engulfing her. Yesterday it had seemed as if her life had the promise of the happiness that had eluded her for so long. Now, it was all in ruins and the contrast made it all the harder to bear. She had no idea

how long she remained there on the floor but eventually, she was aware of feeling cold and stiff. She had cried and cried and now had no tears left. Her gaze fell on the screen of her laptop and she saw that she had a new email. Numbly, she clicked to open it:

"I'm so sorry. I know I've hurt you. I didn't know this was going to happen or that we'd get so serious so quickly. You know that I have always felt very guilty over my marriage breakup and I feel I have to give it another chance, now that Helen has told me how she feels. I'm sorry. Please carry on living in the house as long as you need to. I won't disturb you."

Angrily, she deleted the message. It told her things she didn't want to know, didn't want to believe, but the fact that the words had been there and were now etched in her mind took away any remaining hope she had that they might still get back to the relationship she had thought was theirs. On an impulse, she went over to the mantelpiece and picked up the crystal rose that Alan had given her for Christmas. As she held it in her hands, the happiness she had felt when she had first held it flooded her mind. She

went through to the kitchen, opened the back door and threw it, as hard as she could against the brick wall. It fell to the ground, chipped but still intact. Infuriated, she picked it up and this time, hurled it into the bushes at the bottom of the garden. Then, the tears flowing again, she stumbled back indoors and stared around her as if possessed. Her eyes fell on a CD lying on the coffee table. It was one that Alan had bought her soon after they had met and discovered that they both enjoyed 60's music. She picked it up and began prowling round the house looking for all the other things which were reminders of his presence here and in her life during the past few months, Hurriedly she grabbed a couple of novels he had lent her then another CD and then another thought occurred to her. She raced upstairs to the bedroom. On the back of the door a navy blue Marks and Spencers dressing gown was hanging. She had bought it for the times he had stayed. She grabbed it, ripping it off the peg in her haste and then made her way into the bathroom,. There was his toothbrush, a flannel he had left on the side of the bath, his after-shave and a disposable razor. Sweeping them up, she raced downstairs and pulled open a drawer in the kitchen where she had stored sellotape and wrapping paper from Christmas present



wrapping. The dressing gown she took outside into the garden and stuffed into the dustbin, pushing it to the bottom, where it would be hidden beneath the household rubbish already there. Back in the house, she picked up all the smaller objects she had collected and placed them in the centre of a large piece of brown wrapping paper. Now her frenzied energy had deserted her and she folded the paper over the contents and then looked round for scissors. Finding none, she tore the sellotape with her teeth and finally sealed the parcel. She found a felt pen and scrawled Alan's name and address on the front, before grabbing her jacket, bag and car keys and leaving the house. The front door slammed behind her and she got into her car, throwing the parcel on the seat beside her. For a moment, she sat staring ahead and made no move to start the car. She felt she couldn't bear any reminders of Alan in the house for a moment longer. She had to get to the post office. Sending these things back was her only way of hitting back at him just now. She had a compulsion to hurt him as he had hurt her and this was the only pathetic way she had of doing it.

Her grief and then rage had burnt themselves out and

now she felt unnaturally calm. She put the key in the ignition, started the car and pulled out of the driveway onto the road. Her driving was slow and deliberate as she made her way to the post office and parked in the car park nearby. The winter afternoon had already disintegrated into darkness.

"First or second class, luv?" enquired the woman behind the counter.

"First, please," Julia said. The tears had begun to flow again, but Julia was oblivious. She fumbled in her purse and handed the money across the counter. The woman, embarrassed, lowered her eyes and took the money. Julia turned and walked blindly out of the shop. Once outside, she tried to blink the tears away and made her way back to the car.

## Chapter 17

For two days, Julia spent most of her time in bed, alternately crying and sleeping. After all her experiences of the last couple of months, it seemed that this had been the final straw. Neither her body, mind nor emotions seemed able to cope. She felt as though she had completely shut down. She couldn't imagine how her life was going to move forward. Alan had been right about one thing. She had been in a very vulnerable state when they had met such a short time ago and after all her unhappy years with Paul, the appearance of Alan in her life had seemed like the answer to a prayer. Although she always regarded herself as an independent woman, not needing the company of others to be happy, her experience with Alan had changed that. Now she no longer wanted to be alone. She felt desperate to share her life, but only with someone who could make her happy, and that meant Alan. She alternated between mourning the loss of their relationship and hating him for having reduced her to this state. She remembered telling him that he was not to feel responsible for her happiness - now those words had come back to haunt her. When she was hating him, she hated herself too for having fallen for him

and for being reduced to her present state.

On the third day, she felt she had no more tears to shed and sleep, the refuge she had relied on for oblivion, now eluded her. She got out of bed, wrapped her dressing gown closely around her against the cold and went to look through the window. She watched the cars driving past on their way across Snake Pass, not many of them as it was mid-morning now. The sky was blue and the sun was shining weakly, bathing the rise and fall of the hills. It was one of those all too rare bright days of winter which hold the promise of Spring in the quality of light and a hint of warmth in the air and looking at the panorama before her, Julia felt a faint stirring of hope, a feeling that maybe things would not always be this awful. Slowly, feeling weak as a result of her time in bed, she took a shower and got dressed. After a mug of coffee and some toast, her first food in three days, she put on her boots and anorak and, winding a scarf round her neck, she set off down the front path and onto the road. She walked slowly up the hill, out into the countryside. As she walked, she began to feel more energetic. She gradually became aware of the sound of birds and stopped to listen. She could feel the air on her face and the breeze ruffling her hair. As she stood, she

heard a faint whimpering noise somewhere to her right. She looked around, straining her eyes and ears but could see nothing. There was a clump of bushes in the general direction of the sound, so she made her way over there. The sound was getting louder and suddenly, she could see a light brown furry bundle half hidden amid the branches. She stooped to see more clearly and found herself staring into the eyes of a dog. It was lying on the ground, whimpering, too weak to get up. Gingerly, she put her hand out and the dog stretched forward to lick her fingers. It was a fairly small dog, with tangled hair, probably a mongrel, she thought. Maybe it had been abandoned. It didn't seem injured, just very weak. Carefully, talking to it in a soothing voice, she slid her hands underneath and picked it up. As she did so, she could feel the bony frame beneath the matted hair. This dog didn't seem to have eaten for days. In fact, on closer inspection, she decided it was quite an old dog. Lucky it wasn't very big or heavy, she thought, as she would have to carry it home.

Throughout the journey home, the dog lay motionless in her arms. By the time she got back to the house, light though it was, her arms were aching. She struggled to

unlock the front door and then took the dog inside and put it on the rug by the fireplace. It whimpered again, as if scared she was going to abandon it.

"It's all-right, honey," she said, "I'm going to get you a drink."

She found an old bowl in the kitchen and poured a mixture of milk and water into it and placed it by the dog's head. It sniffed the bowl and then began to lap, slowly at first, then hungrily. Julia was afraid it would wolf the whole lot and then vomit, but it didn't. She patted it on the head and it licked her hand again. As the dog was so weak, she thought she had better take it to see a vet. There must be one in Glossop but she didn't remember coming across one on her travels so she got out the Yellow Pages in search of one. She found one just off the main road and quickly dialled the phone number. When it was answered, she explained what had happened and arranged to bring the dog straight down to be checked over. Then she went in search of an old bath towel to wrap it in. The dog allowed itself to be placed on the back seat of Julia's car and lay motionless during the short journey to the vet's.

"Looks like she's been abandoned," said the vet when Julia explained how she had found the little dog. "It is a she. Nice little thing too, getting on a bit, about ten or eleven years old, at a guess. Seems quite well. I can't find any obvious problems. She just needs feeding up a bit, and she'll need her vaccinations, of course."

"Why would anyone want to abandon such a lovely natured little dog?" Julia asked.

"Probably they decided she was getting on a bit, Maybe they traded her in for a puppy, or maybe she had belonged to someone elderly who died and the family didn't want to take on the task of looking after her. The humane thing would have been to take her to the Rescue Centre, of course, but there you are. We can arrange for that now anyway. She's not been micro-chipped so there's little chance of reuniting her with her owners and, frankly, after the way she's been left out in the wilds like that, I don't think I would want to."

"I'd like to keep her then," said Julia, suddenly. She said it on the spur of the moment but, as she did so, she realised it was true. This little creature had been through a rough time and was alone, like herself. Maybe they would be good for each other.

"Well, if you're sure, we can certainly arrange that."

Shortly afterwards, Julia found herself outside the vet's with the little dog. She carried her back to the main road in search of a shop where she could buy some dog food. She found a shop where she could buy a few tins of food, a collar and lead and two bowls, one for food and one for water and some dog shampoo. With the dog under one arm and the bag of shopping under the other, she made her way back to the car. The vet had told her to give the dog only small amounts of food at first and this she did. She was rewarded by seeing her tail wag and having her hand licked again.

"You are lovely," Julia mumrmured, watching the little dog eating ravenously, "but I think you had better have a bath and then we'll see if we can brush out some of those knots in your hair."

Bath time was hard work. The dog did not take long to realise what was about to happen and responded by running off, tail between her legs, in search of somewhere to hide. There followed a chase around the house, with Julia unearthing her from various hiding places, only to have her shoot off again before she could catch her. Eventually, she cornered her in the kitchen and managed to grab her and



struggle up the stairs with her and into the bathroom. By now, they were both exhausted and the dog seemed to know when she was beaten. Now she allowed herself to be put in the bath in a few inches of water with only a token struggle. It was at this point that Julia realised that she had left the dog shampoo downstairs in the kitchen. She considered using her own shampoo but rejected the idea as she didn't know whether it might do more harm than good. She would have to go down and get it from the kitchen. She closed the bathroom door firmly and raced downstairs, grabbed the shampoo and raced back up again. By the time she got back, the dog had jumped out of the bath and was shaking herself vigorously, soaking everything around her. Julia sighed, grabbed her once again and lowered her into the bath. Afterwards, she towelled her as dry as possible and then let her out of the bathroom to charge around the house, shaking herself and rolling on the floor.

"So much for the bath!" Julia smiled to herself as she watched the little dog's antics. It occurred to her that this was the first time she had felt remotely cheerful for the last three days.

That night, when Julia went up to bed, she found an

old blanket on the airing cupboard, folded it and put it on the floor of the landing outside her bedroom door. The little dog understood that it was bedtime and dutifully lay down, looking up at Julia with wide, brown eyes. Julie patted her and then went to bed herself. She suddenly realised that, being preoccupied with looking after the dog, she hadn't thought of Alan or her own sadness for several hours, but now all the feelings of desolation rushed back and she lay curled up in bed, tears flowing once again. She suddenly became aware of the dog jumping up on the bed, licking her hands which were covering her face and whining softly as if in sympathy. She reached out and stroked her, finding a strange comfort in the softness and springiness of the newly washed hair.

"You shouldn't be on the bed, you know," she murmured. The dog took no notice but continued to lick Julia's hand. She had stopped whining and now curled herself up at Julia's side and closed her eyes. Julia followed her example and the two of them slept, sharing their exhaustion of the day.

Morning came and Julia felt a new energy after a good night's sleep. She was awoken by the little dog licking her

hand once again and whining, this time, Julia suspected, because she needed to go outside. Julia struggled into her dressing gown and slippers and set off downstairs, the little dog ahead of her. She stood at the open back door, shivering in the cold of the morning watching the dog exploring the garden which she had not yet seen in daylight. She bounded around the garden, sniffing here and there, running from one place to another, revelling in her new surroundings. Julia marvelled at the transformation from the pathetic, scruffy little bundle she had carried home only the day before. How quickly the little dog had adapted to this new life.

"Lucky you," she said to the dog, "You find it so easy to forget all that's happened to you. You don't bear any grudges, you haven't lost your trust in us humans. You're all set to make the most of your new life." The dog looked at her, her head to one side as if considering the wisdom of Julia's words.

"Never look back." Julia spoke the words aloud. "Is that the answer? You make a mistake but you can't go back and unmake it. The best you can do is learn from it and move on."

She felt there was sense in this but she knew it would

be some time before she could apply it. Animals have the advantage of living almost solely in the present. She couldn't switch off the memories. Did she really wish she could? She couldn't answer that question but reflecting on it, she could feel tears threatening again. She turned quickly and made her way upstairs to have a shower and get ready for the day.

"I need to think of a name for you," she said to the dog over breakfast. "I can't just call you dog. What can I call you?" Again the dog looked into her face attentively.

"I know," Julia said, "Honey, the colour of your coat." That's your new name, Honey." The dog wagged her tail in approval

The arrival of Honey gave a new structure to Julia's day. Now she was responsible, not only for herself but for another living being so she could no longer remain cocooned in her own misery. Each day, they got up early and went for long walks, whatever the weather. Honey revelled in the care and attention she was receiving and she blossomed into an attractive little dog, who often drew friendly comments from passers by when they were out. Her coat became glossy

and she filled out as a result of regular feeding. If she was an 'older dog' she gave little sign of it as she trotted along beside Julia whenever they were out together. Julia took to walking down to the shops rather than taking the car, unless she needed a lot of shopping, and they both benefited from the fresh air and exercise as well as becoming familiar figures in the neighbourhood. Honey would have to be tied up outside any shops that Julia was going into, and she would wait patiently on the pavement until Julia came out to reclaim her. She seemed to have been well trained in her previous life and was undemanding and well behaved. Julia found that, with a dog for beside her, people were more inclined to strike up a conversation, especially if they too had dogs. She realised how isolated she had become and took pleasure in these brief exchanges.

But it wasn't all positive. She still carried her mobile phone everywhere with her, even in the house, in case she received a call or text from Alan, her heart still raced whenever the phone did ring, although it was always Kate or her mother, never him. She had deleted his phone number and removed his email address from her computer in the same fury that had led her to hurl the crystal rose as

far away from her as possible and whenever she found him intruding on her thoughts, she made sure she busied herself with something. And so, slowly and painfully, with Honey's help, she got herself through the days and weeks. She sent her letter of resignation in, feeling now more than ever that she could not bear to go back to any part of her previous life. She received the occasional email from colleagues at work, especially when they learned of her decision to leave and she responded to them in non-committal phrases. Yes, she was fine, no, she did not regret her decision, nor did she have any firm plans for the future, but she made sure that her brief affair with Alan remained her secret. To Kate, she had also been non-committal, simply implying that things had run their course and she and Alan were no longer in contact. She didn't know or care whether Kate read between the lines, but the thought of having to discuss what had happened with anyone was more than she could bear for now. Sometimes she berated herself for having been so naive as to fall for his charms, sometimes she had wild ideas of tracking him down and persuading him that he should choose her rather than Helen, then she would tell herself how stupid and pathetic she was being. When she had left Paul, she had had no

thought of entering another relationship, she had been quite happy to live on her own and be her own person. Alan seemed to have taken that from her and she yearned for the life-sharing that they had enjoyed. Honey was a far greater support to her than Julia realised at the time, but Julia appreciated her company and somehow knew that without her, she would be in an even worse state.

Two weeks later, the doorbell rang. Julia went to answer it. A woman was standing on the step. She looked about Julia's age but was plumper, more rounded and her blond hair was a mass of untamed curls. Julia smiled.

"Can I help you?" she queried politely. The woman did not smile back.

"I am Helen Edwards," she said. "Can I come in? "

Julia felt her heart thud. Unable to speak, she stood back and opened the door wider to allow the woman in. She, on the other hand, seemed quite composed as she walked past Julia into the living room. She stood in the doorway looking round.

"You've made it look very comfortable," she observed as she made her way to the sofa. "I always liked this room. The view is so lovely, don't you think? Especially in

summer. But of course, you haven't seen it then, have you?"

Julia still did not speak. Without knowing how she got there, she found herself in the armchair by the window.

"Why have you come?" she asked. Her voice sounded as if it were someone else's. She was suddenly back in that strange 'other place' where she felt as if she were observing the scene but unconnected with it.

Helen looked at her curiously. "I could have asked the estate agent to deal with the matter, I suppose, but I wanted to give you as much notice as possible. I'm afraid we are putting the house on the market again. I know the market still hasn't picked up but my husband is thinking of taking early retirement and, if he does, we want to be in a position to move away from here. Cornwall, we were thinking of."

"So you want me to move out?"

Helen Edwards looked relieved.

"Well, not immediately, of course, but I'm afraid I shall have to instruct the estate agents to show any prospective buyers round, which may inconvenience you. I'm sorry to have to spring it on you like this. Alan, my husband should be dealing with this really, but you know what men are like. Always avoid an awkward situation!"



Ain't that the truth, Julia thought bitterly. Aloud she said, "That's OK. I knew when I came here that it would only be a short let and I think it's time I moved on."

She stood up and moved to the door.

"I'll need a few weeks to make other arrangements."

"Oh, of course. No rush. Perhaps you would let the estate agent know when you have a date for moving?"

Julia let her out and then came back into the living room. It was obvious that Helen knew nothing about the events of the last few months. She didn't even seem to know that she and Alan had known each other in the past. And the way Helen had talked gave no indication that she and Alan had been living separate lives as Alan had claimed.

Of course, it explained so many little things that she had wondered about during their brief relationship. This was why they had always met here and never at his house, why he had never given her his home phone number, never agreed to her meeting Damian, why he had been dragging his feet over telling his other children about her. How could she have been so stupid as to be taken in by him? Why had she ignored all these warning signs that all was not as it seemed. She knew the answer to that one.

Because she had wanted so much for it to be all-right. After all the years of Paul's neglect, she had jumped at the chance of being loved. After years of trudging from one mundane day to the next, she had suddenly become alive, she had found someone to share the special moments with and had believed, for such a brief time, that this would be her life for the future. And now, it was as if it had never been - no, worse than that, it had all been based on lies and deceit. The tantalising glimpse of happiness had been tweaked away with no warning, leaving her in limbo.

She sat down once more in the armchair by the window. Honey came over and nuzzled her but Julia did not respond. In her mind she was imagining Alan and Helen together - at home, eating meals, watching television, shopping, gardening, doing all the meaningless, trivial, routine things married couples do, physically together but mentally each living a different life, the one never reaching out to the other. How often had she seen couples like that and wondered what drove them to live out their lives in such meaningless fashion. But when she had asked the same question of herself and Paul, she had known the answer; being lonely as part of a couple might be better than being independent and how did you find the courage to take the

risk unless, as in her case, circumstances intervene and you find yourself in just the position you feared?

She had been betrayed by Alan. Helen too, of course, but Helen still had him. He had chosen to stay with her. Although he had told Julia he loved her, in the end, he didn't love her enough and that hurt so much. She felt the tears overwhelm her again. When would it stop hurting so much?

## Chapter 18

Winter began to give way to Spring. It was part of Julia's rehabilitation that she started to notice the grass beginning to grow again, buds on the trees and the fact that the air was gradually losing its frosty edge when she opened the back door early each morning to let Honey out into the garden. She began to take notice of the changes in the garden and to think about having to find somewhere else to live. There had been only two prospective buyers shown round the house since Helen's visit and neither appeared to have made an offer. One morning, she went out with Honey, still in dressing gown and slippers, and walked round the edge of the lawn, seeing, for the first time, tiny shoots pushing through the earth, new growth on the bushes and even a clump of snowdrops in a sheltered spot at the end of the garden. In spite of the house's association with Alan, she felt sad that her time there was coming to an end and she still hadn't decided where she would move on to. She had bought a ball for Honey with the idea that they could play 'fetch' in the garden with it but Honey had steadfastly refused to co-operate, merely trotting in the direction of the ball when it was thrown and then standing

over it. She seemed to have no idea about picking it up and bringing it back to Julia, so it had been abandoned and now lay on the grass. Julia picked it up, made encouraging noises to Honey and threw it, but again, there was no response. In fact, this time, Honey didn't even bother to run after it. Julia laughed and went back into the house. As she did so, she heard the phone ring. Even now, there was always that heart-thumping moment before she picked it up. It was Kate. Julia was surprised to hear from her daughter so early in the day.

"Kate," she said, "Are you all-right? You don't usually ring this early."

"No," Kate agreed, "but I am going in late this morning so I thought I would ring and ask you if you would like to come down for a few days."

Julia was about to make an excuse - she didn't feel like visiting just yet, but something in Kate's voice made her say yes. They agreed that Julia would come the next day, arriving in the evening when Kate was home from work. As she put the phone down, she realised she hadn't asked Kate if she could bring Honey. Still, Kate loved animals, so she was sure there wouldn't be a problem when she appeared on the doorstep with the dog in tow.

The following day was Friday and Julia was up early to take Honey out and then to get ready for her trip to Kate's. She hadn't seen her since Christmas and it was now the end of February. Two months that she would not like to live through again, she thought to herself. It was mid afternoon by the time she had packed everything into the car, including Honey's feeding bowls and a bottle of water for her to have a drink if they stopped on the way. It was mild but cloudy and there was rain forecast. She hoped it would stay dry until she reached Tewkesbury; she hated driving in the rain. Honey was used to riding in the car now and jumped in eagerly. Julia made sure everywhere was locked up and then got into the car to set off. Traffic was building up now as everyone began their journey home early, looking forward to the week-end. Julia drove through Glossop and on towards the motorway, heading south towards the M6. Here traffic was very congested and the journey promised to be long and tedious. Julia edged her way along the motorway, surrounded by lorries, vans and cars, all anxious to reach their journey's end, all suspended in time as they sat in their metal cocoons. Whilst the car was stationary in one of the interminable queues, Julia looked

back at Honey and discovered that she was fast asleep on the back seat. She smiled. She blessed the day the little dog had come into her life. Looking after her had, to some extent, taken her mind off her own troubles. A van behind her hooted impatiently and Julia realised the traffic was beginning to move again. And so they continued, eventually coming onto the M5 where the traffic was easier and they were able to travel at a reasonable speed. They reached Kate's house at just after six o'clock. Kate was already home and just beginning the preparations for dinner. She exclaimed with delight at the sight of Honey and made a big fuss of her, thus gaining an adoring shadow for the whole of their stay.

"She's lovely, Mum, so sweet! Where did you say you found her?"

Julia explained the story but Kate didn't seem to be listening very closely. Julia thought she looked pale and tired.

"Are you looking after yourself?" she enquired. "You don't look your usual self."

Kate looked startled for a moment and then, swiftly recovered.

"Yes, I'm fine. You know how hectic things get at

work. We've a lot of cases coming to court in the next couple of weeks and a lot of the preparation work seems to have fallen to me."

Julia looked around the flat. Kate was normally very houseproud and always insisted that everywhere should be tidy but today, it looked as if she hadn't done any cleaning for days. There was a film of dust over the normally shining surfaces and the carpet didn't seem to have been hoovered either. Her mother's instinct told her things were not right, but she said nothing. She set the table while Kate was opening some wine.

"Two places or three?" she asked. "Is Joe going to be here?" Kate had met Joe soon after going to university and their relationship had been off and on ever since. Whilst not actually living together, Joe seemed to spend most of his time at Kate's flat. The bonus was that he got his laundry done free and usually ate at Kate's expense. Whereas Kate had always been very focused on the law as her profession of choice, Joe had drifted from one job to another and was now working for an insurance broker while he 'considered his options' which was his way of saying that he still had no idea what he really wanted to do. There was a silence. Julia looked towards Kate, expecting a



reply.

"No, he won't be joining us, not at all, in fact."

"Do you mean you two have fallen out again?" said Julia in mock exasperation. Kate didn't smile.

"It's a bit more serious this time," she said. "I don't really want to talk about it at the moment if you don't mind, Mum. Maybe later when I'm not so tired."

"Of course," said Julia and immediately changed the subject. But the look on Kate's face worried her.

After dinner, Julia washed up while Kate wandered into the living room and switched on the television. Julia could hear the sound of the news as she finished the dishes and wiped the kitchen surfaces. When she went to join Kate in the living room, she found her curled up on the sofa fast asleep. Not wishing to disturb her, she sat in the armchair and Honey came and jumped on her knee to be stroked. It was an hour later when Kate stirred and opened her eyes. It took her a moment to realise where she was and then she was full of apologies.

"I am sorry, Mum. Fancy inviting you down here and then falling asleep. It's just that I seem to be constantly tired these days. I don't have half the energy I used to."

Julia looked at her daughter as a thought popped into

her head.

"You're pregnant, aren't you?" she said quietly.

Kate looked startled.

"Actually, I don't know," she said. "I don't think I can be. We have been careful and anyway, if I were, it would be the worst possible time. I have exams in six months and Joe and I really aren't getting on very well."

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Julia tentatively.

"Nothing much to say really," Kate answered. She sat up on the sofa and drew her legs up under her chin, looking like the little girl of twenty years ago. "A couple of weeks ago, he was on a course at Manchester university, staying overnight, and when he came back, he seemed a bit odd. It took ages to get out of him what the matter was, but he eventually admitted that he had had a one night stand. A gang of them had gone out in the evening and got plastered, of course, and one thing led to another." Her voice wobbled and tailed off.

"Someone from his office?" asked Julia. She had only met him a couple of times and, although he seemed pleasant enough, she had the impression that most of the commitment was on Kate's side.

"Yes," Kate replied. "He wouldn't tell me who and I don't know the people he works with anyway. I told him to get out and not to come back. I don't see how I could ever trust him again after that. I did expect him to put up a fight though, but he left without any argument."

"Why didn't you tell me all this?" cried Julia, distressed that she had not known of Kate's upset.

"Because I knew you had your own problems and I didn't want to worry you, and besides that, I didn't feel like talking about it."

So while she was curled up in a ball crying over Alan, poor Kate had been suffering too. Julia felt ashamed that she hadn't made more effort to keep in touch with her daughter.

"Well, I'm here now," she said, " and I think that tomorrow we should go and buy a pregnancy test for you. Then at least we'll know for sure."

She went over to Kate and hugged her.

## Chapter 19

The following morning, Julia was woken later than usual, and by the time she was up and dressed, Honey was waiting for her, tail wagging furiously in anticipation of her walk. Julia quickly drank a cup of tea and then got ready to go out. Tewkesbury still has an air of a quaint old mediaeval town, with lots of half timbered buildings and, of course, the Abbey, which Julia passed now on her way to the river. It was a cold morning, but crisp and dry. The sky was pale blue and cloudless, as if practising for the Spring mornings that would appear in a few weeks time. She walked Honey along the river bank for about twenty minutes and then turned and walked back. Preoccupied as she was, she couldn't fail to be amused at Honey's reactions to the mallards clustered on the bank. By and large, they seemed to be used people passing by and didn't stir themselves, but as soon as one moved, Honey strained towards it in determined fashion.

"They're not for chasing, you know," Julia admonished her. Honey looked up at her in evident disbelief.

Julia's mind was occupied with Kate's problems. What

if she did turn out to be pregnant? How would she react? Julia didn't want to dwell on that too much. Her daughter had her foot on the ladder of a successful, lucrative career. A baby at this stage would cause an unbelievable upheaval in her life and Julia was not sure how she would cope. Leaving the river and back on the road to the flat, she slowed down, breathing in the crisp, fresh air and glancing into the shop windows as she passed. Back at the flat, she made a cup of tea for Kate and took it into her. Kate was still asleep, her dark hair spread around her head on the pillow. Julia looked at her and her mind went back twenty five years to when Kate was her baby. It seemed such a short time ago. She placed the mug of tea on the bedside table. Kate opened her eyes and smiled. She propped herself up on one elbow to drink the tea

. "Lovely. Thanks Mum, you're an angel."

"Are we still going to get you a pregnancy test?" asked Julia. "I think we should."

"Yes, I suppose it makes sense, No point putting it off any longer " Kate admitted. "I'll get ready now and we'll go. We could do with some retail therapy as well." She grinned. "So we'd better go soon. I know how you hate

crowded shops!"

They left Honey in the flat with a chew stick to work on and set off for the shops. Tewkesbury is not a large town and most of the shops were within walking distance, but, although they normally enjoyed shopping together, today, their hearts were not in it and after a desultory look in some of the clothes shops along the way, they turned into the chemist and made for the pregnancy tests. Julia waited while Kate picked one and went to pay for it and then they walked quickly back to the flat. Kate made them both coffee and they sat at the kitchen table to drink it. Julia looked around at the attractive chrome and beech kitchen and then back at Kate who was sitting hunched up, staring at the table. Julia took Kate's hand in hers.

"Don't start worrying yet," she said. "It may not be positive, in which case you would be worrying for nothing, and if it is, I'm here to help you.....if you want me to, of course."

Kate looked up and smiled. "Of course, I want you to," she said, and Julia was reminded again of the little girl of the past. She stirred her coffee.

"Go and get it over with," she said gently and Kate

pushed her chair back, stood up and went out of the kitchen to the bathroom. Julia remained at the table, warming her hands on her mug of coffee. Honey came over and stood by her chair, wanting to be patted but Julia didn't notice. A few moments later, Kate emerged, holding the test indicator in one hand and her watch in the other.

"How long have you got to wait?" asked Julia, unfamiliar with this new technology.

"Time's nearly up," Kate answered tersely.

Then the two of them watched as the blue line appeared.

"What does that mean?" asked Julia breathlessly. Home pregnancy tests had not been available when she was expecting Kate. Then it was a case of waiting until two weeks after the expected date of one's period. She glanced at Kate and saw that she was still staring at the blue indicator line as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing. Julia's question was answered. The pregnancy test had been positive. Kate was pregnant. In silence, she put her arms around her daughter's shoulders, Kate turned and buried her face in her mother's arms and the two of them remained there motionless and silent until Kate pulled

away from her mother.

"So that's that," she said. "I knew I was pregnant, I just knew it but I tried to ignore it. You hope these things will just go away if you ignore them, don't you?" She seemed on the verge of tears.

"And do you still want it to go away?" asked Julia carefully. She had always been passionately opposed to abortion. She didn't know how she would react if Kate said that was what she wanted to do. She held her breath, waiting for the reply.

"No," said Kate decisively. "I would never have an abortion. I couldn't do that."

Julia was relieved. But there still remained the problem of what Kate was going to do. It would need a lot of thinking about, not something that could be rushed.

"Why don't we go out for lunch somewhere nice? Treat ourselves," she suggested. To her surprise, Kate was enthusiastic about the idea and went off to get ready. Left alone, Julia absent-mindedly ruffled the fur on Honey's neck. She felt as if she was in shock and yet Kate seemed to have taken the result in her stride. She supposed that Kate had had her suspicions for a few days so had had more



time to get used to the idea of being pregnant. But for Julia, it was still a shock, not least, because it meant that she would become a grandmother. She wasn't sure she was ready for that yet! Her thoughts went back to the baby boy she had lost all those years ago. Maybe Kate's baby would be a boy. The door opened and Kate came back in, ready to go out. Honey seemed happy to stay in the house, so they set off. Kate drove. She took them out of Tewkesbury, along winding country roads to a little country pub that Julia had never been to before. They ordered drinks, white wine for Julia and bitter lemon for Kate, and sat down in a corner, where they could talk in peace. Julia studied the menu.

"You'll need to talk to Joe, you know," she said, her eyes still on the menu.

"Yes," said Kate slowly, "I know, That's the part I'm dreading most. I just don't know how he is going to react. He has always said he didn't want children."

"Really?" Kate was surprised. "But he might change his mind when he's faced with the reality."

Kate shook her head. "I just don't know," she said again. "I think I'd better ring him when we get home."

The meal was pleasant and they enjoyed each other's company. They had always got on well together and Julia had missed Kate a lot when she had gone to university and then gone to work in Tewkesbury but she could tell that Kate's thoughts were elsewhere so they didn't linger over their meal but went back to Kate's flat so that she could phone Joe.

"Do you want me out of the way?" enquired Julia." I can go back home and drive down again in a few days."

"No, I'd rather you stayed if you don't mind. I'll ring Joe and tell him I want to talk to him. I'll suggest that I go round to his flat to talk. It's only five minutes walk away. You stay here. I'll be back soon or if things go well, I may not be back for a while. Help yourself to anything you need. Oh, and Mum..."

"Yes?"

"Thanks for being here." Kate gave her a hug, then went to get her coat. Alone in the flat, Julia made herself a cup of tea and then sat at the kitchen table. How was all this going to end, she wondered. Joe had never struck her as being a rock of support. How would he react to the news that he was to be a father? On the other hand, maybe it

would nudge him into maturity and he would give Kate the love and support she needed. Hmm, and maybe pigs might fly, she thought grimly. Why were things never straightforward? She felt her thoughts sliding towards Alan again so she took her cup to the sink to rinse it out and then went to get Honey's lead. The dog watched hopefully, her tail wagging. Another walk already?

"Come on, girl," Julia said to her. "We need some fresh air to blow away the cobwebs."

An hour later, Julia and Honey got back to the flat, both in need of a rest. Kate was still not back and Julia was not sure if this was a good or bad sign. She sat down to watch television to take her mind off things. Later again, she wandered into the kitchen, thinking that she might as well see what was available for her evening meal as it seemed as if Kate would not be back for some time. Just as she was looking in the fridge, she heard the front door open. It was Kate, alone and looking upset. Julia went over to her.

"Are you all-right? Sit down and tell me what happened."

"He's not interested, Mum. We had a long talk and he

said he wanted us to stay together but he couldn't take on the responsibility of a baby."

"He was happy to take on the responsibility of creating it," muttered Julia, then she saw Kate's expression. "Sorry," she said. "I'm not being very helpful, am I?"

"It did take two of us," Kate reminded her. "Anyway, I couldn't be happy with him on those terms. If I had an abortion, I couldn't live with myself and our relationship would never be the same anyway. He didn't even say he loved me - just wittered on about 'the relationship' and 'whether we have a future together'." She put her face in her hands and began to cry, huge, wrenching sobs that shook her slim body. Julia put her arms around her and held her, feeling powerless to help. At that moment, she could cheerfully have murdered this feckless idiot who had come into her daughter's life and caused such havoc. They sat in the darkening room, the silence only broken by Kate's sobbing. At last, she seemed too exhausted to cry any more and leaned against Julia's shoulder.

"Would you like to lie down for a while?" asked Julia.

"No, I'll only lie there with it all going round in my

head. Let's open a bottle of wine and put a pizza in the oven."

Julia was surprised. Kate usually prided herself on eating healthily. Kate and pizza just didn't go together, but at the same time, she was impressed by her reaction. She thought back ruefully to her reaction when Alan had ended their relationship. She had hidden away for two days, hardly getting out of bed. Do we possess a resilience in our youth that fades as we grow older, she wondered. How would she have coped in Kate's position? She didn't know the answer to that.

She went into the kitchen in search of a pizza, some wine and glasses. Kate had several bottles in the wine rack. Julia picked one at random and took it into the living room. Kate was sitting up now, her face puffy and eyes swollen from all the crying but looking a little calmer.

"Are you sure that this is really the end of the road for you two?" asked Julia. She couldn't bear the thought of Kate having to cope with this break up as well as her pregnancy. "Maybe, when he's had time to think about it?" But Kate was shaking her head firmly.

"No," she said, "not a chance. Things were not good between us after the episode with that girl. In fact, looking back, I think they had been going downhill for some time, but slowly, so I didn't really notice. I can't live with someone I can't trust, and besides, every time we had a row, I would throw his unfaithfulness at him and he would probably accuse me of trapping him with the baby. How could I have been so wrong about him? I really thought he loved me." Tears were pouring down her face again.

"It's all too easy to be wrong about people," said Julia, half to herself. "You think you know someone, but you never do, really."

"Oh, I know you have had an unhappy time with Dad. That's why I don't want to carry on with Jack if things are not right between us."

"I wasn't talking about Dad," Julia replied. Maybe it was the effect of the wine on her, but she began to tell Kate about meeting up with Alan, which she knew about already, and about their brief affair which had ended in such heartbreak for her, which she didn't. When she had finished, Kate was silent for a moment. Julia felt that, if nothing else, she had taken Kate's mind off her own

troubles, however briefly. At last she spoke.

"I had no idea all that was going on. You didn't let the grass grow under your feet, did you?"

"It wasn't like that," protested Julia. "I wasn't looking for anything like that to happen. It just did. We were both lonely, or at least I thought we were. I suppose he was just looking for a diversion," she added bitterly.

"You're still not over it, are you, Mum?"

"No, I don't think I am. It will take time, a long time, I think before I'm back to normal."

"I don't think there is any such thing as getting back to normal. Everything that happens to you shapes who you are."

"Agreed, but you do have some control over how it shapes you. I am trying hard not to be bitter and you, Kate, you still have your life in front of you, with so many opportunities to make a success of it."

"This baby is going to put things on hold for a while, though!"

"Not necessarily. Lots of women have babies and carry

on with their education or careers. You hear of women doing degree courses and being back at lectures days after having a baby."

"Like the peasants in the paddy fields of long ago, having a baby in the morning and being back at work in the afternoon! We think we are so advanced and civilised but, realistically, what have we women gained in the last couple of generations? Having a baby and a career just means having to cram forty eight hours of work into every twenty four!"

Julia laughed, admitting the element of truth in what Kate was saying.

"But it doesn't have to be like that for you," she protested. "If you would like me to, I can come to live here and help you during your pregnancy and I can look after the baby for you while you are at work."

Kate was startled into silence. She looked at her mother, not quite sure if she had meant what she said. She could see from Julia's face that she did. Still she said nothing. Julia began to wonder if she had made a mistake. Maybe Kate didn't want her to be so closely involved. Did she see it as interference? Then Kate spoke.



"It would be wonderful if you could, Mum, but you have your own life to lead. This is the first chance you have had to please yourself and do what you want to do."

"This is what I want to do," Julia replied. "I want to help you, and my future grandchild - although the idea of being a grandmother takes some getting used to! I can get a flat of my own. I don't need to cramp your style here." Kate interrupted her.

"You certainly wouldn't be cramping my style! You're more than welcome to live here."

Julia smiled.

"Well, there is always the chance that you might be cramping mine," she joked. "After all, as you said, I'm a free agent now."

They talked late into the night and by the time they went to bed, Kate's wine rack was two bottles of wine lighter and the two of them were feeling considerably more relaxed than they had been during the day. Julia lay in bed and thought about the events of the day. She was impressed with the way Kate had handled things. These were life changing times for both of them but, together, they would draw support from each other and it would be good for her

to have a purpose in her life again. She fell asleep but a few hours later, she was awakened suddenly. She sat up in bed wondering what had woken her so suddenly and then she heard a muffled sound coming from Kate's bedroom next door. It was the sound of crying. Julia got up and pulled on her dressing gown, shivering in the night chill. She made her way to Kate's door and knocked quietly.

"Are you all-right, Kate?" she said softly.

"No," came the reply. Julia turned the door handle and went in. Kate was huddled in the bed, her eyes red from crying. Julia sat on the bed, her hand on Kate's shoulder.

"I'm frightened," Kate said at last, when she had stopped crying and blown her nose.

"There's no need to be," said Julia.

"I'm frightened of going through this pregnancy on my own and bringing up a child on my own. I'm frightened of having responsibility for bringing a new person into the world."

"You don't have to do this on your own. I told you I will be here for you as long as you want me. When the baby is born, I can look after it while you're at work. Lots of

other women do it, many of them without family support. You really don't need to worry, Kate. We can do this between us, trust me."

Kate looked at her mother and smiled.

"I'm sorry. It's just that I woke up and everything started going round and round in my head and I couldn't see how things were going to work out. I'm not usually this much of a cry-baby. I don't know why I am getting myself in this state really."

"It's the hormones, quite normal, especially in the first trimester."

"The first what?"

"It means the first three months of the pregnancy," laughed Julia. "You've got a lot to learn, but you'll cope. We'll cope between us."

Eventually, she got Kate off to sleep again and crept back to her own bed. She lay there thinking. Kate was right in one way. It was a time of upheaval for her and it couldn't be easy for someone as well organised as her. Kate was someone who had had her life mapped out, almost to the month. She had planned her career path, when she was going

to get married, when the best time for a career break to start a family would be if she ever did decide to have one and now ... now it was as if her life were a jigsaw puzzle suddenly tossed in the air, with all the pieces falling here, there and everywhere. Honey woke up and padded over to the side of the bed. Julia reached down and patted her head, Honey jumped up and settled herself on Julia's feet, curled up and fell asleep again.

"You're not meant to be on the bed, you know," Julia told her and then within minutes, she too was asleep.

## Chapter 20

Julia went back to the house by Snake Pass for the last time the following day. Although she had many more possessions there now than when she had first moved in, it didn't take more than a few hours to pack everything up and pile it all into her car. She had left Honey at Kate's so that the dog would be spared the upheaval and also so that she would have more space in the car. Then she drove into Glossop to hand in the keys to the estate agent. There was a different girl there this time. Julia smiled at her and handed her the envelope with the house keys in it. She had written the address on the front. She explained that she was moving out. The girl looked puzzled.

"Well, really you are supposed to give a month's notice," she said.

"Oh I don't think so," said Julia firmly. "The house is on the market, isn't it and I have already been asked to leave, so I don't have to give anything." She almost felt sorry for the girl as she saw her startled expression.

As she went out into the high street she looked around for a few moments before making her way back to the car in the little car park behind the shops where she had parked all those weeks ago when she had first come to Glossop.

Weeks ago and a lifetime ago, she thought as she got into the car and started the engine ready to begin the journey back to Tewkesbury and yet another change in her life.

Kate had put flowers in the spare bedroom to welcome her mother. She had persuaded Julia to stay with her rather than find her own flat. For one thing, it would be less expensive. Julia had some savings and she was planning to sign on with the local authority for supply work until the birth of the baby, but she didn't want to spend money needlessly and flats in Tewkesbury were not cheap. Kate continued to work. Her job was a responsible one and sometimes involved long hours, but the pregnancy was problem free and, apart from feeling very tired during the first weeks, physically, she coped well. Julia went with her to her ante-natal appointments and was there to exclaim over the scan photo of the twelve week old future grandchild. The two of them settled into a pattern of daily life that suited them both.

"I've registered for supply teaching," Julia told Kate one morning soon after her move. Kate looked up from the toast she was pushing round the plate in front of her.

"Are you sure you want to do this? You seemed so fed

up with teaching during the last couple of years."

Julia nodded. "I know, but supply teaching is teaching without being bogged down by all the paperwork and responsibilities that I had as deputy head. You go into a school and teach, which, after all, is the essential part of the job." She smiled to convey a confidence she was not, in fact, feeling. "Anyway, I have to have some form of income. I know I'm getting my share of the house sale, but I really don't want to touch that if I can help it."

"Well, if you're sure." Kate's voice tailed off and Julia could see that she was not really in the present moment. She reached over and took her hand.

"You look tired. Why don't you take the day off?"

"Can't today, I'm afraid. Too much on at the moment. Don't worry about me. It's just that I'm not sleeping too well. I'll be all-right. I'll have an early night tonight."

She smiled at her mother as she stood up. "Anyway, got to go. See you this evening."

Julia heard nothing from the LEA for two weeks and was just beginning to wonder if she would ever get any work when the phone rang at 8 o'clock on the Tuesday morning.

"Would you be available for Moss Green Primary today?"

"Oh, er, yes, of course."

She was given the details and address of the school and, as she put the phone down, she fought to push down the feeling of panic which threatened to overwhelm her. This would be her first time in a classroom since that famous day when she had walked out of her job. She took a deep breath. Luckily she had showered and dressed early that morning. She had already taken Honey for her walk, so she was almost ready.

In the car, Julia set her GPS system with the address of Moss Green Primary. Traffic was heavy and she was glad it was only a short journey. The school was an airy, modern building on the outskirts of a housing estate. Julia rang the doorbell and waited. Eventually, the door was opened by a flustered looking middle aged woman in a red suit and short, blond hair.

"Yes?"

"Mrs Chambers, supply teacher." As she spoke, the other woman was already walking away across the foyer towards an open door. Julia noticed the words 'Head Teacher' as she was ushered in.

"Now, you will be taking the Year 3 class. The teacher is on a course today so she had left work for the class. The details will be on her desk. I think you are playground



duty too and please make sure you mark all the work the children do - in green pen, please. It's part of the marking policy; we only use green pen."

As she was talking, the head teacher, as Julia presumed she was, had scooped up a pile of papers, guided Julia out of the room and down a short corridor to the Year 3 classroom.

"The children come in at five to nine, so that gives you a few minutes to get ready. A lovely class, lovely class!" The woman swept out of the room, her heels clacking on the corridor floor. Did Julia imagine a too bright smile and tone of voice as she said this? But she had no time to reflect further as she hurriedly began to get organised for the day ahead.

The children streamed into the room at 8.55, chatting and scuffling as they hung their bags and coats in the tiny cloakroom area. Julia settled them on the carpet around her chair to call the register and introduce herself. The children sat in front of her expectantly, except for one tall boy who went to a chair at the back of the room and sprawled untidily, leaning on the table.

"Come and sit with the others, please." The boy didn't move. Julia got up and went over to him.

"Come and sit on the carpet. What's your name?"

Without warning, the boy pushed his chair back and sprang to his feet.

"F\*\*\* off!" he shouted and, before Julia could stop him, he ran out of the room.

"It's all-right, Miss. Tommy never sits on the carpet." Bewildered, Julia looked at the plump, sensible looking girl who had just spoken.

"It's all-right, Miss," said the girl again. "He'll have gone to find Mrs Atkinson."

"Mrs Atkinson?"

"She's the teacher who looks after him when he gets like that. She'll properly bring him back when he's calmed down."

Sure enough, half an hour later, a plump, motherly woman ushered Tommy back into the classroom. By now, most of the children were settling down to their work.

"Sorry about that," said the plump woman. "I'm Susan Atkinson. I'm the support assistant for the lower juniors, but most of my time is taken up with Tommy and a couple of others. He is supposed to be getting full time support - behavioural problems, you know - but it's a long time coming. Don't worry if he rushes out again. He'll come to

find me in the Smile Room."

"The Smile Room?"

Mrs Atkinson smiled herself. "Yes, it's a 'time-out' room for children like Tommy."

"And are there many children like Tommy?"

"Oh a few. There are a couple of live wires in this class but if things get too much for them, they know to go and take time out in the Smile Room. Just let them go. It's school policy."

And so followed what was for Julia rather a bizarre day, in which she discovered two other boys in the class who also needed to take refuge in the Smile Room, for what seemed to her to be the most trivial of incidents. Early afternoon was the worst, when they came bursting into the room still simmering with rage over incidents that had happened during the lunch break.

Tommy had not reappeared at all, she noticed, as the children settled around her to begin their geography lesson. Max was roaming round the room, face like thunder, refusing to join the others.

"I'm going to the Smile Room!" he growled.

"Why do you need to go there?"

"'Cos I'm annoyed, that's why!"

Julia looked at him with a serious expression.

"Don't you need to be smiling to go to the Smile Room?" Max glared at her but before he had time to reply, the serious girl, who Julia had now learned was called Alison, interrupted.

"Oh no, Miss. The Smile Room is where you go when you're in a bad mood."

Julia suppressed the urge to grin. There seemed to be a surreal air to the day. In the meantime, Max had hurled himself out of the room and Tommy was now on his way back to fling himself on his chair as he had done in the morning.

By the end of the day, Julia had still not succeeded in getting any work out of Tommy and Max, having returned from the Smile Room, proceeded to tear his worksheet in half and declare that he "didn't wanna do it."

By the end of the day Julia felt exhausted and frustrated as she lined the children up ready to go home.

"See ya next time, Miss," said Max as he filed past her. She stared as he disappeared up the corridor, surprised at the friendliness in his tone.

"Kids eh?" Julia turned to see Mrs Atkinson standing at her shoulder, having heard the departing Max's comment.

"I feel as if I have been doing battle with him all day!"

Susan Atkinson smiled. "Some of these kids have so many problems at home that school is the least of their worries. They come across as abrupt and rude but it's just their normal way of dealing with people. They've never known any different. Oh, we can put strategies in place to support them but they don't cope with changes to their routine very well. They get stability here that they don't always have at home and even having a different teacher for the day can really put them off their stride." She hesitated and glanced uncertainly at Julia. "Sorry, I didn't mean to imply that you wouldn't know all that already."

Julia smiled at her. "It doesn't do any harm to be reminded sometimes. My last school was in an area where we had very few social problems really, so I suppose I got a bit too comfortable." She thought of some of the older staff at Queensfield who constantly moaned and complained about the most mundane misdemeanours of their pupils. She couldn't imagine how they would have dealt with pupils storming out of the classroom or being sworn at.

"I hope you won't have to go back there again," Kate

said when Julia had told her about her day.

"Actually, I quite enjoyed it. The school was OK and the rest of the class were lovely."

Kate studied her mother for a moment and then,

"You know, I would never have thought you could be so calm about being sworn at by pupils!"

Julia laughed. "The old me probably wouldn't have been. This is the new me, laid back, relaxed, cool!" She leaned back in her chair, her arms spread wide as if to emphasise the point.

As time went on, Julia established herself as a regular in several schools in the area and began to rediscover some of the satisfaction and pleasure that teaching had given her in the early years of her career before the pressures of management responsibilities and the constant changes and demands imposed on the profession had turned her into a hamster on an endlessly moving treadmill.

"After all," she said to Kate one evening as they were washing up after their evening meal, "I go in, teach the class, mark the work and come home. No agonising over what levels they're going to reach in the SATS, no sitting for hours in staff meetings, no staffroom politics, no everlasting paperwork."

Kate laughed at her mother's enthusiasm. "I haven't seen you enjoy teaching so much since I was in primary school. It's nice to see you bouncing back."

Julia looked thoughtful. "I hadn't realised how much I had been ground down by the management side of things, trying to work with that idiot at Queensfield School, being constantly undermined and criticised. I suppose I lost track of what teaching is really about."

## Chapter 21

Early summer had always been one of Julia's favourite times of the year. Kate's birthday was in early June.

"What would you like for your birthday?" Julia asked her daughter one day. "It's next week, you know."

"I know, I was there, remember?" Kate grinned.

Julia was pleased at the feeble joke and the smile. It seemed as if Kate had lost much of her spirit over the months that Julia had spent with her. The lively, cheerful young woman, focused on her career, always seeming to be in charge of her life and her future had surreptitiously been replaced by a new Kate, one who seemed to have lost much of her energy and love of life. After the first three months of her pregnancy, Kate had regained some of her energy and was less tired but often Julia felt she was becoming more withdrawn. Attempts at conversation, mundane comments, even direct questions would often go unheard. At first, the lack of response would only spur Julia on to try harder until she realised that it was better to go along with Kate's mood and allow her the space to come to terms with her situation in her own way. But she worried about her all the same. Granted she still stayed in touch with her friends,



but those who had been Joe's friends too, she gradually withdrew from. It was too hard to be reminded of him and of what she saw as his betrayal of their relationship.

"So what would you like?" Julia persisted.

"Oh, I don't know," Kate said vaguely. "I don't really feel like celebrating this birthday anyway. Some baby things, maybe?"

"Well yes, but I wanted to get you something for yourself," Julia said. "You seem to be so...down these days. Understandably," she added quickly, before Kate could protest.

Suddenly she was struck by an idea. "What about a holiday? A short break for both of us before the baby comes. It would do us both good. It's half term next week, so I won't be missing any work and I'm sure you can get a week off, don't you think?"

Kate had decided to work as near to the birth date as she could.

"I suppose so," she said slowly. "I am due some holidays before I go on maternity leave. I'll check it out today and let you know."

"Good," Julia said, relieved that Kate had not raised

any objections. Although her supply work had kept her busy over the past few months, she sometimes felt the burden of Kate's problems as well as her own were almost too much to bear. Kate was not the only one who cried at night. Julia had never been a very good sleeper but since the affair with Alan, she usually woke two or three times in the night. Often she did not know why she woke and for a few seconds it would seem as if nothing was wrong until thoughts of Alan would crash into her mind and she would lie awake, replaying scenes from the time they had spent together while at the same time trying to banish them and the pain they brought. A few days before Alan had finished their affair, she had found an article in the paper about how to handle the break-up of a relationship. She had skimmed through it before moving on to other articles.

"Whenever you find yourself thinking of him, (Of course, these articles were always directed at the woman, she thought fiercely. Don't men ever need help to get over a relationship or are they always the ones who wreck it?) "imagine that he is part of a picture and mentally make the picture smaller and further away... Don't think of the good times, focus on times when he irritated you, think of his

bad points."

She lay in bed staring up at the darkened ceiling.

All very well, but we never had any rows and he didn't irritate me. The only problem we had was what I thought was over-protectiveness of Daniel. Oh and there was the little matter of the fact that he was lying to me.

Sometimes she wondered if the tears would ever stop, if that episode of her life, when she had thought she was so close to happiness, would ever stop hurting her, or was it sealed into her heart and mind for ever?

The phone rang as Julia was vacuuming the flat.

"Hi Mum, it's me. I've got next week off so where would you like to go?"

Julia thought quickly. "What about Cornwall? I've always wanted to go there."

"Hmmm, I'm not sure we'd get in anywhere now, especially with it being half term. Everywhere will be booked up. But, the parents of one of the girls in the office have a holiday home in the north of France. She was talking about it the other day. I'll have a word with her and see if it's available for then. I'll let you know

tonight." The phone call ended and Julia was left to roam restlessly round the flat until the evening.

In the end, the holiday was spent in North Wales, based in a tiny, dog-friendly holiday cottage on Anglesey. As she drove across Britannia Bridge, Julia's mind went back to the holidays she had spent here as a child. Her parents were usually working and often away at conferences and meetings during her school holidays, which meant that she spent much of her time with her grandparents, who lived in Cheshire. So it was with them that she had come several times during her childhood. She remembered an old black and white photo of her three year old self crouching on the beach, bucket and spade at the ready and a slightly older girl behind her, someone she had made friends with at the time. Being an only child, she had been used to the company of adults and had had few friends during her childhood years, something which had changed during her college years, although only temporarily. Her marriage to Paul had gradually led to her losing contact with nearly everyone. She did not realise she had sighed as she thought this, but Kate turned to look at her.

"You O.K. Mum?" was all she said.

Julia smiled.

"Oh yes, I was just reminded of holidays I used to have here as a child. My granddad and grandma used to bring me. Your gran and granddad were always working, you see."

Kate was silent for a moment, and then,

"When this baby comes, I'm going to make sure I spend time with it."

"Well, I suppose my parents did their best, but they were both professional people and very committed to their work. They just always seemed to be so wrapped up in it." Her voice tailed off.

"I wasn't thinking of them. I was thinking of Dad. He was never around when I was on holiday. And he did have time, being a lecturer. He had all those holidays."

"Yes but he always had summer schools to run, courses to go on, meetings to attend."

She didn't want to be too critical of him to Kate, but her daughter was right. Holiday activities had nearly always consisted of just the two of them and the few times when they had all gone away together, there was always as sense of boredom about him, an impatience to have done with the slow holiday pace and the delight in simple activities that she and Kate enjoyed.

"Dad never has done fatherhood very well, has he?"

Kate observed quietly, looking ahead through the windscreen.

Nor marriage, Julia thought wryly as she drove along the country lane leading to the cottage which was to be theirs for the next seven days.

The first four days were spent sunbathing on the tiny secluded beach they discovered down a steep path near the cottage. Getting down was fine, but climbing back up at the end of the day was a little more difficult, involving Kate having to hold her mother's hand and be gently towed up the slope.

"This is ridiculous. I feel like a beached whale and I have weeks to go yet."

Julia couldn't believe they had found such a peaceful haven. It was a really a cove, the beach curving round to one side and ending in large, seaweed covered rocks on the other. During all their time there, they were disturbed by only a handful of people, usually walking their dogs or sauntering along the sea's edge. Each day, they brought folding chairs, an umbrella for shade and a picnic. They

paddled, read, dozed and even made sandcastles and both began to be healed by the sun's beneficent warmth and the calm shushing of the waves.

But the fifth day began overcast and a little cooler, so Julia suggested a drive.

"We can go back onto the mainland," she said. "There are lots of places to visit. You don't need to do much walking. We could do with seeing a few sheep instead of seagulls!"

They set off, not really with any destination in mind. Afterwards, Julia had no clear idea of the route they had taken but there were endless winding roads, spectacular views stretching into a panorama of fields, hedges and sheep in the brightening day and then suddenly, as they rounded a bend, they came across a little church, complete with graveyard.

Kate spotted it first.

"Oh, Mum! Let's stop and look around it," she said. "It looks really interesting."

Julia parked on the grass verge and they went through the wicket gate, down the uneven path through the tiny

graveyard. Leaving Honey in the car, they carefully made their way round the outside of the building and there, on the other side, they found themselves on the edge of a wonderful view of Welsh countryside. Julia stood still and gazed at the expanse of fields, falling away towards the sea, her eyes taking in the varied shades of green dotted about with hedges and trees. She revelled in the peace. Only the sound of birdsong broke the silence. Eventually, she sensed rather than saw that Kate had moved back towards the front door of the church so she followed her. Kate turned the large round door knob, not really expecting the door to open, but to the surprise of both of them, it swung open easily. They glanced at each other and with one accord, moved forward into the gloom of the interior. As her eyes adjusted after the brightness outside, Julia gazed around her in astonishment.

"This is like my dream!" she exclaimed.

"What do you mean, Mum?" asked Kate in surprise.

But Julia didn't answer.

On her right, as she stood at the back of the church, was the baptismal font. At first glance, it seemed green with age, but closer inspection revealed that it was



covered with ferns. Here and there, roses had been intertwined, but these were long since dead. To the left was a small harmonium and on the shelf behind, a pile of dusty hymn books and what looked like a Visitors' Book. She turned the pages carefully. The entries dated from years ago but the latest had been written only last autumn. Fascinated, Julia lifted her head to look around. To the front of the church, beyond several rows of wood and hessian chairs, each with its faded red hassock, she could see the altar, spread with a once white cloth and, like the font, strewn with ferns and withered blooms. Kate was now sitting on one of the chairs near the front and Julia went to sit by her. She was aware of a curious mix of calm and decay. She noticed, for the first time, that the stone floor had also been strewn with greenery and straw and each window alcove held a basket of dried flowers and leaves. There were even the remains of a few apples around them. The whole effect was of a church dressed for a Harvest Festival and now frozen in time.

"It's like Miss Haversham's house," she whispered, half to Kate, half to herself.

"What did you mean about your dream?" Kate asked.

Julia explained about the dream she'd had when she had

first run away.

"This is so like the chapel in the dream," she said.  
"It's uncanny...and weird, but it feels so peaceful here.  
My dream wasn't like that."

"Well, take it as a sign that things are on the up for  
you," said Kate briskly. She had no time for fanciful  
notions, Julia noticed.

After a few more moments, they made their way out into  
the brightness of the day and set off on the journey back  
to their cottage.

The following day, Kate decided to rest for the  
morning so Julia, anxious to take advantage of beautiful  
weather, left Kate and Honey curled up in bed and took  
herself off for a walk. Her steps led her, not towards the  
beach, but up the lane, past fields of sheep grazing on one  
side and the occasional house on the other. She didn't know  
how long she had walked but eventually, she came to a lane  
which seemed to lead back towards the beach. Curious to see  
how far along the coast she had walked, she turned down  
that way and soon found herself at the far end of the beach  
where they had spent their first few days of the holiday.

There was a grassy area running down to the sand and dotted with rocks. Julia chose the smoothest of them to sit down and rest. It was now about ten thirty and she felt the growing heat of the sun seeping into her body. She sighed and stretched her legs out before her. For some reason, her legs never got as tanned as the rest of her, so now was a perfect chance to let the sun do its work. Her thoughts meandered through the past months. She had been careful, even during this holiday, to keep herself busy, mentally as well as physically as she still didn't feel ready to allow her mind free reign, but this morning, her thoughts would not be so easily diverted. She felt a mood of sadness sweeping over her.

"Nice morning."

The voice, gruff and male, came from nowhere. She looked behind her, startled out of her reverie, to see a stocky, grey haired man behind her. His T shirt, shorts and sandals had all seen better days, but it was the laughter lines around the vivid blue eyes that Julia noticed. The dog beside him looked well cared for as it came towards Julia. She reached out and stroked its head.

"What a lovely dog," she said by way of reply. Male or female?"

"Oh, male. Much easier to deal with. Females are far too complicated. His name's Jack. Mine's John Adams"

"Julia Chambers," Julia replied and then, "Hello, Jack," she said softly and the dog licked her outstretched hand.

"He can probably smell my dog," she said. "She's at our cottage with my daughter. She's getting on a bit and I was afraid this walk would be too much for her, as well as the heat."

The man lowered himself onto a grassy patch nearby, followed closely by the dog.

"Do you live here?" asked Julia, as he showed no sign of continuing the conversation.

"I do now,"

"So, are you retired or do you work locally?"

"I've worked in organisational management for years until I began to feel that life was too short to live like a hamster on a treadmill for the rest of my days. Luckily, the firm I was working for wanted to reduce their workforce, so I went before I was pushed. Didn't get on too well with the new manager, you see. Now I do consultancy work. It means I have to travel and stay away at times, but

this is where my home is now."

As he talked, Julia noticed a faint Yorkshire accent, so he definitely wasn't local.

"So what made you choose Anglesey?" she asked, hoping he would not think her too inquisitive. He didn't appear to.

"I like painting," he explained. "Water colour mostly, and the light around here is particularly good. I sell some pieces and now that I have more time to myself, I'm hoping to sell more."

"It sounds as if you've got it all worked out," said Julia, feeling a little envious. "It must have been an enormous decision to leave your job, though. Although, I did the same, but in my case, it was on the spur of the moment." And she began to tell John about the events which had led up to her dramatic exit from her job and her present life with Kate. She was surprised at how natural it felt to talk about it to someone she had only just met but John was a good listener and she felt it was doing her good to talk about it. She didn't mention leaving her marriage or the affair with Alan. That was still too painful. When she finally ran out of steam, he didn't reply immediately

and she wondered if she had talked too much, and then,

"What an idiot," he said, looking, not at her but out towards the sea.

She was startled. Was he referring to her?

"Sorry?"

"That prat of a head teacher," he said, and now he was looking at her. "It sounds as though he felt threatened by you and his reaction was to try to undermine you."

"Well, he succeeded. I was on sick leave for weeks and then resigned and it's only fairly recently that I have felt able to do some supply work, since I've been living with my daughter."

He looked at her intently.

"You have to have faith in yourself, you know. Otherwise no-one else will. Don't rely on others to determine your happiness. That's your responsibility."

She felt he was talking about more than her professional life and felt uneasy, but he was right. She couldn't allow what had happened with Alan to affect the rest of her life.

John was getting to his feet now and Jack, his eyes on his master, was standing in front of him, tail wagging in

anticipation of further walking.

"It was nice to meet you, Julia and I've enjoyed our talk. How long are you staying here?"

"Only a couple more days. Then we're going back to my daughter's in Tewkesbury."

"Might see you around here tomorrow then."

Before she could get to her feet, he was striding off, Jack at his heels.

Hmm, unusual man, she thought, nice and so easy to talk to. She smiled to herself and set off on her journey back to the cottage.

He was there again the next morning as she walked along the beach, this time with Honey. She saw him in the distance, sitting on a rock, throwing a stick for Jack to fetch. Each time, the dog raced back to him, stick clenched in his mouth, tail wagging furiously.

"I never could get Honey to do that," she remarked as she drew level with him. He smiled up at her and again, she was struck by the blue of his eyes.

"I see you've brought her with you this time. Still no daughter though?"

"No, Kate has got used to sleeping in these mornings.

She gets tired easily now."

She sat down beside him and they watched the two dogs circling each other, warily at first and then sniffing each other before they trotted off together towards the sea.

"That's unusual! She's normally a bit nervous of other dogs but she seems to have taken to Jack."

"Most dogs take to Jack. He's a soft old mutt."

Julia stretched her legs in front of her.

"This is so beautiful and peaceful. I really envy you living here, but I suppose it's not so pleasant in the winter."

"Well, it rains a lot but then you get a different kind of beauty. Each season has its own advantages, you just have to make the most of them. So you're off back home tomorrow?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. This was only meant to be a short break before Kate has her baby."

"That's a pity," John said, "but you'll come back some time."

It was a statement, not a question, Julia noticed.

"I'm off myself tomorrow. Some consultancy work in London. Bit of a nuisance really but they'll pay me well so it keeps the wolf from the door. Doing free lance



consulting work now and again means I can stay here the rest of the time and paint."

"Who looks after Jack when you're away?" Julia asked. "I presume you don't take him with you."

John laughed. "No, it's bad enough that I have to go without making him suffer as well! I have a very good neighbour who looks after him. It's his second home."

"Well, I hope your meeting goes well and maybe we'll meet again if we come back here some time."

"Tell you what," he said suddenly, "Give me your phone number and I could give you a ring next time I'm in your area. I work in the Tewkesbury area every now and again. Perhaps we could have a drink together, or a meal."

Julia was startled. "Yes, that would be nice."

She wondered if she had been too abrupt but John didn't seem to notice.

"Good, that's settled then. I'll walk you back to your cottage if you like."

They sauntered along, chatting, the two dogs trotting along beside them, until they reached the cottage.

"If you have pen and paper in there, you can write down your phone number for me," John prompted.

"Oh, yes, of course." Julia opened the front door. She

half expected John to follow her but he had settled himself on the stone wall bordering the tiny front garden and Jack was seated on the ground at his feet. She quickly found a pen and a scrap of paper and wrote down her mobile number.

"I'll say good-bye then," John said. "Have a safe journey tomorrow."

"You too," she said. She watched him as he walked back along the path and disappeared round the corner.

"Who was that, Mum?" asked Kate, who had seen her coming and opened the door.

"That's the man I was telling you about yesterday."

Kate looked at her but said nothing.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully and the next morning, they left the cottage to return to Tewkesbury and the routine they had developed since they had learned of Kate's pregnancy.

Julia heard the clunk of the letterbox as the day's post flopped onto the mat in the hallway. As she bent to pick up the scattered envelopes, she noticed an official looking one addressed to herself. She wandered back to the

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kitchen and tore it open.

"Certificate of entitlement to a decree."

The words jumped out at her.

"The Court certifies that the petitioner has sufficiently proved the content of the petition and is entitled to a decree of divorce on the grounds of the Respondent's unreasonable behaviour."

She read the words again as she lowered herself onto a chair. She read on and realised that this was the decree nisi. 'Unreasonable behaviour.' She tossed the paper onto the kitchen table. Well, Paul had got in first. She supposed her unreasonable behaviour was the fact that she had walked out of their marriage and she was briefly irritated that no account was taken of all the unreasonable behaviour she had endured from him through the years. Still, she wanted to be free of the marriage and of Paul and this was a step forward. A little later, Kate wandered into the kitchen, rubbing the sleep of the night from her eyes. Without a word, Julia handed her the sheet to read.

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After quickly scanning the sheet, Kate glanced at her mother.

"How do you feel about this?" she asked quietly.

"Relieved, I think."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh yes, I've no regrets. It's time to move on and start living my own life. I've had long enough living in your father's shadow." She laughed, a little shakily, Kate noticed. But, when Julia examined her emotions, she did indeed feel relieved. The decree absolute would go through in a few weeks time and then she would be a free agent. She would still be here for Kate as long as she was needed, but she no longer had to live in the shadow of Paul's increasing detachment from her and hers from him. It was a sad but unavoidable end to their life together.

Soon afterwards, Kate learned that Joe had left his job and his flat and moved away.

That was all she knew, but it seemed obvious that he was not prepared to be part of their baby's life. Julia was worried about the upset this would cause Kate, but she seemed to accept the situation and whenever she talked of the future, Joe was not mentioned. Julia wasn't sure whether she really was accepting his desertion or was trying to ignore it.

At the end of July, the weather became very hot and Kate was struggling with the heat. She was now eligible for maternity leave and she was thankful to be able to finish work and take things easy.

"Make the most of it," Julia warned her laughingly. "Once the baby is born, you won't have any spare time for the next eighteen years!"

The days passed by, hot, sunny days, as Julia remembered them whenever she thought back to that summer. Most mornings she took Honey walking along the river bank. She tried to go early so that she could have the place to herself, apart from a few early morning joggers and cyclists. Usually, the sky was practically cloudless as the sun began its daily cycle and the temperature rose rapidly. The coots and mallards roosting in shaded clumps of reeds, awoke, stretched their wings and began to swim lazily across the river in search of breakfast, rippling the glassy surface of the water. Now and again, their harsh cries disturbed the morning's calm and sudden beating of wings on the water warned of squabbles, subsiding as quickly as they began. Julia enjoyed watching them as she walked along the bank. Honey generally ignored them unless they were within chasing distance, and then the constraints

of the lead prevented her from taking her inclinations any further.

The summer term had ended so there was no more supply work for her. By September the baby would be born and Julia's job then would be looking after him or her while Kate was at work. She was looking forward to this but not unaware of possible problems ahead. There were bound to be times when Kate felt she was missing out on the development of her baby but they would have to meet those times when they came and work things out as well as they could. Meanwhile, mother and daughter were getting on well together and the sharing of Kate's flat had not been problematical, as Julia had initially feared it might. While she was still working, Kate had usually been exhausted by the time she got home and would often doze off on the sofa. Now that she was on maternity leave, she was able to rest more during the day, so in the evenings, she had more energy to go out with her friends or go for a meal or to the cinema with Julia. All in all, Julia was happy with her life at present. But she still thought of Alan at times. The most innocuous things could trigger the memories - seeing a car like his, catching a glimpse of someone who

looked vaguely like him, hearing snatches of the music they used to listen to together. And then she would find herself wondering what he was doing, whether he was happy, if he ever regretted his decision to stay with his wife. On each occasion, she pushed the unwelcome thoughts from her head. She wanted to move on. She didn't want to live her life in the shadow of their ill-fated relationship.

And then one afternoon, her mobile rang. Julia was sorting a pile of clothes ready for ironing. Almost without thinking, she picked it up to answer it. A gruff voice greeted her.

"Julia? It's John Adams. Don't know whether you still remember me."

Julia was startled. She did indeed remember him but had assumed his promise to phone was one of those meaninglessly polite things people say to each other on holiday. "Oh, er, yes, of course I remember you, John. How nice of you to ring. How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. The thing is, I'm in Tewkesbury at a meeting today and staying overnight. I know it's short notice, but I wondered if you would like to come out for a meal with me."

Julia hesitated. She had enjoyed John's company during

their two brief meetings while on holiday and he had been very easy to talk to. She supposed it would be a pleasant way of spending an evening and he would probably be glad of the company.

"Yes, that would be lovely, John. It will be nice to catch up."

"Well, I've been doing my homework and it looks as if there is a nice place near the river called the River Inn. How does that suit?"

"Sounds fine to me." Julia had passed the place often although she had never been inside. "I'll meet you outside at seven o'clock, if that's not too early for you."

"That'll be perfect. Gives me chance to have a shower and wash away the boring work of the day," John laughed. "See you at seven, then." And he was gone.

Julia laid her phone carefully on the table. The ironing would have to wait, she decided. She would have to go and find something to wear and get ready. Kate was out with friends, which made it easier. All Julia needed to do was leave a note explaining where she had gone, avoiding any questions or comments which might come her way.

Really, Julia thought with amusement, it's as if I'm the child in this household!



Julia glanced at the half timbered River Inn approvingly as she stepped out of her car. For all his abrupt, no-nonsense attitude, John Adams seemed to be good at choosing pleasant surroundings for a meal, she thought. At that moment, she heard him calling her name as he strode towards her.

"You're looking well," was his comment as he caught up with her.

"You too," she said, smiling. And indeed he did look very different to the scruffy trainer-clad stranger whom she had first met on the beach on Anglesey. This evening, smartly dressed in a dark suit and white shirt, beard and hair neatly trimmed, he had the air of a professional rather than an artist. The contrast surprised her although it shouldn't in light of what he had told her about his life, sometimes artist, sometimes professional consultant, obviously a man of many parts.

She pondered on these thoughts as they walked together towards the Inn.

"You're very quiet," John said, glancing down at her.

Julia smiled.

"Sorry. I was just thinking how different you look in a suit!"

John laughed. "Well, I don't think my clients would have appreciated me turning up in shorts and T shirt. Wouldn't really create the right impression somehow!"

John ordered drinks for them both and they sat at the bar waiting for their table. John glanced around at the heavy oak-beamed ceilings and the large inglenook fireplace.

"Nice places you have in Tewkesbury. Very convivial." He looked across at Julia.

"Anyway, what have you been doing since the holiday? Still teaching?"

"I was, but term has finished now and once Kate's baby is born, I'll be looking after him or her, so I won't be doing any teaching for a while once Kate has finished her maternity leave."

Is that what you want?"

Julia shrugged. "Of course. Kate has her career to think of and I'm happy to help. Eventually, he or she will be able to go to Nursery, at least some days, so I'll be able to go back to supply teaching then."

John looked serious. "Just remember that you are entitled to your own life too." He hesitated. "Sorry, interfering again. Tell me to mind my own business."

Julia smiled. "Not at all. The thought had crossed my mind too. I know this will only be a temporary measure, but Kate was in such a state when she found out that she was pregnant. And her boyfriend didn't stay around long enough to be any help," she added bitterly.

Half way through the first course Julia was laughing at John's description of one of his recent conferences.

"It doesn't sound much different to some of the classes I've taught," she remarked.

John smiled at her. "It's nice to see you laughing."

Julia was suddenly serious. "What do you mean?"

"You didn't laugh when I met you on holiday. You struck me as someone who had endured a lot of sadness but now, you seem as if you are coming out the other side."

"Well, I did tell you about the problems I had been going through in my job and with my husband."

"You did indeed," John agreed. He seemed to be focussing all his attention on cutting his steak and didn't look at Julia at all. Julia gathered the folds of her napkin and smoothed it over her knees again, not sure where the conversation was going. Without quite knowing why, she said, "Of course, I had the added complication of a brief and ill-fated love affair."

She glanced at him quickly and saw that he was now looking at her.

"Oh, it wasn't planned, needless to say. When I left my husband, getting involved with someone else was the last thing on my mind." She stopped. How did I get started on this? she asked herself.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

Julia suddenly found that she did want to.

"He was the owner of the house I was renting and, as it happened, he was also someone I had been at school with. The downside was that he was already married, although he told me he was divorced." She was looking down at her plate as she spoke. Suddenly she heard the sound of laughter. Incredulous, she looked up.

"I'm sorry," John said, becoming serious again as he saw her expression. "I didn't mean to laugh. It's just that, well, it's not very original, is it?"

Julia looked at him, her mind in turmoil before, incredibly, she too felt laughter bubbling up inside her. She pressed her napkin to her mouth but the laughter still came, spilling out regardless, enveloping her with feelings of near hysteria and, what else? Relief? Here was someone

sitting before her who didn't think what had happened was the end of the world, in fact was rather amused by how gullible she had been. Maybe he was right. People fall in love with the wrong people all the time, she thought, but life goes on. She suddenly felt as if the emotional turmoil she had been living with during the past weeks had loosened its grip. Not gone altogether, she knew it would be a long time before she could put it all behind her, but, for now, she felt more at peace with herself than she had for a long, long time. She took a sip of mineral water from the glass in front of her. John was silent, watching her. He put out his hand and laid it on her outstretched arm.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly and she was surprised at the gentleness in the normally gruff voice.

"No need," she said lightly. "In fact, I think your reaction has done me the world of good, sort of put things into perspective, I suppose. All those months living alone probably made me too introspective."

"You have been in a very vulnerable position because of all that had happened to you. You need to take care of yourself now. Take things slowly, one day at a time." He grinned. "Listen to me! I sound like a bloody counsellor!"

"No, you're right. Not about sounding like a

counsellor - but I do need to take things one day at a time. That's always been my trouble, trying to live the future before it's the present."

"You know what they say. The way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time."

Julia laughed.

"What I'm saying," John persisted, "is that you need to go easy on yourself, do things for you, not always for other people and that includes your daughter."

Julia nodded. She suddenly felt the tears welling up inside. She blinked and took a deep breath.

"Now," John said, "Let's have a look at the menu and see what desserts we are going to spoil ourselves with. And I'm not taking no for an answer!"

The rest of the meal passed in general conversation. They sat sipping their coffee. John glanced at his watch.

"I'm afraid I have to make a move soon. I have an appointment in Edinburgh tomorrow afternoon, so I need to get an early start."

Julia felt a moment of regret that the evening was coming to an end.

"I haven't had such a lovely, relaxing evening for ages," she said. "Thank you, for everything."

John helped her on with her jacket.

"I've enjoyed it too. Maybe we can do it again. I'm sure to be in this area again soon."

Together they walked out to Julia's car. She unlocked it and opened the door and then turned to him. As if he anticipated her uncertainty, he took her hands in his and, bending forward, kissed her lightly on the cheek before holding the car door for her to get in.

"I'll be in touch soon," he promised. "You look after yourself."

Julia smiled. He watched as she started the engine and drove out of the car park. She saw him wave as she looked back through the rear-view mirror.

Back at the flat, Kate had long since come in and was in her dressing gown making tea in the kitchen. She turned and looked at her mother standing in the doorway.

"Nice evening?" she enquired and then, "You look as if you have had a great evening. You look really relaxed."

"It was a great evening. We had a lovely meal and did lots of talking."

"And...?" Kate prompted.

"That's it. We'll probably meet up again when he's in the area."

She noticed Kate's sceptical expression and laughed.

"That really is all!" she said. "John is a very nice person - very perceptive too. He's good company."

And that's the truth, she thought as she went to bed. And how refreshing it had been to spend time with someone of the opposite sex with no emotional complications. She was asleep within minutes.



## Chapter 21

On 26th August, Kate had gone to bed early saying she was particularly tired. Julia followed a couple of hours later and was drifting off to sleep when she heard groans from Kate's room. Grabbing her dressing gown, she rushed in to find Kate clutching her stomach and looked alarmed.

"I think the baby's on its way! But it's not due for another week yet!"

"How far apart are the contractions?"

"Seven minutes. I've been timing them. Nobody told me this would be so painful!"

Julia smiled and squeezed Kate's hand. "Too late to change your mind now!"

She helped Kate to get up and get dressed and then picked up the case that was packed and waiting and shepherded her out to the car.

It was a long labour, but ten hours later, Kate gave birth to a beautiful little girl. Julia, still holding Kate's hand and mopping her forehead, looked down in wonder, her eyes taking in every perfect, miniature detail of this new little person, her granddaughter. Kate was

laughing and crying as she held out her arms to hold her baby.

"Look at her, Mum. Have you ever seen such a beautiful, perfect baby?"

The baby's rosebud mouth opened in a newborn's wail of protest.

"Yes," said Julia softly, "You, twenty five years ago. I'm so proud of you, my love." She put her arms around them both, tears flowing down her cheeks.

Kate and the baby were to stay in hospital overnight so Julia stayed to see them safely delivered to the post-natal ward. She sat beside the cot where her new granddaughter was now sleeping peacefully, swaddled in a pink honeycomb cotton blanket, hospital issue. The perfectly formed rosebud mouth, the determined looking chin reminded Julia so much of Kate when she had been born. Julia was suddenly overwhelmed by the memories of that day, more than twenty five years ago, when she had become a mother.

"You will never see things in quite the same way again," one of the nurses had said to her. At the time, she hadn't really understood, but it was true. Once you were

responsible for another life, another person's well being, the whole focus of your life changed and things were never the same again, even when your child grew up and became a mother herself. Had she been a good mother? The question, framed in her mind, remained unspoken as she looked towards Kate and saw she was fast asleep. Julia bent over and kissed her pale cheek before tiptoeing away.

She would come back in the evening, when Kate and the baby had had time to rest, but for now, she needed some time to herself. She suddenly thought of Paul. He should really be told that Kate had had her baby but she didn't feel up to talking to him just now. She would talk to Kate later and ask her what she wanted to do. She parked the car in the little car park behind Kate's flat and made her way indoors. Throwing her bag on the sofa, she went through to the little kitchen to make a cup of tea. She looked around the flat as she sat down to drink it. Over the last few weeks, she and Kate had shopped relentlessly and now the flat was full of baby equipment. It was going to get rather crowded for the three of them and Julia knew that it was only a matter of time before they were going to have to look for somewhere more spacious. Still, that was a concern

for the weeks and months ahead. Right now, she was too tired. She slipped her shoes off and pulled her laptop towards her on the coffee table. She might as well see if she had any emails.

The laptop whirred into life and Julia logged onto the internet and her inbox. She had two emails, one from her mother, which reminded her that she would have to ring her with the news that she was now a great grandmother and the other, she saw with a thump of her heart, was from Alan. She stared at it. After the past weeks and months of steadfastly refusing to allow him access to her thoughts, he had slipped under the net and here he was on her computer. Why did he want to make contact after all this time and what was she going to do about it? She felt a surge of annoyance. All her efforts to shed him from her life, to heal the hurt were for nothing. Just seeing his name made her heart pound like a stupid teenager's. Of course, the sensible thing would be to delete it without even reading it, then she could pretend it had never existed... and go back to trying to pretend that he had never existed, or at least that those months they had spent together hadn't happened.

But in spite of herself, Julia clicked on the email to open it.

"I just wanted you to know that you are not forgotten. I hope all is well with you and that you are happy. Take care of your precious self,

Alan    xxx"

Julia stared at the words. 'Hope you are happy' ...'Take care of your precious self.' How dare he intrude on her life again! He was the one who had decided they didn't have a future, the one who had walked out of her life and now, he thought he could make contact again out of the blue. Why? What was going on in his head?

"Perhaps," a little voice whispered in her head, "he misses you. Maybe he's changed his mind."

"Things like that only happen in novels," she told herself sternly. She began to type furiously.

"Thank you for your email. However, I am not sure why you have suddenly contacted me again. I thought you had said all you had to say when you decided we no longer had a future together, and, let's be accurate about this; you

were quite happy to break all communication with me without any explanation, if I had let you get away with it. I am not interested in you or your life any more. Please don't contact me again."

Again she sat motionless staring at the words she had written before deleting them.

"I won't answer it at all," she told herself.

Hastily she signed off and closed down the laptop.

Later, at the hospital, she sat beside Kate's bed holding the sleeping baby in her arms.

"She's very good, isn't she?"

"You should have been here an hour ago!" Kate replied, "But she seems to be feeding O.K. The nurses seem happy anyway. She's so tiny, though, I feel as if I'm all fingers and thumbs when I try to change her."

"You'll get used to it in no time. By the way, you do realise the poor little thing still hasn't got a name? I know we've talked about a few girl's and boy's names but have you decided on one yet?"

Kate smiled, remembering the way they had joked about names, the more outlandish the better.

"Well, perhaps Ermyntrode or Esmeralda aren't such good choices after all, so I thought Rose would be nice. She has such a lovely little rosebud mouth and it's traditional."

"Rose it is, then," Julia smiled, "and yes, it does seem to suit her. It's nice and short so it will be easy to learn to write when she starts school."

"Oh, mum! Ever the teacher!"

It was lovely to see Kate smiling. Julia looked around the room. There were three other beds, all with cots beside them, all with visitors crowding round, fussing over the babies. She was suddenly aware that she was Kate's only visitor.

"Joe should be here," she thought and felt a sudden rush of annoyance towards him.

She looked at back at Kate.

"I wasn't sure what you wanted to do about letting your father know. He should be told about the baby sooner rather than later."

Her voice tailed off.

"No problem," Kate said, "I asked for the phone earlier and rang him. He sounded - very pleased. He said he and Sasha would love to come over and see us as soon as

we're home."

"He and who?"

"Sasha. She's the girlfriend I told you about. The thing is, Mum, I don't suppose you will want to be around if they do come ... It's a bit awkward."

"Oh, no, that's fine," said Julia, anxious to reassure her. "I'll just make sure I'm out of the way that day. I'll take myself off somewhere, don't worry."

Kate and the baby came home the next day and suddenly they were plunged into the chaotic, never-ending activity and exhaustion that new babies inevitably produce.

"Phew! I can't believe how tiring all this is!" Julia moaned one evening as she flopped onto the sofa. Kate, stretched out at the other end, turned to look at her.

"Well, you should do. You've been through it all before!"

"I think I must be getting old. I don't seem to be able to stand the pace any more."

Kate sat up, suddenly serious.

"Look, Mum, if you think it's going to be too much for you looking after Rose when I go back to work, you've only to say. Maybe I can find a childminder or a nursery for



her, at least for a few hours in the day."

"Not likely! I'm not that old! We'll soon get into a routine. Once she's feeding more regularly things will get better. There's no way I'm going to let some stranger look after my granddaughter!"

She smiled and squeezed Kate's hand.

"I think we need a cup of tea."

The next few days passed in a bewildering cycle of feeding, changing, washing and sleeping, whenever it could be fitted in. Julia had forgotten how totally a new baby takes over a household. How had she coped when Kate was born? Of course, her mother had come to stay for the first couple of weeks. Angela Moore had organised everything with military precision, she remembered and had insisted that this new fangled 'feeding on demand' was no good for a baby or its mother.

"A baby needs routine, Julia and so do you. You were never fed on demand."

Julia smiled at the memory. She might not be as well organised as her mother but she and Kate were enjoying looking after this new addition to their lives.

"Does Joe know about Rose?" she asked Kate one day.

Kate shook her head.

"I rang his mobile yesterday but I couldn't get through, so I rang Matt, a friend of his from work. We've been out with him and his girlfriend a few times. Joe's gone."

"How do you mean, gone?"

"He's gone to New Zealand. He has some cousins out there and he's gone to stay with them, apparently. Matt says he gave his notice in at work just after we split up and took off as soon as he could organise it."

"Hmm, I thought he didn't have any money!"

"Well, I suppose he must have borrowed some from his parents. His father's pretty well off and, as far as he's concerned, Joe can do no wrong."

To change the subject, Julia said, "What about your father? Has he arranged to come over yet?"

Oh, next week, some time. He's going to let me know in the next couple of days."

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Julia's mobile rang the next morning. She glanced around the room, trying to remember where she had left it before diving over to her bag on the sofa in an attempt to answer it before it woke the baby. By the time she had

fished it out, it had stopped ringing. She checked her list of missed calls. The latest number showed it had been John Adams ringing. As she was still looking at it, wondering whether to ring back, the shrill tone made her jump.

"Good morning," said the familiar gruff voice at the other end. "How are you? Not ringing too early, am I?"

Julia smiled, running her hand through her hair. "Not at all. With a baby in the house, no time is too early in the morning. We never stop!"

"Ah, so we are a grandmother now, are we?" John chuckled.

"Yes. Kate had her baby five days ago. They send them home almost straight away these days, you know. So we are trying to establish some sort of routine at the moment, and very exhausting it all is!"

"So does that mean you are too tired to come for dinner with me this evening? Maybe it's too short notice anyway."

"Not at all," Julia assured him. "I'm sure I'd be able to escape for a couple of hours."

She wondered if she had sounded too eager, but the prospect of an orderly, peaceful evening with non-baby conversation seemed incredibly appealing.

"Good. Shall we meet at the same place, same time?"

"See you there."

Julia ended the call. She'd better break the news to Kate.

"I know it will be the first time on your own with Rose, but you'll be fine and I'll have my phone with me.."

Kate was laughing. "Mum, mum, no problem, OK? You go. You deserve an evening off. Rose and I will be fine."

"I didn't think you'd be back here so soon," Julia said as she and John sat down at their table in the River Inn.

"Neither did I, but the company I did the last training day for decided they would like a follow-up, so here I am. Anyway, what about you? And how's your daughter adapting to motherhood?"

Mother and baby both doing fine. It's grandma that's feeling a bit worn out."

"Don't forget what I told you. Take care of yourself. You'll be no use to either of them otherwise."

Julia nodded. "I know. It will be better in a few weeks when Rose has settled into a routine."

"And how about you? 'Ow are yer in yerself, like?"

Julia laughed. "That's a really bad impression of a

Yorkshire accent!"

"It shouldn't be." John assumed a hurt expression.

"That's where I'm from, if you remember."

"Well, I suppose I have been too busy to even think about how I am."

"And when you do think about it?"

"I'm getting there," Julia smiled. "Eating the elephant one bite at a time, like you said."

John grinned. "That's what I like to hear."

And it's true, Julia thought as she studied the menu. Life does go on. She realised that she hadn't really thought about Alan since Rose had been born. Maybe she was stronger than she thought but at the same time, she knew she wasn't out of the woods yet. That was going to take a long, long time.

Later, as they walked out to the car park, John took her hand. Julia was startled. John stopped and turned to face her.

"Julia, we're friends, right?"

She nodded, unsure of what was coming. She liked John, enjoyed his company and had talked more frankly to him than she had to anyone else but that was all. As these thoughts ran through her mind, John began to speak again.

"I enjoy being with you, very much and I think you like spending time with me. I know that's all it is and I'm happy with that."

Julia felt herself relax.

"If you are agreeable, I'd like us to meet up again and maybe next year, you'll come on holiday to Anglesey again. There are some lovely walks I'd like to show you."

She smiled slowly.

"I'd like that, very much." This time, she reached up to kiss his cheek. "Keep in touch, please."

John nodded and opened the car door for her.

## Chapter 22

"That was Dad," said Kate as she put the phone down the next morning. "He wants to come and see Rose on Saturday. I said I'd ring back and let him know."

"Oh yes, you must let him come," Julia assured her. "I'll take myself off for the day. It's no problem, really."

In the afternoon, she took Rose out for a walk so that Kate could catch up on some sleep.

"So, what can I do with myself on Saturday?" she wondered as she pushed the pram along the road, Honey, trotting along beside her.

"Retail therapy, I think and maybe a film after that. It's ages since I've been shopping."

She planned an early start for Trafford Park.

"It's a bit of a distance, I suppose, but it will fill the day nicely," she said to Kate. "Are you sure you'll manage?"

"Of course I will. It'll be good for me. You go off and enjoy your day. You deserve a break."

Driving up the motorway inevitably reminded her of Alan. Since the evening of Rose's birth, when she had discovered his email, she hadn't had a moment to switch the laptop on again but she felt she had made the right decision not to reply. In spite of herself, she wondered again what he was doing and if he was happy. Did that email mean he now regretted his decision to stay with Helen? Even if he did, it was too late now, she told herself. They could never recapture the relationship they had had. Her trust in him had vanished as soon as he had chosen to stay with Helen and with that, her respect and love for him. But that didn't mean that she didn't suffer any more. She sighed.

The car sped on up the motorway and eventually, Julia pulled in to the huge Trafford Centre car park and coasted slowly along searching for a parking space that she would have a chance of finding again when she had finished her shopping. But although it had been some time since her last shopping trip, Julia's heart was not really in it as she wandered around the shops. By now, Paul would probably have arrived at Kate's with, what was her name? Sasha. What sort



of woman was she? A lot younger than Paul, she knew, but was she interested in babies? Did she have any children of her own? Julia realised that she knew nothing about this woman except her name. Still, no doubt Kate would fill her in when she got back tonight. Kate was pretty smart at summing people up.

So engrossed was she in her reverie that, at first, she failed to hear her name being called. She heard it the second time. She heard it but she didn't believe it. It sounded so like Alan's voice. It was Alan's voice. As she turned round to look, she saw him weaving a path through the crowd of shoppers towards her. She stood rooted to the spot, her heart thumping uncomfortably. What could she do? For an instant she thought of running away, losing herself in the midst of all the strangers milling round her, but before she could do anything, he was there in front of her, panting slightly and reaching for her hand. In silence, she stared at him and then, finally,

"What on earth are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question." He smiled and then, seeing her lack of reaction, coughed nervously.

"It's good to see you again, Julia. How are you?"

How do you think I've been?

Aloud she said, "Oh, fine, really. I've been staying at Kate's. She has just had a baby."

She was surprised at how calm her voice sounded. She felt as if her heart were about to burst.

Alan was looking a little shell-shocked too, she noticed with some satisfaction.

"Look, can we go and have a coffee somewhere? I think we need to talk," he said.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. You seemed to have said all you had to say last time we ... communicated."

Her emphasis of the last word reminded them both of the circumstances of their break-up and she noticed Alan wince slightly.

"Anyway, I don't suppose you are here on your own, are you?"

"Oh yes, I am. I wanted a new camera, a digital one, I thought. My old one hasn't been working properly for a while now. I wasn't planning on staying long and then I thought I would have a run out into Derbyshire for lunch and then do some walking. Come with me?"

In spite of herself, Julia was tempted.

"I'm certainly not dressed for walking but I suppose

lunch can't do any harm."

She glanced at him as they walked back to the car park. The contours of his face, the way his hair lay, even his ear lobes were all indelibly printed on her mind but she thought he looked tired.

"I'll follow you in my car," she said when they arrived at the car park, "then it won't be as far for me to drive back to Kate's afterwards."

She waited in her car while Alan found his and drove back to her so that she could follow him. It took some time for them to leave the Saturday shopping crowds and traffic behind but eventually they were on the open roads and the countryside was stretching out on either side. Julia began to relax and enjoy the drive. She kept Alan's car in her sight and followed him as he turned off onto a narrow country road and soon stopped outside a pub. He swept into the car park, quickly got out of the car and waited for her to pull up beside him.

"Well," she commented as she got out of the car, "at least it was an easy route. I shouldn't have any trouble finding my way back to the motorway later on."

"That's all-right. You can follow me again."

He put his hand out to take hers but she ignored it

and led the way into the pub.

"I thought perhaps we could have lunch here. It's half past twelve, so I thought you might be getting hungry."

"Perhaps something light, then," was all she said.

Alan ordered for them and they found a table in a quiet corner.

"So," said Alan, "you're a grandmother now? A boy or girl? And how is Kate?"

He seemed nervous now that they were sitting down and Julia suddenly felt impatient.

"Alan, why are we here? Why didn't you just walk away when you saw me in the Trafford Centre, pretend you hadn't seen me?"

He was silent as he looked down at the table, and then he spoke.

"I wanted to apologise and to be sure that you were all-right. I know I treated you badly..."

"You could say that!"

She stopped, surprised at the force of her reaction. Damn, she'd promised herself that she would stay calm but now she wanted so badly to hurt him as much as he had hurt her. Her hands were trembling. She hid them on her lap as she took a deep breath.

"Well, now, let's get this straight. You want to make sure I'm all-right. Did you care if I was all-right when you told me you were divorced, when we talked all those times about our future together? I trusted you. I loved you but you obviously didn't love me."

"Oh yes, I did, I do."

But she carried on as if he had not spoken.

"You knew how vulnerable I was and you took advantage. I don't suppose I was the first and no doubt I won't be the last."

"I was very attracted to you, Julia. I still am. You know I was attracted to you when we were at school but I never thought I'd stand a chance with you then."

"What a pity you didn't say something then instead of waiting until you were married!"

"What I said about my marriage was partly true. We aren't divorced but we haven't been happy for years and Helen did move out for a while after my affair."

"But really, you only wanted another affair! You had no intention of us having a future together."

"I did, for a while, but in the end, I couldn't face the upheaval - leaving Helen, the reactions of the children. You wanted us to move more quickly than I felt

comfortable with. I couldn't do it. I'm sorry, Julia."

"So am I," she said half to herself and then,

"So, you're not happy in your marriage but you can't deal with leaving Helen? You were quite happy to lead me to think that we could have a future together, you told me how much you loved me and then, out of the blue, you finished it and you didn't even have the guts to tell me properly! What did you think? That I'd read your email and think, Oh well, that's that. It was nice while it lasted? You never loved me, Alan. You don't love anyone. In fact, I don't think you even love yourself. Do you know, I actually feel sorry for you."

He sat motionless for a moment and then,

"You've grown hard, Julia."

"I've had to," she said quietly. "It was your legacy to me. It will be a long time before I let anyone get as close to me as you did, Alan. You caught me when I was at a low ebb. It won't happen again."

He looked at her, startled. "I hope you don't mean that, Julia. I couldn't bear to think I had really done that to you."

Julia sighed as she looked down at her hands. They weren't trembling any more and she felt calmer than she had

for a long time.

"I have to get on with my life and you with yours. You made a choice and now we both have to live with it, chalk it up to experience, I suppose. It reminds me of that programme that used to be on television about parallel universes. You know, it was about a group of people who found they could pass between their life in this world and a parallel universe, so they could alter the course of history." She tried to smile. "Unfortunately, we can't and it's no good wondering about what might have been. I'm determined not to spend my life doing that. I've taken the first steps in making a new life for myself. Some days it's harder than others, but I'm getting there and now I have Kate and the baby to think of. I want to be there for them as long as they need me."

"And after that, when they don't need you any more? You can't live your life in their shadow, you know."

"You lost the right to give me advice on how to live my life when you chose not to share it," Julia reminded him coldly. It irritated her that he had put his finger on precisely the thought that had occupied her mind.

Their meal was finished. Julia stood up.

"I think I'd better be going." She went outside and stood in the sunshine, breathing in the fresh air. As they walked back to the cars, Alan said, "I know I deserved all you said but, whatever you believe, I did love you."

"But not enough," Julia said sadly.

He looked away.

I'd still like us to keep in touch, as friends, you know. I'd like to know you're all-right."

"So you said, but no, I don't think that's a good idea." She turned to face him.

"Good-bye, Alan."

Without waiting for a reply, she got into her car and started the engine. He seemed to want to say more, but instead of winding down the window, she reversed around him and drove out of the car park.

More by luck than good management, she turned the right way out of the car park and drove back up the country lane, eyes smarting with the tears she knew would overwhelm her at any minute. Hastily she turned up a dirt track on her left. She supposed it led to a farm but right now, she just wanted somewhere off the road where she could cry in peace. For a moment, she sat motionless, gazing at the



farmland spread before her. It was a perfect summer evening. Shadows were beginning to lengthen across the field but the cows were still out, lumbering slowly towards the gate at the other end of the field in readiness for milking time, she supposed. What must it be like, she wondered, to live one's life mindlessly following routine, living in the moment with no inkling of what might lie ahead? These thoughts occupied her mind for seconds before the avalanche of tears pricked her eyes and began to course down her cheeks. Still she sat, making no attempt to search for a tissue or wipe her cheeks, her eyes still focused on the blurred landscape before her. Eventually, the tears ran out and she leaned over to search her bag for tissues.

She drove back to the motorway and Tewkesbury, where Kate was busy trying to soothe a grizzling baby after the visit of Paul and Sasha. She smiled as Julia walked in, not noticing her still reddened eyes.

"Am I glad to see you, Mum! This little madam won't give me a moment's peace. She's been fed and changed but she still won't settle. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was sulking after being fussed over so much this afternoon." Kate smiled as she said this, but Julia could

see the strain in her eyes. Gently, she took Rose from her and laid her over her shoulder, rocking from one foot to the other as she held her.

"So who did the fussing, then," she asked, "Your father or Sasha?"

"Oh both! They were all over her. I couldn't believe it. I've never thought of Dad as being very enthusiastic about children and certainly not babies."

Nor me, thought Julia. Pity he was never more enthusiastic about his own child. Aloud she said, "So, what was this Sasha like? Tell all."

"Not a bit as I expected. I suppose I thought she'd be one of these women who has brains and perfect looks, the type other women hate on sight, but actually, she's only got the brains. She's not much to look at at all really, short, a bit on the plump side, mousy brown hair but she does seem quite pleasant." She stopped and glanced at Julia as if trying to assess her reaction, but Julia was deliberately non-committal.

"Oh well, it's good that you got on all-right with her. Anyway, I am absolutely exhausted so I'm going for a long, relaxing bath, essential oils, candles, the lot!" She handed the now sleeping baby back to Kate and turned to go

out of the room.

"Hang on!" Kate said suddenly. "What about your shopping. Let's see all the bargains."

Julia stopped in her tracks. With all that had happened, she had completely forgotten that the original focus of today's outing had been retail therapy.

"Oh, I didn't actually get anything. Always the same, isn't it? Whenever you set out to spend money, there's never anything to tempt you." She made for the bathroom before Kate could reply.

## Chapter 23

Six months later, winter again and Kate and Julia were driving through Glossop on the way to Sheffield. Kate had recently been offered a job in a large firm of solicitors there and they needed to do some house hunting. As they drove towards Snake Pass, Julia's former home came into view, the house where she had experienced such happiness and misery within a few short months. As she looked, she noticed that again there was a for sale sign in the garden. It was with a different estate agent but the house was still obviously empty.

"This is where I lived. Let's stop for a moment."

She pulled over and stopped the car. The two of them got out and Kate unstrapped Rose from her car seat.

"I'm sure it wouldn't do any harm just to look round the garden," said Kate. "Come on."

She pushed open the gate and gently took Rose into her arms. They followed the path round the side of the house into the back garden. Honey followed. Julia felt strange being here again but she distracted herself by walking around the flower beds, remembering the plants she had put in, the seeds she had sown, during her brief attempt at

gardening. She was just looking at one of the rose bushes when she was interrupted by a shout from Kate. She was standing by the wall at the bottom of the garden.

"Look what I've found!"

Julia walked down the path towards her, Rose perched on her hip. She watched as Kate gently dusted the soil off the object in her hand and held it up. It caught the sunlight and immediately Julia knew what it was. Kate came over to her.

"Look at this, Mum. I just found it in the corner over there. How on earth did such a lovely object end up over there? What a shame it's broken."

She held it out and Julia took it and passed Rose back to Kate. The crystal rose glinted in the winter sun as she turned it over. Yes, it had been beautiful, a symbol of something in her life that she had thought was beautiful, until, like the ornament, it had been damaged. Strangely, the surge of emotion she expected to overwhelm her wasn't there. Instead, there was only a feeling of regret. The months of being in love with Alan now seemed strangely remote, like a dream which hovers in the conscious mind on waking before slipping away into the subconscious. She placed it gently on top of the wall.

"No idea," she said, "But, as you say, it's broken. Come on, let's get back in the car. We've got houses to look at!"

They drove off up the winding road towards Snake Pass. Julia didn't look back.

