

# ~ Miracle ~

by Fingersmith (LT Smith) © Jan 2008

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## *Synopsis:*

There are always two sides to every story. Well, actually there are three. Yours, mine, and more importantly, the truth. It all depends on what you want to believe, want to see, and who to trust.

After years of not taking responsibility for her actions, Stephanie Stevenson realises she has become the woman she never wanted to be. Quitting her job as a reporter, she moves to Bassenthwaite, Cumbria, in an attempt to start over. Four years later, a beautiful woman moves into the cottage next to hers. Could she be the answer to Stephanie's prayers? Or will the arrival of her new neighbour dig up the reporter's past? A past Stephanie believes is best left buried?

Erin Mason is not the average woman-next-door. She, too, holds secrets that are craving to raise their head once again. Could Stephanie be the one to unlock the memories? Or is it the other way around?

Two women: one story. Their story.

***Disclaimers:*** Most definitely a need for a disclaimer, as these two do resemble those ladies from a well known TV show. And God, do I miss it. I have tried to give them a touch of me though, so don't expect yiyiyiyis all the way through it. Or even at all.

***Sex:*** Eventually. I thought my juices had dried up at one point! Sorry. Did I say that out loud?  
*Erm.* I meant *creative* juices.

Where was I? Oh right ... going bright red, I remember now. In a nutshell (almond), yes - there is. And if you are too young to read about ladies and their naughty dealings, then I'm sorry. You'll have to wait, or lie about your age ... or throw caution to the wind. But remember - I told you. Same applies if it illegal to read about lady luvvers where you live.

***Violence:*** What does the term violence denote? Do I have to slap and punch, or can I get away with temper tantrums? On a more serious note, there is a reference to rape, suicide and cancer. But these are only in reference, and I don't go into detail.

***Thanks:*** To my beta readers - Dec and Heike. Thank you for being so patient with me.

And Towanda ... you are a star - and never forget it, ok?

I know this story has taken me a long time to write, but you can blame work and bloody Bill Gates. I can't tell you how many times Vista ate my chapters. Greedy git.

Also ... big thanks to you, the reader, who give me fantastic feedback and the want to keep on writing, however much the people at Microsoft want me to stop. And a big thank you to all the incredible writers out there who have given me hours of joy.

**Other Bits and Bobs:** The location for this tale is the Lake District, Cumbria. Absolutely breathtaking, if you ever get the chance. Bassenthwaite is a place where I had the honour of reading for my very good friend Kel on the day that she married her soul mate, Michael. Therefore, that is the reason this is set there. The lake at Bassenthwaite is bigger than I have described in this story, but I have tried to keep the rest of it as close as possible to the truth. I also flit to Manchester on occasion. Can't help it. I'm a northern girl.

**Dedication:** To hope. To life. And definitely to living. And thank you for listening to me rabbit on about this story, and how you made me think about why I do it. Writing, that is.

If you like what you have read, drop me a line. Warning. I am extremely sensitive ... I can cry on demand, which is a little like TV on demand, but wetter.

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Or if you want to check out my published work ... under LT Smith ...

[PD Publishing - LT Smith](#)

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# Part One

## Prologue

Being on my own was never a problem. I enjoyed the tranquillity of it all. The not answering to anyone but myself ... the freedom of walking around the house naked ... the eating crap and crying at shite movies - you know, the '*everything*'. But there comes a time in your life where you start to wonder what you are doing ... where you are going ... and that's what happened to me.

It doesn't always work in the way that you wake up one morning and think, 'I don't want to be on my own anymore.' Or even the doing stuff and wondering what it would be like to do it with someone else. Sometimes it takes something a little less subtle - something like a six-foot goddess with brilliant blue eyes moving into the house next door to bring you out of some kind

of stupor.

Problem was ... she had a man in her life. Second problem, if the fact she loved testosterone flying about didn't make a huge one ... why on earth would she give someone like me a second look? But the main problem was nothing to do with any of the above. In fact, her not liking me was something I had grown to expect, especially since I didn't really like myself to begin with.

But once again, I am jumping the gun. I should put things into perspective - it may help you out in the long run ... it might even help me out too, you never know. Bigger miracles have happened. Water into wine ... the parting of the Red Sea ... even Labour getting in for another run.

So let's go for a miracle, shall we?

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## *Chapter One*

First and foremost, I should introduce myself. Stephanie Stevenson at your service. Go on. Take the piss. Everyone else does. SS for short ... or 'Couldn't your parents come up with something more original?' It all boils down to my father being over exuberant with the 'Let's have a drink to wet the baby's head,' and having one too many until he insisted he should name me after some two bit actress he used to like. Don't get me wrong. My father isn't a bullish alcoholic. Far from it, in fact. And that's why my mother gave in. Unfortunately.

But, you can call me Steph. I don't mind that. And to be a little friendlier, I shall tell you a little bit more about me just to make the picture of yours truly, clearer.

Bassenthwaite. Nope, I didn't sneeze. That's where I live. Right near the lake. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking 'What lake?' Bassenthwaite is one of the topmost lakes in the Lake District, Cumbria. Talk about picturesque. I can honestly say the views from my bedroom window can only be called sublime. Hills, dales, sheep (lots of sheep), water ... green fields, and fresh air. Well, unless it is winter ... then the colour changes a tad, mainly to white, actually. And the lake does look less inviting ...

Before I go into detail about why I live in a place that makes rigor mortis look happening, I should really tell you the reason why I left Manchester in the first place. Shouldn't I? Go on, you've twisted my arm.

I was born and raised a city girl ... thought I would be there until the day I keeled over from inhaling the car fumes, or get knocked down by the 192 from Piccadilly to Hazel Grove. But that wasn't to be. Obviously. I left Uni at the tender age of 21 and started in a newspaper office. (Tea anyone?) Although I started at the bottom, it didn't take me long to climb up the proverbial ladder, mainly because of my skill at being a nosey fucker.

To say I loved my job would be a half-truth. Initially I did, and when I realised I no longer liked it, too much water had raced under the bridge. Being a reporter is not all what its cracked up to be - no tilted hats with name cards sticking out ... no rushing from the courtroom with front page news, and definitely no freebies. Long days filled with seeing things that people should never be witness to, never mind involved with, was my life.

It was on one of these occasions that I decided enough was enough and I threw in the towel. I bet you want to know the ins and outs of it, don't you? I think my nosiness is rubbing off already.

Sigh.

Ok, then. But please don't judge me. I can do that for the both of us.

Four years ago. That's when it happened. Although it feels as if it happened last week. It was nothing out of the ordinary, well, for Manchester that is. And when you spend enough time hanging about with low lives just to glean a titbit of info, you find that life can take you one of two ways. Firstly. You can become hardened to everything - become just as unsavoury as they are. Secondly, you can become increasingly distrustful. Or thirdly (ok, ok, I know its three, and I said one of two ways, but it's my story after all), you can adopt one and two and mix them up, making a low life that is completely distrustful. Not a good combination, to say the least. Good job I wasn't waving a gun - guns don't go well with distrustful lowlives. Believe me.

Right. Down to the nitty gritty, and another reminder that I am not happy about the events that follow, ok?

Rape. Such a horrific word - enough to make us all cringe. An extremely violent rape, to be exact. A mother of two, gang raped by three teenagers whilst her children crouched in the corner too scared to cry. Not a pretty picture, is it? No, I didn't think you'd think so. But to me she was just another story - another headliner - another scoop by Stevenson.

At first she didn't want to tell me ... didn't want to tell anyone. And in retrospect, I don't think many of us would want to relive that time over and over again. Pity I didn't think that when I was pestering the life out of her to tell tell tell.

To this day I can still see her sitting there - so vulnerable, broken, her husband next to her appearing a mere shell of a man, the word 'incompetent' invisibly written on his forehead. And also to this day I can hear myself asking questions, making her go over it again and again just so I wouldn't get my facts wrong. But in the end I got more than my facts wrong. Any decent person would have apologised, got up, gone back to the office, told them to shove it, and walked out, tossing her keys over her shoulder as she went. Not me. I pushed and pushed, and then pushed some more. Then pushed again until I saw her break into a thousand pieces, her husband's flaccid arms trying to give comfort hanging from her body like ivy.

So I kept on going. Had to get my spread ... had to get the kudos that comes with a win. It was only when I felt myself becoming bored with her crying did I stop. In that split second, a flickering of humanity whizzed through me, before I cast it aside, made my excuses (and

apologies), and left.

Four days later it came back to haunt me. Not flashbacks about what a selfish twat I had been, but the recriminations of my actions. I will say this as quickly as I can, and yes, I am a coward. I was in the office laughing. Some stupid report had come in about an old bloke being arrested for giving a safety camera the middle finger as he was caught on film, and him refusing to pay the thousand pound fine for crude behaviour. The sound of raised voices from outside my door alerted me that all was not well in camp.

Standing there, or should I say half slumped and looking beside himself with grief, was the husband of the victim. My victim, as it happens. Yes. She killed herself. Her husband found her in the bath ... and I won't go into the details, for your sake as well as mine. Turns out she read my article, and that was it. The realisation of what she had been through sunk in and she decided she couldn't bear to live with the memory of it.

Even now I can still remember the look in his eyes as he pointed his finger, unable to say the words he had come to say. The pain there ... the agony of not being her protector was evident, but the finger said it all. Quietness reverberated from every wall, the everyday clicking of the keyboards stopped, and I was left standing there exposed to everyone for what I truly was. I was more guilty of her death than the three teens that had started the downward spiral.

All the years of denial surged and flooded, and I knew that my time in this role was over. In that split second I recognized the person I had become and the insight sickened me. There was no way I could turn the clock back and make this alright; there was no way I could live with myself if I carried on.

And as we stood there in muted stalemate, my life changed. My legs gave slightly at the knees and I stuck my hand out to save myself from falling to the floor. The action broke the spell, and the husband lowered his arm slightly as if to catch me. That made me feel even worse, as you can imagine. Then he turned as if to go, stopped, and turned back to me. A voice rough with crying uttered just a few words, but those words disturb me still.

'What do I tell the kids?'

Then he was gone, and I was left with the excruciating pain of beginning to feel again after fourteen years of rejecting anything that has a semblance of remorse or pity.

Two months later I was living in Bassenthwaite. Still a reporter, but this time it is low key. No huge stories to follow up; nothing more exciting than announcing the winner of the local jam making competition, or reports about dogs scaring sheep, and that suits me just fine. I left Manchester behind me, and only go back to visit family on a needs must basis.

But I don't live alone. No sir. I have a very good housemate who keeps me on the straight and narrow. Someone who actually made me feel again ... someone who made me understand what it was like to care for another being ... someone who walked into my life two weeks after my move. Not bad going considering I was definitely on Self Pity Street. But he saw past all that and

saw the inner me; he made me see that life did have a purpose after all.

Reggie. God. If you could see his smile, it would melt your heart. And his eyes ... I could wax lyrical about them for hours. Brown. The colour of roasted hazelnuts. Sparkling hazelnuts, at that. And the way he snuffled me every time I got home from work (that's if he didn't come with me), just after bringing me his squeaky ball, made me laugh out loud and make him go crazy.

But I doubt you want to hear about my love story with my canine friend do you? I didn't think so. Well at least I have disclosed my skeleton for you to think about, something I very rarely do as I'm not much of a 'let's pour out my feelings' type of girl. But I feel I can trust you. The question is ... do you trust me? You must remember that with this narrative viewpoint all you really get is my side of the story - something a reporter is very good at. Maybe I am feeding you a pack of lies to play with your sympathies ... maybe I'm playing with the truth a little to make what I do in the future pale in comparison to what I did before. Or maybe I am just telling you things how they are. Only you can be the judge of that. Everything's relative after all.

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## *Chapter Two*

I guess you want to know more about the six-foot goddess now that I've depressed the arse off you. Anything to push the memory of the woman to the back of your mind - or is that just me? Yes, I will say anything to try to forget what I had done - believe me.

Enough. I will try to move forward, as going backwards gets you nowhere fast.

Let's see. How do I introduce my introduction to 'her'? Do I attempt to place the situation into some kind of context? Tell you about my neighbours who sold up shop and bugged off to the glitzy nightlife of Ambleside? Or should I rattle on about watching boxes and removal vans appear in the early hours of Saturday morning? (Can't help being nosey - it's in the blood) Maybe it could be when I saw her bending over a box and was staring at her arse for what seemed like forever?

Hmm. I don't know. Can't get my head around where to begin. I could go for the time when she knocked on my door after I had just given Reggie a bath ... That sounds about right.

Ok. I'm set.

It was Saturday evening when I first met her - spoke to her, in fact. I had spent the day peeking through the net curtains like a right old woman, telling Reggie what was happening and waiting to see if he would have any input. All he did was whimper for a bit, bring his ball and then lick his testicles for what seemed like too bloody long. Eventually I gave up the ghost and sorted through some of my own boxes, as you do when you see someone else doing it.

Even though she was my neighbour, she didn't live right on top of me. Her house was about three

hundred metres away from mine, which made spying more difficult, especially when it started to get darker. I hadn't seen her up close as yet - only from a distance, and that made her seem quiet small. Did I also tell you I was stupid, too?

It was only Reggie's whine that alerted me I had neglected to take him for his after tea constitutional, and he wasn't a happy boy. This fact he proved by chasing ducks close to the lake, and eventually into it. He was covered in bits of crap and smelled like something had crawled into his fur, died, and promptly began to rot. Hence having a thorough bath when I got him back.

One thing Reggie hates is bath time. Loves water, but hates soap. He is the epitome of a teenage boy ... please note, if teenage boys could lick their testicles they would - believe me - it would save on having to shower.

Anyway. I had just gone ten rounds with him and a bottle of shampoo when I heard my doorbell groaning. As I turned to answer, ordering Reggie to stay, it went again. 'I'm coming, for Christ's sake', which Reggie decided the 'coming' part was for him. Out he jumped and fled through the open door. Water was pissing off him like a fire hose and the wooden flooring was a death trap. Attempting to catch him on his hasty departure, I buggered over and skidded along the floor, soaking up what seemed like Lake Windermere in the process.

'Ding ... Dong.' Another groan. I think the battery was dying - or auditioning for RADA.

'For fuck's sake!' A slippery endeavour to crack the mountainous climb up the side panel of the bath resulted in another slip just as I was about to get on my knees. Thud. The sound of my shin hitting the tile was enough to make a welder cringe ... and my language could make a builder blush, that I can guarantee.

Finally, it was a case of crawling to the open doorway and to dry land that allowed me to take the plunge and try for another attempt of being vertical.

Reggie was racing to and from the door, and jumping on everything in his excitement. I usually loved watching his antics after his bath, as he appeared to be showing his emotions at 'freedom from the watery depths'. But I was in no mood to play and chase him, as I was too busy limping to the door.

Just as I arrived there, Reggie came and sat next to me with my best shoe in his mouth, and that did it - that and the sound of the doorbell wheezing its dying breath again.

Pulling the door open, I glared at the tall brunette standing casually on the steps. Before I knew it I had uttered the welcome, 'What the hell do you want?' and then promptly felt like curling up and dying.

'Erm.' She looked how I felt. Bloody uncomfortable. And it wasn't because my jeans were glued to me, and riding up my arse, either. This was the 'Oh shit' kind of uncomfortable. And to add insult to injury, my face was burning. Talk about being embarrassed.

'Never mind. Sorry to disturb you,' and she turned to go.

'Stop! Wait!' But she continued to walk away, and I could hear her muttering something but did not catch what she said. Reggie, the spawn of Satan, was out of the door and after her. His bark was muffled as he was still carrying my shoe, but she looked down at him, stopped, stooped and tickled his head, before moving on.

I couldn't just let her walk away. That was no way for anyone to be treated when they were coming round to ... what was she coming round to do?

That did it. I followed Reggie, who by this stage was trotting happily alongside her as if he decided he too wouldn't stand for my rudeness. The gravel stuck into my feet, as I wasn't wearing shoes, and I was making the noises only people who have ever tried to run barefoot on gravel make, all the time asking her to stop.

Then it occurred to me. Something I wasn't used to doing, or saying, for that matter.

'I'm sorry.' She stopped, I continued. 'Sorry for my rudeness.' She turned, slightly ... and so did Reggie, as if he had nothing to do with me fucking over in the first place and hurting my shin, whilst absorbing a small African country's water ration for a year with my clothes.

Eventually, with an overdramatic limp to finish, I was in front of her, hand outstretched. 'Let's start again, shall we?' And I didn't give her chance to answer before I continued. 'Stephanie Stevenson. Rude neighbour and grumpy git at your service.' I smiled my most winning smile, tilted my head and poked my face out as if I was waiting for a response.

Blue eyes flicked down to my outstretched hand, then back to my face. Then a deliberate lick of the lips before she pursed them as if to speak. She seemed troubled somehow. Not that I could blame her, as I had not been the most sociable person under the sun when she had knocked on my door. But she waited, and so did I. My heart was hammering so loudly in my chest, and I couldn't understand why I was out of breath. It wasn't as if I had run far, but the feeling in my legs, stomach, and chest said otherwise.

Slowly, she raised her hand, and tentatively stretched it towards mine. The anticipation was killing me. Why did I need to feel the touch of her so much? God knows. But as her hand gripped mine a feeling of contentment washed through me. It was as if there was no other place her hand should ever be but in mine. Weird, I know. And by the look on her face she had read my mind, as she looked troubled. I tried to pull my hand away, but she gripped it firmer and began to shake it in introduction.

'Erin Mason. Your new neighbour.' As my eyes left her hand and ventured higher, I saw a smile spreading like a charm over her face. I couldn't help returning a more natural smile in response, as hers seemed almost addictive. '*Stephanie* Stevenson, you say?'

'Yap!'



I nodded. 'And this is Reggie.'

Her eyebrows scrunched together, and I thought the next bit came out a little strained. 'I've heard that name somewhere before, but for the life of me, I can't place it.'

'What? Reggie?'

'Yap!'

The consternation on her face disappeared with a shake of her head. 'Reggie, eh? The handsome shoe carrier.' She laughed as she said it, and it was like music washing over a waterfall ... ah crap. Why was I suddenly turning into a mush ball because someone had a pretty smile, a firm handshake, and a voice that could crawl under my skin at any time? She was extremely attractive, granted. Especially when she smiled. But I wasn't the kind of person who would just go all goofy when I met someone for the first time. I didn't even know her, although I hadn't forgotten she might have heard my name before. Hopefully she had only thought she had heard it before, and not read it in the article that accompanied the suicide of the rape victim. Nah. That was four years ago. No one would remember that, would they? Although I hadn't read it myself - I was too busy living it. However vitriolic it had been ...

But the thought stopped there, as I was taken by the blueness of her eyes again, the movement of her lips, the heat coming off her. God help me. Here I was swooning over a woman who five minutes ago I had been excessively rude to - so very un British, and standing in the increasing coldness with a wet backside and a dog with my best shoe. For all I knew, she could've just been released from prison. She might be a murderer ... fraudster ... armed robber. Or even just been released from a mental institution - out into the community. *Or* she might even be involved with someone else ... there sure as hell was a lot of stuff going in and out of her place all day.

'So you see ...' Shit. I had missed what she had been saying, and not even clued myself in when I noted her lips had been moving. 'Robert will only be here for the weekends to start off with.'

Robert? I looked over her shoulder and saw the outline of a well-built man struggling with what appeared to be a pinball machine... ah ... Robert. Her other half. Bollocks.

'And I was just wondering if you had a corkscrew we could borrow, as I have no idea where we packed ours.' A tilt of her head as she waited for my response, which, unfortunately, was taking a while to conjure up from somewhere. 'Everybody needs a drink when they first move in, don't you think?'

'Yap!' Thank you, Reggie.

'Erm ... I think I have one. Let me check.' And it wasn't until I went to turn away did I notice I was still holding her hand. It felt so natural for it to be there, that I had forgotten I was still grasping it, and part of me wanted to believe she felt it too. But she laughed and pulled away, making the feeling dissipate.

I rushed back to the house on the pretence of searching out a corkscrew; Reggie thinking it was a game and running ahead. All I wanted to do was to hide my embarrassment, and get some bloody shoes on. Gravel is a bitch. A sticky, hurting, jabbing kind of bitch, in fact.

As I reached the kitchen, I heard her coming in behind me - well, felt her actually. I continued to rummage through the drawers in the kitchen unit, knowing full well where the corkscrew was but playing for time until my face and feelings had returned to some kind of normality.

'There you go.' I turned quickly, my hair whipping back over my shoulder. But my hair didn't obscure the look I saw on her face. I am definite ... yes definite ... I saw her staring at my arse. And if the colour of her face gave any indication, she knew I'd caught her staring too. This feeling should have filled me with some kind of smugness, but it actually riled me a little. There she was, moving in with the pinball wizard and she was clocking my backside. I wonder if he knew that she eyed up women when she had the chance.

'Sorry for staring.' Her voice was thick with embarrassment. 'But you seem to have a piece of soap stuck to the back of your jeans.'

I groped around the back of my pants. Sure enough, wedged onto the blue cloth was something slippery and very securely attached. Hark at me and my sexual allure. There I was, believing she was a closet dyke when all she was doing was trying to figure out why I would be running about with a block of soap stuck to me.

What could I do? Laugh. That's what. What did you expect me to do? Tell her what I had been thinking? So laugh I did. Long and loud and hard (and fake), whilst she stood there for a moment just watching my reaction before she joined in. At least it was a tension breaker. Reggie became excited that we both were laughing and started to fight with my shoe again, which just made me laugh even more (for real this time). I couldn't be arsed worrying about the fact I no longer had a good pair of shoes for when I painted the town red. The amount of times I did that would mean that the shoes would have been outdated by the next time anyway.

Eventually I calmed down enough to walk the few steps over to the doorway and give her the corkscrew. But I couldn't really get my words out. Erin was nearly as bad as I was. Her hand was shaking as she took it from me. Then with her other one, she reached around the back of me and plucked the white slippery object from my butt. As she passed it to me, the laughter started again.

'Right ...' she wheezed. 'Time to get back with this. Robert will be wondering where I am.' Crap. I had forgotten about him for a little while. 'Why don't you join us? You can bring Reggie.'

But I didn't feel up to meeting the man in her life right at this moment. I wanted to think about what could happen if she wasn't straight and involved with my next-door neighbour, even if she was my next-door neighbour too. I know I should just get over myself and meet him ... get it over and done with, but you know how things are. Well, if you think like a twat like I do.

'Some other time, eh? I have a mountain of things I've got to get through.' The lie slipped out

easily, as it had so many times in the past. Nevertheless, this time I felt guilty about it. 'Do you fancy coming over for lunch tomorrow?' Where had that come from? 'I could cook for both you and Robert ... save you trying to get your kitchen sorted.' I don't know where that came from either, but at this rate I would be coming out with way too many surprising things and I thought it would be best if I kept my gob shut for a while. 'About two?' I never learn.

The smile that she greeted me with was nothing short of perfection. She was beautiful ... so bloody beautiful, and I couldn't help the sigh that escaped my mouth.

'That is so kind of you. Are you sure?'

'I have to make up for my rude behaviour somehow, don't I?' And I did. I had been such a grumpy fucker when I had answered the door, cooking Sunday lunch was the least I could do. Erin was looking at me with such an earnest expression, as if no one had ever offered to cook her something before. It made me feel a little uneasy, to tell the truth. Clearing my throat, I nodded to her hand, 'And you can return the corkscrew then.'

Blinking her eyes rapidly, she refocused on me and the here and now, so it appeared, and then looked to the inanimate object clutched in her hand. A smile broke out again, and I thought she must have then remembered Robert and the wine they would have whilst they were toasting their new home. A fleeting spurt of jealousy poked and prodded inside my gut before I silently told it to fuck off.

'We'll be here at two.' Erin nodded once as if making a decision, and then turned to go, stopped and faced me again. It seemed as if time had stood still for just a moment, as she looked me straight in the face before saying, 'Thanks again for this.'

I muttered a response that should have been 'You're very welcome and good luck in your new home,' but it came out as 'Aha.' A woman of many words, that's me.

After she had left, and I had closed and bolted the front door, it hit me. I had nothing in to give them. Not even the spuds. So, at eight thirty at night, I had to change and drive ten miles to the nearest supermarket with a mad dog in the back of my car, and get groceries.

That'll teach me for opening my big mouth. Next time someone moves in next door, I am taking the batteries out of my doorbell.

Shit. I forgot to get batteries.

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## *Chapter Three*

Sunday morning was panic filled to say the least. I have never been the kind of person to entertain with dinner parties and so forth. Usually I invited friends round to watch a film and we

stuffed ourselves stupid with pizza and snacks. But even that hadn't been for quite some time. Well, before I moved to Bassenthwaite, actually. To say my social skills were much to be desired would be an understatement.

At one thirty, I was beginning to panic. Everything was nearly cooked and I still had thirty minutes before they arrived. I can only blame the fact that I had a very bad night's sleep ... my dreams vivid and realistic, enough to make me get out of bed and pace around the house. Reggie followed me initially, and even he got fed up and went back to bed. The content of the dreams were varied, from the events four years ago, to meeting Erin. Talk about pleasure and pain mixing. But, the meeting with her was not as nice in my dream. Well, to be honest, when I had first met her it wasn't a bed of roses either, but that isn't the point. Hopefully I had dragged myself from my social faux pas in reality ... the dream was something entirely different. Erin had been the one who had been raped ... and I was interrogating her and watching her crumple. A blacked out shape was sitting next to her trying to give comfort, but his face was blurred ... and it made it even worse, if it ever could be.

Each time I woke, I would convince myself that it was only a dream and try to get back to sleep to dream of something else, but it would just recur. Even after I had completed x number of laps of the house, I still went back to sleep to awaken with the thought I had broken Erin just as I had broken that woman all that time ago. Weird how events in your life can mix and mingle in dreams, isn't? Especially when they were so disturbed.

I couldn't shake the feeling of impending doom from me, and Sunday saw me walking Reggie at the ungodly hour of seven o' clock. It wasn't until I eventually saw Erin and Robert working outside in their garage did I find a semblance of peace. 'At least she's ok,' went through my head. I know. Irrational. But dreams have the way of tricking you and planting a seed of doubt in your head until you believe there must be some half-truth in it all. Was it a sign that I should not get involved with my neighbours? That in some way I would hurt them? I had avoided making any close friends in Bassenthwaite for the very same reason, as I didn't think I was good enough to be called a friend ... wasn't good enough to have people trust me. I don't think I actually trusted myself enough not to slip back into the uncaring bitch I had once been.

Funnily enough, I had spent years avoiding feeling anything, and now I felt every thing too much. The slightest frown from someone would hit me like a punch in the gut, and I would spend forever going over stories I had written just to make sure I hadn't offended anyone in any way. So, as you can see, I was fraught. Sleep deprivation and guilt can make your cooking times bugger about a bit.

It was while I was thinking this that the doorbell dinged, the dong had gone completely, and I was standing there wondering who on earth it could be. I know. I should also get a stupidity award.

Robert was handsome. Very handsome, in the ruggedly 'I'm a man's man' kind of handsome way. No wonder she was with him. They made a beautiful couple. Both tall, athletic and gorgeous. I felt like a midget compared to them. It was weird that I hadn't noticed how tall she was last night when I had met her for the first time. Well, I had, but I hadn't put her height in comparison to my

own, and how very much of a short arse I was. Although being five foot eight couldn't really be described as short.

'Hey there. I'm Robert. But call me Rob.' A meaty strong hand was thrust out in gesture and I paused slightly, before wiping my sweaty one on my jeans and returning the gesture. Jesus. He had the grip of a bear. And the way he pumped my hand up and down, I thought my fucking arm was going to snap off. I didn't envy her in the sack ... even if I wasn't a raving lezza. If he shook hands like that, God only knows what he would be like when ...

'I hope we're not too early, Stephanie. But Robert was eager to meet you.' I bet he was. He probably had to miss going to the gym this weekend and wanted to vent some of his excess energy on some poor unsuspecting victim. My fingers were curling up and dying and I wanted to blow them and rub the blood back into circulation, but that would've been rude. 'Call me Steph ... please. And no, actually you're right on time.'

After showing them in, sitting them at the table, I dished up lunch. It wasn't bad, although I do believe the roasted vegetables could've done with another five minutes ... Isn't that always the way? And I doubt you are interested in my veggies, are you? Ok. Let's continue.

Conversation was lively, and before too long I knew enough about Robert ... Rob ... to last me for the rest of my life. The one thing I didn't know was what on earth she was doing with him. She seemed so normal in comparison. He was nice in a loud, overly friendly kind of way. It seemed as if he was trying to suck life in all of the time, like he was taking in the world and all it had to offer, whilst she just sat back and let him do it. And then he told me, and I felt like such a shit.

'So when I found out I had cancer, I went to pieces.'

What do you say? Someone you have just met tells you they have cancer and you have just been slagging them off in your head ... I mean ... what do you honestly say? Sorry? Or something similar? He looked so bloody healthy ... so full of life and expectation of what life could bring him.

Erin tilted her head and looked at him with the look that says, 'You shouldn't have said that, Rob.' But why not? Because I would feel uncomfortable about someone telling me they were going to die? It was not my place to say whether he had the right to make me feel bad or not.

'Sorry, Steph. Too much too soon, I guess.'

'No ... no ... that's ok.' I swallowed. Hard. 'So ... erm ...'

'You've made her feel all uncomfortable, Rob.' He had, but that's not the point. 'Steph. He's ok now. The doctors gave him the all clear about eleven months ago.' Erin smiled at me, glared at Rob, then turned and smiled at me again. 'He loves to go into details, so I thought I would save you the pain of it.'

'I was getting to that bit, if you would just give me the chance.' Rob scrunched his face in a comical way, his blonde hair pushing itself forward and over his closed eyes. 'She is such a bossy bugger sometimes. Glad I didn't marry you.'

So, they weren't married. A nugget of information for me to hold close. I couldn't believe I was even thinking that. What on earth had got into me? The man had just got over cancer and I was thinking there may be a chance for me with his woman.

'As if I'd marry you, Taggart.' But the laughter implied they thought the world of each other and this was a game they played a lot. I could only imagine what it would be like to have someone you loved go through what Rob had. No wonder he gave the impression he was taking in life as it came. He had played the game of fifty fifty and come out a winner. But how many couples don't get the opportunity? I am morbid, I know. I have to focus on the depressing ... makes me happy, see?

When I was loading the dishwasher, Rob came in to help me, chattering away, his huge hands making my dishes look like they had been borrowed from Lilliput. Erin was playing ball with Reggie, and I could hear her laughter accompanied by yaps of joy.

'Erin has been a rock. So supportive.' He was concentrating on cramming the glassware into the slots and didn't see me stop and just look longingly through the doorway, where I could see the back of her as she crouched on the floor. Why couldn't I shake off the wanting her when I knew she was happy with him? And him just getting over cancer too. What was going on in my head? Why did I wish it were just her and me here? I barely knew her, but felt I had known her forever. I have to get out more ... meet new people ... get myself a girlfriend. Maybe I would start reacting to people differently if I found myself a wider social circle, as the way I was thinking definitely made me aware that my self-imposed prison was in fact very lonely.

'Do you want to see a picture of the twins?'

Twins? Twins? What twins?

'They are with Sue at the moment, but they should be here next weekend.'

And before I knew it, he had a picture out of his wallet. Two adorable faces looked at me, blue eyed with dark hair. 'Neither of them look like me. They both take after their mother, which is a blessing really.' And they did look like her ... even down to the sparkle in their eyes that spelled mischief. 'That's George, and that's his sister, Daisy.' Fatherly pride filled his eyes, and I am sure I saw moisture forming just in the corners. 'They will be eight next month.'

Looking at him then I understood why Erin loved him. Although he was a huge manly man, he also had a softness that belied his strength - almost childlike. And his zest for life was addictive ... he focused on the good side of things instead of dwelling on the 'what ifs', something I should really take on board. The love for his family was apparent, and he wasn't ashamed to show it. Sensitive, but not in a sissy way. Even though I had had opposing thoughts initially, I concluded that he was a lovely bloke with a cracking personality; it had just been jealousy that had stopped

me seeing that from the offset. From this moment on, that was it. I was just going to have to get over the fact that even though I felt myself attracted to Erin, there was no chance of it ever moving on from a one sided attraction. At least it made me realise that I actually wasn't dead from the waist down - a huge advance on four years ago when I believed I had been dead from the neck down.

So, some good did come out of it after all.

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## *Chapter Four*

Conversation continued over coffee and I felt myself loosening up now I had made the decision to accept that Erin was not available. Then Rob asked me what I did for a living. I felt a cold chill race down my back, something you shouldn't really experience when talking about your job - well, except if you're a tax collector.

'I work for the Daily Press ... the local paper.'

Rob turned to Erin and grinned widely. She, on the other hand, just looked a little startled. 'What a coincidence.' I looked at Erin, expecting her to announce she had taken a job at our place, but that would have been impossible. It was a small office and I hadn't heard of a job coming along for any of the departments. I was one of three reporters, and the rest of the departments were mainly all one-man bands. 'Erin used to be a reporter ...'

'Not really,' I barely heard her say it.

'Yes, you did. Well, kind of.' He turned to face me fully, the smile still splitting his face. 'She did freelance work to pay the bills when she was a struggling writer, didn't you, dear.' The endearment was said jokingly, and Erin punched him the arm making him pretend it actually hurt him. 'Ok ... you did it for about six months, but at least you two can actually talk about something you both have an interest in.' That was the problem. I didn't have an interest in it. It paid the bills and that was that. But even though both Erin and I looked uncomfortable, Rob didn't get the hint. He was too busy looking extremely pleased with himself. 'That's until you both discover other things.' He stopped and looked her squarely in the face, his expression becoming serious for a minute. 'You never know, Erin. You two might have more in common than you both realise.' Then the grin again, followed by a snort.

You know when you have the feeling that there is something going on around you but you are the last one to get a clue? That's how I felt. I felt like an outsider watching a scene unfold and there was no way I was ever going to get a grip and take the hint. Finally, I suggested another coffee, mainly because I didn't know what else to say, and to tell them that they should leave would have been rude. And I didn't want them to leave, actually. Apart from the couple of instances I had felt at a loss for something to say, I had enjoyed their company. So had Reggie, who was by now zonked out in his basket with his ball at his feet.

I did expect them to decline, but Erin said yes near enough straight away. I thought if anyone was to want another drink it would've been Rob, as a couple of minutes earlier I had felt Erin had been just as uncomfortable as me.

As I was in the kitchen, I could hear them loudly whispering to each other. She didn't sound happy to say the least, but he kept on chuckling, followed by a manic hushing sound. Leave them to it, that's what I say, and continued to sort out the coffee machine.

'Hi. Need any help?' Literally, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. Her voice was divine to say the least, with a slight accent that I couldn't quite place. She came and stood next to me, waiting for me to tell her what I wanted her to do. Blue eyes watched my hands as they sorted out cups, saucers, and spoons. Then I felt them rest on my face and I could feel the heat rising from my neck upwards. Inside was a battle. I cannot explain why I felt so damned attracted to her, especially when I knew she wasn't available, never mind the fact that her partner had just come through hell AND that she had twins. What was it that made her so enchanting?

'Ignore Rob. He can be a git sometimes. You just have to get used to him.' Clank. I dropped a spoon right on the saucer and the sound made my teeth ache. 'Here. Let me.' A strong hand took my wrist, and another slipped the next spoon from my grip. 'I can't do much in the kitchen. But I can make good coffee.' I looked into her face for the first time since she had entered. Her expression was open and honest, the hint of a smile creeping around her mouth. I knew she was waiting for me to laugh and break the tension, so I did ... a forced laugh, just to comply. The smile came out weaker than I think she wanted it to. She must have known that I was being fake just to please her. 'Honestly, Steph. Rob didn't mean anything by it. He's a nice guy, just a little immature sometimes.'

It was at this point I wanted to cry. Don't ask me why, because I couldn't tell you. There was a welling building up inside that was trying to choke me, and I knew that if I didn't let it out soon I would keel over. But that's not what you do in mixed company, is it? Break down and cry for no apparent reason - especially if you had known the people less than twenty-four hours. I knew it wasn't what Rob had implied that made me feel like cracking open the pity jar - or the fact he had made me feel bad about my line of work, not that he did - that was me. It was just ... ah God ... if I knew I would tell you.

'You ok?' Erin lifted her hand and stroked my cheek and I expected to see moisture on her fingers as she pulled away. Dry. Thank God. I mean, how do you explain a crying episode to strangers, especially when you didn't know why you were crying in the first place? And through all this emotion whirling inside me, I didn't break eye contact once. It was as if I was mesmerised - caught in the tractor beam of her eyes - the blueness was so calming.

Then I answered. 'Sorry, Erin. Just thinking about what Rob had told me ... about his illness ... Shakes you a bit ... makes you feel your own mortality.' She grimaced as I said it, and I knew it was something she had had to deal with on a daily basis for god knows how long. A spurt of guilt raced through me, as I knew I had upset her only just to get myself out of a sticky situation. It hadn't been about Rob's illness, had it? Or had it? I did warn you I was overly sensitive, didn't



I?

She sighed sadly. 'It sure does. Nothing can prepare you for hearing that kind of news at thirty five.' Erin turned from me and looked down at the coffee cups. Her face creased slightly, as if she too was going to cry. And that scared me even more than me breaking down in front of her. I didn't know how to deal with people and their emotions, although I had been trying to empathise more with humanity. But this was just so real. This woman standing in front of me had faced a waking nightmare. Her partner ... the father of her children ... had visited the gates of hell, and come back. No wonder he liked to joke - not many people could've done that.

But she didn't cry. Nope. She sniffed loudly and straightened her shoulders, and I thought 'I bet she's had to do that a fair few times.'

'It's not me that I feel for.' Not surprising. Any mother would feel for her kids ... put her kids first, so to speak. How do you break news like that to children anyway? The memory of the husband saying 'What do I tell the kids?' flicked into my head before I flicked it right out again. Now was not the time. 'It's Sue.'

Sue? 'Sue?'

'Yes. My sister. Rob's wife.'

Rob's wife? 'Rob's wife?' Did I also mention I could be stupid, too? Ah ... yes. But I think you would have worked it out on your own anyway.

Erin turned and looked at me again, her face showing confusion. 'Rob's wife. My sister. I told you last night.'

Crap. The time her lips were moving and I was too busy labelling her as a serial killer. How do I get out of this? Do I admit guilt? Say 'Sorry, Erin. I was linking you to The Yorkshire Ripper and missed the fact that Rob was your brother-in-law'? Nope. Didn't think so. And don't give me that face ... you wouldn't either.

'Sorry, Erin. I didn't know your sister was called Sue.' And she believed me. Thank God.

As she carried on telling me about how Sue handled the news ... how they kept it back from the kids until they knew what the outcome could be ... all I could do was try and hold back the grin that wanted to spread itself like butter over my face. Not really the time to be grinning like an idiot, is it? At least I am beginning to learn what is right and what is wrong, although sometimes it's still difficult to get my head to think of the right way to react straight away ... but with time, I will get there.

Its amazing how more focused you feel when suddenly things start going your way. Ten minutes ago, I was beating myself up for fancying an involved woman. I don't make a habit of going for someone who was either involved or straight - not my style. There were too many things in there that could cause heartache, and not just for me. Sometimes I am not the selfish bitch I make out,

and do have a conscience, although it does take a while to kick-start. When I eventually find the one I want to spend the rest of my life with, I want her to want me just as much ... need me just as much ... love me just as much as I wanted, needed and loved her. One hundred percent commitment. I don't think any of us should settle for anything less than the whole deal - the full package, so to speak.

Then it hit me. I had spent a while half-listening, nodding, grinning idiotically, and believing that somewhere deep down this woman may be the one I had been waiting for. She wasn't involved with Rob, that's true - but that didn't stop her being involved with someone else, did it? Or being as straight as a laser beam? I think I may have jumped the gun a little, so to speak. And the worse thing was my heart was racing so far ahead I don't think she could hear me when I was shouting for her to come back and read through the rules of the race.

'Shall we?' Erin was standing in front of me, coffee ready and sitting peacefully on the tray. 'You ready?'

As I'll ever be, woman. As I'll ever be.

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## *Chapter Five*

Time to move forward, don't you think? I could step back and sit this one out, this longing, but I think there comes a time in your life where you're fed up just existing. There has to come a time when you actually want to live. So therefore, I believe, after much waffle, that this was the time when I began to wonder what I was doing. And if you remember, I said there was a man in her life. You, same as me, thought it was going to be Rob ... that's what we get for making assumptions, isn't it? Now ... all we need to do now is decide:

Do you trust me to tell you the truth? Or are you thinking that I wouldn't know the truth if it smacked me in the face.

And off we go again ...

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The second cup of coffee was a lot more relaxed than the first. On my part anyway. Rob seemed a lot better, maybe because now I wasn't holding a jealousy stick in front of my eyes.

Don't get me wrong, it wasn't as if I had fallen head over heels for the woman next door - I didn't even know her that well. All I knew was she use to be a freelance journalist and a struggling writer, that she had bought the house next door to me, and that she wasn't with Rob. Oh ... and that she had a sister called Sue. Not too much information to be getting my teeth into. Disappointing to think that all my years as a reporter hadn't pushed me into the who, when, how, where, why and what mode of conversation.

Can you imagine it? Go on, picture the scene ...

Me sitting on the chair opposite her, notebook and pencil in hand. 'Who are you?' Scribble. 'When are you going to let me take you out to dinner?' Scribble, erase, and scribble again. 'How come you are so goddamn gorgeous?' Scribbling frantically now, as there is so much information to write down. 'Where would you like to go from here?' Scribbling like a mad person - have to get all the details. 'Why are you looking at me like that?' Not scribbling, but moving backwards rapidly. 'What are you doing with that baseball bat?'

Even my daydreams don't go in my favour. Why couldn't they all turn out with the woman swooning at my feet and answering all my questions the way I would want them answered, instead of the reality of it?

Anyway ...

They stayed for about another thirty minutes before they realised they still had so much to do. Rob was leaving first thing in the morning to get back to Disley where his wife and family were. Yes. I liked writing that. Where his wife and family were. Had to write it again just out of pure smugness.

As they were leaving, Rob bouncing down the steps ahead, Erin turned to me, took my hand, and shook it. Even I noticed that my handshake needed more work, as it gave the impression of a dead fish. It was because she had surprised me. But what surprised me more was when she said 'Ah stuff it,' and gave me a hug. I was now the epitome of a rag doll, the limp fish syndrome had progressed throughout the rest of my body. Her mouth was so close to my ear as she whispered, 'Thank you for today. Thank you,' that I could feel the softness of her breath on my skin. Her arms tightened quickly around me into a squeeze before she let go, and I felt like something had been ripped away before I had the opportunity of revelling in it. Standing in front of me, blue eyes holding me fast, she breathed in deeply before saying, 'I'll have to return the favour. Got to keep on the good side of my neighbours, haven't I?' The smile I had been trying to conjure eventually broke free and split across my face. 'My. If I knew the promise of my cooking would've brought such a wonderful smile to your face, I would have invited you sooner.' And that made me go red. Don't ask me why, it just did.

'Yeah ... cheers for the lunch, Steph!' Rob called from half way down the path. I waved to him and he waved back and then gestured he had to dash - the 'I've so much to do' look on his face.

Erin turned to go, stopped and turned back. Unfortunately I was in the middle of admonishing myself for not getting a firmer grip when she hugged me at the time her eyes rested on me again. Her face scrunched up as she took in my actions, then a smile appeared. 'You okay?'

I pretended I was trying to swat a fly away, a little overdramatically even for me, and nodded. 'Damned flies. They're attracted by the water.'

She nodded, but I knew she didn't believe me.

Clearing her throat, she asked 'Maybe you could ... erm ... if you get time ... erm ... show me round a bit?' The last part of the sentence was high and squeaky, and it would take an idiot not to notice it must have taken a lot for her to ask. I know what you're thinking. And yes, usually I am an idiot, especially when it comes to understanding people and social situations. But to be honest, the same thought had already gone through my head and I had been a little nervous about broaching it. It's amazing how insular we can be as a species. Too frightened about being refused, looking like an idiot and all that. I honestly believe it's a miracle the human race survived at all. It's a good job there are people out there who just take life by the horns - like Rob, for example.

'... because when he gets up here next week, I would love to be able to show him all the sights, if you know what I mean.' He? Don't bloody tell me I blanked out again? 'And by the looks of things, you know where to take the ones special in your life.' Huh? People special in my life? Who on earth could she be talking about? I hadn't mentioned anyone in my life, and the only pictures I had of anybody in my house were my family. And unlike the mistake I had made about her and Rob, there was no way she could mistake the fact that both of my sisters were happily married women. Pictures of them with their husbands and sprogs put paid to that.

'Come on, Erin! Work!' Rob's voice stopped my stupidity. At least I didn't have to admit I hadn't been listening once again, although at that point I didn't really care. I should have known that Erin wouldn't be single ... she was just so wonderful. It was not just the fact that she was drop dead gorgeous that mattered, it was the fact she had a fantastic personality too.

The realisation I had missed out once again swept over me. '*He*' would be here next week, and it was up to '*me*' to smooth the way for her other half. Talk about being gutted. Why do we do it? Set ourselves up for disappointment, I mean. We hover around the outskirts without the common sense to just come out and ask someone if she is involved with someone before we allow ourselves to develop a crush on her. But then again, wouldn't that take some of the excitement away? The 'does she, doesn't she' factor? Imagine if we just went up to people and said 'Hey. I think I might eventually fall for you. What are my chances?' Nah. It wouldn't work, would it? And think about all the people you were a little attracted to and then realised they were twats. If you had already said the aforementioned line, wouldn't they be expecting you to make a move somewhere in the not too distant future?

Did I also say I could waffle for England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales? Especially when I am nervous. Can't help it. I'm waffling now because I feel like the aforesaid twat, but this time it wasn't the question scenario, it was the unspoken expectation set up. At this moment in time, I didn't know which was worse.

So I did the only thing I could think of doing.

'It would be my pleasure.' And it would be, even though it wouldn't be the ideal situation. I liked her. A lot. So, if it came down to me being the person who could make her feel welcome to Bassenthwaite and smooth the way for her and her partner to start a new life here, then I would do it. If friendship was all that was offered, I would take it. One way or another I wanted Erin to

be a part of my life and my future.

Funnily enough, her face initially showed no recollection of what she had just asked me. She seemed to blush, swallow, and then splutter all at the same time before bolting out, 'Great! I'll call round tomorrow, ok?' A beaming smile. Wow. What a beautiful reaction to me being a tour guide. Then she turned and raced after Rob waving her hand behind her.

With a heaviness that lumped around inside me, I turned and made my way back into the house. Reggie was sat in the hallway with his lead in his mouth and that begging look only terriers have.

'Ok, fella. I'll show you around too.'

God. I can be such a drama queen sometimes.

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## *Chapter Six*

I didn't see Erin the next day. No. I wasn't avoiding her - I'm not that petty, and if you remember, I said that I would take friendship. Although I was finding that difficult, for more than one reason. Firstly, I didn't make friends ... I should add 'easily', but I'll stick with the former. Secondly, there was a something deep inside me that wanted so much more. But, once again, I had to swallow the second one down and focus on building a relationship between us ... one that she might want too.

Therefore, the reason I didn't see her the next day was because work was a bitch. Mainly because of the indescribable incident that had happened over the weekend. Some teenagers had vandalised the local toilets, and it was my job to talk to the locals who were 'enraged' at such blatant disrespect for the beauty of the town. I mean ... toilets! Haven't we all scribbled our names on the toilet walls, leaving messages or exclamations of ardour? That's part of growing up, isn't it? Even if we wipe it off again, we have all done it. Come on. Think back ... see? The 'I love?' is there hovering under the surface in all of us, even though I couldn't never quite understand why people were enamoured with punctuation marks ...

But once again, I will pull myself back on track and continue with my excuse of why I couldn't see Erin on the Monday.

As I was saying ... toilets ... graffiti ... locals. Took all bloody day just to shut them up, and then I had to write the story. At least the events here paled in comparison to what I'd been used to in Manchester. Toilets burnt to the ground there and it only reached page ten - here a doodle made front page. As usual, Reggie came with me to work. That was another bonus about working in a rural area ... dogs were welcome everywhere, although cafes were a little picky ... And he was excellent at calming down the local people - they couldn't resist his overshot jaw and wagging tail. Therefore, I didn't get home until gone seven, and all I wanted to do was curl up and sleep after a soak. Which I did.

It wasn't until the next morning that I saw the note on the hallway floor. I must've stepped right over it as I came in the previous night. On closer inspection, I had ... well, stepped on it, actually, as I could see my boot mark on the white with a half a paw print on the edge.

The writing on the front was neat and small, and I didn't recognise it. It wasn't until I opened it up and looked for the signature did I feel a tightness in my gut. Erin. Then I looked at the top. She had written the date and time. Six twenty, March 25th - the previous night, to be precise.

*Steph*

*Seems as if you are busy today. Wondering whether you would like to come round for a bite to eat tomorrow night? About seven? Hopefully it's a yes. If you can't make it, give us a bell on 6576812.*

*Erin*

Short and to the point. I didn't even give myself chance to argue whether I was going to go or not - I was, and that was it. I needed to socialise more - get out - talk to people who were fun and interesting for a change. And her being eye candy couldn't hurt could it? A grin cracked open on my face, and then I noticed a PS ...

*Reggie is more than welcome. Doggy food is my speciality.*

I laughed. Reggie would love to sample her delights, and so would I.

'Stop that, Stevenson.' And I laughed again, making Reggie get out of bed and come and stand next to his mama with a 'What the hell's got into you this morning?' look on his face. 'We, my young man, are going out for dinner.'

'Yap!'

'Yes. Now go for tinkies.'

As I stood in the doorway waiting for Reggie to finish his morning ablutions, I allowed my eyes to drift over to Erin's house. The downstairs light was on indicating she was up already. I contemplated calling her and accepting, but that's not something you do at six thirty in the morning, is it? I'm not up on social etiquette, but personally I would rip the head off someone who called me that early and it wasn't important. I fingered my neck and decided I would rather keep it attached to my head for the moment. I'd ring her later ...

*'Come on, Reg! Brekkie!'*

The volume of my voice carried across the morning air, and I honestly believed they heard me a couple of miles away. It must have been excitement that made my voice reach that pitch, excitement that for once in a long time; I was actually going to do something constructive with

my day. I was going to start a friendship. Now that was something to shout about, wasn't it?

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You were right. I forgot to call. Well, I didn't forget as much as I forgot the piece of paper with her phone number. All day in the office waiting for news to come in so I could get to work, and all day worrying that she would think I was a git that had no manners. Which I didn't ... obviously, because I didn't call.

Ah shit.

I even contemplated sneaking home and getting it, but my editor was giving me the evil eye all day. I think it was because of the complaints he'd had for my 'Spend a Penny for Your Thoughts' article I had written about the toilet fiasco. Even the subeditor's lackey, Pippa, was in her element thinking I had got myself into trouble. The locals were not happy that I had decided to use a pun for their misery ... God ... they want to get a life. At least *I* was trying to get one. And if I hadn't had to chase the spawn of Satan around for ten minutes to get my hairbrush off him this morning, I wouldn't have forgotten the bloody piece of paper in the first place.

At the memory, I glared at Reggie, who, from his basket in my office, glared back in defiance, as if to say 'And your point is?'

'You know, you little devil.' But the grin he gave me made me forget all over again why he was in the doghouse, or basket, even.

By the time I had finished the day, I was fraught to say the least. Sounds such a trivial thing when you think about it. But I wanted to make a good impression. She was the first person in a long time that had made me want to be a better person, make me want to get out and do stuff, and I had buggered it up.

So, I found myself driving into her driveway instead of mine when I got back to Bassenthwaite. The next bit was me banging on her door like I was being chased by a mad axe man. I think she thought I was being chased too, if the look on her face when she answered the door was any indication.

'You're early. I haven't even started cooking yet.' She looked at her watch to check it was the time she thought it was. Five. And, yes, I was two hours early. 'But at least you're here ... thought you would be too busy.' Was that a dig because I didn't call? Never mind. I had to explain. And as I tried to get the words out, she just stood there nodding.

'But it said to call if you couldn't make it. So why are you worrying?' To think I call myself a journalist. I can't even read a hand written note properly now. I stopped in mid garbled apology and thought back to the note. She had. And I had made a fool of myself. Again. 'I'm glad you can make it tonight. You're not allergic to anything are you?' Myself? 'Seafood?' I shook my head, words deciding they had given up hope with me, and my ability to make any sense.

As she spoke, she opened the door wider and gestured for me to go inside, but I declined. She shrugged her shoulders and then smiled.

'I've got to get back and shower.' I don't know what possessed me to lift my arm up and sniff under my armpit in front of her. Fuck. All I can say is I was nervously relieved for some reason or another, and it wasn't until I had my nose crammed into the crack did I realise what I was actually doing.

The sound of her laugh was loud and hearty, 'So ... do you ...' more laughter 'need to shower then?' I just looked up; my arm still raised, and grinned the grin of the exposed. 'You'd better wash all that muck off you. It's amazing how being with some of the scum of the world tends to stick like dirt.' She noted my confused look. 'You know ... all the toilet vandals.'

So, she had read my article. I felt chuffed that she had read it. Had she read it because I had written it or because it was the *only* local paper? I was hoping she had read it because she knew me and wanted to 'have a look'.

'You have a lovely style, you know?' My face scrunched. 'Writing style, I mean.' Then she laughed again. 'Because I don't think the style of sniffing your armpits will catch on.' More laughter, but this time I joined in. You have to laugh at yourself sometimes. What's the point in being so damned angsty all of the time?

After a few more minutes chatting, I got back into my car and drove the short distance back to my house. I had dinner arrangements with the woman next door. But why did it feel as if I was going on a date? And why was it so important? By this point I was focused on just getting ready - nothing else mattered. I didn't even look back in case I realised this was all a dream.

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Reggie was ready before me. Obviously. All he had to do was have a quick brush and he was set. He didn't like the bow tie I put on him either. Well, we had to make an impression didn't we? I just want to add that I am not in the habit of dressing him up as if he was a pseudo baby - but that bow tie just made him look even more handsome than he already was, if that was possible. The redness of it brought out the black and tan of his fur, and made those sparkling eyes sparkle just a tad more. Erin was impressed, anyway. And that's what matters. When she answered the door, she spotted it straight away, maybe because he stood on his hind legs and showed it off. My dog is a poser, although he hates being brushed, and you already know his utter dislike for soap. But anything that bought him optimum attention was fine in his book - and mine, for that matter. She made such a fuss of him I believed he wouldn't be able to get his head through the doorway - lots of 'Aren't you the handsome one?' whilst I stood there feeling proud.

The smells coming from her kitchen made my mouth water. A scent of garlic wafted and tempted me to walk inside her house and make my way to where I believed her kitchen would be. I was hungry by this stage, and so was my boy, who raced ahead and into the kitchen to see what he could scrounge.



'Like mother, like son, I see?' Her voice was light and good-humoured. I turned and looked at her standing next to the open door, and watched as she closed it before resting her back on it. The slouch of her frame accentuated her contours, and for a moment I allowed myself to swallow the image of her. She was beyond a doubt the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and my heart surged in my chest pushing out the sigh that had been waiting there. Her legs seemed to go on for miles; jeans hugged her thighs showing toned muscle, and I felt the moisture building in my mouth. I wanted to blame the smells coming from the kitchen, but I knew it would be a lie. The white shirt she was wearing was unbuttoned just enough so I could glimpse the shape of her cleavage - and it was perfect. Round. Curved. And I can guarantee it would taste ...

'Hungry?'

You bet I am. My appetite was raging, but it wasn't the smell of garlic and seafood that had made me feel as if I was starving. Just the sight of her, as she pushed herself forward and towards me, made me want to grab her and kiss the life out of her. To this day I don't know what stopped me. All I could think about was what her lips would taste like ... feel like under mine.

With that thought, I caught myself looking at her mouth. Such a sensuous mouth at that. Lips made from silk, I bet. Red. Inviting. Being slowly licked by her. Or was it the sensation of time slowing everything down so it looked as if she was tortuously licking them? I didn't know and I didn't care. All I knew was they fixated me. Made that yearning even more acute. And when they were moving ...

But I caught myself. Don't know how, but I did. I only missed the beginning of the conversation, which was a bonus and a vast improvement on the last couple of days.

'... so I thought we could eat in the sunroom and then get comfortable in the lounge afterwards. What do you think?'

I think you are the most beautiful woman I have ever met.

'That sounds great.' The answer came out almost squeak like. 'I'd better check on Reggie. He loves to sample things he shouldn't.' Next thing I knew was I was in the kitchen leaning on the door and panting. This 'only friends' thing certainly took it out of you. Especially if every time you saw the 'friend' you wanted to jump her bones.

Talking of bones ... tenuous I know, but I do have a point. Reggie had decided there was a bone in her dustbin. And if you know dogs, they like to find bones. And to find them, they must be able to knock the bin over and rummage through, making sure all the rest of the crap is splattered everywhere it shouldn't be.

That cooled my ardour slightly. There were two things I could do. One. Confess. Show Erin the mess Reggie had made. Two. Be the fastest cleaner in the world. I opted for two, as you may have guessed. I didn't want Erin to think my dog was the Evil One, although at times he did a fantastic impression. And why didn't I want her to think that? Because I wanted her to like him ... love him, maybe. That way maybe she would like me too.

'It should be ...' But unfortunately I didn't get the chance to tidy up. Erin walked in just as I was on the floor with my hands full of rubbish and Reggie looking at me as if to say 'Mum? Why are you rooting through this nice lady's bins?'

I froze. Vegetable peelings sticking to my hands and poking through my fingers. It did feel as if I had been caught doing something I shouldn't be. I'm sure I heard Reggie laugh, or was it the sound of my heartbeat thundering through my head? The sensation of being bright red was the key emotion of the moment, and all I could do was raise my hands in the air as if the peelings would explain themselves.

She just stood there and looked down at me, her hands on her hips, and her once voluptuous lips in a straight line. Shit. I was in for it. Reggie was in for it too, as there was no way she would think I had come in here and tipped her bin over, was there?

'As I was saying.' I hoped that was the sound of humour in her tone. 'Dinner will be ready in five minutes.' She paused before continuing. 'If you can wait that long, that is?' Deathly silence, until a gurgle from Reggie's tummy broke it. 'As for you, young man ...' I thought she was going to bollock him ... bollock me, for that matter, 'I have something special for you.' Go on! Treat him! He deserves it after making me look like a dick head.

But she didn't get out the biscuit jar. Instead she crouched down next to me and began to help me clear up the peelings, chuckling intermittently whilst I just stared at her. 'Come on, you. Get cracking if you want feeding.'

But it wasn't the fact she was an animal lover that made me feel so bloody contented inside. It wasn't the fact she accepted that Reggie was a git sometimes. It was the fact that as she was getting to her feet again, she looked at me so kindly before she nipped the end of my nose between her thumb and forefinger. Such a small gesture, but it made me feel as if I could do anything. Anything. Anything.

It was at that moment that I knew for sure. And the thing I knew for sure was tonight I was starting to live again.

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## *Chapter Seven*

Dinner was excellent. Can't cook, my arse. I wasn't a real seafood lover, but it just melted in my mouth. I did have to be coaxed to sample the oysters as they did a very fishy impression of snot. And unlike kids, I don't like to eat snot - or bogies, for that matter. Talking of bogies, the whelks looked like they had been sneezed out of an elephant's trunk. Sorry. I doubt you wanted to hear so much information about my ability to classify food as bodily waste, did you? Especially food that is supposed to be considered an aphrodisiac.

Anyway. To continue more genteel like - the meal was wonderful ... even Reggie enjoyed his bowl of specially prepared beef and vegetables. Now, the thing with Reggie and beef is they have an understanding going on. Reggie wolfs it down like he has been starved and the beef replies by giving him the worst case of flatulence known to man ... or known to dog, as this case may be. I can guarantee that half an hour after he has whizzed through it, he could toot the national anthem on demand. That wasn't so bad ... it was the smell that made the gag reflexes at the back of your throat work overtime that was the problem. All this information was whirling around inside my head all the time he was guzzling it down, and I just hoped that Erin had a cold ...

Over coffee, I could hear the familiar gurgling coming from my furry fart factory, and tried to ignore it. By the second cup, he was windy walloping with the best of them. The first time he did one, Erin was in mid sentence, but she stopped and looked over to Reggie, who by this time was sniffing his backside in surprise.

'Did he just break one off?'

Honestly. It was like having kids. Here I was trying to make a good impression, and my nipper was doing his damndest to put a spanner in the works. At least it took a good thirty seconds before the perfume reached us - unfortunately. And by the time he had rattled a few off, we had both become used to the noise and the smell. The only one to still act surprised was Reggie himself. Every time he would look at us, sometimes with wonder, and other times with an accusatory look on his face.

As she was clearing the table, I had a look around her place. No. I didn't stiff her with the washing up. She insisted. Told me to play with Reggie - and I would have too, if I'd remembered my gas mask. So the next best thing was to have a nosey round.

It was amazing what she had done to the place in just a couple of days. Shelves were sporting books, and I couldn't resist having a look at the kinds of things she would be interested in. Maybe I could glean a little information about the subjects I could broach with her, although we had no difficulty talking about every thing from politics to what shoes were good for walking. Talk about eclectic - the books, I mean. The range of genres she had was phenomenal ... everything from carp fishing to Shakespeare.

Carp fishing? What the ... and then I remembered. It must belong to 'him', the partner who was coming at the weekend. Over dinner I had forgotten that she had a bloke, and the realisation of her being already with someone else made my heart sink all over again.

It was as I was putting the carp-fishing book back that I noticed it. Erin Mason. The name on the spine of one of the books stuffed down at the bottom ... then another one ... Erin Mason. She had two books published and I hadn't even asked. I knew she had been a struggling writer, but I didn't know the struggle was over. When I had asked what she did over coffee, she had become shy and muttered something about working from home. Just her countenance told me that I should change the subject, so I actually followed my instinct with a little help from my gut-busting buddy, who had chosen that precise time to hit his crescendo.

I had just got my hand around one of the books and turned it over to have a peek, when I heard her coming back. All I had time to do was clock the title ... *Into the Light* ... before stuffing it back on the shelf. Why I didn't say something is beyond me. I mean, she had two books published, and there was me, acting as if they didn't exist. I should have just held the book up and waited for her response. But no ...

When she appeared in the room, I was standing at the corner cabinet looking innocent and interested.

'Ah. I see you've spotted my man.' Fuck. Staring right at me was a picture of a bloke in walking gear, crouched down with his arm around a black Labrador. 'Gorgeous, isn't he?' In a hetero way I suppose he could be classed as good looking ... although smarmy ... with big teeth ... and a square jaw like Buzz Lightyear. 'You'll meet him at the weekend.' Whoopee doo. 'And he is going to love you.' I turned at the statement, but thankfully she was talking to Reggie, who went all stupid to the extent he rolled on his belly to flash his todger at her.

But, dogs know when to help you out, don't they? Just as she rubbed his belly, he let one go. And man alive, it was a cracker. I honestly saw her go green around the gills, as her face had not been too far from him at the time.

'I think I'd better walk him around a bit. You know, get rid of some of it before he explodes.' She did laugh, but it sounded muffled as her hand was clamped over her face.

Getting up, slowly, she made her way over to me, releasing the death grip she had over her nostrils and mouth when she thought she was at a safe distance. 'So soon?' The look on her face told me that she genuinely meant it, and I did feel bad that I was using Reggie as an excuse to flee the scene of my unrequited longing. But it was all too real, you know? All this 'friendship' was all too real. I knew with time I would become used to the idea of it, but at that moment, I was content to baby step into the role of 'chum'.

I nodded sadly, gestured to my canine pal, and rubbed my belly. 'I think it's for the best, don't you?' She took it as I meant her to. That it was best for Reggie, but I was actually thinking it would be best for me. 'Thanks for dinner, Erin. I, *we*, loved it.' And we did. It was great to spend time with someone who I got on with ... who made me laugh. Most importantly, to be with someone who gave me an indication that I could feel.

At the door, I felt a little awkward. I wanted to repeat the action she had made to me the previous time we had shared food together - you know - the hug. But in a way I didn't trust myself. All the time I spent with her it seemed as if my feelings for her were becoming more acute. It may have been because every time I saw her she looked more beautiful than the last time, but that might have been because every time I saw her another problem was thrown into the mix. I hadn't even told her I was gay, although that was not usually the first thing you said to someone when you met them, is it? 'Hi. I'm you're dykey neighbour. Welcome to the neighbourhood.' No. I didn't think so.

Reggie was sitting next to the door, his stomach making noises that would impress a civil engineer, so I opened it and let him wander outside. Erin was in the kitchen taking the last of the coffee things through, and I couldn't just shout thanks and bugger off, could I?

In less than two minutes she was back with a parcel of uneaten dessert in her hands. 'Something for breakfast.' The grin she gave me was what the Great Masters would call perfection - the epitome of beauty, and I think my heart jumped into my throat to have a better look. I couldn't even answer her, just took the parcel and smiled. Even to me it felt weak.

'I've had a lovely time, thanks.' She tilted her head and grinned wider, exposing beautifully straight teeth.

'My pleasure.' No. Mine, I think.

I could feel the sigh of contentment and want gurgling up my throat and I had to swallow rapidly to get it to go back down and stay there, but it wanted out. It wanted to expose me, and inform her that I felt things one friend shouldn't feel for another.

'See you soon?' The tone was soft, and I couldn't resist looking into her eyes. Blue. Open. Honest and trusting. Why on earth did I ever think she would give me a second look? Even if she was gay like me ... she had it all. Brains. Beauty. Personality. I would be right at the back of the queue of people bending over backwards to be with her.

'Of course.' Of course? Why the fuck did I say that? 'I mean ...' But she just laughed and pushed me gently in the stomach.

'I know what you mean.' That laugh again. You know, the musical one. 'Its not as if we live miles apart is it?' I laughed too, but that wasn't what I meant at all. Although I couldn't actually tell you what I did mean, if you know what I mean? I know I'm not making sense - even to myself.

As I stepped onto the porch, her voice broke through the nighttime air. 'Any chance of that tour when you are free? I'd love to see the place through your eyes.'

How could a woman resist such a plea? 'It would be my pleasure.' Then I attempted to leave again.

'What? Not even a hug goodnight?' Good job I had my back to her, because if she could have seen the idiotic grin on my face she might have thought twice about wrapping her arms around me and pulling me close. So close. Close enough so my face was buried in her hair. The smell of her was more addictive than anything I had ever smelled in all my life, but even that paled in comparison to the feel of her in my arms. For an awful minute I thought I wouldn't ever be able to let her go, as unlike the first time she had hugged me, this time I got a very good grip back. And wonderful is an understatement.

When I was pulling begrudgingly away, she quickly kissed my cheek. Just a peck. Featherlike ... almost a wish from my imagination to my skin. But it was real, because I could feel the burning

of the happy flesh stand against the cold night air. Now, the hug I had wanted and was semi prepared for, but I wasn't prepared for that. Not that I minded, God no. Just stunned a little. I had to work exceptionally hard to stop my hand from hovering to my cheek and caressing the spot where her lips had been in case I exposed myself even more.

'I'm so happy to have found you, Steph.' God. Could this get any better? Was she going to admit her attraction to me after all? Fuck. My heart. My poor heart. It was banging so hard I honestly thought I would collapse. 'Here only a matter of days and here I am ...' Yes. Here you are. '... finding myself with a really good friend.' Friend? Aw fuck. When would I ever learn? 'Think we are going to be good friends, don't you?'

All I could do was nod. The disappointment was stopping my mouth from forming the words of agreement.

'Good. Now I think you'd better sort Reggie out, as I can hear him in the bushes after something.' I nodded again, and mumbled another thanks for dinner before walking away, lifting up the parcel of dessert as gesture.

My heart had stopped her acrobatics and was settling to a dull thumping sound in my chest. It almost mimicked the sound of my footsteps as I walked away from her and back to my empty house, collecting my hunter gathering fart man on the way.

And it wasn't until I had unlocked, entered, and locked the door to my house, did I allow myself to gently stroke the place where she had kissed me, releasing another sigh as I did so. Sometimes we know that we haven't a chance in hell, don't we? However, that doesn't stop that tiny pocket buried deep in our chests holding onto that grain of hope ... or is it want? Or maybe it is even more than want. Maybe it is need that sits there waiting to be unleashed into the unsuspecting world of loneliness.

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## *Chapter Eight*

Sleep didn't want to come. I lay there getting more and more irritable with myself, looking over to the alarm clock and working out how long I had before the alarm would scream and inform me to get my lazy arse out of bed. I was feeling so unsettled and I couldn't understand why. It may have been the rich food, or even the last vestiges of disappointment from realising that I didn't have a cat in hells chance of ever being with her. Either way, I was not a happy camper.

Eventually I fell into a fitful sleep that conjured images of everything from running through the woods to carp fishing. You can imagine how I felt when I woke once again at 3:40 am. Not happy to say the least - fucking fishing and exercise were not the ideal content for a sound sleep, and with a lot of sighing and thudding about, I got out of bed.

After a cup of hot chocolate and twenty minutes watching insomniac's TV, I felt that sleep would

arrive a little more easily. I had to be up at 6:30 to walk Reggie before going into the office, as well as doing all those chores that accompany being presentable in a social situation, and I knew that I would be a grumpy git ... again. Then again, I spent most of my time being a miserable fucker that another day wouldn't hurt.

I was right. Sleep came almost immediately and I can tell you it was extremely 'restful', for want of a better word. The dreams this time weren't as frantic as the last lot had been. In fact, they were more than appealing.

This time I saw myself sitting at the dining room table with Erin. Candles illuminated the scene and made it appear to be almost gothic. Her eyes were so blue ... so vibrant. She was feeding me oysters, but this time they tasted perfect ... no allusion to bodily waste at all. Every time she lifted one to my mouth, the juice would spill onto my chin and her fingers would stroke the wetness away. Weirdly, the moisture seemed to move lower and lower, until I could feel a definite wetness between my legs.

Two ... three ... four oysters, all hand fed, and all accompanied by the gentle brushing of her fingers. A fire sputtered awake inside my gut, moving lower and lower and making my hips jerk forward. Then a stray finger traced the contours of my lips until I caught one and sucked it into my mouth. The sensation was exquisite, and I fluttered my eyes closed only to open them and stare right into hers. They were violet - dark violet, and promising something I wanted so fucking much.

Lifting my hand, I grasped her wrist and pulled the finger from my mouth, only to moan at the sound she made as I did so. Gently, I lifted her hand and brushed my lips over the softness of the palm and back, progressing to kissing the fingers one by one ... a timid tongue poking out and trailing down each digit. Her skin tasted just as I imagined it would, but better. Turning her hand, she curled it around my face and pulled me towards her, lips parting in expectation. Moisture was building both in my mouth and between my legs. God. This woman ... This woman was so sexy ... so bloody unbelievably sexy. A shooting pain raced across my chest, but it didn't hurt in the way a pain should. It was agony, but blissful, do you understand that? A real oxymoron; one you could feel.

Just before our lips met, she stopped and held my gaze. My heart was beating so loud, it seemed as if it was inside my head. Rapid breaths met and blended; the look was captivating. I wanted to close the distance and kiss her ... taste those lips I had coveted, but I waited, her hand still holding me steady. The intimacy of the position was torture, yet perfect. And although being so close to her that I could see those eyes in detail ... read those eyes ... note how they were digesting me and the moment ... revel in the wanting and knowing she was feeling the same way, it wasn't enough. I had to sample her. Savour her. Understand the texture of those lips as mine moved against hers ... know that those lips ... that kiss ... would signify all I ever wanted in life.

Contact. Blissful contact. So soft. So gentle. So totally blindingly enchanting, I felt myself becoming lost in her and the moment. I didn't even notice my hands sliding into her hair and pulling her face closer, only realised as she imitated the action, bringing us even closer than

before, if that was possible. The kiss developed, became more ardent ... deeper and richer and fuller. Mouths opened and devoured. Tongues entered and tasted, only to search more fully the hidden treasures we both held.

The sensation of falling forward and into her overcame me, but I wasn't worried. I knew she would catch me ... save me from falling. I knew she would never let anything hurt me, even her. And that feeling was the most precious feeling I had felt in so long. Nothing mattered. Nothing but the feel of her holding me, kissing me, stroking my back, my hair ... my side ...

... Until I felt her hand slip under my top. Those fingers, so deft, so right, so hers, touching my skin, taunting it into submission, making me putty in her hands.

'I ... *want* ... you.' Short gasps hitting my skin and making it tingle with expectation. 'I want ... *you*.' Fuck. I wanted her. Wanted her. Wanted ... *her*. But I couldn't answer. I was in a haze of ecstasy, and my voice failed me. My mouth couldn't form the words that I wanted her too; it was too busy trying to consume her throat ... consume all of her.

But words were unneeded. Redundant. We had come too far to worry about reciprocating utterances, as my actions more than told her I was hers for the taking.

When I felt the button pop open on my jeans, I knew this was the moment I would treasure for the rest of my life. The moment I knew what it would be like to be taken by her ... the moment I knew what it would be like to slip my hands over her body and make her mine too. I felt myself lift up so she could push her hand down and into my underwear, her fingers playing with the hair until they pushed down further and between my folds.

'*God*.' The first and only word I could say, but that summed up how I was feeling. It was as if she'd been sent by some celestial force to make me feel this way, and part of me wanted to get on my knees and thank the lord for sending me this miracle.

Parting my legs, I opened myself to her, in more ways than one. It had been such a long time since I had opened myself for anything or anyone, as I was too scared of hurting them or them hurting me. I didn't want anyone to get under my skin and make me care, but it was too late. She was already there ... spiritually, emotionally and physically. Her smile was in my heart; her want was in my soul, and I knew that if I didn't have her soon I would shrivel and die.

A noise was coming in from the background ... a shrill distant noise that was trying to interrupt us, but I tried to ignore it. It got louder and louder, but I still tried to get her to slip her fingers inside. She was becoming distracted ... looking over her shoulder ... looking for the source of the sound, before she looked at me as if to say 'What is it?' I tried to show her I didn't care, but she pulled her hand away leaving me wanting.

I had to stop the noise. Had to get her back. Had to make her want me again, want me just as much as I wanted her. The cold air was hitting my stomach and I remember looking down at the exposed flesh before looking back at her, my eyes saying don't leave me like this ... I need you, Erin. But she did. Stood up and walked away to search out the racket that seemed as if it was



right next to me.

And it was. Right next to me, I mean. My alarm clock had decided it was time to stop me fantasising about something I could never have, awake or asleep. I can't repeat the names I called it, as I do profess to have some standards when in company. Let's just say you wouldn't say them to your mother.

Now, I did say that my night's adventuring left me feeling rested, that they were appealing, didn't I? Well, you can see how I could say they were appealing, even though we didn't get to the place where I wanted them. But I class that as our subconscious mirroring real life. In reality I didn't have a hope with her, and I was just glad that I did sample her lips, even though they were the somnambulant type.

As for feeling rested. I did. Strange, I know. But the events of the dream showed me so much more about myself than I ever dreamed possible. They showed me that I was eventually moving on with my life. I had got to the point in my dream where I realised that nothing could hurt me if I had her there, even though I had only known her for a couple of days, I knew that she had come to me for a reason.

I don't know why, but at that moment I had the urge to speak ... just the one word. 'Erin.' Just the feel of her name on my lips made me smile. Therefore, if the reason why she had come to me was nothing more than for friendship, or never got past that, then so be it. I was content to just be. It was something I hadn't felt in such a long time, even by just dreaming about her or even saying her name aloud in the early hours, I was beginning to feel happy for the first time in a long time.

Grinning stupidly, I stretched fully in the bed, trying to touch the bottom with my toes, the gaggle of sensation racing up my body and forcing out a growl of contentment. Even though I could feel a definite wetness between my legs, I knew I didn't need to do anything about it. Strange, I know, but that's how I felt.

Today was going to be a good day. The first of many, thanks to the woman who had now become my reason to get up in the morning.

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It was only Wednesday. Bloody Wednesday! I had only known Erin since Saturday, and the biggest part of me was wondering how she had become so important so fast. I was beginning to doubt my own state of mind. Maybe I needed to rationalise things a little, as even I knew this was way too soon. And that didn't take into consideration all the other hindrances that came along when fancying a woman whom you know to be involved with someone else.

I needed to broaden my social circle a little ... needed to get out and about, show my face, and meet the people, so to speak. The thing about living in the sticks is that everybody knows everybody else, and nobody knows anybody at all. Since I had moved to the area, the only times I had been in a pub was when my family visited, or when we went out for a meeting at work.

Once or twice, I had been in one through work, but nothing actually coming from my decision to go and meet people ... or even just someone. Even my previous neighbours of four years had had the pleasure of my hellos about ten times.

Now don't get me wrong, I wasn't completely celibate. Just because I didn't go out every night didn't mean I didn't have liaisons with women. That would be too far fetched even for my sad little life. No. I wasn't a nun. However, I wasn't a social butterfly either. My 'relationships' came in the form of one-night stands, and not on my own doorstep. The reason isn't that I was ashamed of who I am and what I do; it was mainly to do with keeping people at arms length. Therefore, all my nocturnal meanderings happened when I visited my hometown. I just carried on being the person I used to be - not caring for others.

Fuck. That makes me seem so bloody cold. It wasn't like that ... no ... not even in the slightest. The women I chose to sleep with were after exactly the same thing as I was. Release, I think. Just the connection, however briefly, with another human being. To be honest, it had only happened four times - once a year, you could say, although I didn't time it. I couldn't even tell you their full names. Go on. Shake your head in disappointment; I know I did, every single time. Nevertheless, I couldn't be with them, couldn't be more for them, and to them. I couldn't even be more for myself. It would've been cruel to promise them a tomorrow if I couldn't even face looking at my own reflection, wouldn't it?

I know you think I've been rattling on a little, but I just want you to know the bare bones of it. Want you to know what a misfit you are entrusting your time to. And it will also tell you why I wanted more in my life. Why I wanted to start moving forward and into something that did promise a tomorrow, and hopefully the disgust I faced in the mirror every morning would eventually fade over time.

Fingers crossed.

Now where does this link to the previous night? Easy. Last night I realised I didn't want this kind of existence anymore, didn't want to just carry on being a loner with her dog. As I said, I wanted so much more from life: it was as if I'd been given a chance to renew the lease in some form or another and Erin was going to help me. Yes, it does sound confusing ... but you have to remember, I was the one having to go through it. A very shaky time to say the least.

Ok. Let's continue. Let's get back to Wednesday morning and the realisation I was going to change my hermit like ways.

Right. Here we go ...

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## *Chapter Nine*

Erin was in her garden as I came back from Reggie's walk. She had her backside sticking up in the air and was fighting valiantly with some stubborn bush root. Well, that's what it looked like

to me. Initially I was tempted to just carry on walking, and, truth be known, if Reggie hadn't decided he wanted to say hello, I probably would've done just that. Old habits die hard, I guess.

But I have to admit, watching her scream and run forward as Reggie jumped up behind her was worth me crawling out from under my antisocial rock. My poor little fella looked startled, and stared at me for guidance. Before I had the chance to shout out a reassurance to both Erin and Reggie, she had realised what had happened. I stared at her with my mouth hanging open like a retard. As you do.

'Buggeration!' A laugh, short and sharp. 'He frightened the crap out of me.' Don't we know it? Reggie just continued to stare at her, expecting some form of reprimand, but she just laughed again and held her hand against her chest, panting heavily. Yes. You guessed it. I was staring at her heaving bosom - can't blame me ... it was a sight to behold. Almost like something from a bodice ripper of days gone by, the ones that inflame your imagination, and maybe somewhere decidedly lower. 'Good morning, fella.' Erin bent over and fussed over the now happy dog, whose tail showed everyone that he was both pleased to see her and relieved he wasn't told off. I just watched her. It was a beautiful sight - honestly. A gorgeous woman and a grinning dog right in front of me. I felt a surge erupt in my chest, a surge that swelled outwards and around my body. 'And ... good morning, Steph!' Erin was smiling broadly at me, a truly genuine smile. The realisation that I could differentiate between a fake smile and a genuine one made my smile almost crack my face in half. This woman was so good for me, in more ways than one. It was as if she was training me to live in society again, training me to feel again, and it felt fucking fantastic.

'Good morning, neighbour. Sleep well?' Why on earth I asked her if she slept well was beyond me. Maybe because I hadn't. Or maybe because just as I asked the question, the images from my dream popped into my head. Obviously, that made the blood race to the surface. In my mind, the images were apparent and I believed she would see what I got up to when I was asleep. But she patted Reggie on the head and began walking towards me. The closer she came, the more incandescent I became, and by the time she got to me, I was luminous.

'I slept fine. You?' Bang. I must've been purple by this stage. 'Are you feeling ok? You look as if you're sweating.' Concern flooded her face and she lifted her hand and placed it on my forehead. 'You're boiling. I think I'd better get you to bed.' Shit. Why did she have to phrase it like that? Why couldn't she just tell me to get indoors and take the day off? 'Come on. Let me take you to bed.' This calls for a 'fuck!' because the more she went on about taking me to bed, the clearer the images I had of me kissing her palm ... me kissing her neck, could even physically feel her fingers in my hair, probably because they had just been near it. If that wasn't bad enough, I could feel myself becoming turned on again. I knew I should have sorted myself out this morning before I got up - but no ... I had to be 'Little Miss Contented' and think that my new lease of life would compensate for the burning need I felt in the southern regions of my body. A tip for you. Never trust your body and mind to actually carry out the promises they make. If it's a toss up of being either rational or horny ... Ah ... I don't have to spell it out to you, do I?

'Honestly. I'm fine.' Her look told me she didn't believe a word of it, followed by her grabbing the top of my arm and trying to guide me back to my house. 'I ...' What? Feel horny? 'I ...' am a

perv? 'am hot.' In more ways than one, I assure you, and mainly in the v part of my jeans. 'I think I put too many layers on this morning.' A quick gulp. 'And I've been chasing Reggie.' At this point Reggie stopped his sniffing of the bush and stared at me as if to say 'Liar!' It felt like her fingers were burning through my coat and jumper, just like Reggie's eyes, eyes that were burning through my face.

She let go. I heaved a sigh of relief, although not a notable one, a secret one, if you know what I mean. 'Are you sure?' I could tell by her face she wasn't convinced, so I tried harder.

'Yes ... I'm definite.' Summoning a grin from nowhere, and avoiding looking at my dog, I continued. 'It seemed chilly first thing ...' I drifted off for effect whilst tugging at the jacket I was wearing. 'See? Winter wear.' Although I knew I was lying, I also knew that she was not totally convinced either. But what more could I do? I had to take the heat off me some way or another. 'What are you doing Friday?'

'Friday?'

'I was thinking about taking some time owing and showing you the neighbourhood.' A tad extreme just to get out of feeling embarrassed, but I was going to ask her anyway. I couldn't put off the inevitable forever. 'You did say you wanted a tour ...'

'I would love to. Love to.' Erin was grinning widely, and I felt so good that I could make her do that, nothing else mattered. 'Although I have to be back about six ish.' My face said 'huh?' and she continued. 'Brian is coming on Friday ...' And then I blanked out for a moment. I'd forgotten, briefly, the reason why I couldn't be interested in her. So, that was his name. Brian. Like the snail in the Magic Roundabout ... 'And my sister is coming too, with Rob and the demon seeds.' She looked so happy ... so happy. Well she would do, wouldn't she? Her bloke was coming and so were her family. 'They would love to meet you ... especially Brian.' What about Florence, Dougal and Zebedee? Not forgetting Ermintrude the cow. Might as well go for the whole cast.

But I chickened out. I wanted to be the martyr and say 'And I would love to meet the man in your life', but I just couldn't. The words stuck in my throat, and I felt my lips moving but nothing coming out.

'You ok?' I had to say something. Anything.

'Erm.' Good start. 'Erm ...' still good, but becoming repetitive. 'That's fine. I have plans for the evening anyway.' Washing hair? Washing dog? What? 'I am popping to Manchester to visit my parents about that time. You know ... beat the traffic.' In Keswick? In March? It was so obvious I was making it up as I went along, but the funny thing was, Erin didn't seem to notice, just gave me a disappointed look.

'That's a shame. You will be back before Sunday won't you? I would love you to meet my sister.' It wasn't her sister I was trying to avoid. 'Cos Brian will be here for good from then on.' Bollocks. What was the point in running away? I had to meet him eventually.

'Saturday afternoon. It's just a flying visit. Touch base, and all that.' What I hate more than the term 'touching base' is the knowledge that I was a twat. And the more I tried to avoid both the term and the action, the more I used it, thus becoming even more of a twat. Vicious circle. I mean, I would have to drive all the way to my parents, and then my sisters would visit, and I would have to be all sociable and happy and prove to them how much better I was - all because I wanted to get out of meeting my neighbour's husband. Husband? Partner? I quickly checked her left hand and smiled at the nakedness. Partner, it is. But that still made me a twat. Right?

'Good.' She lifted the bare hand up and brushed her fingers through her hair and continued. 'Because I've told them all about you ...' She stopped. Blushed. Stammered. Then tried to get her now tangled fingers out of her long dark hair. 'How ...erm ... what a good neighbour you've been.' The last couple of words kind of trailed off, and her eyes were frantically searching everywhere but at my face, eventually landing on Reggie, who was calmly itching his ear. Her eyes brightened, as did her face, as she directed the next comment to him. 'And they can't wait to meet you either. Especially Brian.' Why did she have to keep mentioning his name? It was bad enough to think she was with someone else, never mind constantly being reminded of it.

I wanted to ask her that if Brian was so fucking special, why had he let her do all the donkey work when she moved? But, obviously, I didn't. I didn't want to make assumptions about why he wasn't there. I'd assumed Rob was her partner and look where that got me. Sitting there feeling awful whilst the poor guy told me about him getting over cancer. No. It could be a myriad of reasons. Work. Tying loose ends up. Sharpening his jaw. God help me. I was getting worse.

'Anyway. I'd better get to work.' Clicking my fingers, Reggie was at my heels and waiting to be led. 'See you Friday morning then? Say about nine thirty?' I watched her mouth form into an o shape, and initially took it to mean she didn't want to start that early. 'Later?' Then her face crumpled a little and I realised that it wasn't because I had mentioned the time ... it was because I had said Friday. I think a part of me actually read the response right. She wanted to see me before that. A huge part of me wanted to say 'What about tonight? Fancy grabbing a bite to eat?' But I just couldn't. I knew if I wanted to start feeling normal around her, I would have to cool things down a bit - no seeing her at every opportunity. I know it sounds callous, but I also knew that as soon as Brian turned up, I would be pushed into the shadows once again.

You're thinking 'How do I know that?' Simple. She had just moved to the country, and Bassenthwaite was as rural as you could get ... Erin was bound to be lonely - she was here all alone, after all. Next, she meets a woman who was close to her age ... stands to reason that she would want to get to know her better. Especially if that woman knew the area well and appeared to be a happy-go-lucky kind of person. I know I'm not, but it is what you project, isn't it? Therefore, in conclusion, when Brian turned up, the aforementioned woman would no longer be needed. Right? Right.

Yes. Cynical to the last. I couldn't suddenly shake off the wariness I had for other people, even though I thought she was the most wonderful woman I had met for a long time - if ever. Come to think of it, it wasn't her I didn't trust. It was myself. And don't I go on? I'm getting on my own tits now.

'Nine thirty sounds great.' Her voice tried to be upbeat, but I detected a hint of sadness there too. Never mind. She would soon forget about me after Friday.

Mentally I admonished myself before smiling broadly and nodding. 'See you Friday then, Erin. Come on fella.' As I turned to leave, I had another thought. 'And by the way. Get an early night Thursday ... you'll need all your strength.' A laugh broke free from her- loud and hearty. 'I'm not joking. Gonna walk the legs off you.'

'Erm ... ok. Consider me in bed at seven.' And no. I won't tell you what went through my mind at that very moment.

Leaving her to tend her bush ... now that's a funny statement ... I went inside to prepare for another day in the office. Hopefully there would be nothing much happening - well, as in having to get my coat on and go out amongst the masses. I wanted a nice quiet day at my desk ... having not much sleep the night before was beginning to show, and it was only eight thirty.

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Unfortunately, God was not on my side when it came to work, but it was a good day all in all. There was a report of an off duty fireman who had got stuck up a tree trying to save a cat, and it was my job to go and interview everybody involved. Obviously the fireman was embarrassed, as he had to have his colleagues come out and save him. It wasn't as though he had climbed the tree and was too scared to get down. No. It was a case of him climbing the tree, the cat pissing off, and him getting the back of his all in one suit caught on a branch. Initially I thought it would have been a case of slipping out of the suit, but that was a no go. One reason was because he wasn't wearing any underwear ... and secondly, even if he didn't mind exposing his nether regions to the old lady who had turned her concern onto him whilst stroking her pussy ... the cat, I should say ... he was caught in a position where he couldn't get the clothes off without falling. All in all, humiliating to say the least.

The article came out so smoothly, and the puns were a plenty, although I had to avoid writing about pussys and off duty firemen. Steve McCann, the bloke involved, was all for having a joke at his expense, so there was no danger of offending anyone. Dave, our photographer, got a wonderful picture of Steve holding the cat, who seemed be grinning at the camera. It would have been a great shot for Caption of the Week. I also took a couple on my camera phone, as I wanted some on file - or maybe just to take out and laugh at later.

Reggie spent the whole time glaring at the cat and licking his lips, until the moment came when he couldn't take it any longer and launched an attack. The cat fucked off up the same tree and was hissing down at my deranged animal that was impotently scrabbling at the base. Border terriers have this hunting instinct that nothing, or no one, can stop, and my boy was a Border terrier through and through. It ended up with me locking him in the car until I had finished getting interviews. The worse bit was the cat was apparently stuck again, and Steve volunteered to get it down. Thankfully, as soon as he was half way up, Tiddles came down. Another lovely shot by the cameraman - and me - couldn't resist. My editor liked the headline 'Cat Escapes Embarrassment - Man Not So Lucky', and the article was then taken ready for the next day's

paper.

That about sums it up. My day, that is. And that was one of the reasons why it was wonderful to live in the countryside. Imagine. The headline news being nothing more than man saves cat, cat pisses off, and man saves man from a tree. Idyllic, to say the least.

By the time I got home, I was beat. I ate, showered and went to bed, where sleep found me quickly. No dreams that night. Nothing but blackness. Just the way I liked it.

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Friday morning came around so bloody quickly, but didn't, if you know what I mean? Thursday dragged and raced by every time I thought of being with Erin the next day. I wanted nothing more than it to be there, but at the same time didn't. I know. Confusing. But arrive it did. And for once the weather promised to be lovely.

After I had packed my overnight bag, fed both myself, and the overexcited Reggie, it was eight thirty. Just time enough to take my fella around the lake. Obviously, Reggie was ready and waiting at the door, his lead in his mouth and a tail that could dry paint. He looked so happy ... so full of life and ready for the day that it was natural to feel a spark of excitement too. Therefore, it was only normal to continue grinning like an idiot when I opened the door, even when I was greeted by a beautiful woman who had her hand raised to knock.

'Good morning, Erin!' My voice was high and happy, and it was soon joined by the yaps of my dog, which was totally smitten with my neighbour. They do say that dogs tend to be like their owners, or is it the other way around? Either way, or not even continuing that discourse, both of us showed we were pleased to see her. Funnily enough, for once, she looked startled. 'You ok?' I could feel the smile slipping down my face. I knew why she was here ... she was cancelling. I bet she was cancelling today. Disappointment eked its way up my body, and I tried to shake it away. This is what I wanted, isn't it? The thing I had been thinking ever since I had offered. Well, not in as many words, but I had wanted to avoid seeing her.

'Sorry ...' here it comes ... 'I ... well ...' just spit it out 'you startled me.' Because I answered my own front door? 'I didn't expect you to be smiling.' Now that was worse than being told to fuck off. In other words, I was a grumpy git. She could see my expression change; I thought it would enable her to recognise the person she knew. 'No ... not like that. What I meant was ... it's so early ... and you weren't expecting me ...' So, I was grumpy early in the morning AND when I met new people ... she had me sewn up. The realisation of these two personality traits made me laugh out loud, which made her even more uneasy.

'I like to keep people on their toes.' Erin gave one of those smiles that can't decide if it feels safe or not, and that made me laugh even more ... but I did calm it down to splutter, 'So ... what can I do for you?'

She didn't answer right away, and seemed as if for a brief moment she had forgotten what she had come around for. I watched as she moved her lips, but nothing came out. It was like watching an inner battle of some description. Why couldn't she just tell me she had changed her

mind and didn't want to go out for the day? Then I could just go around my business and forget all about her. Maybe that would be for the best after all.

I was just about to prompt her again, and even contemplated telling her I couldn't make it to save her the job, when she spoke.

'Food?' My face asked the unspoken question - maybe because my brain was so set on her giving me the knock back, I couldn't quite grasp what she was trying to say. 'Food? As in what are we going to eat today?' She looked down at Reggie before continuing. 'I assume Reggie is coming with us.' I nodded, and he licked his paw, as if to say he was listening but the bit of crap wedged between his toes was more interesting. 'And I doubt they will let us into many places for lunch ...' She paused, and I waited. 'Picnic?' I waited some more. I knew I was not being much of help, but I didn't want to interrupt her flow. 'How about you take Reggie for a walk, and I make us a packed lunch?'

Then I felt a sensation that bordered on relief flow through me, as I had initially thought she would be telling me to sling my hook and wanted to stay home and prepare for Brian.

'That would be great. What a lovely idea.' The smile she greeted me with made my heart sing Westlife songs - and that was enough for me to speed things along, as I had a sudden urge to start singing them too, and there was no way I was ever going to put her through my singing. Ever. 'So ... we'll be with you in about an hour, ok?'

'You have a beautiful smile, you know?' Her face was deadly serious, and her eyes were staring at my lips. I knew they were, because the object of her gaze suddenly decided it needed the help of my tongue to moisten them - and she mirrored the action, her eyes glued. 'So beautiful ...' Her voice was a mere whisper, but the timbre of it spoke deep inside me. Then she shook her head and glanced quickly away, nodding at her house, her throat working quickly. 'I'll be waiting at home for you, ok?'

She didn't wait for my response - just walked quickly away, leaving me and Reggie staring after her. Well I never. If I didn't know better, I would have been certain that Ms Erin Mason had been thinking lewd thoughts about her neighbour. But that was the problem ... I did know better.

'Come on, fella. Walk.'

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We were on the road by nine forty. Lunch packed into the boot of the car; Reggie safely tucked behind the grill separating him from the front; Erin seated and buckled next to me. I told her I wanted her to see Keswick first, as Derwentwater was a sight to behold first thing in the morning, although I really meant at sunrise, but this would have to do.

After parking near the Lakeside Theatre, we made our way around the lake. Not many people were there at this time of the morning, or this time of the year, for that matter. Greenness was poking its head through the backdrop of the lake, as spring had only just arrived, and England



was just growing again. Hills, hills, and more hills surrounded the tranquillity of the still water, and I enjoyed explaining the names to her. Castlerigg and Derwent fells straight ahead, and Borrowdale's mountains to the south; Newlands on the west; and Skiddaw, the fourth largest 'mountain' England had to offer, to the north.

She seemed as if she was interested in it all, so I continued to tell her about the five islands in the middle of the three-mile lake, and she grinned when I told her about the floating island as being the fifth one.

'You're pulling my leg,' and nudged me, making me nearly slip over in the goose crap that was round the edge. 'Hey ...' She lunged and grabbed my arm to pull me back, and I fell helplessly into her grip. It was so soft, yet not, and for a fleeting minute I didn't want to move. The smell of her filled my nostrils and I could feel my eyes fluttering closed. 'You ok?'

Fluttering over. I pulled back quickly, and tried to compose myself. When I turned to face her again, she was just staring at me, her arms hanging limply at her sides. There was an eerie stillness surrounding us, and I didn't want to be the one to break it. As soon as I turned away to face the lake again, she spoke.

'Fancy walking around it?' I turned to look at her, my face answering her with an expression that asked if she was mad. 'I would love to see it from the other side.'

'Yap!' Trust Reggie to agree to such a stupid idea. He'd agree to anything to get an extra long walk.

'It's quite a trek ... you're talking about at least seven miles around.' She looked disappointed, but come on. Do you know how many lakes there are in the Lake District? We would be half-dead by the time we had walked a fifth of them. So, I decided to compromise. 'Look. This one is one of the largest ... Tell you what. You pick a lake from the guidebook, and we'll walk round that one, ok?'

Silence, then a muffled ok. 'And if we walk all the way around this one, we won't get a chance to see the rest today.' Another muffled ok, as she fiddled with the cuffs to her coat. She looked up at me and attempted a smile, but I knew she really wanted to see the view from the other side. I sighed and rolled my eyes. 'What if we got into the car and drove to the other side of the lake? Then you could see it.' The smile grew a little bit more. 'On the way, we could stop at the Pencil Museum ...'

That did it. Her eyes lit up, and the grin was huge. 'What a good idea.' Sorted. I loved the Pencil Museum, and it was a case of any excuse to go. Would be nice to go with someone I liked too, as the previous times (yes - I've been more than once - sue me), I had gone alone. Yep. The little saddo in the corner, who wouldn't be out of place wearing a flasher mac.

So that's what we did. Went to the museum first, of course. It was on the way, after all. But it wasn't until we parked that I realised that Reggie would have to be left in the car, and there was no way I was going to let that happen. Even though the weather wasn't hot, I didn't like the

thought of him being stuck in there on his own, especially if the sun did come out even more. Erin was very understanding, and we continued to the other side of the lake. But the view was absolutely breathtaking. It seemed weird to be standing on the other side looking back on ourselves - or where we used to be. Now, if I wanted to get all philosophical ...

But now is not the time, is it? Therefore, I will continue ...

Just standing there with her seemed perfect. We didn't have to talk ... the silence seemed apt, somehow. Taking in the view of the lake, and the hills, I felt at peace for the first time in a very long time. Even Reggie was happily sniffing around a bush. A couple of swans were nearby, and I could see the makings of a nest. It was that time of year when things start to live again ... the earth takes stock from the winter months and begins to start afresh. Rebirth. That's the word. To break away from all the bleakness, and concentrate on the beginning of something wonderful, seemed like an idyllic time of year to me.

Swans are wonderful creatures. So committed to each other. A pang of longing raced through me as I realised this, and I turned to look at Erin. It came as no surprise to see her looking at me. I don't know why, it just didn't. A soft smile graced her mouth and I felt the pang of longing sweep right into my chest. At that moment I wished I was a swan ... wished I were one of the swans helping to build a nest, knowing that it was for all time ... for the rest of my life. To have that certainty - *that* knowledge that the one you were with would be with you forever, through thick and thin.

It was also at that precise moment that I realised the only thing holding me back from all this was myself. I had erected the walls; I was the one who locked all the doors and hid the keys. But what I couldn't quite remember was the reason why. I didn't want to hide away behind my own confines, but I didn't quite know how to take the bricks down either. In my head I wanted to speak to Erin, tell her everything, tell her who I was and who I wanted to be. Maybe that was the key? Maybe if I came clean I could shake off the shackles of guilt I had laboriously wrapped around myself until I felt so restricted I barely wanted to speak to another human being. However, now was not the time. And I believe that Erin was not the person I should be opening up to either. I had known her less than a week, and to tell her of my shady past would not be the wisest move I had ever made in my life. Why tell her anyway? It wasn't as if she was ever going to be my swan, was it?

'I love swans.' Short and to the point, but as she said it she wasn't looking at them. She was still looking at me. 'The way they mate for life ... makes me want that too.' But you have that, Erin. You have that. 'Imagine spending every day with the person you love the most in the world. Wouldn't that be perfect?' But you have that. Brian's coming tonight ... and then you can start your 'every days'.

Instead of saying that, I just nodded and looked back over the water. Both swans were busy with the nest, the cob bringing the material, whilst the pen assembled. Together they worked to start their life, to build their home ready for their offspring. A sad smile slipped on and off my face before I turned back to her. Her attention was fixed on the birds, fascinated at the wonder of nature. This was the time I had to really look at the woman standing in front of me. Standing

there with her hands in her pockets, most people would have thought she was relaxed, but I could tell by the hunch of her shoulders that something was bothering her. That ... and the crease between her eyebrows told me she was uneasy. What was she thinking that would make her look like that? I knew she was concentrating on the swans, but it seemed more than that. Not exactly unhappy, but not cheerful either.

Even though she was not smiling radiantly, or looking at peace, she was still beautiful. So bloody beautiful. Her long dark hair was swept back into a ponytail, and wisps had escaped confinement to dance upon her cheeks and throat. Blue eyes stared intently straight ahead of her, so fixed ... so blue ... so enchanting. For a brief moment I was thankful she wasn't looking at me that way, as I knew I would crumble under such scrutiny and bare all. Red, soft lips were parted as if she was about to speak, but they were silent. I wanted to feel how soft they really were; experience them as they took mine with hers and swallowed me whole.

'Steph?' The sound of her voice brought me back to the here and now, as it seemed the only thing I could hear. 'You ready?' Ready for what? 'Shall we?' Shall we what? God, I was so dim sometimes. 'Or would you rather stay here all day?' Ah. She wanted to go. Her face still seemed sad, and all I felt like doing was making her smile - anything to make her smile.

As I stepped forward, I had the sensation I was going back. Confusion was paramount in my mind, and there was nothing I could do to shake off the impression. Maybe because the feeling wasn't in my head, it was actually happening; I was going backwards. Frantically I stepped forward, but I felt my boot slip underneath me and myself falling towards the ground. All I could see was goopy mud racing towards my face, and the smell wasn't anything like wet soil. More like swan crap.

Splat. Face first. I knew I should never stand with my hands in my pockets, but I was distracted, ok? And by the time I had dragged them out, the only thing they were able to do was to slap helplessly at my sides as my face got the health spa treatment. One thing I was thankful for was that I had shut my mouth, as that would have made me gag even more than I was already doing. I lay there for what seemed like an age, but was in fact only seconds, allowing myself to come to terms with what had happened. But it was enough time for Reggie to think I was playing dead and he had to come and see if he could save me. Therefore, when I tried to get up, he was launching himself onto my back, which just made me slam back into the stinking mess in front of me.

Booted feet were next to me, and I could hear Erin trying to get Reggie from doing his 'let's save mamma' dance on my back. I could also hear her trying not to laugh, and I felt a flicker of annoyance that she would take great pleasure in my misfortune. It wasn't until I was able to turn myself over and look at her grinning face did I stop being irritated. The vision that greeted me actually stopped my heart in my chest. There she was, in all her beauty, looking down at me, her hand stretched out to help, with a smile that could rock the world. I had my wish. Well, one of them. I did say I would do anything to make her smile ... even if it meant me landing face first in a swan's bathroom.

'You ... ok?' I knew she was trying not to laugh, but the words came out stuttered and strained.

'Take ... my ... hand.' Do you know she didn't blink as I lifted my crap-filled hand and slapped it right into hers? Even when I purposely rubbed as much of the poop off it and onto her palm? No. She gripped me and pulled me to my feet, and in that movement she also swept me off them. Metaphorically speaking, of course.

Once on my feet, I looked down at myself. I was covered from the waist up, and God only knew what my face looked like, as I could feel the formerly *wet* mess beginning to stiffen. She was still holding onto my hand, and I surreptitiously wanted to keep on holding it, but I knew I was just eking out the inevitable.

I looked her right in the eyes, blue eyes that were open and expectant. Initially, I thought she might be waiting for me to go ape shit - or swan shit, but I didn't feel angry at all. I felt so bloody happy. I know. Falling into a pile of poop is not what most people think of liberating, but to me it was. Because she smiled, you see? I had made her smile. Well, not me, as such ... my situation. I could've been pissed off that she was laughing at my misfortune, but I took this as a sign. I had wanted something, and the world had conspired to help me achieve it.

Now, if I really put my mind to it, maybe she ...

'You stink.' Maybe not. 'Have you got a wet one?' A wet what? And wasn't that a loaded and ambiguous question? 'Or we could get you somewhere so you could wipe ... erm ... wash it off.'

So, that was the morning. Me covered in swan doings and scrubbing myself clean in the nearest public convenience. As I stood there, my jacket in the sink and soapsuds up my arms, I couldn't help just stopping to relive the moment when she smiled at me. And you know what? It was all worth it, and I had to stop myself from writing it on the toilet doors.

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We stopped for lunch at Buttermere. Now, there's a view, but I won't bore you with details, as I know you are more interested in the woman I was eating a packed lunch with. So was I, for that matter. All of God's creation paled in comparison to her. Even Reggie decided he wouldn't chase the ducks, as he would rather sit and stare adoringly at Erin. Don't blame him in the slightest. Erin was definitely more exciting than ducks.

Over lunch, I remembered to ask her the thing I had been thinking about. Where on earth did I know her accent from? Every time she spoke, I thought about doing it, but one thing or another had happened. I didn't even think to ask her when I had dinner at her place. Makes me wonder what we actually spoke about. In my limited experience of accents, I had presumed she came from near where I had originated. Disley had been mentioned, and that was on the outer fringes of Cheshire, but that wasn't it. Her voice had more of a lilt to it, more singy songy, if that's even a phrase. Slight, but there, if you know what I mean.

Ireland. That was it. She was Irish ... well she wasn't actually. Or was she? God. I have the ability to confuse myself, and every one right along with me. As we were eating, she told me she had been born in Ireland, but her family had moved to Manchester when she was nine, as her

father got a managerial job in some kind of publishing place. This was the perfect opportunity to ask her about her books, but like a chicken, I clucked, and didn't. Don't know why. That should have been something I should've commented on right away, but it would've given away the fact I had been rooting through her bookshelves. I couldn't understand why she never mentioned it, either. Therefore, the mystery continues ... well, until I grew a spine.

After lunch, I thought it apt to leave looking at lakes for a while and take Erin to see Ambleside. Yep. The glitzy place where my ex neighbours had bugged off to. Ambleside is a gorgeous little place just above Windermere ... to sum it all up in a nutshell ... picture-bloody-sque. The main thing I wanted her to see was the Bridge House. It was so cute, in a crookedy, fairytale way. The structure consisted of two rooms, one above the other, and actually straddled Stock Beck. I felt like the ultimate tour guide as I explained the reason was to avoid land tax, and that it used to be an apple store for Ambleside Hall.

'You wouldn't believe that a family used to live in there, would you?'

Erin turned to face me, and I could tell she didn't believe a word of it. I nodded and tried to look intelligent, as if I really knew what I was talking about.

'Is that the same as the floating island?'

A grin split my face in two, but that's the problem. I was actually telling the truth - on both counts, however hard to believe they sounded. And the worst thing is, when this happens it is difficult to appear like you are not lying.

'Trust me.'

Erin's eyebrow rose until it was nearly in her fringe, and her lip curled up slightly adding to the picture of not believing a thing I said.

'Check out the local history.'

'Under gullible?'

'Ok. Don't.'

Neither of us were arsey, although it may seem like it. There was a friendly banter between us that usually comes along when you've known someone for a very long time. I hadn't even known her for a full seven days yet, but that didn't stop us standing close together and looking at the architectural marvel standing in front of us. The twisted outline was weirdly comforting. It felt as if I had been transported into one of Grimm's fairytales, and I was standing next to the fair maiden. Did that make me Prince Charming? Or was I the ogre that usually hid underneath the bridge? I was hoping for the former, but sometimes I knew for definite that I would have the personality of the evil stumpy creature who lived off young virgins. My past paid claim to that.

When that thought popped into my head I felt the smile slide. A memory so strong of the woman

crying on the sofa in her house flooded and consumed me. And there was I, Miss Ogre, pushing for answers, pushing for the truth. Then his voice, 'What do I tell the kids?'

'Hey. You all right?' Her voice was soft, her breath was on my cheek, and I knew that if I looked at her right at this very minute she would see it all, as if she could read my mind. I also knew that if I turned to face her, she would see the tears waiting to spill over and race for safety. A lump had formed in my throat, and it wasn't just for the death of that poor woman. It was the shame I felt; the shame I felt at being part of the consequences that led to it. Therefore, answering her seemed difficult ... well, words, that is. I had to rid the lump, get rid of it, but that is easier said than done, isn't it? When you get a lump the size of a grapefruit jamming in your throat, wishing it away was never the answer.

She didn't say anything else. But after a little while, I felt her hand curl around my arm and her fingers squeeze in comfort. That should have made me feel worse, even help to release the lump into a bout of crying, but it didn't. I felt the lump decrease in size and sink back down into my chest, where from there it dissipated into nothingness. Just her touch had done that ... just a hand on my arm in reassurance had eased the pain. Why? Why her? Why couldn't it have been from someone who could be with me? Could be mine?

Shaking my head, I turned to face her. There was a sympathy there that I honestly could equate to empathy. But there was no way this woman standing in front of me had ever done the things I had. Erin was the kind of person who people aspire to; she didn't force others to lay their worst nightmares out in the open.

Swallowing a few times, I enabled myself to form the words, 'Wordsworth's Cottage is not far,' and then dragged a smile up from deep within.

She digested the information before smiling in return. 'Another day, perhaps?' I was going to ask why not today, but she nodded her head to the ground. Reggie was staring up at me in the way that dogs do when they want to say you are their world. Bless him. 'That gives me another excuse to get you to myself again.'

What a funny choice of words. I mean, why on earth would she want to get me on my own? Did she mean like a girls day out when the man in her life was here? But whilst these questions were buzzing through my head, I didn't miss the faint hue of a blush scoot up from the base of her throat and settle around her cheeks. This was the time ... this was my chance to ask about Brian. Ask why she was with him when ... when what? When she blushes because she thinks you might have got the wrong end of the stick? That stick always gets a mention, doesn't it? I mean, what a life to lead. Always being referred to in a bad way. Either someone is holding you at the wrong end, you are a shitty stick that would only poke hateful people, or even you could be given or even receiving the said stick - both of which sound painful.

And yes. I am delaying. A good tactic for when you don't know what to do or say next. Therefore, sticks do have their uses after all ...

But time does not stop when you want it to. Nope. It continues to burr and fizzle, and then it

becomes and awkward moment. That is one thing I did not want to happen. Up to now, silent times between Erin and I were just that - silent times. Not a big deal. Nothing to get my knickers in a twist about. Just because she had mentioned that she wanted to get me on my own again, and the fact she had a fella, shouldn't be an excuse for me to get all pious ... or to waffle on endlessly about sticks and their uses.

'How about we go to Windermere?' There. That was better. I can move on when I put my mind to it. Not the most noteworthy comeback, but a comeback nevertheless. Her face said nothing, and neither did her mouth. 'Or ...' She went to speak, and I stopped, and so did she. 'Or ... we could ...' I waited for an idea, or her to stop me and say Windermere would be fine, but neither were racing to get into pole position. 'Do you like sugar?'

Priceless. That was the expression on her face. Priceless. Me going from sticky moment to sweetness in the blink of a sloth's eye - seamless, even.

'Sugar?'

It was for the first time in a while that I could actually give a true smile. 'Yes. Sugar.' I held my hand out towards her, and took her fingers in mine. Then with a gentle pull, I began to walk away, leading her with me. 'If you like sugar ... you are going to love this.'

Oh. I surprise myself sometimes on my way with the ladies. So slick ... so charming ... and so bloody naff. But, like a lamb, she followed. And so did Reggie. He loved sugar nearly as much as he loved me, but definitely less than he loved beef.

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Kendal Mint Cake. If you ever try it, make sure you are ready to have so much energy you could run the marathon. The slogan on the packet is that mint cake went up Everest with Sir Edmund Hilary and Sirdar Tensing in 1953, who both enjoyed a chunk when sitting on the summit. I'm surprised they didn't run down. I mean, all it is made from is sugar, glucose and water - then peppermint oil. It should just say on the packet 'If you need a sugar rush - look no further. Guaranteed to make you high as a kite or your money back'.

And that's what I gave her. No, not her money back. A sugar rush. And I did it in style too ... took her to Kendal to buy it. No expense spared. I couldn't believe she had never tried it before ... and I couldn't believe she had more than one piece ... or two ... and when she got to the third bit, I could feel my stomach churning and my fillings begin to ache. Even Reggie stopped begging after one chunk, and my dog was a scrounger. He spent the rest of the time trying to dislodge his piece from the roof of his mouth.

'Good stuff.' I grimaced at her. Couldn't help it. Just the thought of all that sugar fighting to hit every nerve ending in her body, made me shudder. 'Very moreish.' Then ate another piece. It was fascinating to watch, especially when I saw her eyes begin to widen, as they tend to do when the body is bombarded with a stimulant. She lifted yet another chunk in front of her eyes, and gazed adoringly at it.

'White-handed mistress, one sweet word with thee ... honey, milk and sugar, there is three.' Fuck me. She was quoting Shakespeare at it. I had to do something before she ate the whole bar.

Carefully, and hopefully without causing offence, I folded the top over the packet and slipped it in my pocket. Erin didn't seem to notice, as her attention was focused, or should I say unfocused, on everything going on around us, her mouth moving in fixed pleasure. Then her knee started bouncing, her foot tapping on the floor in an unsteady rhythm. It was a definite high ... if this bar can help men climb Everest, I'm sure to God it can make someone itchy to do something a little more exciting than sitting on a wall in Kendal Market.

Her head snapped round, and I felt the intensity of her gaze. 'I need to walk.' I bet you do. She leaned closer, her breath on my face, and all I could smell was mint. She repeated, 'I need to walk ...' as I said, well, not out loud, I bet you do. But I couldn't say anything. Having her so close, close enough to feel the soft warm air leaving her body to seep into mine, was enough to freeze me to the spot. 'You said we could walk around a lake.' Trust me, and my ability to be a twat. 'Which one's the biggest?' If she thought I was trailing my butt around Lake Windermere this late in the afternoon, she could think again. 'Windermere?' As if! Windermere was at least eleven miles long, and a full circuit would be ... I'm not even going there.

'Erm.' Good answer, Stevenson. 'Erm.' Yet again, bravo. 'Windermere is ... erm ...' the ability to think was marred by her face. She was still so bloody close, and by the looks of it, hanging onto every word I was trying to say. I couldn't tell her it was too big, as that would only incite her more. 'Windermere. Well ... erm ... we could get around it ok, but Reggie would have difficulty.' I heard him harrumph at my feet. Trust my dog to try and drop me in the shit. Again. 'What about Lake Coniston?'

'Is it big?'

I nodded, and that seemed to placate her for the minute. I knew that by that time we actually got there, the effects from eating too much sugar would have lessened, and she would probably feel like curling up and going to sleep. Good plan. A better plan, especially if the other plan involved me fighting to keep up as we power walked around Lake Windermere.

'Let's go then.' And she was off, marching ahead like she was in the lead of the Racewalking team at the Olympics. Honestly. Both Reggie and I had to run to keep up with her. I may have been a little shorter than her in the leg department, but this was ridiculous.

By the time we reached the car, I was out of breath. She, on the other hand, hadn't even broken a sweat. It was at this point that I wished I were wearing a tracksuit.

We were only in the car for less than forty minutes, and all the time she was fidgeting about like she had ants crawling around her underwear. Lucky buggers. From the corner of my eye, I could see the longing on her face as we passed through Windermere. The vastness of the lake stood out above everything else, and sailing boats peppered the water. At one point I thought she was going to ask me to pull over so she could run around it, but she didn't.



By the time we arrived at Coniston, my prediction had come into fruition. Erin was relaxed and leaning back into the seat. I couldn't help but give myself a self-satisfied grin that definitely bordered on smugness. Even her eyes were beginning to close ... result. It was only at the sound of the handbrake clicking into place, did her eyes pop open, and for a split second, I wished I hadn't disturbed her. I wanted to see what she looked like asleep. Ok. Not the most normal thing I have ever wanted, but you see, there would not be another opportunity for me to see what she would look like when she was totally relaxed. Quite perverse, if you think about it. Watching someone sleep, especially when that person would never be sleeping next to you in the full sense of the phrase.

'You ok?' I tried to make my voice soft, as I know what it feels like when someone wakes you up and talks at a volume that could make your ears bleed.

At this, she stretched back exposing a taut stomach, and momentarily I had an overwhelming urge to trace my fingers along it. It wasn't until I noticed that I had stretched out my hand that I stopped myself. The worse thing was that Erin was in mid yawn by this point, and stopped. Looked at my traitorous hand. Then looked at me. Caught red handed, or stretched handed, as this case may be.

'Thought you had a bug on you.' In March? 'Was going to flick it off.' Her hands were half way down again, but suspended in mid air, her eyes looking to her belly expecting to see a huge arachnid happily dancing on her skin.

'*ARGH!* Get it off! *Get it off!*' Get what off? I was lying. But the reaction she gave me said otherwise, and then I expected to see a huge arachnid with fangs and 'LOVE' and 'HATE' tattooed down each leg. Therefore, I joined her in the screaming, flaying my arms about and slapping haphazardly at her, an action she copied with abandon. Reggie was by this time going crackers in the back, thinking he had to save his mamma and the lady who gave him beef. This was getting us nowhere. The more frantic she became, the more I hit her ... the more I hit her, the more frantic she became. Then it dawned on me.

'Stop!' One word. And it worked. She stopped, and I stopped too. 'Let me see.' Now this is the bit I have been leading up to. The bit where I could use both my hands on Erin Mason. The bit where I could stroke all over her beautifully flawless skin. The bit where I could feel the smoothness, experience what it would be like to have this woman underneath my touch. She just sat there, her breathing heavy and laboured, but totally trusting me to take care of her and capture the deadly creature that had made up home in her naval. Then I spotted it. Spotted the thing she must have seen when I mentioned bug. A piece of fluff from her sweater had stuck to her skin, and it did, at first glance, resemble something you wouldn't be too happy crawling about on you.

'Here it is.' I tried to be cajoling, but when I lifted the piece of fluff up she screamed again. So I dropped it. Well, you would, wouldn't you? Big mistake. As I leaned down to get it again, and then show her it was nothing more than wool, she lifted her knee up and smacked me right in the jaw, knocking me backwards until the side window stopped me going any further.

'Jesus!' Talk about a wake up call. That's the last time I try to grab an eyeful off some half-asleep woman. My jaw felt as if it had been disjointed, and the back of my head must have had a lump the size of a golf ball nesting in it. She was over to my side of the car in a flash, the dangers of the 'fluff' a memory.

'Steph. God. I'm so sorry.' Her hands came out and cupped my face, and the pain shot up the side, making my ears ache. But I didn't care. The touch of those hands ... I can't describe it. And the position she was in, it looked as if she was just about to kiss me. Imagine it. There she was, leaning over the car, kneeling even, her hands on my face, her face so close to mine, concern flooding. Her thumbs started stroking the sides, and I felt a warmth seep and trickle down the length of my body. Apart from the quickly diminishing pain, this was heaven. 'You're bleeding.' I didn't care. I would give up more than blood for her to continue the stroking. 'Your lip. It's bleeding.' Ah well. I have two. Her finger grazed over my lip, and it was so intimate. So bloody intimate. I wanted to part my lips and capture that lone digit inside my mouth and suck. 'See?'

Blood, red and rich and mine, coated her finger. But it was only blood. Life was too short to worry about such things, wasn't it? I just wanted to stay here and allow her to take care of me. But I couldn't do that, could I? Pretend I needed to be molly coddled because I was bleeding? Damn right I could. This felt so right ... so absolutely right. Me laying back and her leaning over me, holding my face, brushing her fingers over the now tingling lips. Even the pain in my jaw had subsided ... well, until I tried to give a contented smile that is.

Crack. Firmly and surely put back into place. '*Fuck.*' The only verb I could muster, well, the only one *after* the initial crunching of my face locking back into shape. Involuntarily, my hand came up to rub the spot, and in the process, it knocked hers away. Instantly, I missed it. I wanted to grab hold of her hand and put it back, allow it to continue its ministrations. But it was too late. So, I did the only thing I could think of doing. I grinned at her, but she just looked concerned. I grinned wider, trying to make her see I was fine now that I had rubbed the spot. I was too. Until I got blood on my hand. My eyes grew wide, and I knew if I kept on staring at it, I would flake out. Therefore, it was only natural to act butch and wipe it down the side of my jeans, and in my head I was manlier than John Wayne. I'm surprised I didn't whip a pencil from my pocket and start sharpening it with a knife.

'Ready?' Was that my voice? That deep and masculine throb? 'Want to see the lake?' Erin just looked startled, as if she had only now realised she was sat in the car with The Duke. If I had ended the question with 'A man ought to do what he thinks is right' it wouldn't have looked out of place. But in fact it was more of a 'Life is tough, but it's tougher when you're stupid,' and I was definitely stupid. Believe me. If I hadn't been so stupid, I would have still been laying there with a gorgeous woman stroking my face.

A gorgeous *straight* woman.

Inwardly, I sighed. This was not getting any easier. The more time I spent getting to know her, the more I wanted to get to know her better. All this time I had avoided getting involved with anyone, and now I felt I was drowning. I didn't have a chance in hell. Not ... a ... chance. Even if she wasn't involved with a man, she was just too damned perfect to want a reject like me,

however manly I could speak.

All the time I had been thinking, she hadn't said a word. She just looked at me, firstly with surprise, and then with something that bordered on questioning. But I wasn't in the mood to answer any questions that she may have thought up. I just wanted to get the day over and done with before I made a bigger fool of myself than I had already. It was only the matter of a couple of hours before I dropped her off, packed the car up, and fled to Manchester. Then all she would have to do was shower and change, and then wait for Mr Right to come knocking, shouting through the letterbox, 'To infinity and beyond!' I know. I'm being a bitch. He had done nothing wrong, just had what I wanted, that's all. And it was only a couple more hours of pretending that everything was perfect. I could manage it. Just.

I sat up straight and tried to arrange myself into some kind of order. Silence sliced through the air and hurt, but it seemed hard to break, like I couldn't, or shouldn't be the first one to do it. Even Reggie was quiet, and that was a miracle in itself.

'Fancy a quick one?' Excuse me? Did I hear that right? 'Not all the way, though.' A pause, for her or my benefit, I'm not too sure. 'I think the sugar has worn off.' My head snapped around to look at her, the pain in the back of my head making a brief appearance, but enough to make me utter a slight groan. 'Look. You're in pain.' Her hand came forward, stopped, and then continued until it had clasped my limp one. 'We could just go home.' I was still thinking about fancying a quick one, obviously, although I knew she meant a walk around the lake. I looked down at her fingers, which were holding and stroking mine. I think it was a nervous reaction or something, as there was no way she was thinking what I wanted her to think. Unfortunately. And on that note, I slipped my hand away from hers. No point prolonging the agony of unrequited feelings, was there?

A sigh slipped out and met the air. It was from me, in case you were wondering. I couldn't contain it ... just popped out before I had the chance to stop it ... something like a pressure valve on a steamer. It seemed as if I was always sighing when I was around her ... I just hoped she didn't think I had breathing problems to add to everything else. Silence yawned once again, and at the same time I heard Erin join it. I wanted to just say something light, something about the area, something that could be anything. But I didn't have to, as Erin decided she would be the one to break the quietness.

'Is this where Donald Campbell broke the water speed record?' For a minute, I couldn't even remember who the hell Donald Campbell was. I was too busy thinking of something to say, and my brain was acting like a fucked up smack head. 'He died here, didn't he?' *That* Donald Campbell. Information charged into my thick skull, and started to pour out and generate the senses inside until I could move my mouth and relay all kinds of useless tat.

As I was doing it, I unbuckled my seatbelt and climbed out of the car. Then walked around the back, still yammering on about the events in 1967. She followed me. Seatbelt off, out of the car, around to where Reggie was standing with his face mashed against the rear view window. It wasn't until I paused for breath did she speak again.

'You are so intelligent, Steph.' Good job I was bending down, as the blush I sported was glowing. I would've preferred to be called gorgeous, sexy, and even a charmer, but at least she had thought enough to actually say something complimentary. The blush deepened at the thought, and I knew if she saw it, I could guarantee it would be worse still. 'You know so much.'

I kept my head facing the ground, and fiddled with Reggie's harness and lead. 'Part of my job to know the area, that's all.'

'No. It's more than that. You have a real interest for things that go on around you.' She gave a small sharp laugh. 'And from my experience with the media, most reporters are more interested in digging up the dirt and making people's lives a misery.'

Snap. My head was up and I was staring right at her.

'What do you mean by that?' Cold and matter of fact.

'Nothing. I was just ...' I didn't give her time to finish. Turning sharply, I tugged on Reggie's lead to make him hurry along. All I wanted to do was run and hide my shame away, because just in that short intercourse, I felt more exposed than I had in a very long time.

'Steph?' I was putting distance between us, and for the life of me I couldn't honestly say the reason why. She had only been making a point ... how was she to know what I'd got up to in Manchester. It wasn't as if I had continued being the hardhearted cow I once was. Or had I? Four years and I'd let no one get close to me, always fobbed them off with one excuse or another. Until now, that is. And it hurt. I hurt. But it wasn't her fault; it was mine.

I stopped near the John Ruskin Museum and waited for her to catch up. When she did, I just nodded to the entrance and said, 'Another day?' I knew she had been expecting me to continue being a twat ... and I surprised myself at breaking my habit, especially making arrangements to see her alone again. 'We could do it after we visit Dove Cottage - the Wordsworth place, if you want?'

Erin gazed at me for what appeared to be ages, but in fact was the matter of seconds. Her face showed confusion, but then it broke open into the most gorgeous smile I had ever seen.

'I would love that.'

And so would I, Erin. So would I.

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## *Chapter Ten*

We didn't stay long at the lake, as I still had to drive to Manchester. Erin rattled on about how sad it was that I couldn't delay my journey for an hour or so, because she so desperately wanted

me to meet Brian, and everyone else who was coming up. I assured her that I would be home the following afternoon. I can't give you much more detail, as, to be honest, my mind was elsewhere. All I can tell you is that her voice was musical, and the name Brian popped up too many fucking times.

It was with a mix of sadness and relief when I saw the entrance to the lane where we both lived. Sad because I didn't want the day to end ... didn't want to relinquish her to the arms of another. Relief because I knew if I stayed with her much longer I would blurt out that Brian was a twat, and I couldn't bear the pain of being with someone who didn't want me the way I wanted them. Weird, I know. We barely knew each other; yet, I felt I had known her all my life.

Therefore, it was with forced indifference that I bade her farewell with the promise of calling around to her place the following day. Just as I was about to turn and leave, I heard her say my name softly. Facing her, I saw her expression was soft and beautiful, and before I knew what was happening, she held me in a tight hug.

'Thank you so much for today, Steph. It meant so much to me.' Her arms were gripping me tightly, and I couldn't help but pull her closer, and into me. The scent of her overwhelmed and begged me to remember it, as if I ever could forget. 'And don't forget ...' so gentle 'you promised me another tour.' Yes I did. And for a split second, everything seemed perfect. 'Reggie could stay with Brian.' The split second was over, and I felt tightness in my gut that threatened to flood up my throat and throw itself all over the ground.

It surprised me how calm my voice sounded. 'He would love that.' As if? If there was one thing I didn't want my dog doing was like being with the man who shattered any chance I ever had with Erin. Even if I had to train him to attack at the sound of his name. Nevertheless, just like the feeling of perfection, my feeling of revenge was just as short. If it wasn't Brian, it would be some other bloke ... and I couldn't train Reggie to attack at the sound of all the male names in the world. She was straight - a fact that however much I disliked it, it didn't make it less true.

Sadly, I knew this was my time to say goodbye. Again. Erin turned to go, but stopped, turned back, and kissed me gently on the cheek. She was gone by the time I had gotten over the surprise, my hand slowly stroking my cheek and inwardly vowing never to wash again.

It was a battle. Yep. Definitely that. A battle between my heart and my head. My heart was telling me that I should keep hope alive, whilst my head was reprimanding me and booming out 'Get a grip! She will never want you!' Like all the battles that raged within me, once again my head won out. Sometimes I wished it would just chill, even for a few minutes, so I could at least dream.

With a sigh, I knew it was time to get going. I had to pack and get the house in order before I left. Not that there was much to do; just an overnight bag and checking everything was unplugged and locked up. And call my parents to tell them I was coming ... something I should have really done in the week, but never got around to it. I think deep down I was hoping that Erin would tell me that Brian wasn't coming after all, and therefore I didn't have to run off into the sunset, dodging the tail weaving in and out of my legs. But. I wasn't so lucky.

Five-thirty saw me throwing my bag into the boot of my car only to stare toward her house. Inside I was in two minds whether to go and say goodbye, but in the end, I decided not to. Head won again, but not because my negotiations in the battle stations I called my head and heart had come to some kind of resolution. Nope. It was the fuck off huge Land Rover I saw turning into the top of the lane that prompted me. Driven by Buzz Lightyear, of all people.

Time to go. And I did. I was out of the lane by the time he had craply reversed his weapon of moss destruction at the base of her driveway.

'Want to go and see Nanna and Grandad, fella?'

'Yap!'

At least I had Reggie. Then it hit me. The smell of a minty fart, that is. I was in for a good journey, by the looks of things. Could my day get any worse?

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Yes.

The journey was a nightmare from start to finish. I had definitely set off at the wrong time, as everyone, their dog, and guinea pig, had decided five thirty was a fantastic time to set off to Manchester Being stuck in the car with Mr Mint Imperial himself, wasn't fun either.

By the time I reached my parents, I was fraught to say the least. Thankfully, my sisters hadn't arrived, so at least I had the chance relax for a good twenty minutes. It was such a good feeling though, as my mum opened the front door and threw her arms around my neck. It always amazes me that whatever happens in life, going home to see your parents always gives you a sense of safety. Well, for me anyway. I always felt, and still do, as if the outside world couldn't affect or hurt me in any way as soon as the door closed behind to lock, and block, it all out.

My dad was still the same. I say that as if I hadn't seen him for years, but in reality it had only been a couple of months. There he was, sitting in front of the tv and arguing with the newscaster. When I was a kid that used to wind me up, but now it made everything just feel right. I had been there a good five minutes before he stopped ranting for long enough to notice I was there. Then he struggled to his feet, as his slipper had decided to attack his trouser leg.

'Hello, sweetheart.' When he hugged me, he did the thing he knew I hated. Rubbed his stubble all over my face, and then laughed like a maniac. Git. But a nice git, if you know what I mean. 'Where's your mother?' I started laughing and he looked at me quizzically. 'What?'

'You always say the same thing.' I hugged him close to me again, and then looked at his confused face. 'Where's your mother? Every time. Did you think she ran off with the buck toothed milkman again?'

He laughed aloud. 'Wouldn't put it past her.' Then he stopped, looked over my shoulder, and then back at me. 'Where is she?'

For as long as I could remember, every time my dad couldn't see my mother, or hear her, he would shout her name or ask us where she was. The standing joke was that she had run off either with the coalman or the milkman, both of which had bucked teeth and frizzy hair. They didn't, in case you were wondering. Their teeth were average, and if my memory serves me rightly - the milkman was bald. And we hadn't had a coalman for over thirty years, so maybe he was bald too. But that didn't stop us saying it. Families are weird, but I wouldn't change mine for the world - even all the tea in China.

'She's making a brew.' At this, his face lit up. Not because he was going to get a cup of tea, but the knowledge that she was there. To have a love like that, eh? They had been married for over forty years and his face still lit up when he thought of her. For a fleeting moment, I thought of Erin. Did she think of Brian like that? More to the point, did he think of her like that? I hoped so. I know you think I'm lying, but deep down, all I wanted was the best for her, even if it was with someone other than me.

'Tea's ready!' My mum's voice drifted through to the living room, and my dad tapped me on the arm before scuttling off to the kitchen, leaving me standing there in contemplation. All that was in my mind was Erin's face - so happy - so contented - so not mine. With a sad smile of defeat, I followed in the footsteps of my father, and went to the kitchen.

I was only half way through a cuppa when the brood arrived, and then all hell broke loose. It was good to see them, and for a little while I forgot about how shitty I had been feeling. The name Brian started to ease from my mind, and even the image of him in his Star Command vehicle had lessened. However hard I tried, the image of Erin was still there though, throbbing uncontrollably in the background.

My sisters, their husbands, and all their kids (which actually only amounted to four spawns) had turned out to see me, and in a comforting way, that made me feel special. They had given up their Friday night at short notice and come over. My parents' house was not big, by any stretch of the imagination, and to have seven adults and four kids there, it was positively cramped. Reggie was in his element, as the kids wanted to play ball with him - a game that ended up being shifted outside, as there was no room for his racing about. Thankfully, he had stopped farting as we hit Cheadle, so that was a blessing. For all of us.

Over the course of the evening, the topic drifted onto my new neighbour. My eldest sister, Anna, decided it was a good idea to tease me, for some reason or another. Turning to her husband, the bloke who could barely string a sentence together, she nudged him. 'Looks like Steph won't be single much longer.' It was supposed to be a joke, I know that. But when the joke hurts, that's taking it too far, isn't it? But then again, how was she supposed to know? She wasn't. Nevertheless, I wasn't in the mood for 'Let's torment the crap out of Steph,' and proved as such by standing up sharply, knocking the tea things off the table, before storming out and up to my room.

I could hear her asking 'What did I say?' before I heard Julia tell her to put a sock in it. Ju, as I called her, was the middle sister of the three of us, and we had always been closer to each other, both in age and temperament. If Ju would have said the same thing, I think my reaction would have been different - who knows. All I did know was by the time she knocked on my bedroom door, I was already half changed to go out. I had decided that I needed a trip to Manchester ... to the village, of all places. In my fucked up little head I truly believe that all I needed was a good fu ...

'Can I come in?' I glared towards the now open door, and into the face of my sister, who was peeping around it.

'No one's stopping you.' Then I turned back to sorting out my top.

I heard her come in, stand behind me, then finally settle on the bed. She waited until I had finished getting dressed before she spoke.

'What's going on, Steph?' I didn't answer. There wasn't anything going on. I just wanted to go out. Not a crime now, is it? 'Why did you fly off the handle like that?'

Yes. Why did you?

I ignored the question. Both hers and mine

'Is it your neighbour? Erin?' At the sound of her name, I whirled around and glared at Ju. 'Ah. I see.'

'There's nothing to see. She's with someone.' Ju went to speak again, but I cut her off. 'A man. She's straight.' I saw the realisation dawn on her face, and her expression turn into that kind where the person is just about to come out with something profound like the 'plenty of fish and sea' scenario. But I didn't want any other fish. I didn't like fishing. I wanted that one ... the one I didn't have the tackle for. At the thought of that, I laughed, short and sharp. Trust me to make a pun out of wanting someone and not having the right tackle. How ironic.

Turning back to the mirror, I applied some lipstick and smacked my lips together in an attempt to finalise my thoughts. But Ju was having none of it. I felt her get up off the bed and stand behind me, her green eyes peeking over my shoulder to look at me through my reflection. She didn't say anything, just watched me pick up my mascara. Then as I was trying to put it on, her voice came low and even.

'Weird.' I stopped, and waited for her to continue. However, she stayed silent until I attempted to put the crap on again. 'Weird.' This time I glared at her.

'What's weird?' But she shrugged and watched me slam the brush back into the tube, only to pull it out and hover it in front of my face, all the while expecting her to say something. But nothing. Well, until I brushed the make-up over the other set of eyelashes.



'Weird.'

'Look. You are getting on my tits. What's weird?'

Ju shrugged and sighed. 'Just ... nah ... you wouldn't be interested.' I turned to face her, and I could feel she was holding something from me - something important, maybe something that would affect the rest of my life.

'Believe me. You have my undivided attention.' She sighed again and turned to go. 'Tell.'

Ju walked over to the bed and sat down. Her body language sent my defences into overdrive and I had to know what was going on in her head. I waited. She stayed mute. I waited some more, and then the waiting began to get on my nerves. 'Come on, sis. I'm sorry for being a pain.' I tried the puppy dog eyes, and it was a matter of mere seconds before she crumpled.

'I was just thinking.' Yes. What? Tell. 'That isn't it strange.' What's strange? Life? Love? Expectation? World Peace? 'That it is impossible ...' Women are impossible - especially when they dragged things out until you could rattle each letter from between their teeth. 'To apply mascara with your mouth shut.'

What? Is this some kind of dementia? Was my sister finally losing the plot? Then I saw the smile creeping up from the corners of her mouth, and I knew she had me.

'You git.' The smile broke loose, not only from her, but from me too. Then an all out laugh. I couldn't help myself. Not the laughing, the launching myself at her, and pinning her to the bed. 'Why you little ...'

Ju was laughing unrestrained now, and it felt good. I had my fingers jabbing in her sides, and she was laughing hard and stupidly, and I knew if I continued I could make her pee her pants, just like I did when we were kids.

Then it hit me. I felt good, not just 'it'. Felt good to just enjoy the moment. Life was too bloody short to be so up myself all of the time. And I had been up myself ... angry ... doleful ... down right twattish ... for far too long. At that split second I seemed to take notice of myself, of how I had been acting, and not just over the course of the last half an hour. Initially I felt a twinge of disappointment at myself, but then I realised that I could change my life ... change my outlook ... change my future. It was almost a fucked up version of A Christmas Carol, without the spirits and clanking chains. It occurred to me that even though I couldn't have Erin, meeting her was still the best thing to happen to me for so bloody long. Through her, I realised that I could actually feel again ... hope again ... learn to trust, and hopefully be able to love.

'You're a good person, Steph.' Ju's voice crept up and into my consciousness. It startled me for a second, as I had forgotten that I was straddled over my sister and in the middle of trying to get her to piss herself. Looking down into her face, I saw honesty and sincerity. I knew my face was begging her to continue, but my voice had decided it was off duty. 'Don't ever forget that.' I think I had, through it all, I mean. Well, you would, wouldn't you? Every day, all I did was beat myself

up about things in my past I had no control over here in the present. All I ever saw was the person whom I disliked, and I never gave myself a chance to make it up to anyone, not even myself. I'd been in hiding. Not only from the man who lost his wife, but from myself too. To sum up, I had been living a very solitary existence, not a life, a mere breathing in and out. It was fear more than anything. Being attached, or involved with living, meant to take responsibility for whom I was and who I could be.

'Do you love her?'

A simple question. A stupid question. How on earth could I be in love with someone I had only known for a week? And I was just about to tell Ju so, and then stopped. Did I love her? Nah. I was infatuated, true. But love? I barely knew her. And she had someone else in her life.

But does that necessarily make a difference? Do we choose not to love, or be loved, depending on time and circumstances? Is it within our power to select when and with whom? We can try, but love is a fickle player and doesn't always act as rationally as we would wish.

I slumped back and released Ju from underneath me, slipping off her body to sit next to her on the bed. Hanging my head forward, I slipped my hands into my hair and gripped. I felt her shift and sit up, and then I knew she was waiting for me to answer. But I couldn't. In all truthfulness, I couldn't. It would have been easy to just say no and leave it at that, but ... the word jammed and throbbed and acted like a cat in the proverbial pillowcase in my throat. It would be like dismissing all the emotions I had been experiencing since I first saw Erin. And to me, that seemed as if I was going backwards instead of onwards and upwards. If this wasn't love, then what was it? A crush? A stab at life again ... a dream that I could be the person she had shown me I could be?

So I answered the only way I knew how.

'I don't know.' Not original. Not the answer to the meaning of life, but at least it was sound in the air. I turned to face my sister, allowing my hands to stop their search in my hair and flop down onto my thighs. 'Honestly, Ju. I don't know.'

She reached over and placed her hand over one of mine. 'Steph.' By the tone of her voice, I knew she wanted to discuss it further. But what could I say? A voice inside me told me to open up - tell her - but for the life of me, I didn't know what to say. I wanted to bare all, but how? There was nothing to tell, was there? I know it's all confusing. I know my story is all over the place, but that is exactly how I was feeling. At that moment, I didn't know my arse from my elbow; or my elbow from any other part of my anatomy.

'Life has a funny way of telling us we are still part of the race.' She gripped my fingers tighter, and I could feel tears collecting, waiting to be unleashed. 'Maybe Erin was sent as a reminder that you have so much to give ... you know, like a miracle.' A miracle. She was too ... the perfect example of something wonderful and amazing. 'And what you need to do is decide.'

'De ... decide ... what?' It hurt even to say it, as I had no idea what I would be deciding between.

'Whether you want to knock down those walls you have erected, or block everything out ... just like you've been doing for years.' Before I knew what was happening, I was in her arms. Tears flooded down my face and soaked her top. Amazing really, considering I had spent the last four years holding everything back, not allowing anyone close enough to even see the glistening in my eyes, never mind get to know the real me. The only problem I could see was how I was going to stop the flow. Four years was a long time to keep things bottled up, and now the dam was down, how did I stop it?

Easy. I had a wonderful sister who held onto me, stroked me, and whispered words of love in my ear.

After I had stopped crying, and blown my nose, I felt something I hadn't felt for far too bloody long. Light. So wonderfully light and free ... I felt as if I could float from the bed and hover in the air. My eyes were stinging and my throat hurt, but I didn't care. I knew from that moment I would make it.

'Aunty Steph! Reggie's eaten the bread we put out for the birds.' Dave, Ju's son, anxiously came racing into the room. 'He ... he ... you been cryin'?' Bless kids and their inability to be tactful. 'He didn't eat all of it.' I tried to wipe the tears away from my eyes, but all that did was make it more obvious. Mainly because my mascara had decided to slither down my face and smudge itself at every opportunity. 'Why are your eyes all black?' I snorted out a laugh, couldn't help it. Why couldn't we all just accept things the way kids did? 'You look really scary.' And say what we mean? 'I love you.' He stood in front of me, his blue eyes so wide and honest, waiting for some kind of reaction from me.

Leaning forward, I kissed him gently on the cheek. 'Love you, too, Dave.' With that, he threw his arms around my neck and started to squeeze. His muffled voice drifted up and I could just about make out that Reggie was being a git, eating bread, and chasing next door's cat whilst barking madly. 'Give me a minute, Dave. I just have something to do ... can you try to get him inside?' He nodded, and gave off the appearance of someone who has been given a very responsible job to do before scuttling off out of the room. Turning towards Ju, I was about to say something about her revelation ... her profile of who she thought I was and what I had been doing, when she lifted her hand to stop me.

'It is your decision, Steph.' I went to speak again, but she shushed me. 'Only you can be responsible for how you are feeling. You have to make the choice to start living, or be happy with what you have.'

True. I was in control of my life. Not events that happened four years ago. I could begin to build a new me, a happier me. Begin to be the woman I had always wanted to be. But I also knew that Rome wasn't built in a day. One person *could* make a difference - especially if that person was me.

Ju left me to think not long after that, and before I knew it we were all saying our goodbyes at the front door. Anna stopped as she was leaving, her face trying to tell me she was sorry for

upsetting me, but I just grabbed hold of her and pulled her into a hug, whispering an 'I'm sorry,' into her ear before releasing her.

'What for? It should ...'

'No. You have nothing to be sorry about.' I looked at her in earnest, and she deliberated before nodding slowly, almost as if she was accepting the fact that I had removed the firmly wedged stick from up my arse. Keith, Ju's husband, hugged me as he left, and whispered in my ear, 'I'm here too, if you need me.' It was good to know my sister had found her swan.

Ten minutes after they had gone I had my coat on and was heading out of the door. I needed to get out and think about what was going to happen next, and what I was going to do to make my life bearable again. What I didn't expect at this stage in my acceptance of my future was to find myself in Manchester's gay village. Especially the bit where I was chatting up a woman who bore an uncanny resemblance to Erin Mason.

Amazing to think that not even an hour had passed since I had my epiphany, and here I was, ready to bed someone on the first instance. Where had all my philosophising gone? Where was the 'new me'? You know, the one who believed she had a future in the real world? But I was, wasn't I? I was taking control of how I looked at life. Was starting to live again. Wasn't I? Well, I would've been if I had made the conscious decision to allow this woman to be a part of my future, but that wasn't the case. I was here for the only thing I ever wanted to be here for. Sex. Not love, or understanding, but the ultimate three letter word ... the one that preceded cum and run - in that order.

As I was kissing her, pinning her against the wall, all I could think about was how I wished she were Erin Mason. Then, as she whispered about going back to her place to continue, all I wanted was it to be Erin saying it. But that didn't stop me from sucking onto her neck and growling a yes into her skin ... didn't stop me from capturing her nipple between my thumb and forefinger and rolling it until she leaned backwards and gasped.

Even in the taxi back to her place, I didn't relent in trying to take her. Maybe because if I did, I would remember that this was not what I was looking for ... not what I wanted, although the lower part of my anatomy would firmly disagree. I didn't even care that the taxi driver was watching us through his mirror. Watching as my hand snaked its way underneath her skirt and up her thigh ... watching as I devoured her throat and shoulder ... watching as I pushed myself into her and above her ... and still watching as I claimed her lips as if they would suddenly disappear if I didn't.

It wasn't until the slam of her apartment door that something ricocheted in my head ... a something that made me freeze my administrations to the now overly ripe woman leaning against the door with her skirt pushed high and her thighs parted. My hands were either side of her head and my face was mere inches from hers. I could see the expectation on her face, as I had made sure all the way from the club that she knew I was going to fuck her. But when it came down to it, I couldn't. It was the ricocheting, you see. The reverberating sound of Erin's voice ... her laughter ... the knowledge that I knew a woman like that which made me stop and stare at the

woman whose name escaped me.

As her voice questioned with a soft '*Baby?*' I knew I had to go. I couldn't go through with it. It was definitely a case of my body writing cheques that my head and heart couldn't cash, to use a tired old phrase.

'Is there something wrong?' Yes. Everything. 'Don't tell me you're ...' I didn't have to answer. My body said everything I needed to say. I was rigid. There was no sign of the sex-starved monster of five minutes ago. All I appeared to be was an empty shell again ... back to square one. I couldn't have sex with this woman, although every nerve ending in my lower body was screaming at me to just do it, just take her and let her take me, the upper half was defiantly pulling away. The vacant look in my eyes told her that there was no way I would be changing my mind. It was a mistake - although it could've been a lot bigger if I had gone all the way.

Initially, I thought she was going to blow her top, shout, and scream at me for wasting her time, but she didn't. The anger on her face dissipated when she made eye contact. She must've seen the disillusionment hovering underneath the surface - not with her but at myself. Disbelief that I couldn't take what she was offering me on a plate - no strings attached.

I lifted my hand and touched her cheek, as I needed to explain to her what the matter was. I didn't want her to think I didn't find her attractive or desirable, because she was both times a hundred. I wanted to tell her that it wasn't her it was me, but how lame does that sound?

Less than two minutes later I was out of the door and half way down the stairway with not even a glance back. Five minutes saw me pounding concrete. Ten, I was in a taxi and on my way back to my parents.

Reggie was sitting behind the door patiently waiting for me, ball ensconced in his mouth, the look of adoration clear. In less than thirty-five minutes I was home, undressed and in bed, with a very contented dog curling up at my feet. Sleep eluded me. You can understand why. I just lay there, staring. Thoughts of what had transpired that evening whirled and danced around inside my head. Why couldn't I just take what was offered? Why did I believe I wanted to move on, but wouldn't actually take a step to realise my dream?

I shifted, moving the sleeping dog slightly with my foot. If Reggie hadn't have been there, I believe I would have been pacing around the room, even going as far as pulling my hair. But no. I carried on lying there and staring. Lying there and thinking. Lying there trying to sort my life into some kind of order. Then it came to me. I wasn't avoiding moving forward. Nope. I was moving, slowly ... inching even ... but moving. It wasn't a case of not being able to take what was offered me; it was more like I was becoming more selective. There was only one person I had wanted to be with me tonight, pinned against that wall ... Erin. Her name seemed to echo around the room as if I had spoken it out loud, but I knew I hadn't. And I also knew that whether she wanted me or not, I wanted her. End of.

With that realisation, if you can actually call it a realisation, I felt the tentacles of sleep begin to grip. Eyes began to flutter closed, and the last thing I remember was a snort of contentment

oozing from the bottom of the bed as Reggie settled himself further into the duvet.

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Morning arrived and nearly blinded me with its stark brightness. I had slept in, as I discovered when I looked at the clock that happily announced it was nearly ten o'clock. Stretching my body, I grunted in the way a person would do when they had slept well. Reggie decided it was time he performed his serious head rubbing of the day and climbed up my body to deliver his good morning message. I loved the way he would become excited in the morning when he realised I was awake. His tail would go crazy, as if he had just realised I was there and he wasn't dreaming. Dogs have a fantastic way of making you feel special time and time again, even when you feel like crap. Therefore, I allowed myself another fifteen minutes to wake up and make a fuss of my boy before making an appearance downstairs.

After letting Reggie out to perform his morning ritual of sniffing every blade of grass to make sure it was all in order, I strolled into the dining room to see my parents sitting at the table. Both of them looked at each other before looking at me, and then they looked at each other again before saying hello. I had the distinct impression I was on the outside of something, but to be honest, I couldn't be arsed worrying about it.

Mug of tea, the paper, and back to let Reggie in. I plonked myself at the table and opened the paper. I knew they were watching me, and I knew it would be my mo...

'You got in early.' What was this? The familial neighbourhood watch? 'You usually don't come back till the early hours.' And? Problem? 'I ... erm ... we were wondering if everything was ok?' I dropped the paper and gave her a look. You know, the type of look that says I am now erecting a brick wall. Enter at your own risk. 'Well ... erm ... you see ...' It always amazes me how our parents don't recognise the look. I folded the paper carefully and slowly, making sure they knew I was folding it carefully and slowly, and that they should be worrying themselves stupid right about now. But no. My mother and father were waiting patiently for me to stop. Even Reggie was licking his nuts in boredom. I must have lost my look somewhere and nobody had been bothered enough to tell me.

'I was just tired. Been a busy week.' I knew they wouldn't believe me, but thankfully they didn't push any further. My mum gave me *her* look in return ... yep, the one that totally takes you in at that precise moment and knows that every word you will utter after that moment will be a lie. So I grinned widely at them before launching into the story about the off duty fireman and the cat.

After five minutes my dad decided he wanted to show me his culinary skills, a term that should, in this instance, be used very loosely. It wasn't that he couldn't cook. No ... it was more of a case that he used the same knife he had put his marmalade on to cut through a bacon sandwich, thus making it taste of oranges, not to mention the splattering of everything up the walls.

It was just before one o'clock that I decided it was time to get my arse into gear and face my demons. Funnily enough I already knew that the demons I had were of my own doing, but that didn't stop my gut squeezing and pinching at the thought of seeing Erin and Brian. Reggie gave a

loving lick to both my parents before I bundled him into his box in the car, and after I had kissed them (I must note that neither of them had wiped the doggy lick from their faces before I kissed them), I started my engine and slipped away and onward to heartbreak.

God. I am such a drama queen, aren't I? Can't help it ... all part of the training of being a martyr. Part of the job description - long hours and underpaid.

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## Chapter Eleven

Two and a half hours later saw me pulling into my driveway. I could see them all outside her house ... Rob, Sue (must've been her - too alike to be a stranger), two kids running around like bandits ... Erin ... and last, but in no way least, Brian (aka twat). Standing there looking all butch and manly. He was leaning against the house as if he truly believed it would fall down without his Charles Atlas strength to hold it up. Mr Samson. Buzz. Wanker. I actually felt myself pale and then flush with anger. It was only the thought of how irrational I was being that stopped me speeding up and ramming my car into his relaxed posture. I really really *really* wanted to do that so much. Reggie started to whimper in the back and clamour at the front of his box, clicking his nails against the metal grid.

I couldn't do it. Go up to them and be all nice as pie with lashings of icing sugar, I mean. I couldn't. I doubted I could get past a hello without punching him squarely in the face. This was ludicrous. Why did I feel so bloody strongly about her? Why did I have this overwhelming urge to inflict bodily harm on someone over someone who I knew deep down would never ever feel the same way about me? I just hoped that nobody saw me sitting there like a waste of space...

'STEPH!' Fuck. Trust Erin to spot me. I could see her looking at twat head, who was already moving towards my car, and gesturing wildly. Unfortunately this was accompanied with her moving hastily in my direction - led by him. Oh bollocks. This was the time where I had to grin and bear it. This was the moment when I had to suck it in and break bread with the bloke, when all I wanted to do was break a piece of two by four over his head.

Slowly, I opened the car door and slipped out. A forced wave came from a reluctant hand, almost making it appear I had special physical needs. Erin was grinning widely even though she was running, all the time looking over her shoulder and speaking. The only things I could hear were the words 'Brian' and 'Come on'. Christ. She was impatient. He was right behind her and anyone watching would think he was on the other side of the lake.

I opened the back door and unclipped Reggie's box door, where an extremely excited dog shot out, over the seat, and through the open doorway. Just like me he wanted to run to Erin and get patted and praised, and I couldn't help but turn and watch as they had a happy reunion. But that didn't happen. Reggie raced towards Erin and Buzz, slowed down as if he was going to say hello, then ran straight past. Erin's laugh reverberated, followed by a macho guffaw (yep - I honestly think that is the first time in my life I have actually heard a bona fide guffaw - told you he was a

wanker, didn't I?)

The next thing I knew she was in front of me, her arms embracing and pulling me close. I just wanted to absorb the moment - pretend that this would never stop and that this would be the way we would spend the rest of our lives.

'Missed you, Steph,' a whisper followed by a small laugh landed in my ear and trickled down my skin. 'Weird, I know.' Definitely weird, considering the love of your life is standing right behind you. At this she pulled away and I felt the cool air hit my skin like a slap. Even though I wanted to ignore his presence, I couldn't do it. Not to her ... and actually not to myself. 'This is ...'

'Brian. I know.' I shoved my hand out, forcing the fingers to unwrap from their fist like position and act cordially. 'Good to meet you at last.' Nothing. He stared at my hand then at my face ... then at Erin's face, who was staring at my hand, then Brian's face, and then at mine. And I thought I was the one with the issues here. I felt my hand drop just as Erin started to laugh ... followed by wanker boy. The anger was surging back and I wanted to tell them both to go fuck themselves ... or each other. Talk about being well suited. How rude to treat someone like that. Didn't they know how hard that had been for me? Didn't they understand that all I had wanted to do was sidle away into my own little shell and never have to speak to him?

'Brian?' They both looked at each other and laughed even louder - him still using the Shakespearean guffaw. Erin was doubling over by this stage, tears springing from her eyes, 'Brian?' In order to stop me slapping both him and her, I jabbed my hands into my sides and stood as if I was a statue and just waited. The urge to storm off had flitted inside my head, but then disappeared just as quickly. I was waiting for an apology. I may be many things, but bloody down right rude is not one of them. Well, not all the time. '*Brian?*' For fuck's sake. This was becoming ridiculous. Brian Brian Brian. Got that? BRIAN! 'You think HE is Brian?' Well, who else would it be? Lord Lucan? Then she started laughing again.

Brian decided he wanted to join in on my humiliation, only making me hate him all the more. 'Brian.' Were they pissed? They must be, especially if they didn't even know his name. And it definitely was Brian ... the one from the picture - and may I take this opportunity to stress that he looked more like Buzz Lightyear when you were really close to him. But I still said nothing. Just glared.

'I'm sorry, Steph.' Yeah. You sound it Erin. You sound like you have just found out that all your family's been wiped out by a freak accident. 'This isn't Brian.' But it had to be. She had pointed it out when I saw the picture in her house.

The words 'Gorgeous, isn't he?' resounded in my head, and I wanted to repeat those to her, and then add that 'No. He wasn't. He was rude ... obnoxious ... and should be on set at Disney Pixar.'

'This is James Cullam. My publisher.' Huh? But ... but that's Brian. I could hear Reggie yapping excitedly in the background, and I knew he was on his way back. As soon as that scamp of a dog was in sight I would make my excuses and leave. These people didn't know their arse from their elbow. I distinctly remember all the bloody 'Brian this and Brian that' to be mistaken in this



bloke's identity. But the look on her face was one of absolute truth, and by this stage the man with no name - or even two names, had stuck his hand out in greeting, and this time it was me who was staring at it in wonder. If I took his hand that would mean I believed what they said. If I took his hand maybe I too would be transported to cloud cuckoo land to join them. 'Aha ... and here's Brian now.' I looked past Buzz and expected to see his doppelganger - Buzz Lightyear Two - the sequel - not as good quality, but still entertaining... but all I saw was Reggie jumping from side to side like he was chasing something. Then I saw it. Saw him. Saw Brian.

A huge black Labrador came bounding up to me, front paws landing with an oof on my chest, and a very wet tongue sticking out and wiping itself up my stunned face. 'Now *this* is Brian.' A dog. A dog. And for the record, so not to add to anymore confusion ... a dog. 'Gorgeous, isn't he?' What I could see of him and his rapidly swiping tongue ... erm ... yes. 'And didn't I tell you that he would love Reggie?' Erm ... yes again. But this time I didn't want to disown my dog for loving Brian back. Before I had chance to comment, Brian was down, barked once at Reggie, who barked back, and they were off, chasing each other round the lake.

I felt numb ... maybe it was the realisation that the love of Erin's life was not actually the bloke from the picture ... maybe it was the fact that a huge dog had thrown its whole body weight against me. Whatever the reason, I was still numb. And still stupid. The reason I was still stupid was because I hadn't firmly gripped the newly named James' hand and pumped it up and down like a madwoman. He was still standing there, although unlike me when he had ignored my outstretched hand, he was smiling. By the feeling creeping across my face, I think I was beginning to smile too. Well, more like grin madly - teeth exposed - the works. With a hot flush of happiness, I stuck my hand out in greeting and began to pump it wildly like I had expected myself to do when I first found out.

'Sorry ... sorry ... sorry ...' Was I gushing? Dribbling a little? 'I think I got the wrong end of the stick at some point ...' There comes the shitty stick again - you would honestly think I would learn, wouldn't you?

They were both laughing, and James was returning my over zealous handshake with gusto, guffawing (which, incidentally, didn't sound so twattish now) loudly. Just at the precise moment James released me, or I him, and who cares, I looked at Erin. Her blue eyes seemed to lock with mine, if only for an instant, and I felt my whole being gravitate towards her. The sensation was like being caught into a whirlpool, and it felt glorious, even though it was brief. When she broke the contact, I followed her gaze, which had gone to James by this point. He was smiling at her and I am definite I caught the tail end of a nod. So, I quickly turned my attention back to her, and once again ... a definite nod, followed by a smile, followed by another look straight at me.

'Erm ... I ... *we* were wondering,' Erin's voice wavered a little, 'if you would ... erm ... that is ... if you ... well ... if ...'

'For God's sake, Erin.' James' voice was bold and loud, but there was a hint of laughter behind it. 'What she is trying to ask you ... *badly* ...' Erin slapped his shoulder and he pretended he was injured. All I wanted him to do was to bloody ask whatever it was he, or she, wanted to ask me. To say the suspense was killing me would be an understatement. 'Do you fancy coming over for

a barbeque later?'

Was that it? All the fumbling and if ifs? A barbeque? Anyone would think she was trying to pop the question at the rate she was going. And all this internal monologue had given her the opportunity to believe I wasn't interested in attending aforementioned barbeque, as when I came back into the land of the living, James was looking at me expectantly, yet Erin's expression was one of disappointment.

'Another time, maybe? You must be tired from your journey.' Why did I just stare at her? Was it the fact that I was once again mesmerised by just how bloody beautiful she was? The way wisps of her hair fell across her cheeks? The blueness of her eyes ... the redness of those lips I had coveted so much? Was it the scent of her perfume, which drifted into my conscious and subconscious? Whatever the reasoning behind my self-elected muteness, it wasn't doing me any favours. It was only when I heard the words 'no worries,' did I snap out of my 'I adore you' phase.

'I'd love to, Erin ... *erm* ... and James.' I had to include him in my response, didn't I? It had been him who had invited me after all. The expression on her face lit up, I'm sure it did, and with that expression so did my future. I know I am a pessimist, but even I got the distinct impression that she wanted me there. And if my memory serves me rightly, it wasn't just the gesture and reaction from one neighbour to another ... or one friend to another. It seemed like this question held something more ... something a little more in depth, if you get my meaning. It almost appeared that Erin had asked me as she would have asked someone she liked, liked more than a neighbour ... liked more than a friend. I just hoped that for once in my life I had not read things the wrong way, and that I wasn't racing ahead of myself.

'Reggie is more than welcome too.' At the sound of his name being mentioned, my mutt appeared around the corner, his face grinning like a maniac. Seconds after, a grinning Labrador came careering around the corner in hot pursuit. 'Bless. They are so happy. Look at them.' Reggie steamed past me and into the wooded area at the side of my house. Brian followed without a backward glance to his mistress. 'I say that Reggie's welcome, although I doubt we'll see much of those little buggers tonight.' I laughed at the sight. Reggie was in his element - and so was I. An evening with the beautiful Erin Mason. What more could a woman want?

Five minutes later, and a discussion whether I should meet her sister and the sprogs now or at the barbeque, I was inside the house, Reggie panting at my feet. I pressed my back against the front door and threw my overnight bag halfway down the hallway. A gurgling sensation rippled up from my belly and gathered at the base of my throat. It wasn't uncomfortable ... by no stretch of the imagination. It was wonderful ... almost effervescent. A joy was inside me, a joy that I believed was long since dead. All this feeling from an invitation to a barbeque - Jesus knows what I would have been like if she had asked me on a date.

A date. Imagine the possibility? And for the first time I allowed that sensation to undulate inside - allowed the chance of 'a date' with the beautiful woman next door to become a likelihood - something that could possibly happen. A tiny voice reverberated within me, a voice that ordered me to stop and listen ... to stop and realise that I was not good enough, but I shook my head, and with a resounding 'Shut the fuck up!' I peeled myself from the door and skipped down the

hallway. It was time to stop listening to the negative side of life, and start living. Whatever the outcome from this evening, from any evening thereafter, I would take it on the chin. Life was for living after all ... not for hiding away in the dark recesses of an old cottage in the middle of nowhere.

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## Chapter Twelve

Reggie was ready before I was. Obviously. All he had to do was to lick himself all over, gnash his hind leg for a bit, and then scoot across the floor on his backside for a while. I, on the other hand, had to shower, dry my hair, dress, undress, dress again ... slag myself off in the mirror, undress again ... dress ... begin pulling my hair from the roots whilst wailing to the heavens, undress again ... and then finally put on the very first outfit.

Finished. Unhappily so. I mean, all I was wearing were jeans and a t-shirt. Anyone would think I was attending the annual ball instead of a casual barbeque at my next-door neighbour's house. But I had to feel right ... and to feel right I had to be comfortable ... *right?* I convinced myself that my jeans were wedging up my arse, and that I would spend the best part of the evening trying to dislodge them from crawling up to my colon, until I whipped out a shoehorn and pulled them free with an exaggerated pull. However, they were not tight ... they were in fact quite loose around the curve of my butt. I discovered this by standing in front of the mirror for nearly fifteen minutes staring at my rear. Finally I decided enough was enough and turned back, only to imagine that I had a camel toe where my crotch should have been. I know you think I am going on, but imagine being in my shoes? Or jeans? You would want everything to be perfect, wouldn't you?

Ten minutes later, I left the house wearing a cream pair of cargo pants, and praying that Reggie didn't find any mud that he would happily share with mama - usually right down the front of my legs - worse still - two paw prints on my backside ...

I believe I was still arguing with myself as I approached the group of people who were, in turn, arguing over how to light a barbeque. Good to know that families are the same wherever you are - makes you feel safe.

'Need any help?' My voice was steady and in control ... pity it couldn't have a word with the fashion police who were in my head. 'I can have a go if you like?' Now there is one thing I am bloody good at, and that's starting a barbeque. Not the first thing you would write on a CV, but in a sticky situation - preferably, before blows are thrown - I'd come in useful.

'Thank God someone round here has a clue.' Erin started laughing and passed me the box of matches. 'You look great by the way.' So did she, but I didn't have chance to tell her as a familiar voice rang out from behind me.

'You must be Steph.' I turned and looked straight into blue eyes ... nearly as blue as Erin's, but not quite. 'I'm Sue, Erin's sister.' I stuck my hand out and realised it was the one with the

matches. Therefore, I swapped the matches into the other hand, only to stick out the hand that still held the fucking box. Talk about presenting myself as an idiot. And they had trusted me with flammable objects - I bet they were crapping their pants. But no ... they were in fact pissing them - so I joined in, accompanied by the single woof of my faithful companion, who was eyeing up the meat that was stacked on the table, Brian seated right next to him.

'I've heard so much about you.' On this revelation, Sue threw her arms around me and pulled me into a hug. As much as she resembled her sister, I didn't get the same feeling I did when Erin had hugged me. This felt like a sister hugging a sister - or a friend hugging a fr ... I think you get the message without me going on and on and on ... I could see Erin standing behind her, and I was definite I saw a hue cross her face in a flash. A hue of red ... well, more like pink. Why would she be blushing? 'All we seem to here about these days is Steph this and Steph that ...' Sue let me go and I saw the flush on Erin's face darken as it reappeared, and I felt a lurch of happiness gather and expand within me. Was she embarrassed because she had been caught out talking about me? 'Sis tells me you're a reporter. What paper?' Pride comes before a fall, doesn't it? Sue was waiting expectantly for my response, and I tried my best to get the words out without stammering. I must definitely think of a new vocation in life if every time I had to say I was a reporter made my insides churn up with fear and loathing.

However, the conversation of my job was short lived, as Erin seemed to take the initiative. 'Come on then, Zeus ... get the fire bolts thrown, and let's get cooking.' Inwardly I thanked her, as I didn't want the evening to be ruined before it had started. I knew that the conversation would have gone along the lines of 'Why are you working here and not where you originate from?' And to be honest, there was no way I would be going into detail about that.

So, I grinned, held up the matches and said 'Me make fire for woman.' Considering my come back, I should have told them why I had moved to Bassenthwaite - less embarrassing. However, everyone laughed - which surprised me. Inwardly I was trying to dig up some more jokes, but eventually gave up, as they were even worse than the first attempt.

It wasn't long after when the barbeque was going. Rob said it would be best if we let it gather heat for about an hour and a half. What would we do in that time? I was ok when I was eating, or had something to do other than make conversation. Remember I was out of practice at socialising. The only socialising I did was either with my own family, interviewing, or chatting up a woman once a year at a gay bar. But there was no need to worry, as being with Erin's family seemed like an extension of my own.

Thankfully I wasn't in charge of cooking the meat - the hunter-gathering role was passed over to the 'men' in the group, and as for all the sundries, Erin and Sue had prepared them before I had arrived. This gave me time to get to know the sprogs of the household. Please remember when I use the term 'sprog', I do so endearingly. George and Daisy were a handful to say the least, but in a good way. They had so much energy that they made me breathless watching them play with Brian and Reggie. Reggie was in his element, as he had so many people throwing a ball for him and another dog to compete with when chasing it. Now and again, he would trot over just to make sure I was ok, and then he would be off again.

'Fancy a game of football?' You would expect this to be asked by Rob or James ... even George or Daisy, but no. It was asked by Erin. 'I think the blokes have everything under control.' As she said this, we both turned to look at James wafting the smoke away from the grill and coughing melodramatically. 'He is such a girl, don't you think?' I looked back at her, but her face held a softness as she observed him, you know, like a sister who has a little brother. This made me feel even better, as even though I had established James (ok ok - maybe it took more than me to establish it) was her publisher and not the love of her life, it didn't mean that she didn't fancy him, did it? But watching the way she looked at him, watching the way he coughed and wafted then placed his hand on his hip, it all became clear. James wouldn't be interested in Erin. And it wasn't the fact that he was by now staring at Rob's arse that gave it away. No. It was the case of he was the epitome of a man who was extremely comfortable with his feminine side. Extremely comfortable, as in not really being interested in how beautiful Erin and her sister were ... as in noting that Rob was a very handsome man comfortable. A laugh popped out. Couldn't help it. Pop. Just there in the air like a sign that things were getting better and better. 'Well?'

'Well what?'

'Footie? You, me, Sue, Rob and the kids.' She turned back to James at this point. 'You're not up to playing footie are you, Priscilla?'

James didn't bat an eyelid, just shook his head dramatically, and shouted back, 'Nope. You guys go for it.'

I was still a little shocked that she had called him Priscilla. Not very PC, is it? Erin had plonked herself down next to me by this stage and was changing into a pair of trainers, but I was just staring down at the ground. Did she accept the fact that even though James did an outstanding impression of being a straight man, he was in fact gay? Or was that a little dig at his sexuality? I couldn't imagine Erin being horrible to anyone, but when it comes to sexual orientation, sometimes people can surprise you. One minute they are your best friend, and the next you are the plague of Satan. As if whom you slept with should be of interest to anyone else. Whatever we do in our bedrooms is private - as long as both parties are willing.

'Did you ... Steph? You ok?' She looked concerned, and I can guarantee I looked a little green by this stage. Here I was a raving lezza (ok - not so much of the raving, as action had been a little slow of late), sitting next to a woman whom I fancied the arse off, deliberating whether she was a homophobe. Where's the problem with that? Erin looked over to James and back at me. 'God no.' Don't tell me she had read my mind. Women do have the gift ... 'I hope you don't think I was being horrible to Pris ... erm ... James.' Well ... now you mention it. 'James is gay, Steph.' I know that - took me a while, but finally I caught up. 'You ... you ... don't ... have a ... problem with that, do you?' What? You calling your male publisher Priscilla? Not me you should be asking. 'James did a charity event at Gay Pride last year and went as a character from Priscilla Queen of the Desert ... the name just stuck.'

I looked to the floor and stared at her feet. She had one trainer on and the other lay limply by the side of her bare foot. Silence came between us, and all I could hear were voices that seemed distant and detached. What if she wasn't gay? And why was I doing a Gwyneth Paltrow? She

seemed relaxed in James' presence, had a joke about his charity gig, and seemed quite proud of the fact that her publisher had gone all out at Pride. If that didn't say she wasn't a homophobe, I must be losing the plot somewhere along the line.

'I should have told you, shouldn't I?' Her voice seemed loud in my ear, maybe because she was sat right next to me. 'I just assumed that it was pretty obvious.' Then another bout of quietness, until she asked, 'Steph? Can I ask you something?'

'You just did.' I tried to keep my face straight, and I knew this wasn't the time to be arsing about, but I wanted to disentangle the air of tension from around us. The line was ignored, as I believe she had a more important line to deliver. 'You're not ... how can I say this?' Quickly. Especially if you are going to ask me if I am gay. 'You're not a ... please don't take offence by this will you?' She was. She was going to ask if I was a carpet muncher. 'You're not a ... a ... homophobe, are you?'

'Huh?' I mean, HUH? Me? A homophone? I mean a homophobe. Jesus. I couldn't even get the word right. But asking if I was a homophobe. As if. And if the next thing could have been measured on a Richter scale I would say it would frighten dogs - and my proof was in the fact that Reggie came scurrying over to see what the problem was, as Brian did a leap onto Erin and knocked her flying. 'Homophobe! Me?!' I saw her feet lift and fly past me as she disappeared off the bench, and when I turned, she was flat on her back being ferociously licked by an overexcited Labrador.

'*Get ... off ... me ... Brian.*' But the dog was in for the duration. He wasn't a small Lab by any stretch of the imagination, and it took quite a lot of pulling and cajoling by me to get him off her, but I managed - eventually.

I looked down on her prostrate form, her legs suspended by the bench, and I wanted to laugh. She had mud all over her, big juicy paw prints all down her top and her hair was slapped onto her cheeks by saliva. It was adorable. Honestly. I know that at that precise moment, Erin felt the furthest away from adorable any woman could ever feel. I also knew that if I laughed now I would pay dearly. So I swallowed and swallowed and swallowed the vibrations eking up from within, until I felt I had some semblance of control. I leaned over her and offered her my hand.

As I felt the warmth of her fingers wrap themselves around my own, I felt the familiar spark race up my arm, but I just smiled at her and said 'No. Erin. I am very far removed from a homophobe. Believe me.' Just as I delivered the totally in control speech I felt a shove from behind and felt myself falling forwards. Unfortunately, I only had one free hand to save myself, and that one was aiming itself right for Erin's right tit. Therefore I felt like right tit as I landed flat on top of her, as well as looked like one. Her face was so close ... so close ... close enough to actually feel the closeness and want to close that miniscule gap between us with a stolen kiss. The temptation was so strong ... the want was overpoweringly magnetic, but neither of us did anything about it.

Then she spoke. Each word hit my skin, imitating the kiss I so desperately wanted. 'Well, Stephanie Stevenson. That's good to know.' The eyes had me once again. The lips tantalising and closer still. All it would need was for me to lean just a little ...

'You playing?' I turned my head at the same moment that Erin did and felt her cheek rub alongside my own. I couldn't help it. My eyes fluttered shut as if they were taking a snapshot of the memory, something I could indulge in when I was on own ... something I could revel in. Then as my eyes opened again, they were greeted by two pairs of blues eyes - blues eyes that were set in very young faces ... blue eyes that were waiting impatiently for us to get our acts together and come and have a game of footie. 'We're all waiting for you two to stop kissing.'

'But ...' Both Erin and I shot out the 'but', but neither of us continued. We stopped after the one word, turned and looked at each other before laughing loud and long.

And through the laughter, I heard Daisy say to George, 'And they call us kids.' Bless them. And also bless one laughing black Labrador who had the insight to push me over in the first place.

As they were walking away, I heard George say something to Daisy, her turn to look at us, and then shrug, before beginning to run to get the ball. When I turned back to Erin, her face was blood red. Wonder what it was he had said that made her react like that? Not the mention of us kissing ... or was it? Nah. It must have been all the falling over and stuff.

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The evening was wonderful. The food was wonderful. The company ... ah, you guessed it ... was wonderful. But none of the 'wonderfuls' compared to how wonderfully brilliantly elated I was feeling by the time I was getting myself ready to leave. As my mother always says 'Never outstay your welcome'. So here I was ... not outstaying my welcome, and not wanting to leave the safety of the group of people I had connected myself to.

Too many 'You're not leaving already' lines were thrown my way, but I just smiled and nodded, wanting nothing more than to stay with them. Reggie was curled up in the curve of Brian's legs and both dogs looked contently happy. It was a pity I couldn't do the same thing. I would have loved to curl up in the curves of Erin and fall asleep with the knowledge that was where I belonged. I also knew that this night would be the start of many to follow, and I think that thought was the one thing that actually allowed me to make a move in the direction of my dark, uninviting cottage.

Kisses and hugs and slaps on the back, and I turned to leave. Reggie was licking Brian's ears by this stage, the look of total contentment on both their faces. 'Hey! Wait up.' Erin was next to me, linking my arm with hers. 'I'll walk you back. Don't want you getting kidnapped do we?' I snorted a laugh, and she joined me.

As we walked back I could still hear the rest of them wishing me a goodnight. Then I heard Sue shush them and say something that I couldn't quite catch. Next thing they were all trundling inside Erin's cottage as if they were on a mission. Fuck knows what they were up to, but to be perfectly honest, I didn't care. I was strolling happily back to my house with a gorgeous woman as a companion. It felt as if we had been on a date and she was seeing me home. Yep. I was feeling that 'first date' feeling, and deep down I knew it hadn't been a first date, but that didn't

stop me imagining it, did it?

'Well.' We stopped at my front door, and the feeling of the end of a first date came over so bloody strongly. You know that feeling when the woman sees you home and then you are deliberating whether to kiss or not? That was racing through me. The overwhelming urge to just kiss her was winning hands down. 'Here we are, then.' Yes. Here we are. Now kiss me and save me the embarrassment of kissing you and getting punch in the choppers.

But no. We both stood there, the feeling of stalemate racing through the air and creating a tension that I usually didn't feel with her. Reggie was sitting at my feet looking at the both of us. I half expected him to say, 'For Christ's sake! Kiss each other!' So, I opened the door and told him to go inside and wait. Turning back to Erin, I felt the spark of expectation rise again. Then it happened. No. Not what you are thinking. I wish. No. It was that bloody little voice again, not the coveted kiss I longed for. Just a whisper at first and I actually felt myself shaking my head as if to dispel it. However, it wouldn't go, just became a little louder ... a little more insistent. Words along the lines of 'She's way out of your league' and 'You think she wants to kiss you. Just because she's not a homophobe, doesn't mean she's a pervert like you.' Considering I usually didn't feel my sexual preferences were perverted, this took me by surprise. Therefore, the surprise turned into me extending my hand and taking hers - not in the 'Oh ... lover. Come here.' More like 'Nice to meet you. We'll have to do it again sometime.'

You know the strangest thing? The strangest thing through all of this palaver was the look of absolute shock on her face, and the way she physically shook her body as if she was dismissing the fact I was dismissing her. It was at this precise moment that I knew I had made a terrible social faux pas, but there was nothing I could do about it. In that instant I knew she was expecting the same thing as I was - a kiss. Even if it had been a little one on the cheek, a kiss was what she had expected, and I had truly fucked it up. I know I could've just made light of it ... you know, laughed, and then brought out my manly 'I'm taking control' stance, whilst pulling her into me and claiming her perfect mouth for my own. I wish I had. I wished beyond all wishes that I could have taken the initiative, but the voice was still there and telling me I had read the signs wrong - it was all in my head.

Warm fingers wrapped around my own, and this enabled me to come back to the present. Erin was smiling at me by now, the shock she seemed to have felt had subsided and she was back to the friendly neighbour guise. Pity I was such a twat, really.

'Thank you for coming over.' No. Thank you for inviting me. Yes. They were the words that were itching to break free from my muted mouth, but all I did was stare at her. And grin. 'Would ... erm ... would you like to come over tomorrow?' She coughed and started again. 'We are all going out for the day, and I'm sure they would love it if you could come along too.' Her face showed surprise, then shock, and she started to babble a little about her wanting me there too. I just grinned and waited for her to stop.

'I'd love to.'

'Really?' The smile was a picture in the making - a true Kodak moment. Moths were fluttering



around her in order to get closer to the source of radiant light she was emitting from her face. And then it happened. The giant leap - the one I had been waiting for, yearning for, promising to sell my first born for. Well, when I say 'giant leap', I mean more like a baby step. I know you are thinking 'For fuck's sake! Just bloody tell me what happened!' And I will. She kissed me. A kiss. The kiss. The one true thing I had wanted to happen for so bloody long (well, a week, but who am I to argue with the mysteries of time).

Cough. Erm. Well ... when I say kiss, I don't necessarily mean tongues down the throat and an extended game of tonsil hockey. It was classier than that. It was on the cheek. And I know by this stage you are thinking one of two things. One. I am over exaggerating the impact of a kiss on the cheek. Two. How on earth can this 'kiss on the cheek' be anything more than a kiss on the cheek? Go on ... I'll make it three. The final one is 'This woman is a twat.' But you see, it was more than a kiss on the cheek ... more than a goodnight to a friend or neighbour. It was perfect.

Let me explain. When someone kisses you on the cheek, you just know ... the emotions it evokes, for a start. Then we have the amount of time the aforementioned lips stay on the cheek. If it is fleeting, then yeah ... nothing to write home about. But when it stays for longer (and I promise you I wasn't saying 'one elephant ... two elephants' in my head) then it is more than likely not just a friendly peck. The kiss was soft. Perfect. Moreishly wonderful. And I wanted nothing more than to turn my head, take her lips with my lips, and show her how much I wanted her at that precise moment ... well, more than just at the moment ... I just wanted her. Full stop.

Then those precious lips moved to my ear. 'I'll give you a knock in the morning, then. Ok?' Words like feathers. Breath like a hummingbird's wings in flight. I turned my face to look into blue eyes ... blue eyes that seemed darker than usual ... Was it the lack of light, or something more? I was definite I saw some form of longing looking at me, but I wasn't sure whether it was my own reflection pooling inside those blue orbs. I could feel my chest heaving, the breath shooting from my nostrils, as I had my mouth truly and firmly closed, as I didn't trust myself not to just blurt out and tell her how I was feeling. Her hand rested on the top of my left arm, and I could feel sparks of electricity race through the skin and charge around my body. She leaned closer ... her mouth mere centimetres ... mere millimetres ... mere ...

And I kissed her. Everything was lost ... everything was found and grabbed and held close. Everything I had been feeling tumbled and twirled and danced and found itself caught in some kind of oblivion - some kind of epiphany. A surge of emotion raced and pressed against my lips making them want to open and swallow her ... open and give myself to her. Her hand had not moved from my arm. Her lips had not opened ...

I felt a gush from the pit of my stomach, as it felt as if a key had been turned within me ... a key that released the fear ... released the emotion that had been imprisoned inside for years. The force of my sob pushed her away, and tears sprang loose from deep within, culminating and devastating, not allowing me to push them back inside ... wanting to expose me there and then on my doorstep, in the darkness, on a Saturday evening.

Erin moved closer. Her expression was of concern, but I couldn't tell her why I was crying ... couldn't tell her because I didn't understand it myself. All I knew was I had to get away ... had to

flee the scene. Inside. I had to get inside and break apart ... break loose the fear and loathing I had buried deep ... break it out, crack it open, and lay it bare. Examine it. Excavate and tag it. Understand me more before I allowed myself to understand her ... understand what I could have ... wanted to have. Without this I would end up with nothing, even though I wanted her so much, there was no way I was going to just fall in headfirst and ignore everything I had been trying for years to hide. What if I became the woman I had been four years ago again? Where would that leave her? Leave me? I had to move this on, move this out ... make a break from my past in order to live my future.

I could see her opening her arms as if to take me into an embrace, the fear on her face was enough to make me push her roughly away. 'No. Don't. Touch. Me.' And I was gone. Inside the house, door slamming behind me as I cradled my head in my hands and sobbed. I knew she was still waiting outside ... still standing on my porch wondering what had happened. Part of me wanted to open the door and fall into her arms, but the stronger part held me firm. It was for the best, for now. For now. For the best.

So. As you can tell, it was more than just a peck on the cheek ... Baby steps? Do you think? Or was it the giant leap I had first told you about? Only time would tell, and I had that in abundance. The only thing I was unsure about was whether she would still want me when I had stopped beating myself up.

Five minutes later I heard her footsteps move away from the porch, and then the familiar crunch of gravel as she walked back to her own house. My legs decided that was the precise moment they would stop holding me up, and I felt myself slide down the door and land on the floor. Tears came easily ... flooding and flowing. Sobs came and went, as I began to rectify my own demons. Reggie tried to lick and comfort me, but I kept on pushing him down and away, until he decided it would be for the best if he curled up next to me and waited for mummy to come back to him.

I couldn't tell you how long I stayed like that. All I know is that by the time the first flush of tears were over, I was beginning to seize up. I stretched my legs out and grimaced at the pain rushing up my calves. Time for bed. And that's where the second bout of crying began.

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## *Chapter Thirteen*

All night I had nightmares. Different dreams, but with the same conclusion. Death. Sometimes it would be the woman crying and her husband hanging onto her, before the final shot was of her lying in a bathtub, the water red with blood. Other times it was Erin, her face in an agony of hurt, me knowing it was because of what I had said and done. The final shot was of her. Dead. Me looking over the body and crying, spluttering words of sorrow and regret, knowing it was my fault.

The next day saw me up and out at the crack of dawn, Reggie trotting by my side. Once around the lake and back inside to stare at the four walls - four walls that were less of a prison than the one I had placed myself willingly into. I couldn't settle ... couldn't concentrate. Even tried to

watch TV, but the pictures just moved and mouthed muted words.

There was no familiar knock at the door. No one came to call and ask if I would like to go out for the day with them all. I knew it was because of the way I had reacted ... knew it was because when we had kissed I had pushed her away and not told her it was not because I didn't want to kiss her. She must've thought I had regretted the action ... must be disgusted with her. I hadn't told her the only person I had been disgusted with was me. All it would have taken was one phone call ... one 'I'm sorry for last night. It wasn't you it was me.' But, once again, the words 'lame' and 'sound' spring to mind. I could've told her I wanted her, but I had things I had to sort out before I made that final step. But would she want me with all my psychotic baggage? Wouldn't it just be better to stop it all now?

I know. I was crawling further and further into the pit of despair, and I knew the driver was my own insecurities. I had to shape up. Shape up and shake off the past. Shake up and pick up the phone. Tell her. Tell her I wanted last night to continue ... wanted the parts before I lost my head to continue. Apologise and beg her to understand that it wasn't her it was ...

But I didn't. I just sat there and watched them all bundle into the car. Watched as I saw both Erin and Sue glance over to my house. Watched as Sue grabbed Erin's arm and spoke words forcefully to her, shake her, and then let go. Erin's arms hung limply at her sides ... she appeared almost like a rag doll as she ambled, shoulders slumped, towards the waiting car. However, I found it difficult to watch as the car's engine started, and moved away, taking her with it. The reason being I was crying again.

One day. Please God. One day, please give me a spine. Please. Then maybe one day I would begin to live again.

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All the way through my tale you have witnessed me fluctuate from being in control, accepting that I have to change, and then finally bottling out at the last minute. Do you feel as confused as I do? I hope not. You could say I was truly fucked up ... and you would be right. Think about it. What exactly was my problem? I made a mistake - one of many mistakes, but now I was trying to get my life back into some kind of order. Maybe it was the fact I was trying to make my life perfect ... hoping that in turn I would actually get some kind of perfection in my life. Funny thing was, the only perfection I could see was living in the house next door, and what I was hoping to do was to make myself worthy of her.

In all this blackness, I didn't realise that the more I sought perfection, the more I felt it slipping away from me. What I needed to do was to follow the line of 'Imperfection is beauty', accept who I was, what I had done, and move on. You are thinking, 'Didn't she have this internal monologue a while ago?' Yes. I did. But having the internal monologue and actually seeing it into fruition are poles apart. Deep down I believe I needed time to wallow in my own misery; needed time to take a long hard look at myself; and last, but by no means least, needed to sort my bloody life out once and for all. We all have shortcomings, misgivings, regrets, but if we decide to live our lives by them, where does it leave us? I'll tell you where. It leaves us in the middle of

nothing, surrounded by emptiness, and clutching onto a tiny thing called hope. What I needed was a miracle. But they are not as easy to come by as you might believe, hence being called miracles.

It was whilst having this debate with myself that I remembered something ... something extremely important to whom I was and who I wanted to become. My dream. Remember? The dream I had about Erin. The one when I compared her to something being sent to me by some celestial force, making me want to get on my knees and thank the Lord. I know you shouldn't live your life holding one person as the be all and end all of all creation ... the be all and end all of your happiness, as this would bound to end badly. But it was a start, wasn't it? Then Ju's voice sneaked in, 'Life has a funny way of telling us we are still part of the race ... Erin was sent as a reminder that you have so much to give ... like a miracle ...'

There you have it. My miracle. Flesh and blood and living next door to me. I felt the smile split my face, and I knew that everything would be ok. Everything would work out in the end. If she was speaking to me, that is. If I hadn't spend the best part of two weeks hiding away from her, avoiding going outside if there was any chance of seeing her and experience the coldness that I knew she would send my way.

Bollocks. This was quite an obstacle. I don't think it would have been too bad if I had called her on the Sunday and explained why I had acted like a total moron ... or maybe it would, but not as bad as it would be two weeks after. But no. I had spent Sunday feeling sorry for myself, and half of the night Googling her on the internet. At least I had found out about her books. I know ... it took me long enough. It had been ages since I had surreptitiously lifted one of her books from the shelf before ramming it back. *Into the Light*. And you know what it was about? Well? Do you? You probably do, as I guess you are far smarter than me. It was a work of fiction, but I believe there must have been some fact in there, or why else would a woman write a story about another woman coming out - falling in love with her best friend, and realising that it was the most natural thing in the world. Her other book, *Rainbows and Shadows*, was a sequel, but seemed darker. And yes, I did order them, but by the time I was having the inward dialogue they still hadn't arrived. But I knew one thing. Erin was gay. Took me long enough. All the classic signs were there, but I had no gaydar, so it appeared. I used to think I was pretty good at spotting a fellow lady lover, but it appears that I am shite at it, especially when it comes to people I like. Well, more than like. Actually, this was the first time someone had gotten past me, maybe because I just wanted it so much. And I did ... want it so much, that is.

At that moment, I made a decision, hopefully one that would change the course of my life. I would shower (and God, did I need to - feeling sorry for yourself doesn't half fuck up hygiene priorities), eat ... needed to give me strength - maybe pancakes were the order of the day? Yes ... with syrup - or should I have honey? And who gives a shit if I cover them in duck poop. I was feeling better already (and better still after I had sorted out the rudiments to healthy living).

Getting up from the sofa could have gained gold at the Olympics. I didn't think I actually felt myself touch the sides ... I had this euphoric feeling raging through every nerve ending, and I knew that I would have to calm myself down before I skipped over to Erin's like someone high on crack.

Twenty minutes later, I was scrubbed and dressed. I felt so much better already ... so much better than I had felt in the last two weeks ... the last four years ... It wasn't until I went into the kitchen and started banging about with the bowl to make the pancake mix that I noticed that something was missing. And that something usually came sniffing at my feet at the first opportunity of food. Reggie wasn't there ... wasn't in his basket ... wasn't swirling around my legs in the bid to catch anything that happened to come his way. Wasn't in the living room ... dining room, bedrooms ... not even in the bathroom. I called his name repeatedly, but there was no sight or sound of him anywhere in the house.

Back in the kitchen, I opened the back door wider and peered outside. He wasn't snuffling around the flowerbeds, or bushes. Wasn't digging a hole at the end of the garden and burying his toys ... he wasn't anywhere. And this sent a chill down my spine. Reggie never wandered off ... never wanted to explore territory on his own. The only other time I had known him to do that was when he met Brian ... but he was with Brian then, and not on his own ... I looked over at Erin's house, and I knew that she was out. I could tell. Wasn't the fact that she had gone out in her car, as that was still there ... it was the general feel about it. The house looked empty, if that makes any sense. But I had to check, didn't I? Had to go over there and double check to see if Reggie had wandered over in the bid to play with his pal once again.

Grabbing my keys, Reggie's lead, and a jacket, I was off towards Erin's house, the first time in a long time. I didn't care that she might be cool towards me, didn't worry that she might slam the door in my face. All that mattered was seeing if Reggie was ok. As I ran, I called his name. Nothing. He would've come back to me by now, would've come back to see what was going on. And this insight made me worry even more. What if he was trapped? Injured? What if he was stuck down a hole, as was the fate of many Border terriers? What if someone had stolen him? Panic was well and truly settling in by this stage, and the fact I was right ... Erin was out ... and so was Brian, by the looks of things. I didn't know what to do ... where to go ... whom to shout to. All I had was me, and that didn't fill me with any kind of comfort.

First things first. I had to calm down - think straight ... imagine I was Reggie sneaking out of the house. Where would he have gone? That was obvious ... he would have gone over to Erin's to play with Brian, but they weren't here. So where else? Nowhere ... there wasn't anywhere he would have gone to ... he had never sneaked off to do his own thing before ... well, as far as I was aware.

It was a choice of going back inside and calling the vets to see if anyone had taken a stray into the surgery ... or phone the police. But what would the boys in blue do? Nothing. To them he was just a dog. I had to act fast, and acting fast meant running round in circles and screaming his name. Or maybe not. Maybe if I was to retrace the steps I had taken this morning when we had gone for our usual constitution, I might find him. He had shown interest in a hole near the fallen tree. He could be there ... getting trapped as I stood there deliberating whether to just get my arse into gear or not.

Decision made. I was off at a run, all the time shouting his name, and inwardly praying that my baby was ok.

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Three hours later, I was back. I was exhausted and still missing a very important part of my life. Reggie was nowhere to be seen. I had gone around the lake twice ... gone down towards the water, nearly dug the small hole near the fallen down tree to three times its original size with my bare hands, all the while knowing that he wasn't there, even though I could tell there had been something scrabbling near there, as there were claw marks. All I hoped was that he didn't actually get down, although I knew deep down that the hole was too small. I felt defeated. Drained. Hopeless. And worse still, Erin's car had gone from her driveway. It had been there the last time I had passed, but now it was gone, and I didn't have a chance to tell her I needed her help. Why hadn't I left a note on her door? Asked her to help me find Reggie if she came back? All it would have taken was one minute, and maybe I would have had three pairs of eyes, and a fantastic sense of smell to help me find my furry pal.

All that was left to do now was to call the vets and the police, something I should have done in the first place. But hindsight doesn't change the fact I couldn't find my dog, does it?

As I mounted the steps to my porch, I could see something pinned onto my front door. Paper. A piece of paper with my name printed on the front. Tearing it off, I opened it and read quickly. I physically felt the vomit race up my throat as I read the words *'I have found Reggie and am taking him to the vets.'* Before I had time to read the rest, I threw up all over my front doorway; heaving punches to an empty stomach strained the muscles and made me feel momentarily faint. I gripped the side panel and tried to collect myself, which came begrudgingly a few moments later. Back to the note. *'Don't panic.'* Don't panic! That bit should have come first. *'He hurt his paw trying to dig a hole near the fallen down tree. You weren't in when I got back with him, so I am taking him to the vets to have it checked out. I'll bring him back as soon as he's patched up. Erin.'*

I was in a dual state. I know - that doesn't make sense, does it. Ok, I'll clarify. What I mean is that on one hand I was relieved to know that Reggie was ok, but worried about his paw. And also, I was happy that Erin had found him, but shitting my pants because I knew I would have to see her. Yes .... No need to remind me that I was actually going around to see her before I found out Reggie had done a bunk. But it's not the same is it? Going round to apologise for being a twat seemed like a better position than thanking her for saving Reggie. The last one could be construed to be a forced 'let's make up', couldn't it? And who gives a shit. Erin had found Reggie, taken him to the vets, and let me know she had. One could say that it was a start ... a conversation starter, to be exact. All I needed to do now was wait for them to get back, as I didn't know which vets she had taken him to.

I hate waiting. Waiting is pants. Especially when your stomach is fucking about with everything inside and starting a revolution. Small intestines were given the opportunity to shake off the shackles of subservience to the larger intestines, whereas the place where my colon used to be was decidedly lower and touching the inside of my underwear. Sorry for being vulgar, but I believe in sharing all the nitty gritty details. I guess you don't want to know what my bladder was planning, do you?

It was just over an hour when I heard her car pull into the drive, although it felt as if it had been a lifetime. I wanted to race out and grab that wounded soldier and crush the life out of him - in a motherly loving way of course. But there was the barrier between Erin and I to get through yet. And before I had a chance to even contemplate thinking the last bit through, I was out of the door and speeding for the car. She hadn't even had to chance to take off her seatbelt when I was grabbing at the door handle trying to get to Reggie. Then I stopped myself. This wasn't the way to behave. Not in the slightest. I had to collect my decorum and act like an adult.

Stepping back, I tried to relax my face into a welcoming, appreciative smile, but all I seemed to manage was something posed by the elephant man. Well, that's what it felt like. And if I had started quoting 'The Lord is my shepherd' whilst sucking in dramatically, I wouldn't have been the least surprised.

'Hey ...' My voice sounded weak even for me. Erin just looked at me briefly, before sorting her seatbelt into position. Slowly. Very slowly, and bordering on aggravating if the truth be known. I could hear Reggie whimpering in the background, and I had to physically dig my fingers into my sides to stop myself opening the car door. I cleared my throat, and tried again. 'Is he ok ... erm ... *everything* ... ok?' Still quiet. I know I deserved it, but come on! At least she could've put things aside for the kids.

Then she opened the door, the metal slamming against my wrist in the process. The squawk I released seemed to pop the pressure valve I could feel generating between us ... well, mainly from her, as I was too concerned about my man.

'Shit, Steph! God. I'm so sorry!' Her hands cupped my wrist and began to rub vigorously up and down, trying to bring some blood back to the wounded spot. Erin's face was wrapped in concentration and concern, and who was I to say anything. I must admit, it did sting like buggery, and who would know if I laid it on a bit thick.

'Ow ... ow ... ouch!' I should have been awarded an Oscar. I would have upstaged Bette Davies. All the time I was performing, Erin was apologising for being so stupid, and it wasn't long before I began to feel an inkling of guilt. Here I was, allowing this woman to feel bad about something that wasn't her fault. Story of my life, don't you think. It seemed as if it was a recurring theme around me, although I did take the blame more now. Sometimes a little too much, if you know what I mean. 'Erin.' Nothing. No response. No stopping from her rubbing and apologising. 'Erin.' I spoke a little louder in the hope she might actually hear me this time. But no. She actually bent lower and rubbed harder. 'Erin!' This time I coupled her name with the action of tugging my hand away. 'I'm ok. Honestly. See?' And I waved my arm in the air to display my agile limbs. Well. I tried to wave it in the air, but on the way, I kind of smacked her in the face.

'Shit!' This time it was the both of us who shouted out, which was shortly accompanied by the howling of two very distressed dogs who were clamouring to get out of the car. I was cringing like crazy by now, the pain in my hand informing me I must have socked her in the teeth. I quickly looked at my knuckles, and sure enough ... teeth marks. My eyes shot to her face, and the first thing I noticed was her holding her mouth. The second thing I noticed was that when she

pulled her hand away, there was blood on her fingers. What was it with the both of us? Last time it had been her smacking me in the mouth when she thought there had been a spider crawling over her.

*'Fucking hell fire! Erin! Fucking hell fire!'* Sue me for repeating myself, but would you be able to come up with something more original? I couldn't think of anything else to say, obviously, and even the reference to hell, fucking and fire seemed to escape me after the second utterance. Therefore, I did the next best thing I could think of. I lifted the offending hand and gently touched her cheek. The face that had showed so much pain seemed to freeze as my fingers touched the skin ... everything seemed to stop ... hold ... and transport me to a place where there was nothing else but her and the feel of the softness. Even the boys had stopped howling. The expression on her face just captured me ... her eyes seemed to expand, and in that instant I could see deep within her. So open. So honest and open. I couldn't resist ... couldn't resist ...

Fingers curled and stroked slowly down her cheek, shortly followed by my other hand, which cupped her jaw gently. It seemed that if I did anything wrong at this precise moment, everything would be lost forever. And there was no way I wanted that. Tentatively, I pulled her head towards my face and paused briefly to look deep into her eyes. I didn't have to ask if it was ok ... didn't have to ask for permission ... and it wasn't because I was scared she would say no. Our lips met. Tenderly. Softly. The warmth sifted from her to me ... from me to her, until I couldn't stop myself from moving my lips against hers. A spurt shot up from my stomach, as I felt her lips move against my own, and I knew that at this precise moment I was hers for as long as she wanted me. I didn't even question how long that would be, because I knew, deep down, that it didn't matter. What I was feeling at this moment would be enough to last me my whole life.

I pulled her closer, or did she pull me? The kiss became more ardent, more demanding ... more real, as her blood slipped from her to me. Mouths opened and tongues gently caressed lips, lips that were fervently seeking forever. Her hands slipped up my arms, along my hands and onto my face, pulling me closer. Nothing existed, except her. Nothing mattered, except her. I was lost, found, captured, and released in one kiss. Everything I had experienced before this moment fizzled and faded away. I had no past. All that mattered was the here and now, something I had been wishing for far too long.

Slowly, reverently, the kiss began to slow. But it wasn't as if it was over. Erin pulled away from me, her eyes fluttering open and looking hazily into my own. 'God.' The word was more like a gasp, and I felt my heart reboot, as if everything that had transpired in the last few minutes had made it go crazy and stop. She leaned her forehead against my own, and I heard her whisper 'God' again. I was thanking him in my own quiet way, because to have this woman react to me like this was nothing short of a miracle. 'Steph?' Even the way she said my name seemed different ... seemed more personal, if you know what I mean. 'Do you know how much I like you?' And can this get any better? Here was a woman who I wanted more than anything telling me she wanted me. Even in my wildest imaginings I never thought this moment would be as perfect as this. I couldn't speak ... couldn't put into words all I wanted to say. It seemed as if I had every word in the English dictionary fighting to get out, but I couldn't seem to get a handful to work with me. All I could do was nod, but feeling her head nod along with mine was worth it all. I wanted to ask her what would happen now ... or did she forgive me ... or even could I take



her out to dinner, but the words ... ah ... you get the drift. The moment was too wonderful to ruin them with jumbled sentences.

'Yap!' And through it all I hadn't given Reggie a second thought. Him injured too. What kind of mother was I?

'He's ok. Just a pulled nail.' That voice. So close ... so beautifully close. Her breath was digesting me, so soft and light. 'Although I think he wants to see his mamma.'

When she pulled away, I felt the emptiness engulf me. In her arms I believed I could do just about anything; in her arms I felt safe and protected for the first time in a bloody long time. I think I was still a little dazed from it all. I mean, one minute I had been frantic with worry about Reggie, then worrying about what Erin would say to me when we finally saw each other after me making a fool of myself, ending it all in the blissful meeting of my lips with hers. Wouldn't you feel a little out of it?

Before I knew it, Reggie was there looking sorry for himself. He had a bandage on his left leg, and the base of it was covered with waterproof plaster, making his foot look huge. 'Don't let that worry you ... it's not as bad as it looks. Believe me.' But there he was, looking all small and pitiful, and I couldn't even remember the anger or fear I felt when I realised he had mugged off on his own. All I felt was this gushing of love coupled with this overwhelming feeling of protectiveness. Scooping him into my arms seemed the most natural thing in the world, and as he nuzzled my neck and emitted tiny whimpers, all I wanted to do was to get him inside and comfortable. But I didn't want Erin to go either. It seemed as if I had only just found her, and if I turned away now I would lose her forever.

'Are you coming in?' Why did those words seem weird? Why was I holding my breath?

'Do you mind if Brian comes in too?' And just those few words seemed to make everything all right again. I should have known that Erin wouldn't be the type of person who would just kiss and run ... or even the kind of person who would leave a person to look after an injured animal on her own. As I looked at her face, something else caught my attention. Her mouth. Not in the way it had a few minutes before, it was more the fact that it was beginning to swell. Once again I felt the same feelings I had when I had seen Reggie sitting in the back of her car sporting a bandage. The same gushing of love coupled with an overwhelming feeling of protectiveness, and I wanted to scoop her into my arms and feel her nuzzle against my neck.

Tenderly, I lifted my hand to the swollen lip and tentatively stroked it. 'Come on. I'll get you some ice for that.' Without another word, we gathered our canine friends and made our way inside the house, all the time my heart was racing and my stomach was bobbing with happiness. Now was the time to deal with my overwhelming urge to mother and comfort.

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## *Chapter Fourteen*

It was only an hour later when I had the chance to kiss her again, but it felt like a lifetime. Both Reggie and Brian had been fed and loved, and were now curled up in front of the fire looking contented. I felt a little uneasy about kissing her again, or attempting to kiss her again, I should say. Not that I believed she would push me away in disgust, we had come too far for that. It was the fact that her lip still looked painful; I must have thwacked her good and proper. Trust me to put a spanner in the works when I had the opportunity to be with the woman I wanted. I mean, I had been waiting for this moment from near enough the first time I had seen her, and now I had the chance, or the opening, I had made it uncomfortable for her. Totally unintended, of course.

Erin was lounging on the sofa as I came back carrying two mugs of hot chocolate. It was only three o'clock in the afternoon, but I thought we both might have needed the sugar after all the excitement of the day. When I held out the beverage, I knew I had made the right decision. Her face lit up and her hands shot out to accept the hot cup. As she tentatively took her first sip, I saw her wince in pain and felt the inklings of guilt race through me. She must have noticed I was feeling uncomfortable, and before I had the chance to apologise again, she plonked her cup on the side and held her arms open in invitation.

The speed I moved at when putting my own mug down made her laugh. I didn't have to be told twice to snuggle with her on the couch, and the next thing I knew I was in her arms. Nothing seedy or sexual, just in her arms, and for the moment that was perfect. I didn't need anything more than this. Then I felt her lips graze the top of my head, and the previous feeling of not wanting anything more than this increased. Her lips went to the side of my face, and once again ... nothing more was needed. But when those lips touched my lips, I was undecided. On one hand, I felt so wonderfully at home and contented I semi believed I didn't need more than this, but as those lips started to kiss me deeply, and my own began to kiss her back ... ah ... there was a definite urge for more.

Before I knew it, I had pushed her back onto the couch and glorified in the feel of her underneath me. Even though we were fully dressed, I could feel her. So toned and firm. So soft and womanly. And all I wanted at that precise moment was to know what she felt like as I made love to her. The kiss was becoming more ardent, more demanding, and there was a fire burning within me that her mouth was feeding. Hands were examining curves and dips; fingers were playing in hair; lips were taking and giving, and the contact of everything was nearly blinding. The taste of her throat was addictive, but the sounds she made as I sucked and licked the skin were enough to drive me over the edge. My hands were on a mission, and I couldn't stop them. Surreptitiously, they danced at the rim of her top and begged me to allow them to slip inside. I did try to tell them to wait, but they were insistent, and before I knew it, I could feel her stomach dancing underneath my fingertips.

Slowly, I granted them permission to venture higher ... and higher ... and higher, until I could feel the curve of her breast underneath her bra. Just as my fingers reached the spot, her legs decided to wrap themselves around me. God. I was between her legs. I was touching her skin ... kissing her neck ... devouring her, and the best bit was there was still so much to experience. The only obstacle I could perceive would be that I wouldn't survive it - that I would keel over and die before I had my fill of her. Funnily enough, as that thought whizzed through my head,

another one chased it. However long I knew this woman, or made love to her, it would never be enough.

'Steph.' Her voice, God ... that voice. 'Steph.' The way she said my name, the way she made me feel. 'Steph.' I could listen to her saying it forever ...

And it wasn't until my hand was firmly around her breast, and my lips were on the curve of her neck, did I realise she had been trying to get my attention. Pop. There it was - in my head, and throbbing the announcement like a supermarket speaker. 'Steph ... we need to ...' I know we do ... otherwise I think I will explode. '... talk.' Talk? Talk! Why now? Then it hit me. I had been rushing her ... I mean, women like Erin Mason don't just kiss and make out on the first instance. That was more my style, as it appeared.

I shot back from her and nearly fell backwards off the sofa, but she caught my arms before I made the final leap into the land of shame, and pulled me back towards her, where I landed with an oof on her chest. Her arms wrapped around me and pulled me into what I believe to be the best hug I have ever received in my life. My head was cushioned on her breasts and it seemed as if we just clicked together. Erin's heart was racing so much; I could hear it hammering on her ribcage in the attempt to break out. It never entered my head that it was more than exertion ... never thought it was because she was nervous or disturbed about anything we had experienced, which for me was a first, as I always seemed to think of the worse case scenario.

'Steph ... I ... really like you.' I felt the smile I was sporting turn into one of those dippy dreamy ones, and I nuzzled my face deeper into her. 'I have done since I first saw you.' This was getting better and better. I moved my head and lazily peeked up at her face, which was turned down towards mine. Her expression was so serious, as if she was expecting me to say something in return ... shit, she was ...

'Same here.' A flicker of relief passed across her face. 'This isn't just a fling for me, Erin. Believe me.' I lifted my hand and touched her mouth, which by this stage was looking less swollen, but redder than I had ever seen it before. The gesture was to try to signify that what I had said was the truth. This was not a fling ... never could be a fling. I knew at that precise moment that I wanted her in my life for as long as she would have me.

'Good.' But as she said it, there was no smile. Just a solitary word, that almost appeared like a warning of sorts. I am not sure whether the warning was actually in the word, or something that lay beyond it, but I didn't have time to deliberate over it, as she crushed me to her once again. 'I don't want to rush us ... rush into this. You mean too much to me, Steph.' And that final sentence made me feel as if I could take on the world and come out victorious. This woman wanted me ... I meant something, more than just something to her, and there was no way I would do anything to mess this up, even if it meant lying by her side without touching her for the rest of my life.

Lifting up on one hand, I leaned above her. Making sure I had her undivided attention, I spoke slowly and surely. 'And you mean more than the world to me, Erin Mason.' Eyes locked and held, and I am definite the world stood still for the briefest of time. I didn't care. The blueness of her eyes transfixed me, and nothing mattered apart from falling deeply into her and staying there

for the rest of my life. Her hand came around my neck and tangled itself into my hair. Slowly, she pulled me towards her, stopping briefly to examine the honesty I had pouring from within me, before claiming my lips as hers. It was slow and sure ... and seemed to have so much more than any kiss I had ever experienced before. Then it slowed down, and I was left breathless and fulfilled. This woman ... God ... this woman ... and I don't know how to express it more than that. This woman. Or I could say, my woman, as much as she could say the same about me. I was definitely hers for the taking.

Gently, I eased myself back into position on her chest, my head sinking into her breasts, and my heart rate gradually slowing down until it became a form of normal when around her. Then it went quiet. No talking, just quiet. And it felt like the most natural thing in the world, to be lying on my sofa with the most beautiful woman in the world.

It must have been the fire ... the sound of absolute silence, apart for the crackling of the flames and the breathing of four bodies, or maybe the fact I hadn't been sleeping very well, but I could feel my eyelids begin to close. The rhythm of Erin's chest was luring me into the land of nod, and all the desire I had felt surging through me seemed to evolve into some kind of security blanket. The last thing I remember was her voice saying that we still needed to talk, but it didn't worry me ... if the talking she wanted to do was anything like the one before I was more than happy to oblige.

In retrospect, it's a pity I didn't bolt upright and have the talk there and then. But that is another story. Hers, to be exact.

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## *Part Two*

### *Chapter Fifteen*

I didn't mean to lead her on ... didn't mean it to go as far as it did without telling her the truth about me, and the kind of person I was. I'm not proud of what I did to her, or how I acted. All I can say in my defence is that I didn't mean to. Lame, I know. And if I could take it all back and start from the beginning, I would. But I can't. And that's the bit that hurts the most. The fact that I hurt her so bloody much and all I wanted to do was love her.

But I think I am jumping the gun a little here, don't you? I should put everything into some kind of perspective, then maybe you will understand a little better, or better than either Steph or I did. Ok. I'll start from my beginning ... start from where it matters.

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Born and raised in Ireland. One sister. Two parents. A dog. And a charmed life. To an extent, that is. Most things had been easy for me, and I took everything for granted. Even to getting my book published. The one thing that changed all that happened when I fell in love with Teri. Not that I regret the time we spent together. What I did regret was the fact that although I loved her, she didn't love me back - in fact she decided that being with a woman at all was not what she wanted. She wanted a man in her life. A kick in the teeth, don't you think?

At this time I had just finished writing my first novel - all about Teri and how much I loved her ... how much I had relished the time she had given me - how coming out to myself, and my family, had been the most enlightening and frightening time of my life. And for what? I'll tell you ... for me to clam up inside my spiteful shell and look at the world with a very warped perspective.

It was about this time, also, that I was working as a freelance journalist. I had to support myself, didn't I? And this was the time I first heard the name Stephanie Stevenson. You guessed it. I knew her before the meeting over the corkscrew - knew her before I had ever spoken a word to her. Actually, I took pride at the time for being the one who broke her apart.

Now you are seeing the real me ... well, the real me at the time when my perfect world had gone tits up and I had to take it out on someone else, that is. Stephanie Stevenson was what you might call a bit of a legend in the newspaper world. She wouldn't tell you herself, but she was, and still is, a fantastic reporter. Everyone wanted to be her at one stage or another in his or her life. Beautiful, talented, and always got the story. So, when it came about that some woman had topped herself because of an article she had written, obviously this was the time for people to stick the boot in - as you do, well, as people do when they have pain the size of a third world debt raging inside them.

No one wanted the job of writing the article. Come on ... it was 'the SS' we were dealing with. Whatever the person had written, Ms Stevenson would wipe the floor with them and then squeeze the remains into a slop bucket. Rumour had it that she had resigned, but I didn't believe that for a minute. There was no way this woman could just up sticks and give up the best part of her life for something she had no control over. This was just up my street. I needed someone to finish me off. I didn't care about anything or anyone anymore, and what a way to go, eh? I didn't even care that my book was just about to be released ... nothing mattered after I saw Teri piling the last bits of her belongings into the car and driving off into the sunset.

Therefore, I turned into some kind of kamikaze pilot, driven to destruct and taking me along with it. I volunteered to write the article on Stevenson, and I believe that was the first time I had smiled for months. I even went to visit Henry Poole, the devastated husband of his dearly departed wife, Lisa. To see this man willing to talk to me after what happened to his wife was nothing short of a miracle. It was a Princess Diana all over again ... the media killed my wife, and all that. I know I sound like a bitch, and at the time, I believe I was.

But it wasn't long before I knew the reason why Henry Poole was ok with talking to the media. And as the people hater I had become, I felt myself becoming disappointed. Mr Poole didn't believe the article had tipped his wife over the edge after all. The rape had been the catalyst to

that, and whatever anyone had said or done afterwards, it wouldn't have made a jot of difference to the outcome. By all accounts, Lisa had suffered with depression for years ... even attempted to kill herself twice before, but he had stopped her on both occasions. This time he hadn't been so lucky. He had only gone to pick the kids up from his mother's, as she said she had a headache and wanted to lie down. That was the last thing she ever said to him. When he got back, he found her. The kids, thankfully, had decided they wanted to see their friends next door for a while before tea, and after all they had been through seeing their mother floating in a pool of red would have finished them off, too.

As I was leaving, he grabbed my arm and looked me squarely in the face before saying, 'Please tell Ms Stevenson it wasn't her fault. Please.' And I agreed. Lyingly agreed, that is. I knew I would not be writing anything that could make the 'Perfect Stevenson' feel better. Why should I, when I felt like crap? Therefore, the article came out vitriolic and spiteful, all the while convincing myself that I was doing the world a justice. How on earth a woman could choose her career over the life of that poor woman sickened me ... And looking back, I realised that I was a hundred times worse than a thousand Stephanie Stevenson's. She had reported the news, whereas I had done mine from sheer disillusionment with humanity.

And had it made me feel any better? Nope. Just made me fall deeper into myself and contemplate the reason why I was still breathing at all.

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## *Chapter Sixteen*

But life has a weird and wonderful way of informing you that now is not the time to give up on hope. However much I hated myself, there was still my family to think about. Whatever I felt, I would never burden them with it. Nevertheless, I was no way near the happy go lucky girl I had always been. It seemed as if when Teri left, she took the best part of me with her. After the article on Stevenson had been published, I waited with baited breath for her response ... and then nothing. The grapevine had it that she had left the area and would not be returning, but I still held onto the hope that she would be the one to tip me over the edge, and plunge me further into the darkness that was enveloping my life.

This was not to be, though. No return article ... no reporter's pads drawn at dawn ... nothing. Ten months later I got my wake up call ... or should I say a phone call from my sister, Sue. Rob had been diagnosed with cancer, and that kind of snapped things into some kind of perspective at last. Hearing the news saved my life, in a way, because before I knew it, I was the one taking charge over everything. Daisy and George were in the dark about why daddy couldn't play ball or take them to the zoo like he used to do, and I willingly took on the role of the pseudo father ... and mother, if truth be known. Sue was devastated - more so than Rob. He was everything to her ... her reason to smile, as she said. And there he was, wasting away to nothing ... chemo and drugs the order of the day, a wife who found it difficult not to crumble every time she visited him in the ward, and kids who looked at him as if they didn't recognise him.

Every day I spent with them. Every waking moment, I thought about how I could make their lives better. If I was thinking about them, I wasn't hurting, and I know you are now thinking that I did it all because I wanted the pain of losing Teri to ease, but you would be wrong. To see someone you love suffer and be impotent ... that is worse than anything else in the world. Eventually, Sue learned how to adjust to Rob's illness, but I supported them all as much as I could.

It was after about two months of Rob being ill that I found my muse again. I realised that I had to lay the ghosts of my past to rest somehow or other, and the best way was the way I felt the most comfortable. That is how *Rainbows and Shadows* was born. It acted as a journal for me in some way ... as well as telling the events after Teri left - fictionalised, of course. *Into the Light* was doing well, and I was beginning to stand on my own two feet financially. When I wasn't with my family, I was writing, and when I wasn't writing I was with my family. A cocoon of sorts, if you will. If I blocked out everything else, then I would be safe, wouldn't I?

Well, when I say I cocooned myself ... that would be a lie. It was at this time that I got Brian. He was another reason to get up in the morning. And seeing Daisy and George's faces when I turned up at their house with a wriggling mass of black fun was priceless. I told them they had to help me train him, and that he was as much their dog as he was mine. Amazing to think that Brian not only helped me, but he helped the twins to cope too. Everyday I think I fell in love with that dog a little bit more - and by the way he looked at me when he woke up in the morning, I think he felt the same way.

A year passed and things were getting better. Rob was becoming stronger, and the cancer had gone into some kind of remission, even his blonde hair was growing back, but the doctor didn't give him the all clear until nearly fifteen months later. By this time, he was back to his old self, and grasping onto life with both hands. Being around him just made people feel good, and obviously this was the catapult I needed to get me back into the human race once again. I felt the best I had in so long, and when I thought of Teri, I remembered the good times we had spent together rather than the hurt and pain I had lived through when we had first broken up. I didn't blame her now ... the blame didn't lie with either of us, that much I did understand. We just wanted different things - I wanted her, whereas she wanted something else. End of.

One thing that was consistent throughout it all was the memory of what I had written about Stephanie Stevenson. I wanted to apologise to her, and also explain why I had written what I had. I also wanted to tell her the message Henry Poole had asked me to deliver - that it wasn't her fault, but no one knew where she was, or if they did they did an exceptional job of hiding the fact. The only thing I knew was that she was somewhere near the Lakes ... and that was all I had to go on.

And go on I did, as six months after Rob was given the all clear, I was looking at property to buy in the Lake District. It was time for me to move on, as what was good for Stephanie Stevenson was good enough for me. And for Brian. Living in the country had always been a dream of mine, and I knew that Brian would love a place where he could run around all day.

I can't tell you how many houses I looked at. At one time I even considered myself qualified to

actually become an estate agent. I knew all the blurb and metaphors for 'Quaint and Cosy' that could last anyone a lifetime. Then I saw the cottage at Bassenthwaite, and, to tell you the truth, I wasn't overly impressed. I can still remember standing at the window of the cottage looking out at the lake and yawning, wanting nothing more than to go back to the hotel and climb into bed. The owners were yammering on about something and nothing, and I was trying to be polite and listen, but all I wanted was sleep. Then everything changed. The view became so much more breathtaking.

There, in the garden of the neighbour's house, was a woman who just blew me away. She was trying to get a slipper, or shoe, off a Border terrier, and the dog was having none of it. Although she tried to sound angry, there was a musical quality to the laughter she was releasing in spurts, as the dog gripped more tightly to the object. I could hear her trying to cajole him, trying to reason ... beg, order, but the dog gripped harder. Eventually she tripped and fell backwards onto a bush with a yelp, and the dog dropped the shoe and dived on top of her. Muffled laughter came through the open window, and I knew from that moment that I had found my future home. I didn't know anything about the place ... anything about her ... But I wanted to, and that made all the difference.

'Ah ... I see you have spotted Ms Stevenson, our neighbour.'

Bollocks.

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## *Chapter Seventeen*

Coincidence? I think not. Part of me wanted to run away and never return, but the bigger part of me agreed to pay the full asking price there and then. Two months later I was moving in, and God, was I shitting my pants. I wasn't even exactly sure if she was *the* Stephanie Stevenson, as all I had was a rumoured location, and then a surname from the people I was buying the house from.

However, I had made a resolution. As soon as I moved in and met my new neighbour, I was going to tell her exactly who I was and what I had done - if she was the right one, of course. It was the only way to move forward. But as you may guess, making a resolution in your head is very different from actually carrying it out. Part of me was hoping and praying that she wasn't the famed reporter, but just a woman who happened to share the same surname.

As soon as the removal van turned up on the Saturday morning, all I kept doing was going over in my head how I was going to break the news to Ms Stevenson that I was the rat bag who had ripped her apart in the paper. It wouldn't be so bad if I had actually used my real name on the article. But no. Teri had influenced me to use a pseudonym, Ellen Michaels, because she thought it would affect my career as a writer if people knew I worked as a reporter. As if that would have made any difference whatsoever - but being in love made me follow her like a lamb.



Back to 'moving in' day. I think that's what you really want to know, and not about the woman before my obsession of Stephanie Stevenson.

All day I kept on looking over at her place, and never saw her. The only evidence I had was the way the curtains kept on twitching every time I went outside. At least she showed some interest in me - or maybe it was Rob who grabbed her attention? I had not even contemplated the fact she might have been straight, as sometimes when you start thinking on one path it is difficult to think outside the boundaries. This thought made me panic a little. What if I had made the decision to buy the cottage, up sticks and move to the middle of nowhere, and find out that I hadn't a chance in hell? And that topped with the fact that as soon as she found out what I had done, the previous worry about her straightness wouldn't come into the equation anyway.

As time went on, I began to panic more and more. It seemed as if I was building mountains out of molehills, anthills even. There was only one thing to do, and that was to take the bull by the horns, bite the bullet, and do the thing that you do when you are in a situation where the only outcome could be shit or bust. But I couldn't think of an excuse to go around to her house, as I had thought of every thing I needed before I set off. Even milk. It was Rob who saved the day when he demanded a glass of wine to help with all the dust he must have swallowed whilst helping me move. I was in the kitchen at the time, and actually had the bloody corkscrew clutched in my grip. The smile that cracked over my face was priceless.

My stomach was in knots as I walked the short distance to her house. I knew she was in, as I would have noticed if the front door had opened anytime in the last five minutes. I had seen her very briefly as she had got back with a very sorrowful looking dog - it looked as if he had rolled in something smelly and extremely sticky, and I thought of Brian, who would be stuffed full of treats by now.

When I pressed the doorbell (should I have told her that I thought her batteries were on their way out?), there was shouting coming from inside. I wasn't too sure if it was aimed at me, or if someone else was there with her. This thought made me panic a little, and I thought the best form of action would be to leave it a little while, if at all. But that didn't stop my hand shooting out and pressing the doorbell once again. And then again. What was wrong with me? Did I have some kind of doorbell tourettes?

She wasn't what I expected. Not by a long shot. I knew she was fiery when it came to getting a story, but the way she spoke when she answered the door surprised even me.

'What the hell do you want?'

And how do you answer that? Especially when in fact you don't really know what you want. Well, you do ... and now I'm not making any sense. All I could splutter was 'Erm' and then something about sorry for disturbing her. By the looks of her, I could gather she had been in the middle of hosing something down. Her clothes were soaked, and her hair was sticking out in all directions. In order to avoid laughing, I looked down and saw the most angelic little face looking back at me. The dog was sat at her feet holding something in his mouth that had the resemblance of a shoe at one time of another. Nevertheless, for all her cuteness in appearance, there came the

angry vibes that were shooting off her. Therefore, I felt embarrassed, and did the only thing I could think of. I left.

I could hear her shouting for me to wait, but I couldn't. There was no way this woman would ever understand anything, and why was I thinking I would tell her my part in her downfall this early in the game? Because that's what I had promised to do, wasn't it? As soon as she introduced herself, I was going to utter some line about the article and make out they had made me write it. And made me edit the apology ... that line of thinking was not a good way to start any form of relationship, even if it with just your neighbour, is it? I can think of that now, but at the time I just wanted to pass the buck. Amazing to think that when I had first written the article, I had wanted her to be angry with me. But now that I had met her ... Although I couldn't see the reason why I would want to carry on meeting her, if her reaction just then was anything to go by.

The only thing that stopped me was the dog. Even after I had said hello and tickled his head, he wanted to walk me home. Now, if what I know about dogs is right, there is no way a horrible person could have a pet that was so bloody nice. Not that I'm saying if you own a vicious pet it is because you are horrible person ... that's not it at all. It wasn't even her apology that stopped me, although I think she believed it was. I have to admit, she did look a sorrowful sight as she limped towards me; barefoot on gravel - that must have stung like a bitch.

Then she introduced herself. And I didn't say anything. Well, I did, but not the thing I had been practicing saying to her. I came out with something lame like 'I've heard that name before, but for the life of me, I can't place it.' Can't place it my arse. All I had up until that point was the presumption that Ms Stevenson was Stephanie Stevenson, and here she was standing in front of me in the flesh. And there I was lying through my teeth. I think it might have been the feeling that raced up my arm when she grabbed my hand in greeting. To this day, I have never felt anything like it before or since. Have you ever had an electric shock? Not a huge one so it will hospitalise you ... no. A sharp shooting pain ... tingly ... not scary, just weird? That's what it felt like. It raced up my arm, along my chest and expanded until it filled me with energy, almost like I could take on the world. Therefore, rationality and truth telling were out of the window, and I lost the ability to own up my misdeeds. So I did the next best thing. I began to babble on about Rob and the move ... and every thing else I could think about, before actually getting to the point where I asked if I could borrow a corkscrew.

Do you know something, though? Nothing had prepared me for how beautiful she was up close. Green eyes that seemed to sparkle when she spoke, blonde shoulder length hair that seemed to reflect the last glimpses of the sun's rays ... and I felt a sudden rush of emotion race through me, something I hadn't felt in such a long time.

I didn't even notice that I was still clutching her hand. It seemed so natural for it to be there, somehow. A nervous laugh flew out of my mouth, and I yanked my hand away. I missed it immediately.

A few minutes later we were in her house. It was so cosy ... so homelike, that I knew that this woman was very contented with her life and surroundings ... secure in herself, if you know what I mean. But it wasn't until I saw her bending over the kitchen drawer did I find my attention

drawn to her backside. Such a firm, round, wonderful backside, that I actually forgot myself for a moment. Her voice alerted me that I had been out of it for a while, and when I looked at her face I knew that she had caught me in the act.

I felt like curling up and dying there and then on the spot. How do you get out of a situation like this? But I was saved (told you I led a charmed life, didn't I?). A piece of soap was wedged firmly to the back of her jeans, something I hadn't taken much notice of when I had been licking my lips and longing for her. Something I needed to work on, I think. I mean, I barely knew her - knew of her, but didn't know her, and here I was leering after something I knew that in a million pipe dreams, this woman would never look at me twice. Never mind when she found out I was the one who had written the article ...

But something surprised me as I turned to go. She invited me for lunch the next day. Yep. Sunday lunch. Both Rob and me. It's amazing how a first meeting can change your perspective about a person in a few minutes. It also astounds me that what you hear about a person is not necessarily the truth, and what we need to do is assess the situation ourselves. Everything is relative after all. And for all you know I might be feeding you a pack of lies.

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## *Chapter Eighteen*

The next day couldn't come quickly enough. I don't think I slept at all the night before, as all I wanted to do was get around to Steph's and see that smile again. Today was going to be the day I would tell her. I had to, or else what we were building, if we were actually building anything, would not withstand anything - shaky foundations, and all that.

But I didn't. I just grinned and grinned and made small talk all the way through dinner. Steph was so entertaining ... so at ease with herself and her life, that I felt like a twat, and then I grinned some more. On one hand I was glad that Rob was there with me, but on the other, there was nothing I wanted more than to be with her on my own. All I kept on thinking about was how I could make that happen, and unfortunately that gave Rob the opportunity to do most of the talking. Not that I minded him talking ... actually, not that I minded him taking control of the situation and babbling on about the world and everything in it. It was the fact that he told her about his cancer. I know you are thinking 'Why ever not?' I don't mean it in a bad way, but that's not what you do when you just meet someone, is it? Or is it? Maybe it was because I couldn't tell her the things I wanted to tell her as easily as he did. I don't know. But the thing I do know is that she seemed embarrassed for some reason, and I felt the urge to pacify her and make things ok again.

It wasn't long after when it was time to wash up. Rob volunteered to help, and I wanted it to be just her and me in there. That would have been the perfect opportunity, wouldn't it? But no. I was in the hallway playing ball with Reggie ... mainly because from there I could still see her. And whilst writing that last statement I realise that I was a stalker. I should get the t-shirt which says

'Stalker Lesbian. We are where you are' in bold letters.

The opportunity arose again when we were having coffee. Rob 'The Gob' asked her what she did for a living, and I felt the room shrink - unfortunately, I grew in size, or so it appeared. Then the gobshite told her I was a reporter too. Fuck and fuckity fuckster. All I could squeeze out was a 'Not really'. But that didn't stop me punching him one. I knew it hurt him, but he tried to make out that it was a playful jab. What I wanted to do was ram my fist down his throat by this stage, but I was worried that Steph might not want to see the dinner she had prepared again so soon. Rob didn't take the hint - and do men ever? He tried to stir it up; purposefully hinting at my sexuality and that I might have a chance with her. If looks could kill, I would definitely be up for murder one right about now.

When she left the room, I turned on him. 'What are you playing at, you git?' He just laughed at me. 'Why don't you just tell her you're related to a lezza?'

'Because it is more fun to watch you squirm.' I wanted to twat him. Really. But then he turned more serious. 'Look, Erin. You need to lighten up ... meet someone new.' He leaned forward and whispered close to my face in order to make sure that Steph couldn't hear him. 'You and Teri are a thing of the past,' he nodded towards the door where Steph was preparing another drink, 'And I think you and Steph would make a great couple.'

I leaned back on the chair and let out a sigh. 'It's not that simple, Rob.' He attempted to answer, but I stopped him. 'One, she might not even be gay.'

Then he said something that made me get off my arse and get moving. Something simple. Something a child would say if you asked them. 'Well, you won't find out sitting there, will you? Go and help her.'

So I did. As easy and as straightforward as that. I think it was mainly to get away from my grinning brother-in-law, but I went to help. And also I thought now was the time to tell all, and my stomach was not doing a happy dance - although it did feel as if it was breakdancing to a degree.

However, that was not to be (thankfully). I soon found out that today was not the time to say anything, mainly by what I saw when I went to help. It was the way she reacted when I entered the kitchen. Well, not when I entered the kitchen, more like when I tried to help her actually make the coffee. She had dropped the spoon and seemed a little out of it, so I tried to take it off her. I could feel her shaking, and this stunned me. She had seemed so self-confident, so secure in herself, that to note that she was trembling over something as simple as a dropped teaspoon made me try to establish what I thought I knew about her. Which by this stage I realised I knew nothing.

Green eyes looked into mine, and I believe I fell into them. There was so much sorrow looking back at me ... so much vulnerability, that I didn't know what to say or do. All I wanted was for her to be happy ... I would have done anything to make her smile again. Before I knew it, I was touching her face. It seemed the space between me noting how upset she was, to the time I

actually stroked her, had blended. There was no in between. As I pulled my fingers away, I was surprised not to see tears glistening on them.

Steph just stared into my eyes, as if she was reading my thoughts at that precise moment. I felt totally exposed, and had a taste of how vulnerable she had appeared only minutes before. It was about Rob. That's why. She told me so. Couldn't understand why someone so healthy could be blighted with such an indiscriminating disease. I felt the tears well up inside me, and I believe she thought they were about Rob, but they weren't ... well, not all of them. They were all about emotions that were piling up and trying to get out. Maybe it was the realisation that I was a coward, or maybe it was the final cry before I actually said farewell to Teri - who knows, because I sure as hell didn't.

But now was not the time to get all sentimental, was it? I had to be totally British and sniff it all back inside until I could release the pain when I was on my own again. I knew that I had spent too many nights crying over Teri; knew that deep down I didn't love her anymore. In fact, there were times when I actually questioned if I had really loved her at all, or had it been that she was the first and only woman I had ever been with? Talk about the wrong time to start this train of thought. So I did the only thing I could think of. And that was to bring in someone else we could both feel sorry for. Sue. My sister ... long term martyr and my best friend.

But on the mention of Sue's name, I could tell that Steph didn't have a clue about whom I was talking about. I had mentioned her before, hadn't I? When we had been talking last night? ... Ah no. I had babbled and babbled and babbled on about crap, that I hadn't mentioned anything really significant about me, or my life. But when I told Steph that I had mentioned her, she seemed as if she might have known I had a sister, but didn't know her name. I didn't believe her, mainly because I knew I hadn't mentioned her, but I wasn't going to tell her that, was I? And by the looks of things, there were more pressing matters that I hadn't told her about. Nevertheless, I thought telling her the gory details about Sue and how she handled the news was the best way to go. Got me off the hook anyway. And to add the feeling of competence and reliance on what I was yammering on about, I even made the coffee whilst Steph seemed to just stand there nodding her head and grinning. At least I had made her smile.

And what a smile. Such life in it ... such quality and honesty. I felt disappointed when we had to join Rob back in the sitting room, but that was a given. I held the tray aloft and uttered the words, 'Shall we?' And believe you me, they weren't only indicating the steaming cups. To me, they held so much more, and I prayed deep within me, that they held the same message to her. Although I doubted it. Who in their right mind would want someone as socially defunct as me?

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## *Chapter Nineteen*

It seemed as if time was not on my side that afternoon, as it seemed to race ahead of me before I could plan a way to see her again. It wasn't until I was leaving that the idea struck. Rob had bounced ahead like Tigger, and I was standing feeling useless in front of her. Sticking my limp

hand into her firm one, I realised I definitely needed to work on my handshake a little. I couldn't resist just giving her a hug; it seemed as if I needed to smell her for some reason or another. It is times like these that you realise that you are one step away from a psycho ward. But I had to say something, rather than filling my nostrils with the intoxicating scent of her.

'Thank you for today. Thank you.' And then it hit me. Invite her round for lunch ... or dinner ... or supper ... or anything. I wasn't bad in the kitchen, and I knew that I could read a recipe book if push came to shove. When I asked her, I don't know, she grinned widely, but I still wasn't sure if she wanted to see me so soon. Maybe she actually wanted to see the back of me racing away into the sunset. But that didn't stop me trying to charm her with the corniest of lines, 'My. If I knew the promise of my cooking would've brought such a wonderful smile to your face, I would have invited you sooner.' Fuck me. Talk about cheap! But I couldn't help myself ... I was turning into some kind of deluded charmster - a bad one at that. Even I had to swallow the vomit back down, and by the red glow surrounding her, I think she was doing the same.

Rob 'Tigger aka the Gob' shouted something which distracted me for a second, and when I turned back I saw her rebuking her acceptance - well, that's what it looked like. Even when I asked her if she was ok, I wasn't totally convinced that she wanted to see me again, never mind open herself up to botulism. So once again I began to babble. The only thing I could think about was Brian ... how he would love it ... how I missed him and couldn't wait to get him back. At this point I knew I was rabbiting. There I was, yammering on about my dog, and she must have been bored stupid. My only hope was that she didn't think I was a serial killer. But I doubt if she had thought that she would've looked so uninterested ...

And I think you get an impression of how I can rabbit for England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Who on earth would want to have me as their girlfriend? Unless she wanted me to enter the Olympics representing the United Kingdom for talking shite. I am worse when I feel cornered or nervous ... and the more I feel either of those ways, the worse I get.

It wasn't until she said, 'It would be my pleasure,' did I stop to think about what I had asked. Fuck. I asked her to take me out! Shit and fuck. Even for me, although I didn't have much practice, that was quick. God. That was the thing I had asked her first, too. What was the matter with me? Now I could distinctly remember stammering over the words ... clearing my throat *and* stammering over the words 'Ccccoould ... you ... show ...' Jesus! But I think you get the message. Anyone would think I had asked her out on a date. But it wasn't a date.

Or was it? More importantly, she had said yes ...

I couldn't help the beaming smile that flew across my face. 'Great. I'll call around tomorrow, ok?' Whatever happened to playing it cool? Fuck knows. Next thing I knew, I was racing after Rob like a teenager. I wanted to skip, but even in my high state of elation I was aware that she might see me. One thing even worse than talking like a twat is skipping like one.

When I got back to my place, I was in a sense of panic. The house still looked as if a bomb had bounced in, exploded, and promptly exploded again. I had to get things sorted before I saw her again. I couldn't wait until the next day, although when I looked around at all the boxes, it

would've been better if I had asked her for another day. But that was the problem ... I couldn't wait. And the next problem on the agenda was why I wanted to see her as much as what I did. Then another one: a bigger one. I still hadn't told her about the article, and this was getting beyond stupid. If I left it any longer, there would no way I could tell her, was there? There is nothing worse than someone keeping something back from you, especially something as big as this. I should've just told her in the first place, and then maybe we could have climbed over the great big mountain that would have come between us. If she found out another way, that would be like a kick in the teeth. There was no way she would believe it if I told her that I didn't know who she was - I had written the article after all. And I knew that she was reporter ... from Manchester ... who had lived here for four years ...

Talk about putting a dampener on things.

I seemed to slow down in my movements, and the boxes were emptying extremely slowly. From the corner of my eye, I could see Rob bouncing around like a pinball, and all I wanted to do was drug him. I felt low by this stage. I had consciously tricked Steph into thinking I was a nice, trustworthy person, and here I was lying through my gritted teeth. Well, not exactly lying, but not telling the truth, if you know what I mean? To avoid the truth ... is it lying? Can we honestly classify omitting details a lie? Yes. Plain and simple. If we mindfully edit what we say in order to get out of a spot, then yes ... it can be classified as a lie. And this train of thought was getting me nowhere fast. The boxes were staying full as my insides were seeming to empty.

It was Rob who came to my rescue, and I think you believe he came in, gave me a huge hug, followed by a giant box of chocolates, and then sat me down to make every thing all right. Nope. He swanked in, his face showing how pleased he was with himself, and slapped a cookery book down in front of me.

'If you don't ask her to come to dinner, I will do it for you.' He leaned closer. 'And I will tell her you only want to shag her senseless then drop her like a brick.'

All I could muster was 'You wouldn't dare.' But the smile he gave me back indicated he would. 'But you are leaving soon.' I honestly thought I had him on that one, but he smugly pulled out a piece of paper with something written on it. 'What's that?' I felt my heart sink, as I had a sneaky feeling I knew what he had done.

'Whilst you and Rupert Murdoch were making coffee, I kind of wrote down her phone number.' Before I had the chance to ask why on earth he would do something so utterly twattish, he stopped me by dramatically holding his hand up. 'Please, dear lady. You don't have to thank me. It was my pleasure.'

I shot to my feet and towered over him. 'Thank you?' The words spat out of my mouth along with some wet stuff. 'Thank *you*?' More wet stuff, and more anger.

'I said there was no need to th ...'

'You are by far the most annoying git I have ever met, Rob Wyatt.'

He laughed. Bloody laughed at me. The same want to shove my fist down his throat came back with vengeance. This time he didn't have the security net of barfing over Steph's living room carpet to fall back on. I even had my arm raised to complete the momentum, but stopped. There was one thing I wasn't, and that was violent, although in this situation I was more than willing to give up a habit of a lifetime for just one thwack.

But I didn't crack him one. Not because I didn't want to - no. It was because he got in the next line of his defence. 'She likes you.' And there it was. Three little words that made all the difference from wanting to punch his lights out, to sitting with a thud on the sofa. He continued. 'She does, Erin. I could tell.'

'How? You never knew I was gay until Sue told you. Even *after* you had read my book.'

Rob shrugged his shoulders as if agreeing that he knew nothing about lesbians and their ability to blend into the wallpaper. 'Dunno really.' I attempted to stand again, as I believed he had only said the first bit to stop my cracking him one. 'Just the way she kept on looking at you. Especially when we were washing up.'

Ding dong. The bell inside my head was loud and clear. If Rob thought she liked me, even noticed that she had been looking at me, could there possibly be a chance of it being true? The answer to that is ... I don't know, but it wouldn't hurt to at least try, would it?

'You're too late.' He looked at me in a puzzled way. 'I've already asked her over for dinner, and to take me on a tour.'

Rob's laugh was loud and hearty. 'That's my girl!' And for the first time since I began beating myself up about not telling her what I needed to tell her, I felt good again. It was also a reason to pick up the cookery book and flick through.

Now. What would I serve on a 'would be', or even 'could be', date?

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## *Chapter Twenty*

I didn't see her the next day. I spent most of it looking out of the window. It amazed me how long the day seemed when I was left to my own devices and wanting nothing more than to see her car turn into the driveway. Therefore, it gave me the opportunity to get my house to resemble something like a home, something I wouldn't have done if she had been ambling around close to me.

When it came to her actually coming back, I missed her as I was taking a shower to get rid of all the cobwebby spidery things that delighted in sticking all over me and dangling from my hair. One thing that did disappoint me, though, was that I had slipped a note under her door and she



hadn't called. But then again I had told her to call if she couldn't make it. Bollocks. I couldn't believe that I had written that. I should have written, 'Call either way.' I had on the first two notes I had written, but decided they were too long and windy and ripped them up. I even deliberated just popping around to her house to see if she was still up for it. But by the time I had argued with myself about 'Am I a stalker - Am I not a stalker', the lights all went off and I knew she was in bed.

Sleep was a bugger. Didn't want to come at all. All that kept on racing through my head was would she come or not. Eventually I gave up the ghost and climbed out of bed at the ungodly hour of five forty five. If Brian was here already, at least I could've taken him for a walk. But he wasn't due down until the weekend, and at this early stage in the week, it seemed that I wouldn't last until then without pulling my hair out at the roots. Living in the countryside was not what it was cracked up to be, I can tell you that. Owls hoot at the strangest times, and if I heard my bushes rustle once in the night, I heard them rustle twenty times. Coming from the city into what people call the edge of insanity, was no picnic, I can tell you.

After three cups of tea, toast, and a flick through the tv channels, I thought about my neighbour once again. Was she up? Should I call? Should I be locked up for my own sanity and everyone else's safety? I had to laugh at that. I knew deep down I wasn't a stalker, I was just lonely, I guess. And the fact that my next door neighbour was similar in age, and we got on ... well, that would make me want to spend time with her, wouldn't it?

Therefore I decided I would just bob round and see if she was up for dinner later that evening. It wouldn't hurt, would it? Maybe if I strolled out into the garden I might see her getting into her car ... or walking Reggie.

I was right. Well, about the car thing that is. Just as I got outside of my front door, I saw her pulling out of the driveway and on her way to work. Grimacing, I turned to go back inside, and then turned back. Should I make the meal for the evening, or not? She would have told me if she wasn't coming, wouldn't she? Yes. Of course she would. She was a decent human being, and she had said she would come previously, hadn't she?

Decision made, I went back inside. All I needed to do was to go and get the supplies I needed for later. Maybe even pick up some batteries for her doorbell.

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Supplies bought and brought home, Captain. And I felt good, apart from forgetting the batteries. Shopping in Keswick was so pleasant, and I found everything I was looking for. For most of the day I pushed to the back of my mind the fact she might not turn up, and that if she did, I would tell her what I needed to tell her. And when the thoughts did pop into my head, I just popped them straight out again. The meal I was going to prepare didn't take very long to do, and if she didn't turn up, I could just make less. Therefore I had plenty of time when I got back to sit down and have a read of the local paper. It surprised me to see her name on the front page accompanying the article '*Spend a Penny for Your Thoughts.*' But what didn't surprise me was the beautiful crisp style she had. All the humour was there for the taking, but it still delivered the

news. I bet she would have a few complaints about that today, if what I had discovered about the locals so far were true. Not that they didn't have a sense of humour ... not that at all. It was that they took vandalism of their beautiful town very much to heart. Don't blame them really.

After I had read the paper from cover to cover, I folded it up neatly and slipped it into the bottom drawer of the coffee table. Maybe I would read it again later, who knows. I like to look at the style of writing someone uses - tells me so much about the person. And what her style had told me already was that she was very talented, extremely witty, and excellent with words. Maybe on closer inspection I would find more.

Before I had chance to deliberate any more, there was a huge banging sound coming from my front door. It honestly sounded as if someone was trying to get in because a mad axe man was chasing them. There was no way I would ever have thought it could have been Steph ... it sounded demented.

But it was. And I found myself saying the only thing I could say, and I knew it was lame as soon as the 'You're early' slipped through my lips. I tried to make it up with garbled words about how pleased I was that she was willing to come, even though for a moment I thought she had come to give me the knock back. I even tried to get her inside at one point, tempting her with the offer of seafood. As if! I honestly believe at that moment in time I was not at my most rational, but then she did something even I wasn't expecting. She lifted her arm and sniffed her armpit. Unusual, if I may say so, and almost hypnotic. I felt the need to do exactly the same thing, but felt my arms pinning themselves to my sides in defiance. There was no way they were going to let me make an even bigger fool out of myself ... well, even more than I already had. So, I did the next best thing. Yep - you guessed it. I laughed like a maniac.

Her face was priceless. When I say priceless, I obviously mean adorable. She was like the proverbial kid with her hand stuck inside the cookie jar ... or nose up her pit, in this case. So, off I went into gabble mode again and blurted out that I had read her article. What a fucking stalker I was turning out to be. That's what she must have been thinking at any rate, as her expression showed one of shock, then embarrassment. Did I stop? Did I buggery. I went on ... and on ... and churned up phrases about writing style, as if that was going to get my stalker impression off the hook. Eventually, I think she took pity on me and started to laugh, and for the life of me I can't tell you what about. If I knew, I would have done it again, as she had the most addictive laugh I have ever heard.

Before I knew it, she was climbing back in her car and driving the short distance to her house, and I was left standing on the doorstep like a prize one nugget, grinning and waving as if I wouldn't see her again for at least five years. Then she disappeared inside the house without a backwards glance. There was no way that this woman would ever look at me than anything more than a neighbour. And why on earth did I feel so bloody disappointed?

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I worked like a mad woman. Honestly. Its amazing how time consuming it can be when you want everything to be perfect. Even Reggie's food ... bless. I couldn't wait for him to meet Brian

- they would get along so well. Hopefully just as well as both their mammas. Another bit of wishful thinking there, I believe. But you can't blame a girl for trying, can you?

When everything was nearly ready, I decided that it was time for me to get myself sorted. I didn't want her to come around and find me stinking of seafood ... imagine the embarrassment? After turning everything down, or off, I slipped up to shower and choose something to wear. I had all day to find the right outfit, but oh no ... I had to wait until I didn't have the time to get all bloody picky and hate every item of clothing I owned. When I look back at how long it took me to choose a white shirt and a pair of jeans as my ensemble, I can still cringe. I must have tried every single piece of clothing I owned on before settling for near enough the very first thing I pulled out of my wardrobes. I wanted to look good, but not the cocktail dress and tiara good. Even I knew that was going over the top a tad, although I did try on a few dresses, but dismissed them as slutty.

When she arrived, I didn't feel ready. I wanted to run upstairs again and change, as I still didn't like the outfit I was wearing. But that all went into the dust as I saw her standing on my doorstep smiling at me. For a minute I felt a little stunned, and when Reggie made a noise it kind of broke the spell. Looking down at him I felt so much love well up inside and flow out into a gaggle of smooch. He was sporting a red bow tie that made him look absolutely adorable ... even more than usual, if that was at all possible. Steph stood there looking as pleased as punch because I had noticed her son and heir, and that made it seem even more like a family gathering. Strange, I know, as in reality I wasn't a part of their family.

Before I had the chance to think of anything else, Reggie was off at a pace and into my kitchen. I had put everything back onto to finish cooking, and it smelled wonderful, if I do say so myself. When Steph walked through, her perfume wafted underneath my nostrils, dispelling the scents from the kitchen and filling me full of her. Wham. I felt my legs give just a little bit, and had to lean on the door to make sure I didn't fall over and lie at her feet in a puddle of stupidity. What was this all about? I barely knew the woman, but she seemed to have an effect on me that I had never experienced before. My heart was banging so loudly, I was definite she could hear it. And when I saw her staring at my chest, I was convinced she could see the excessive rise and fall of it from where she was standing.

It wasn't until I saw her lick her lips that I knew that she wasn't thinking about the brass band I could hear coming from inside my rib cage. Deep down I wanted her to be licking those precious lips because she was looking at me, but in reality I knew it was because she was hungry ... but that didn't stop me licking mine back. It was as if I was licking hers, if you know what I mean? And if you do, can you explain it to me, because at this rate I was becoming more and more fucked up. I even started to rattle on about what the evening would consist of ... talk about being a twat. If I would have given her a printed out version, I doubt I would have batted an eyelid. I was becoming obsessed in more ways than one. I think by this stage she was becoming a tad uncomfortable and was seriously regretting accepting an evening with a maitre de, because as soon as I had spluttered the last of my 'To do' list, she made an excuse about seeing what Reggie was up to.

When she had disappeared through the kitchen door, I just stood there and allowed the feeling of

being a complete waste of space (slash stalker and leech) wash over me. What was I doing? All I seemed to allow to happen was for me to show her that I wasn't worthy of her wiping her boots up and down my back ... hobnailed boots ... hobnailed boots covered in cow shit, to be more precise. If I carried on like this she would begin to avoid me, and that was the last thing I wanted to happen. The thing I couldn't quite grasp was the reason I was acting like this in the first place. I had never gone to pieces over anyone else before ... even when Teri left. So why now? And why her?

Then I remembered something even more important than my gradual decline into mental illness. Tonight was going to be the night where I sat her down and told her about the part I had played in her downfall. I had to. This was getting beyond the proverbial joke. If I told her after feeding her full to the brim with good food ... maybe plied her with wine ... then maybe she would find it in her heart to forgive the fact I was a total shit who had the means to stop her feeling the guilt she must have been carrying around with her for the last four years. There was one thing I knew for definite, and that was that Stephanie Stevenson wasn't the cold hearted bitch everyone had said she was. She was good at her job, and delivered a very good story, but there was no way she would ever hurt another living creature if she could avoid it.

My instincts were right. As soon as I entered the kitchen I saw her on her hands and knees trying to gather together the rubbish from my bin. Reggie had done something that Brian loved to do ... and that was to discover treasure that he believed I had lost. In the shape of the vegetable peelings, that is. The look on Steph's face was an absolute picture. Green eyes looked up in shame as she offered the peelings out for me to see. Twinkling brown ones stared at her then me, and then back to her again, making it obvious that Reggie, the bow tied gentleman, wasn't going to take the can for the mess on the floor. For some strange reason, I think she thought I would go mad. But as any dog owner, and lover, knows, they are worse than kids. If they can find a reason or an opportunity to embarrass you, they will. There was only one thing to do ... help. Oh ... and take the piss. Well, given the circumstances, that's all I could think about doing.

As I was getting up from my knees, my eyes went to hers again. She looked at me with such tenderness and thanks that I couldn't help my next action. Before I knew it, my traitorous hand had shot out, and I was nipping the end of her nose between my thumb and forefinger. Such a natural thing to do, well, as I was doing it, but as soon as I had contact I realised it wasn't the 'done thing'. Steph's face blazed crimson, and I knew for definite I had overstepped the mark. Trust me and my ability to screw up the tiniest of gestures. I was just thankful I was now standing straight. It made it easier to scuttle off to the other side of the room and pretend I was inundated with chores, when in fact everything was done.

It was at that moment that I knew for sure. Tonight was not going to be easy.

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## *Chapter Twenty-One*

She liked the food. Thankfully. I could tell she was a seafood lover, and I had certainly made the

right decision when it came to Reggie ... the way he wolfed the beef down brought a tear to my eye. But not as much as his farts did a while later. It was just a shame that when he decided that it was time to show his delight in his food, it was through the guise of an air biscuit.

Unfortunately, I was in mid sentence; therefore, I had my mouth open and got a decent sized taster of the effects of my cooking.

You can imagine how difficult it was to ask the simple question 'Did he just break one off?' when you were trying, desperately, to keep the contents of your stomach down. Reggie didn't look fazed in the slightest. A couple of sniffs to his backside, and he was set to go again. After a while of inner prayer, I adjusted myself to the fact that there was no way this boy was ever going to ease up ... and the only way I could cope with the crackle, pop, and stun man was to pretend it wasn't happening. Steph seemed embarrassed at first, but then got to the stage where she began to feel more comfortable sharing a room with the smallest toxic waste container this side of the Lakes.

I can't tell you what the conversations consisted of ... they just were, if you get my drift. Whatever we spoke about was lively and entertaining, but nothing too in depth. Therefore, I didn't get the opportunity to spill my guilt, not that I tried very hard, that is. Whenever the words popped into my head, I metaphorically pushed them out again. Why spoil such a good evening? I could tell her tomorrow, couldn't I? And it would be better in the long run, wouldn't it? There was more of a chance of her forgiving me if she got to know me first, wouldn't there? I know ... I know ... a cop out. But by this stage I was too far gone. You would have been too if you could have seen her. She was totally engaging ... breathtaking (and that wasn't because of Reggie, although he did have the ability to take your breath away, but not in the same way - obviously). The more time I spent chatting, the more I could feel myself falling under her spell. I do believe that woman has the greenest eyes I have ever seen ... the most perfect mouth ... a smile to make my insides jiggle and dance in time with my rapidly banging heart.

So. I kept my big fat mouth truly and tightly shut. For once. Pity I hadn't done that four years ago.

Sitting at the table does have its delights, but I wanted to make things a little more comfortable. Therefore, I suggested moving into the sitting area. Steph wanted to help me clear the table, but I wanted to clear my head ... and if truth be known, just to get a little fresh air.

I left her to play with Reggie and slipped into the kitchen to load the dishwasher. I could have done it all in five minutes, but I took this opportunity to have a really good think about what I was allowing myself to get in to. And the very first thing I thought of was 'Get in to what? She comes round for dinner and you are here making wedding plans.' I had to laugh at myself, but like all truthful realisations, the laugh came out bitter and tinged with sadness. It wasn't as if I wanted to get hitched to her, but I would have liked the chance to allow myself the comfort of believing she liked me more than a neighbour likes another neighbour. Friends? Were we? Or was it for convenience she came around? I was the only other single woman of her age in the area ... maybe it was out of necessity that she was here.

And I'm getting on my own nerves, never mind getting on yours. Why I had to stand in the

kitchen watching the kettle that, supposedly, never boils, I'll never know. I needed to get out ... you know ... meet other people ... mix ... socialise more. After Teri, I hadn't given myself the opportunity to get over what had happened. I had submerged myself inside the cocoon of my family, swallowing everything they had ... being their rock, when in reality I needed the rock for myself.

It was then it truly hit home. They were my rock in a way. Through Rob's illness I had become a different person to the one Teri had left behind. In my own way, I had grieved over the failings of a relationship that was one sided through the love and support of a family in crisis. Watching people pull together ... being a part of that scenario actually helped me cope with what life was throwing at me. And even though I believed that I was on the mend, it was times like this that I realised that in fact I needed to do more. I had to allow myself to become a friend to Steph, rather than just jump her bones. I made a decision there and then to go back into the room and tell her everything she needed to know.

Of course I didn't. I'm a definitely too much of a wimp for that, as I found out.

When I entered the room I saw her looking at the picture of Brian. She looked startled for some reason or another, guilty even. But what was there to feel guilty about? It was only a picture. If I had been in her position, I would have had a really good rummage around whilst she was out of the room. However, I doubted Steph was the kind of person who would interfere with other people's belongings ... unlike me.

Therefore, I felt myself trying to give comfort to her, for some strange reason, and began to talk about something she was interested in. Dogs. My dog, for that matter. He was a gorgeous fella, if I do say so myself. As I was waxing on about him, I noticed that Reggie had rolled over onto his back and was begging to be tickled. Please. If you learn anything at all whilst reading this story, let it be this. Never ... ever ... fall for the cute card, when you know for definite that the perpetrator has spent the best part of an hour turning the air in your house a toxic green. The minute my hand touched his hairy belly - crack. It was like Chinese New Year. The worst part was that the smell immediately flew up both my nostrils and into my mouth. God only knows how I didn't vomit there and then.

When Steph decided it was time to allow Reggie to alleviate his 'wind problem', I must admit I felt relieved. Then guilty, as I believed the relief must have shown on my face - if the expression of eating death had disappeared, that is. I didn't want her to go ... in fact, I didn't want Reggie to go either ... I only wanted the beef to leave, preferably in the form of him popping outside, killing the grass, and then coming back to sleep contentedly at our feet. But I understood.

Whilst she was getting herself sorted I thought of the uneaten dessert. It would have been a waste to let it sit there all night, only to be thrown away the next morning. So ... into the kitchen I went to make up a doggy bag. I looked at the dish of beef that I had prepared for Reggie in case the first bowl wasn't enough, but decided it wouldn't be in mine, Steph's, and even Reggie's best interest if I poisoned him on the very first evening I had cooked for them both.

Standing at the door, I pushed out the biggest smile I could muster, and the weirdest thing

happened. I was sure that Steph sighed. You know, one of those sighs that kind of says 'I have too much going on inside me right now to actually formulate a sentence.' Or was it my imagination? Did she actually sigh, or did she push it down? And why sigh in the first place? It was only left over dessert.

The minute she turned her back on me and started on her way home, I missed her. I know I'm fucked up - you don't have to tell me. But it felt as if we had known each other for longer than we actually had. Inside, my brain was in overdrive. It was battling to find a reason to see her as soon as possible, but it kept on coming up blank ... well, until my gut had a stroke of genius.

'Any chance of that tour when you are free? I'd love to see the place through your eyes.' Then held my breath. My brain was thinking 'Why didn't I think of that?'

'It would be my pleasure.'

No. Definitely mine.

However, my gut didn't know where to stop. It had received the correct response from her, and now thought it was omnipotent.

'What? Not even a hug goodnight?' Why oh why was I born at all? Why couldn't I just have said goodnight, like a normal human being. But no. I had to push the boundaries and expect more, didn't I? The reason why I am waffling on is because I saw Steph's whole body freeze after the words had escaped. Even my gut was thinking 'Oh shit', whilst my brain was complaining that he was in fact in charge, and if it had been left up to him, I wouldn't be dying right about now.

The next minute I was in her arms. God. In her arms. Her face in my neck and being allowed to smell her hair was the ultimate in contentment. I didn't want to let her go ... even though I could feel her pulling away; I wanted to just hold her. I wish I could say it was nothing sexual, but I would be lying. But it was more than just sex ... much more. It felt as if I should always be in her arms ... that I have been missing this part of my life for too long. Now, I know you are thinking 'She's like a teenage lad', and usually I would agree with you, but it - I - wasn't like that. I hadn't felt the urge to be intimate with anyone for the last four years and then BAM ... here I was becoming all hormonal. And bugger me that the next thing I did was plant one on her cheek. I felt a burning sensation and wasn't sure if it came from her or me ... but by the looks of her embarrassed face, I think I had overstepped the mark. Again. So ... back into babble mode.

Words flew out in all directions, and the long and the short of it came out with me admitting I liked her as a friend. A friend, for fuck's sake! Why did I have to say anything? Why couldn't I just let the kiss say that, because it sure as hell said the opposite when I firmly ground home the fact I thought of her as a *friend*? I should have spluttered 'I fancy the arse off you, Steph. You ok with that?' As what I had said was near enough the same thing, except that the line I had uttered added 'but I'm embarrassed about fancying you.'

See? Total babble. I can't even write about it without it all coming out tits up. As you can tell, this woman had made me behave in a way that I hadn't behaved since I was in High School and

arsing about in class, something I'm sure most of us can relate to.

When I entered the house, I allowed myself the pleasure of just stroking my fingers along my lips. They had been on her cheek ... although I wished they had the momentum to actually get a grip on her lips. See? Never satisfied. One minute beating myself up about becoming too friendly, the next I was doing ten rounds with guilt, and then back to day dreaming again. Why couldn't I just be satisfied with having her in my life?

Then it hit me. The reason ... the reason why I wanted to be satisfied with just having her in my life is this ... When Steph found out that I had written the article, I would be yesterday's news ... and tomorrow's chip wrappings.

Feeling drained, I made a move towards the stairs. I wasn't tired; just beat, in the 'feeling beat 'cos I am beat' kind of way. I just prayed that I could have a sleep without dreaming.

No such luck, as it turned out.

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## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

I said that I didn't want to dream, and in a way, I wish I could say with all honesty that is what I truly wanted. But the dreams I had didn't hold any malice. Not by a long stretch of the imagination. They were very pleasant dreams, in fact. So why did I say 'No such luck' then? To explain more fully ... they were just dreams, and I knew in the light of day that I had no chance of making them real.

I'm not making any sense ... like usual. It would probably be best if I were to explain them more fully.

Picture the scene ... very similar to the one I had shared with Steph earlier that evening, actually. But there was something ethereal about the set up. Candlelight, as candlelight tends to do, made the room seem misty - but it was even more misty than actual candlelight. I know! I can't explain it better than that. Maybe because my focus was on her eyes ... so green ... so delectably green, and devouring me whole. Lights danced behind them, just as if the candles were in fact there instead of around the room.

Breaking away before I actually fell into her, I looked down and at my hand. There sat an innocent oyster, so perfect and round, and the imagery of the treasure found between her legs became all too real. Or was it between my legs? I'm not sure, but what I do know is that when she placed her perfect lips around the delicacy, I felt the whole of my groin contract with pleasure. It was the way she sucked it inside her mouth, the way she deliberately consumed me whole as well as the oyster that made me moan with abject want and need. Green eyes fluttered closed, only to reopen with a carnal need apparent and fighting to restrain itself. I didn't want that need to be restrained, so I lifted another oyster, slipped the knife inside the shell and eased the lid



off. All the while, Steph was watching my every move.

Two ... three ... four oysters, all delivered in the same way ... all eliciting more promise from the woman who engaged all my attention. After each oyster, I couldn't help but trail my fingers over her lips, praying each time that she would make a move and break the stalemate. I wanted her so much ... so fucking much. Inside I was dying for want of her. One touch and I knew it would spell a trip down the road I would never return from.

And then it happened. Her mouth opened slightly as I was stroking her lips, and she sucked my finger inside, her eyes fluttering closed briefly, before opening up to confirm that at that moment in time, she wanted me as much as I wanted her. Gripping my wrist, she pulled my hand closer, brushing her lips along the skin and bringing the hairs on my neck and arms to full attention. One by one, she sucked and loved each digit in turn. I was enraptured by her, by the action, by the sensation of being totally at her mercy. Pulling her closer, I knew I would have to take those lips for my own, taste those lips, own those lips even for a moment, or else I would fizzle and fade.

Just before I got there, just before contact, she stopped and held my gaze. I couldn't break eye contact, even if someone had smashed inside my house at that precise moment. Breathing was laboured, demanding and rapid, but we just stared into each other - not at, but into. It seemed as if at that moment, I could read her ... and I allowed myself to fully open up just for her. I wanted her to know the true me, the person who wanted her so much, needed her so much, that the mere thought of not having her in my life was enough to make my heart weep.

To put into words the feeling as she closed the gap between us have not yet been invented. The emotion I felt welling and pouring from me into her, and then back again, I doubt has ever been rivalled. Nothing could match this ... nothing. Everything faded into blackness, and all that existed were her and me ... me and her. That's all that mattered. The feeling of her fingers in my hair completed something I didn't know was missing. I know this all sounds like something you would read from a trashy romantic novel, and before this dream I would have said exactly the same thing as you, but now ... now was different. Now was now ... and as different as I never ever believed I could ever achieve, or, in fact, ever achieve again.

Steph's body moved more into me, and I accepted all she had to give. I wanted to pull her into my arms, lift and carry her upstairs, and make love to her for as long as she wanted me. Instead I allowed my hands the freedom they craved. Carefully, and gently, I slipped one underneath her top, the awareness of naked skin all too much.

'I ... *want* ... you.' I could barely breathe I wanted her so much. 'I want ... *you*.' I could feel tears throbbing at the back of my throat, as the emotion of the moment was becoming too much. Inside I was alive ... on fire ... demanding and ready to become the heavyweight champion of anything for just one chance ... one chance to show her that I would never hurt her ... never leave her ... never take what was offered and not treasure and cherish each molecule that came from her to me.

I didn't wait ... couldn't wait. My hands were slipping further south to their final destination. I needed to know that she wanted me as much as I wanted her ... needed to feel the wetness

between her legs and see if it matched the flood of desire pooling between mine. Soft, downy hair greeted my eager fingers. Perfect, but not enough. Down further. Yielding folds parted at my appearance, breaking apart like a ripe fig ...

'*God.*' The first word she had uttered for so long, and one I had been praying for. If she had said no ...

But there was something not quite right. Another noise came into the fray, and I could feel Steph becoming distracted. I wanted to scream at her to ignore the incessant ringing ... to disregard the blatant intrusion into our moment, but she was no longer fully with me. She was going, fading, and so was the scene ...

Opening my eyes, I realised I was alone in my bed. The aching between my legs was agony. So close, yet ...

She wasn't here ... hadn't been here. The torture of knowing that it was unlikely she would ever be here hit me, and I released a sob into the air. I needed her so much ... needed her to be here with me and allow my dreams to, for once, become true. Even if it were only for one night, at that moment I believed that would last me a lifetime.

I should have gone to sleep. Should have shaken my head and laughed at the situation, but I couldn't. Here I was, lying in bed and wanting a woman I barely knew. But I couldn't laugh ... couldn't shake off the wanting and yearning and needing I felt for Steph. It was all too real ... too new and real. It seemed as if I had been waiting for her my whole life, as if she were the reason I had been born at all.

How stupid. How fucking ludicrously stupid. All I needed was a good shag - that was it. No soul mate reunion ... no 'I've waited a lifetime for you.' I needed sex. A good fuck. Full stop. The reality of it only being me in that oversized bed didn't deter me ... one of the reasons why God gave us hands, don't you think?

Slipping my hand below the covers, I could feel the waistband of my shorts acting as a barrier. Slowly, I inched my way inside, fingertips playing with the hair, and wanting nothing more than to push down further and rid myself of this ache. My other hand had decided to come into the action, and silently slinked along my stomach, making circles on the tightening flesh. One hand higher - the other lower, and both of them party to the gasp that left my lips. I wanted to rush and claim my prize, but there was another part of me that wanted to take time in eking out this action I felt had been denied me in my dream.

Separating my folds, I was greeted by wetness I hadn't experienced in such a long time. A smile crept along my face, which opened up as my fingers dipped even lower. My other hand was teasing an erect nipple by this stage, and the joint sensations were taking this want even further than I thought possible.

When I reached the core of this desire, I stopped ... just the one finger begging entrance ... then began to circle luxuriously, as if I had all the time in the world. Hips began to lift and push,

wanting to assert authority and take what I believed was owed to me. Funny expression, to say the least. But if you have ever dreamed a dream of someone you just couldn't have, wanted something you just couldn't have, then I guess you will understand.

Momentarily, the urge to satisfy left me. Maybe it was because I knew it was just me... maybe it was because I realised that the need I had could not be satisfied by these two hands after all. It was then I wanted it even more than I had previously. Strange, but true. I wanted to show myself, for some Godforsaken reason, that I could be contented ... satiated ... satisfied, without the help of the green-eyed beauty who eluded me.

Green eyes ... gorgeous green eyes ... green eyes that swiftly appeared before me like a hologram. The room seemed to become brighter, as if an ethereal light had been turned on. But I couldn't see past those green eyes ... they hovered ... they danced and sparkled. They spoke to me about love and want and desire. They promised me fulfilment and contentment. And that was it ...

Inside. One stroke. Deep. It wasn't me and my meagre two hands ... or even one finger, anymore. It was her. Her and me. She was inside and filling me with just one finger. It wasn't just the finger ... it was so much more ... so much more. Then it was out ... and I was left wanting again ... Then back in ... and out ... and in. I wanted more ... I needed more ... I wanted her. The rhythm was speeding up, and I could feel my breathing becoming more and more ragged. One finger was joined by another ... and then another, and I was pushing and pulling ... my left hand nipping my nipple between agitated fingers, forcing me to grit my teeth and grind them together.

Shocks were splattering and dispersing throughout my body, and I could feel the sweat seeping through my pores. Lifting my legs higher, and opening them wider, I could push even more deeply inside. Then again ... more deeply ... then deeper ... and the three fingers I was thrusting in and out were also scraping along the contracting walls.

Faster and faster ... deeper and deeper, I knew the time I could flip over into the sense of wonder I needed was near. It was Steph ... her and me ... Steph ... the one I wanted ... she was here, she had to be ... It was Steph ... the green-eyed woman who was above me and taking me with everything she had. And I was frantic ... my movements were uncontrolled and delirious ... I was thrusting upwards onto her fingers ... thrusting forwards and into her ... thrusting ... thrusting ... thrusting ...

I am definite I heard her voice ... quietly, almost not really there. One word. Just the one.

*'Erin.'*

Unmistakeably elusive, but as real as I could ever imagine it to be. And it was enough to send me tipping and tripping and flying into ecstasy, her name gripped between defiant lips and refusing to become airborne. It was as if a firework had exploded inside me ... the colours magnificent and vibrant, the booming of nerves colliding together to make a triumphant rainbow of blue ... yellow ... orange ... and green. Most of all ... green. Just like her eyes ... her eyes ... those eyes

which were with me still, and looking at me with understanding and compassion, so much so, I wanted to cry with both joy and despair.

Wet fingers slipped from inside me, and I sensed that if they stayed there I could experience this wonder all over again. But I couldn't do it. It was the fractured feeling of joy and despair that stopped me.

Turning over onto my side, I looked out from my bedroom window. My breathing still heavy and uneven. From this position, I could see her house. The place I wanted to be. The place I needed to be. But I wasn't there ... as you well know. I was lying in my oversized bed, alone, and understanding that having two hands didn't compare to sharing what I was feeling inside me with the woman only a short distance away. It was the knowledge we were a million miles apart that made the tears begin to flow.

And as I lay there in the early morning, I allowed these tears their freedom. Allowed the emotion of what was, and could be, come into the real world at last.

Click. I watched as a light pinged on in the upstairs of her house. She was up. And like all the best stalkers, I continued to watch her shadow pass to and from the window until the lights came on downstairs. I knew it wouldn't be long before she would be taking Reggie out for his walk, and I also knew I had to at least speak to her before she went. I could lie at this point and say it was because I wanted to tell her how I was feeling - not about just wanting her, Jesus ... no. About what I had done to her in the past - the article - the omitting the truth from what I had written ... tell her all and see where our relationship went from then on.

Decision made, I was up and racing towards the bathroom. I didn't want to see her and smell of sex, did I? Or did I? I think at the moment a refreshing shower was the order of the day.

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Not long after, I was outside. Why I thought standing about in the garden and waiting for her was a good idea, I'll never know. How fucked up would that look? The only thing I could think about doing was some gardening, and to tell you the truth, I didn't have a clue where to begin. I had spent the whole of my life in the city, even when I lived in Ireland. Plants were an alien concept to me. But that didn't stop me yanking anything out of the ground that bore a semblance to something of the weed ilk.

It wasn't long before I was getting stuck into it, and to tell you the truth, the labour actually made me feel better - can't say the same about my armpits though. The shower was definitely a waste of time, as it wasn't long before I was covered in dirt and sweating like a horse.

The worst of it was that because I had decided to join the team of the tv show *Ground Force*, I didn't see her coming back from her walk. And when Reggie decided to launch himself at me I was happy I didn't scream or shout out an eff word. A curt, yet tame, 'Buggeration!' was the only thing that appeared - well, followed by a laugh, which was mainly brought on by nerves at actually standing there in front of the woman who had been the centre of my imagination only

mere hours before.

'He frightened the crap out me.' What else to say? He did. But not as much as my need to spill all in one foul swoop did. I do believe at that moment in time, I was the closest to having a panic attack as I have ever been. My chest was heaving, and I knew everything about my body language screamed guilty. I could even see Steph looking at my chest as if she were expecting my heart to fly out and slap her in the face alongside my confession. 'Good morning, fella.' I had to speak to Reggie first ... had to, as I thought if I directed the first bout of waffle right at Steph, I wouldn't have the sense to know when to stop. It was the look on her face that stopped me making a total arse out myself. She seemed so rested and relaxed ... celestial, in a way. I leaned over and started to fuss over the excited dog.

As quick as the panic had been there, it disappeared, 'And good morning, Steph.' Normal. In control ... and followed by a smile I had conjured up from somewhere in the coffers inside me.

'Good morning, neighbour. Sleep well?' Fuck. And then FUCK. She knew. She had to. Why was she blushing? Why was I faltering? And why was I walking closer to her when she would see how fucking red I had become? I don't know how she knew that I had taken myself with her image in front of me last night - or early hours of the morning, but she did. The expression, and colour, on her face paid claim to that.

There was only one thing to do ... be stupid. Although I had no difficulty at all of pulling that act off the way I had been behaving lately. The weird part about acting stupid is that it really takes hard work ... and stamina. All I could think of doing was repeating what she had said - you know - ask her how she slept. I think that in all the 'Look at me. I'm an idiot' competitions, I would be a winner hands down. But it was the increasing colour of her face that alerted me that all was not well ... to be more specific ... her not *being* well. I honestly believed she was about the keel over and die right in front of me. She was purple. A luminous purple, to be exact.

'Honestly. I'm fine.' This was my chance to take the focus of how bloody uncomfortable I had been feeling. All the while I was playing Florence Nightingale, she was stammering out a response that she didn't need assistance. It wasn't until I realised I was becoming obsessed that I let her be. She was stumbling over excuses by this stage - something about winter wear, which for a minute I didn't believe, but hey. As soon as she mentioned Friday, and wanting to be with the village idiot/stalker (me, if you were wondering), I felt my whole body relax. It wasn't just the thought of spending the day with her either ... it was the thought that Brian was coming on that day too. And Sue, Rob and the kids ... and yes ... that was an after thought. I missed my man - you don't blame me, do you?

Funny thing was the expression on Steph's face changed as soon as I mentioned my dog. She seemed to close up in front of my very eyes. Then when she said she was going away on the Friday, I ... well, let's just say, I didn't believe her. Was it because she felt uncomfortable about Rob? Or was she shy about meeting Sue? It couldn't be because of Brian, because there was one thing I knew for definite about this woman was that she was a dog lover. Did she think that my dog wouldn't like her dog? That they'd fight?

It was at this moment I let my guard down. Didn't realise it, but I did. And the next thing I remember doing before I went to the land of purple again was admitting to Steph I had told every one and their mother about her. What the fuck? Why would anyone tell everyone about their neighbour? Why? Other than they fancied them ... or if they suspected them of being a serial killer ... What to do .... What to ...

Reggie. The poor little fella. He was contentedly itching his ear, and didn't understand that he was the key to me getting myself out of one of the numerous sticky situations I seemed to land in whenever I was around his mamma. 'And they can't wait to meet you either. Especially Brian.'

There it was again. That look that said everything, yet nothing. And the silence was too loud.

'Anyway. I'd better get to work.' She seemed colder than she had been. Distant. And she was becoming more distant as she was moving away from me. 'See you Friday morning, then? About nine thirty?' I didn't want to wait until Friday to see her again. That was two days away. Two days! And I still hadn't said the thing I wanted to say ... you know ... Article, although even to me, the mere mention of that by now was beginning to bore the tits off me - never mind your tits, if you don't mind me bringing in your ladies at this point in order to drum the point home.

But like the ultimate wuss, I didn't say anything. Didn't rabbit on. Didn't spill the beans. Just took it on the chin. I do believe I kept my disappointment well and truly hidden.

'Nine thirty sounds great.' Although it would have been better if it had been sooner.

She left a couple of minutes after, vowing to walk my legs off me and for me to grab an early night. And as the words, 'Consider me in bed at seven,' popped out from my lips, I knew I was going to blush like an idiotic bolisha beacon again. Therefore, the only thing I could think of doing was messing about with my bush.

Funnily enough, it was near enough the same thought that made me want to light up like a Christmas tree in the first place.

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Those two days went too slowly. TOO slowly. It seemed that being in a rural place, time had adopted a new role. Or ... should I say it took on new meaning? Whatever it was, time was definitely longer in the Lakes than I could ever remember it being. Weirdly, though, when I had spent time with Steph, it had reacted in the opposite way. A whole evening with her seemed to pass in a blink of an eye, whereas when she wasn't in the picture ... God. Talk about dragging out. Every action, chore, or thought made me appear as if I was the only fast moving figure in a freeze frame. It was almost comedy. Almost. If you weren't living it, that is.

By the time Friday arrived, I was more than ready to spend time with Steph. I would even have considered having lunch with a ninety-year-old politician. Anything to break the monotony of the days. I think it was mainly my fault that I found everything dull and lifeless. I hadn't given the area a chance - not even gone out for a wander by myself. I was saving that for when I was

with her. I wanted to see things how she saw them. And yes. I am a sad fucker.

Sue was my salvation, in a way. I can't remember how many times I called her in those couple of days, but I do remember becoming more and more obsessed with the woman next door. Even Sue noticed, and that took a lot. Countless times, she asked what the deal was, you know, with Steph and me, but in reality, there was no 'deal', as she put it. I liked my neighbour, true. But there was nothing going on. Unfortunately.

By the time Thursday evening came around, I was talking myself out of just 'popping' in to say hello. Therefore, the only thing I could do was to take her advice and grab an early night.

Lying there in the dark, the excitement about being with her again came upon me full force, and the rest of the night was spent in disturbed and restless sleep. Dreams bombarded me ... dreams of what could come about the next day. Images of Steph telling me that we should spend more time together were my favourites, but nasty little sparks of her realising I was a liar always interrupted them - not forgetting to add I was beginning to believe I was a bastard.

By the time morning sauntered around, I was ready and waiting to get up and across to her, even though it was only six-thirty. Too early for anyone to be calling and demanding a full tour of the area, don't you think? Therefore, it was a case of trying to have a luxurious, and calming, shower that obviously didn't work. Then followed by me trying to swallow pancakes - a feat I do not envy anyone.

All this time still left me with well over an hour before I was supposed to be ready to see her. I had read yesterday's paper - again. Washed up. Tidied up. Even vacuumed. But there it was. The evidence. It hung on the wall tick tocking away and announcing that I was before my time.

Sitting at the kitchen table, I wracked my befuddled brain for an excuse just to go and break the emptiness I was feeling inside. It must have been only the matter of five minutes before I noticed Brian's bowl sitting on the counter ready to be filled for his arrival later that the idea came to me.

Reggie. Reggie would be coming with us today. He had to be. There was no way she would leave him on his own all day - unless ... unless ... it was only a quick tour about the place.

Ah fuck. What if she just spent a couple of hours with me? She was going to Manchester tonight, wasn't she? That would mean she wouldn't want to be dragging a woman around all day if she had to drive and still feel refreshed enough to see her family.

Bollocks. I hadn't thought of that before. All I had concentrated on was how boring my life had been until I could see her again. Even that thought worried me. I was never a person who relied solely on someone else to find happiness and pleasure in life. I had so much to do. I hadn't even started my new book yet - and it wouldn't be long before my publisher would be giving me the calls that stressed I had to get my arse into gear to meet the deadline. Even when I wasn't under a deadline ... I enjoyed looking at the world around me. Didn't understand what I was looking at, but I enjoyed it anyway.

However, that is beside the point, and not what I want to tell you at this precise moment. There will be enough time for you to know who I am and what I like in life, although I think you are getting a big enough picture as it is.

Back to the dog bowl. Back to Reggie, and how he could be a key in me getting to see Steph a little bit earlier ... and him too, of course.

Even if it was going to be a quick tour, I wanted to know beforehand. Therefore, I could find a way to hide my disappointment by coming back here for a while before going out. And on a brighter side, if it was going to be for longer, I would have the opportunity to come back and have a dance about the house until it was time to leave.

It was simple. Food. Did we need a picnic? Being a dog owner, I knew it was a rare occurrence that places allowed dogs inside. Therefore, if we were going out for longer than a couple of hours, we needed to get some food ready.

It wasn't until I was half way over the divide between her and my house that I realised Steph might not be too happy about me knocking on her door at eight-thirty in the morning.

Standing there on the porch, I was the picture of idiocy. Three times I lifted my hand to knock, and three times I lowered it again. I even turned at one point and made a move to walk away. The memory of the very first time I had seen Steph raged inside my head. The *'What the hell do you want?'* followed by the look of total outrage when I had made my presence known to her less than a week ago. And that was in the early evening, never mind first thing in the morning. But all that paled in comparison to the delightful and enchanting face she had when she was apologising straight after. The way she tried to make up for her rude behaviour ... and the way her hand felt in mine when she took it in hers ...

Before I knew it, my hand raised for the fourth time. It was at this point that the door seemed to open without me actually announcing I was there, but that was not the reason why I stood there gob smacked. The smile on her face was enough to melt away any inhibitions I had, and replace them with a feeling of total contentment. I was mesmerised. Steph was a vision of everything I ever wanted in life. It wasn't just her beauty ... no. It was so much more than that. I can't explain it ... it was just a feeling I had that started somewhere deep inside my chest and seeped around to every nook and cranny of my body. Even when she greeted me, I couldn't answer. She had, in effect, taken my breath away. It wasn't until I saw her concern, accompanied by the 'You ok?' that I realised I had to speak. Had to utter the few words I needed to utter in order to stop her losing that smile I loved so much.

But they wouldn't come. They started and they stopped. They played with my tongue and tormented my lips, until I said the most stupid thing I could say. Why did I have to say I didn't expect to see her smiling, I'll never know. Because in my head, that is all I really ever saw her do. Such a captivating smile ... such an honest and heart-warming smile. A smile that was disappearing right in front of my eyes. Panic set in, and I did what I knew best. I waffled and babbled ... then waffled and babbled some more, until the smile I needed was back. An open-mouthed one that ran alongside the most musical sound I have ever heard. Her laughter.



The sensation that had been racing around my body suddenly shot back to the place in my chest to grip and hold the pumping organ. I felt like my whole world had culminated into this one perfect moment, and I had to stop myself falling onto my knees and crying for some strange reason. It was as if I could see things so clearly now, that I frightened myself into total insightfulness. This couldn't be love. This couldn't be. I barely knew her. I was lonely, that was it. I needed something in my life, and had latched myself onto her hoping she would be my salvation.

I could see her waiting. Feel her waiting for me to speak, but I was finding it so hard. I wanted to ask her why I was feeling like this - ask her why I felt so right with her, but even in my demented state I knew that would sound surreal. I had to get a grip. Just ask about the picnic, but time was speeding and slowing and making me into a twat ... a mute, confused, and psychotic twat.

It wasn't until I saw her open her mouth that the word 'Food' shot from mine. I had to stop her telling me to go and crawl under a rock and die. This was not the time to fall apart. It was supposed to be a good day - a nice day - a day where I could get to know my neighbour ... get to know the place I had willingly chosen to live for the rest of my life. This was not the time to confess feelings I didn't have. I couldn't love her ... couldn't. Things like this do not happen. Do not. This was just a reaction to cooping myself up in my house for a couple of days ... of missing Brian and my family. This was not a reuniting of soul mates. That was a myth. Something that was spread around to make us want to never give up hope of feeling whole again.

Eventually I managed to splutter something about having a picnic ... then held my breath. This would be the moment when I would find out whether I was to be a quickie, or a more in-depth tourist.

'That would be great. What a lovely idea.' I couldn't help the smile. It was there and beaming. Then so was hers, and I couldn't help the next sentence that slipped uncensored from my mouth.

'You have a beautiful smile, you know?' It would have been better if I hadn't delivered it in the way someone would if he or she were telling you the meaning of our existence. But that was the way it was. And the way I stared at her lips because I was too scared to look into her eyes ... the way my voice couldn't rise up as I repeated 'So beautiful ...', they were all delivered by a side of me I couldn't control.

I had to shake this off before it got out of hand, if it hadn't already. Physically I mimicked what I should do, hoping that the movement of shaking my head would refocus me on what I had to do. And that was to move one foot in front of the other and back to my house to make a picnic. 'I'll be waiting at home for you, ok?'

Then I was gone. Didn't even turn around. I had to leave there and then, as I didn't trust myself to continue any form of conversation.

I had only an hour to get myself sorted. Amazing to think that before my visit to Steph's, I would have thought an hour was an eternity. Now that I had so much to mull over, I was beginning to

panic. I needed longer. I needed to get through everything I had experienced in the last fifteen minutes. Maybe that was what Andy Warhol meant when he said that everybody got their fifteen minutes, even though he meant of fame rather than the realisation of why we were placed on this earth. Part of me wanted that to be true. That the feelings I had just had were over and done with. But a larger, more insistent part of me wanted those fifteen minutes to multiply and expand into something so much bigger ... something that wasn't one sided.

Therefore, you can understand why an hour wasn't nearly enough time, can't you?

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I tried to blank it out as soon as I closed the door behind me. Tried to erase and eradicate those feelings and pretend they were the result of relief in speaking to another human being face to face after forty-eight hours. Tremors still chuckled around my body, and if you looked hard enough, my hands were still shaking slightly. I knew that in less than an hour, Steph would be knocking on my door with Reggie, and ready to give me the full nickel tour. There was no way I wanted a dampener to settle on something I had looked forward to. I would have plenty of time later ... well, after my visitors had gone to bed, that is. Maybe I could talk to Sue about it all.

And say what? You have finally cracked up and are stalking your neighbour. The same neighbour who, upon seeing, you bought the house in the first place? The same neighbour whom four years ago you had wanted to crush because your girlfriend had admitted that you weren't enough for her? I could see that going down as well as a pork pie in a synagogue.

It's in these kinds of situations that you deliver one of those laughs ... the ones that are sharp and derogatory and aimed straight back at you. The ones that make you stand back and look at yourself with a hint of contempt, yet appear to be omniscient.

Turning, I could see my reflection in the window ... slightly out of focus, but still there, almost spectral. I leaned closer, and stared deeply into my eyes, taking in all I could see. At these points in your life, I think you believe you see the true you. But in fact, you actually see your representation of what you want to see. And what I saw was me. Exposed and vulnerable. Two things I didn't want to be. I wanted to be full. Wanted to be whole. Wanted something that was definitely lacking in my life. And that something seemed further from my grasp at that precise moment than it had ever been.

Swallowing deeply, I turned away from myself, literally as well as metaphorically. This was not the time, as I said before ... not the time to open myself up to me ... or Steph ... or anyone. I had to stay focused and in control. Had to be stronger than I believed I could be.

The feeling I had experienced whilst standing in front of Steph swept through me again, as a reminder that this was far from over. This feeling ... this can of worms I had willingly opened myself up to was telling me that this time I had to see the whole thing through, whatever that meant. I couldn't run ... couldn't hide forever. And if I let my guard down for a split second it would be there to conquer. Funnily enough, this kind of thought should have been enough to scare the living crap out of me, but in reality I readied myself. When the time was right, I would

be prepared for whatever life would throw at me. I know it sounds jumbled and confused, and to tell you the truth, I didn't understand it completely myself. I just knew that something bigger than me was happening here, whatever that was.

Walking over to the radio, I switched it on. I had to have something to occupy my thoughts rather than my own delusional meanderings. It wasn't until I was singing away whilst chopping salad did I take note of the words to the song I was shaking my hips to. Bloody Hot Chocolate was pumping seventies vibes through into my kitchen and I surprised myself by knowing it near enough word perfect. *You Sexy Thing*, for God's sake. Believing in miracles was something I never did, although I had seen my fair share ... one in fact. Rob. But my attention did not stay with the fight my brother-in-law had had with cancer ... not by a long stretch of the imagination. I think it was the words about where had she come from ... the likening to an angel ... praying for her ... and the fact that when this woman had entered his life he had started to believe in miracles.

*'Yesterday ... I was one of the lonely people ...'*

'So was I, Errol. So was I.' And why was I talking to the lead singer? The smile split my face, followed by a laugh of relief. At that moment I knew that part of my faith in life had been restored ... not by Steph, not by moving here, and not even by Hot Chocolate. It had been restored by me ... the woman who couldn't string a sentence together when nervous ... the woman who had taken what life had thrown at her without a fight ... the woman who knew that there was actually something to smile about, fight back for, live for. And in a way, I think that was miracle number two.

Today was going to be a good day. A new day. A day where I could start again, live again, accept who I was and am again. No more hiding behind brick walls, or my family. Today I would become Erin Mason. The woman who wanted more than her fifteen minutes.

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## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

It wasn't long after that Steph knocked on my door, and before I knew it, we were all bundled in her car, Reggie secure behind bars. Conversation wasn't really needed, and I happily allowed the miles to slip away into nothingness, as we drove along in silence. Steph decided that Keswick should be our first port of call, and I was happy to just sit and let her take me anywhere.

Upon arriving, I was flabbergasted by the view in front of me. I wasn't a complete stranger to the Lakes, but to see Derwentwater at this time of year ... wow. Then wow again. England was raising her head once more, as spring was showing herself against the backdrop of hills and green. Steph began to explain all about the area, like a true guide, even going as far as if to say there was such a thing as a floating island, something to this day I don't believe. And I told her so ...

It wasn't until I nudged her and nearly had her falling over in a pile of what appeared to be goose

poop, that I grabbed hold of her. The reason I am saying this is that I had wanted to link my arm through hers ever since we had left the car. I know there is nothing wrong with two friends linking arms, but I still felt the need to pull back a little ... didn't really trust myself to behave, if the truth be known. Nevertheless, it wasn't a 'linking of the arms' moment. I had actually pulled her hard enough so she slammed straight into me. The feel of her in my arms was what I would like to call a heavenly moment; I even felt my eyes flutter closed for a second.

Shit. There I was, trying to make out that I was a normal human being who was enjoying being shown the area by a very kind neighbour, when the next thing on my stalker agenda was to try and shove her into crap, drag her back to me, and then stand there fluttering my eyelashes. I just hoped she hadn't seen me do it. The fluttering, I mean.

'You ok?' Well. What else could I say? 'I enjoyed that. Fancy a shag?' Didn't think so.

Straightening my back, I dropped my arms to my sides. It took so much strength to pin them there, I must have looked like a tin soldier. However, the reality was I didn't trust them not to try to get a grip of her again. The air around us was weird. Eerie, if you know what I mean. No noise tried to break through ... nothing. Just me and her - and a very mute dog, who silently sniffed the crap scattered all over the ground, and if I'm not mistaken, actually licked at some.

Steph was facing the lake again, and I allowed myself to let out the breath I had been holding. I followed her gaze, and it took me to the other side of the lake. Maybe she wanted to see it from that side instead.

'Fancy walking around it?' Where the fuck did that come from? It must have been miles to the other side, and whatever you may think, I am not a big walker. 'I would love to see it from the other side.' Why is it when the atmosphere tells you it is perfectly ok not to say a word that you insist on saying the biggest pile shit possible? Is it human nature? *My* nature?

'Yap!' I should have guessed that Reggie would love the idea, and I was hoping that his mamma disagreed with both our suggestions ...

When I heard the words, 'quite a trek', I felt the relief flood through me; although I tried my hardest to make out I was disappointed. I felt even more relieved, if possible, when she agreed to let me choose the lake I wanted to walk around. I made a mental note that I would be going through that guidebook to find the smallest one; although I would definitely make out that I was a walking type. Reason being, I thought that's what she might want to hear. Simple. We all do things that we feel will impress the person we wanted to impress ... and by the look of Steph, she took extremely good care of her physical shape. Don't get me wrong, I am by no means a salad dodger, or scared of exercise, but I find there are other ways to get fit rather than walking. Brian was the kind of dog that near enough walked himself. All I had to do was to give him the opportunity to race around like a maniac.

The ok I gave her sounded muffled, maybe because I was trying desperately not to cheer. And when she continued to make excuses why it would be for the best that we didn't trek nearly seven miles ... I wanted to laugh. She looked so cute standing there all bundled up against the cold ...

standing there trying to make me feel better, and better I was feeling. Especially when she said we could go in the car. That way she would be able to see the view from the other side of the lake, and we could even get the opportunity to visit the Pencil Museum. I had read about that in the local paper and had wanted to go, but by the look on her face, I don't think that was her idea of having a great day out.

Thankfully, I didn't have to worry about her not going into the museum, as both of us had forgotten that Reggie would be stuck in the car all the time we were gone. I agreed totally with her explanation - there was no way I would have ever left Brian in the car when I went in somewhere ... and not just because of the heat. Dogs are sitting targets now to thieves and kidnappers, and my boy meant too much to me to let him become another way for some bastard to make easy money.

Turning in my seat, I looked Reggie right in the eyes. Brown and twinkling ... so full of love and fun, that the same sentiment I had felt previously for Brian went for him too. I couldn't imagine how Steph would feel if something was to happen to him ... and the way I would feel too. Strangely enough, Reggie was taking a place inside my chest right alongside his mamma, and for once that day I did not struggle with the idea of letting someone in.

Ten minutes later, we were at the other side of Derwentwater. The view, although similar to the previous one, was in fact better. Everything was perfect. The scene ... the company ... the weather ... everything. We didn't have to talk ... didn't feel the need - again. It was weird that half the time I felt so at ease with this woman, and the other half on pins.

Steph moved forward towards the edge of the water, and I could see her concentrating on a couple of swans that were building a nest. They were so engaged in what they were doing they never noticed we were there. It was fascinating to see ... such dedication ... such a bond. And by the look on Steph's face, she felt the same way as I did.

Before I knew it, the words, 'I love swans' burst from my mouth and disturbed the solitude. By this time I was looking at Steph and trying to gauge what was going through her mind. 'Imagine spending every day with the person you love most in the world. Wouldn't that be perfect?' I wanted that. God ... I wanted that, and I think my tone exposed this want inside me. But I doubted Steph felt the same, as she nodded curtly and turned away as if she were dismissing my words. But it was the hunch of her shoulders that told me she might have felt differently. I can't explain it better than by what I saw. I could see the side of her face and her expression kept shifting from happy to sad so quickly, it was as if she couldn't make up her mind what she wanted. Amazing to think that this woman was more like me than I had thought before this moment.

A gust of wind swept past her as I was watching, and I saw her blonde hair dance in the current. She was so beautiful standing there. Regal, in a way. Her cheeks were rosy and healthy, and she had a look that tamed the fear inside of me. Why fear, you ask? Fear because I was scared that she would turn around and see me for whom I truly was. A nothing and a nobody, in that order. A nothing and a nobody who was finding it more and more difficult not to fall more and more for this incredible woman.

At this point, I didn't seem to care whether she liked me or not. It was just a privilege to be near her, something I would just have to get used to. Look, but not touch, so to speak.

Stuffing my hands into my pockets, I turned my attention again on to the swans. Thoughts raced around my head about what life could be like if I were someone else. Wouldn't that be wonderful? Imagine being able to select qualities about yourself that you could call upon when wanting to impress someone who usually you wouldn't have a cat in hell's chance of ever being with. I would be able to get rid of all the things that I despised about myself and replace them with perfection.

But would that make us truly happy? Perfection, I mean. Aren't the little foibles we bear the things that make us unique? The crooked smiles ... the moles and freckles ... the little fingers that are not aligned to the rest of the bigger, stronger fingers. Why would we think it would change us and make us more alluring if we were constantly upbeat, if we never grew angry, or said something out of turn? What if you were supposed to be the kind of person who is a waffler ... a babbler ... an indecisive, vulnerable woman who was scared the world wouldn't, or couldn't, accept who she was?

Teri's decision to be with someone else came into my head, obviously because of what I was thinking. Maybe this was the reason why I felt a little off kilter ... it wasn't the fact she had decided I wasn't enough, it was because she had told me that being with a woman wasn't what she wanted. Furthermore, was it enough for me? Or, more to the point, did I accept who, and what, I was? A gay woman, I mean? I know I had written two novels about coming to terms with my sexuality, but had I really '*come to terms*' with it? Was this the reason why I was so bloody scared of falling for someone else ... falling for the woman who was standing mere feet away from me? Did all women who had relationships with women feel this way? Was I living a phase that I would eventually discover to not be enough?

Looking at Steph I thought about how she would react to me asking her this. Would she agree and say that the 'phase' we are always told we are going through is in fact true? Or would she put me in my place, tell me to grow up and accept that Teri had made her own choices in life, and one of them did not include me. Maybe, just maybe, Teri hadn't been the one for me after all ... and maybe she was the one who had lived her phase and moved on, just like I should be doing ...

'Steph?' I wanted to ask her ... wanted her to tell me everything would be all right. She didn't turn straight away, and it seemed as if she had been going through her own demons by the look on her face. At that moment, I lost my nerve and just prompted her to move away from the water. 'Or would you rather stay here all day?'

The next part of the sequence went so slowly, as if you have all the time in the world to stop it happening, but you, too, are stuck in the slow motion and can't speed up. Steph was going backwards, then forwards, then bang. She had landed face first in the gooey mess that was around her feet, and by the smell of things when I eventually found my momentum to move, it wasn't mud. Reggie got there first. Unfortunately. He decided that mummy wanted to play and jumped onto her back, thus pushing Steph's face further into the swan crap.

I know I shouldn't have ... I knew I should have been serious and showed concern, rather than what I did do. I laughed - muffled, but a laugh all the same. It wasn't just the fact she had fallen in a pile of stuff you wouldn't wish of your worst enemy; it was everything else besides. Less than a minute ago, I was feeling so bloody sorry for myself, believing the world was conspiring against me, and then ... splat. It was as if someone up there had made this moment just for me ... something to make me smile ... something to break the blackness that was all too willing to consume me.

Eventually, I actually got Reggie off her back, and this enabled her to look up at me. For all the world, she was a vision. Not by any stretch of the imagination a bad one. She may have been covered in shit, but she still looked beautiful. It was so difficult to ask the simple question, 'You ... ok?', as I knew by the looks of her that she wasn't. Who would be after such an experience? But it wasn't just because of that why I felt it difficult to speak ... it was more ... as the feeling inside my chest could prove. However, this was not the time to have epiphanies. This was the time to take the situation for what it was - a chance to lighten the mood and offer my friendship.

Grinning widely, I lowered my hand to hers, knowing that she would take this opportunity to get me back. I did think she would pull me down with her, but as she slammed her hand into mine and proceeded to rub as much of the excrement as possible onto my flesh, I didn't care. This load of shit between us sealed our friendship in a way, and I would have plenty of time to deliberate over what had happened this morning and before this moment later.

Yanking her to her feet, I noticed the smile radiating from her. This woman was amazing. She was completely covered in swan's doings and she still grinned at me, her beautiful green eyes sparkling with happiness. I wanted to wipe away all the mess from her face, to clean it all up so she could just stand there and look at me in the same way for as long as possible, but that would mean having to let go of her hand.

Then, like the socially inept person I am, I said the words any woman would love to hear.

'You stink.' See? I couldn't just keep my mouth shut, I had to show that I am in fact a moron. 'Have you got a wet one?' As soon as that sentence popped out, I wanted to blush. Therefore, me being me, had to get myself out of the ambiguous situation. 'Or we could go somewhere so you could wipe ... wash it off.' At least I'm practical. There was no way she would be able to just get a tissue and gently wipe it away. This was more like a situation where a hosepipe and jet wash come into mind.

Not long after I was standing guard outside the nearest public convenience, Reggie sitting patiently by my side, waiting for the woman who made my days to get cleaned up.

What a wonderful start to the day.

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Buttermere was wonderful. We walked partly around the lake, and then sat and had lunch.

Reggie was more interested in what was coming out of the small plastic containers, rather than chasing ducks. I believe he was hoping for more beef, but I can assure you, that was not going to be on my bill of fare for him for a long time to come.

Conversation with Steph was so easy, and I found myself telling her about my childhood and moving from Ireland. At nine years old, the move was daunting, exhilarating, and frightening to say the least. Having an accent, I found that other kids could be quite cruel, and they had fun taking the piss out of me at every chance they could. Not that I told Steph that ... no way. I just rattled on about what it was like in Ireland, and then added a little about being brought up in a different country.

Afterwards, Steph decided to take me to Ambleside. Now there's a place ... If you ever get the opportunity to visit the Lakes, make sure you stop there. Especially Bridge House. That was one fucked up building, if you'll pardon the break into the obscene. It was as if it had stepped, if buildings could actually step, from the pages of a Grimm's' fairytale. Illustrated of course.

Standing in front of it, I found I had to tilt my head to the side in order to make it appear almost normal. Steph proceeded to tell me how a family had once lived in it. As if! I doubted I would have been able to stand up straight if I had gone inside.

'Is that the same as the floating island?' I couldn't resist teasing her, even though I knew deep down that she was telling me the truth. She was grinning now, and I understood the feeling she was going through. When you tell someone something that sounds unbelievable, and of course they don't believe you, it is difficult not to grin and laugh when trying to convince them. I wanted to have a little fun.

'Trust me.' I do, Steph. It's me I don't trust very much. 'Check out the local history.' I don't need to ... I had her.

'Under gullible?'

'Ok. Don't.' The way she responded didn't make me think I had overstepped the mark. Being with her made me feel safe and happy, and I knew she was playing along with me.

We stood there for a while longer, taking in the view, although if truth be known, I spent more time surreptitiously looking at her as she digested the building brick by brick. Without warning, I watched the smile slide from her face. I couldn't understand what had brought that on, as previously her face seemed contented, but when it changed ... it was as if she had seen a ghost. Looking about, I realised there was no one around that could have made her react that way. Although people were passing, no one had caught either of our attention - though I had not been looking at anyone else but her before that point.

Panic seeped in, and I thought for a split second she was on the verge of passing out, as the colour in her face had disappeared.

Stepping closer, I asked if she was ok. Nothing. She didn't even turn to face me. I could see her



throat pumping up and down as if she was trying to swallow a huge object, so I didn't repeat my question. I waited. And then I waited some more. Then a little longer just to be on the safe side. When I placed my hand upon her arm, I could feel the tension running through her. It was the matter of a split second before I squeezed the muscle and felt the tension begin to ebb away. Nothing was said ... it wasn't needed. So, we stood there a little longer, until I saw her shake her head before turning to face me.

Her expression was so open and honest, and I believe if I had looked deeply enough I could have read what was bothering her in her eyes. But that isn't the right thing to do, is it? Take advantage of a woman when she was the most vulnerable? No ... So, I watched her swallow a few times before she stumbled out a suggestion about going to Wordsworth's Cottage, a smile appearing as if on command. I knew she wasn't up to going there, I could tell, but I still didn't understand why she had reacted the way she had. Even when I explained that we couldn't because of Reggie, she looked startled, as if she had forgotten she had a dog. This wasn't right. She wasn't right. And all I wanted to do was to make every thing right ... Therefore, when I stated it would be a good excuse to get her on her own again, I was even more surprised by the way she reacted.

Startled. Like a rabbit in the headlights, that's it. Did she know I was gay? Was she gay? Fuck! Did she think I was coming onto her? Even though I wanted to, I hadn't meant it the way it had come out. I had avoided the fact of telling her I was gay, and even though I had heard some stories when I lived in Manchester ... that's all they might have been ... stories. All this time I had spent deliberating about how I wanted my life to pan out, how I fancied my next-door neighbour, how I had felt something ping deep inside my chest this morning, and at no point did I question if she was a lesbian. Talk about being even more stupid than I thought I was.

'How about we go to Windermere?' She looked at me with such innocence after asking, I became speechless. I think it was the guilt racing around me that stopped my brain functioning properly. I had to say something, anything, but thankfully she stopped me. 'Or ...' Then she stopped as well. Could she see my guilt? Is that why she stopped? Or had she just realised I was not all I was pretending to be? 'Or ... we could ...' Then she stopped again, and I was left hanging onto the unsaid sentence. 'Do you like sugar?'

I can't remember the exact feeling in perfect detail, maybe because I believe I was numb from the forehead down. I can vaguely recollect the effort it took me to repeat the word, 'Sugar?' I just didn't get the link. How could sugar be connected to me being exposed as a dyke?

Steph took my hand in hers with the promise of making the next part of the day memorable. I wanted to respond by saying it was ok ... I think I would remember me being a twat for a long time, but I didn't. I just followed her like a lamb to the slaughter. I couldn't even warn her that I shouldn't have too much sugar, as it made me a little wired, if you know what I mean. I was ok with a bit ...

With hindsight, I should have told her. Not just because I didn't like the feeling of being as high as a kite ... or out of control, but more about the fact that I could become even more annoying than I was already.

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Kendal Mint Cake. If anyone ever offers you a piece, do one of these two things. Firstly, refuse. Trust me. REFUSE. It has the ability to pump so much adrenaline around your body that I feel you could keel over with a heart attack at any given time. Secondly, if you feel you can't help but try a piece, make sure it is just that. A piece. Don't be all macho and think, 'Hey. I can handle this. It's just a little bit of sugar.' It is not. It is a lethal weapon in the wrong hands.

But no. I had to be overly friendly, didn't I. I had to take a piece ... then another ... and then too many, until I felt all the nerve endings in my body stand to attention and scream, 'I NEED TO RUN!' It wasn't that it that scared me though. It was the wanting to shout out random words and phrases, which, I would like to add, would have told her exactly everything I didn't want to her to know about. All the wanting I had for her was there crying out at the surface, not to mention the article, but the only thing I allowed to come out was fucking Shakespeare. Yes. You read that right. Shakespeare. So you can see I was in a pickle.

I tried to tear myself away from gazing into her eyes and then quoting some more of the Bard at her, but that just made me appear deranged. I was finding it difficult to control my movements, even my knee started shaking and quaking and edging towards freedom and safety. If I could have got up and ran, I would have. But I have to admit that the next hour was a bit of a blur. All I remember was seeing her face hover in front of mine before I found myself in the car watching images crawl by. Thoughts of getting out of the car and running alongside it were in the forefront of my mind, and the internal struggle I had to not just open the door and leap out, was exhausting.

Then everything went black. I either passed out or feel asleep, my final thought being, I want to climb Everest.

Arriving at Lake Coniston came as a surprise, and it was only the sound of the handbrake being put on that made my eyes snap open and wonder where I was. Steph was looking at me, and she asked if I was ok so softly, at first I thought I was still dreaming. Instead of pinching myself, I stretched, thinking this would help me shake of the shackles of sleep that seemed to envelope me. The last vestiges of the sugar had long since depleted from my system - thankfully, and all I felt now was the urge to just curl up and fall back to sleep again.

When I found myself focusing, it was to the weirdest sight I think I had seen for a long time. Steph had her hand out stretched towards me and was intently focused on my lower abdomen. I couldn't, in my half-asleep state, understand what she was doing. When my eyes met hers, the look that greeted me said nothing - it was as if she had closed off.

It was the next thing she did say that sent the fear of God racing through me. 'Thought you had a bug on you. Was going to flick it off.' I think it was at that moment in time that I felt a little bit of pee escape into my underwear. But the icing on the cake was when I looked down and saw something black moving up my belly. Like the coward I truly was, I showed my colours ... in the form of having the screaming Mary's and demanding she take the invader away and destroy it, or words to that effect. What was the matter with her? She looked at me as if I was an idiot, or

something just as intellectually challenged. Then I saw her face cloud over slightly, before a look of absolute terror replaced it. I wanted to slap myself, slap the spider, slap her ... Instead she began to slap at me ... and scream ... and slap ... and scream louder. Reggie was going crackers by this stage, and I wanted to scream at him to help me, because his mamma was doing a shite job of it.

'Stop!' Was I back at school? Whatever the reasoning, or memory, I stopped. I had to, or else I would have keeled over and snuffed it right there and then. I didn't think my heart could stand much more. Steph was deliberating touching me, and if this were at any other time, I would have been relishing the experience. However, it seemed I was already being touched ... by eight legs, which were multiplying and becoming an army of spiders and bugs and all varieties of the insect world.

My breathing matched someone who had just run the marathon ... maybe run it twice over. After all that sugar, and the depletion of all that adrenaline, I wouldn't have been surprised if my blood pressure was at danger level. Steph wasn't helping at all. She was taking in the situation as if she had all the time in the world. Good job the thousands of creepy crawlies weren't dancing on her skin, wasn't it? Maybe then she might have acted a little faster ...

At this point, I was frozen to the spot. If I moved, the bug master would take me as his prisoner and I would be enslaved into the world of creatures with more than two legs for eternity. It wasn't until I looked back at Steph's face that I felt a surge of safety flash, disappear, reappear, and then settle over me. Previously, I had imagined that I was at that point of no return, but the look on her face informed me that everything would be ok ...

Bollocks to ok. Bollocks to her saving the day. I trusted her to capture the alien and dispose of it, but no ... she got it, then dropped the fucker back onto me. At least I had known where my enemy was when it was on my naval, now I didn't have a clue ... It might have been entering any of my orifices ... some of which I am quite selective about who, or what, goes in and out of. This revelation made me scream even louder than I had before, but the absolute star turn was when I kicked her in the head.

Erm. That doesn't sound right ... and in reality, wasn't exactly what happened. I didn't purposefully set out to thwack her at the side of the head with my knee until she flew back and cracked into the window. It was an accident. Honestly. My leg just jerked of its own volition, and bam ... there she was, splattered against the driver's side window. Strangely enough, the fear I held onto previously dissipated, and I forgot about the bug. Steph looked dazed and little out of it. The only thing she had spluttered was a pained 'Jesus,' and I found myself on her side of the car.

Amazing to know that at times like this the ability to be gentle comes automatically. I can't even remember lifting my hands and cupping her face, holding them there as if she was made of porcelain. My face was mere inches from hers, as I felt the need to check her pupils ... they did look rather dilated. What if I had given her concussion, when all she was trying to do was save me from my irrational fear of something that was probably more scared of me than I was of it? Then I spotted the blood. Not much, but enough to scare the living crap out me all over again. I

tried to show her, but she seemed dazed, unfocused ... all because of me.

Her eyes were opening and closing and she hadn't spoken, although I had tried to get her to respond. This didn't look good. As you might guess, this situation was going from bad to worse. All she had done was to try and show me the area ... put herself out for my benefit. And what had she received in return? A maniac on a sugar rush, followed by someone who was shit feared of spiders, and happily kneed her guide in the head until she blacked out. I think Steph might have drawn the duff card when she had me move in next door to her.

Then she smiled. Such an uncontrolled and fuzzy smile, that I began to worry even more. A cracking sound came from somewhere in her direction, but I am uncertain from where. The 'Fuck' that shot from her mouth alerted me to something I didn't even know I was doing. I, like an idiot and an opportunist, was stroking her mouth ... well I was, until she slapped my hand away. Crappity crap. Did she think I was coming on to her when she was in a weakened state? Could things get any worse? At this rate, I would put money on it.

Slowly, Steph wiped her hand over her mouth and jaw, all the while with me watching intently. Lifting her hand away, she examined the blood now on her fingers, and I was holding my breath. This was the moment where she told me to get out of her fucking car and make my own way home ... not that I would've blamed her. This was not the case, though. She kind of looked proud of the fact that she was bleeding, almost as if she had won the first battle, in a way. Obviously, I was losing the fear of her hating me, but replacing it with the fear of what she was going to do to me ...

The next bit surprised me even more. I had expected her to whip out a tissue from her pocket and wipe the blood away, but no ... she wiped it down the side of her leg, an act I watched in rapt fascination.

'Ready?' God. Did I smack her in the throat too? Her voice was gruff and sounded like her windpipe had been damaged. And more to the point, ready for what? 'Want to see the lake?' Was she going to throw me in? Give me the concrete slipper treatment so I couldn't harass the ass off her in the future? Therefore, with these thoughts racing around my head, I couldn't formulate a response. Could I out run her? Maybe ... but the main question should be 'For how long?' And that's what worried me the most.

Her sigh alerted me that I had been gone into the land of stupidity for too long, and now was the time I should say something to try and rectify the situation, but for the life of me I couldn't think of anything to say.

It was so quiet inside the car. Even Reggie had decided to lie down and wait for us to get our acts together. The sound of the clock on the dashboard began to get louder and louder and ... Then she sat up ... started to fiddle with her clothes, as if she was readying herself for something.

Looking out of the window, I spotted signs that informed visitors of the direction of the lake, as if the huge mass of water wouldn't be enough to give them a clue. Words popped into my head, and then straight out of my mouth without the usual process of censorship.

'Fancy a quick one?' Ah fuck. And then to cover up my social faux pas ... 'Not all the way though.' I could feel the heat travelling up my neck and around my ears. I needed to say more before I felt the impact of a smack in the choppers. 'I think the sugar has worn off.' Einstein. That's my new name from now on. Albert to my friends. I couldn't bear to look at her reaction, well, until I heard a cracking sound coming from the quick movement she made, followed by a groan. As usual, I was on the case with my ultra fast medical diagnosis. 'Look. You're in pain.' No shit, Sherlock. But even though I tried not to lurch out and grab her again, I once again failed miserably. Before I knew it, her hand was in mine, and I was stroking her fingers, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. To be truthful, it felt perfect, and I didn't want the sensation to end.

However, I was alone on that one, as after what felt like seconds, Steph snatched her hand away as if she had been burned, a disgusted sigh meeting the air. This was the moment when I knew I had pushed this too far. If Steph hadn't known I was a lezza before the spider incident, she sure as hell knew now. It wasn't just the fondling and the hand holding that had given me away, it was everything. The way I acted, you know, like a love sick pup, the way I looked at her with apparent adoration written all over me, the way I stumbled over words, saying the most ludicrous thing at the most inopportune moment. The way I blushed, and faltered and fell over myself all of the time. Even the way I found myself just saying random things at random times just so I could hear her voice again ... oh ... that was a new one, by the way, as you might be able to tell by the next thing I said.

'Is this where Donald Campbell broke the water speed record?' And who gives a fuck? Steph didn't. At that moment, I wasn't too sure she had even heard of him. 'He died here, didn't he?' Just like I am, too. A big fat case of social suicide. I could teach classes titled: How to get your neighbour to hate you in less than a week. Or five easy steps to become ostracised from your community.

All I wanted was everything to be how it was this morning. Well, a little better than this morning, if truth be known, as this morning I was feeling insecure. A voice inside my head asked, 'So ... what, exactly are you feeling now?'

Nevertheless, I didn't get the chance to answer, as Steph had started to give me the answer to the Donald Campbell question I had posed a couple of minutes previously. Obviously, by this point, I had forgotten I had asked about him. This was mainly due to the fact that she was getting out of the car, and I was sitting there like a lemon. Reggie was waiting for us to free him from his doggy prison, and like a fool, I was beginning to relax.

Big mistake. No. Bigger than that. I'll give you a clue. Think about everything I have done this far. Thought about it? Realised what a git I had been? Right. Now double that ... no ... treble it. Because I found that although I can be a twat sometimes, at other, more special times, I can be a fucking huge twat. I think it was because I led myself into a false sense of security, although I do believe Steph had helped me let down my defences when she had answered my question. I know I'm trying to shift the blame here - don't even understand why. I know I'm a dipshit, as you will find out.

It was innocent at first. Yes, innocent. I simply praised her ... told her that I thought she was intelligent. Inside I was thinking 'Nice move, Mason', but it was a move that I didn't know would lead me into checkmate. The next thing I said was pretty complimentary too ... saying I thought she had a real interest in the world around her. Not bad ... not brilliant, but not bad. Then it went tits up. Without my knowledge, a part of me must have pulled out the invisible dunce cap and placed it onto my head, because the next thing I said was as far removed to what I wanted to say it's untrue. I mean, why would I mention about reporters and digging up dirt to a woman who quit her job for believing she had made someone commit suicide because of her actions? Can you explain? Because I certainly couldn't.

If I had wanted to get her attention, that was certainly the way to do it. The look she gave me as her head snapped up was enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey. Not to mention her voice. Jesus ... when I think about that tone ... God ... it could've sliced through titanium with ease, and was even more threatening because I had never heard her use that tenor before. All she said was, 'What do you mean by that?' but believe me, that was enough. I didn't even get the chance to respond to her properly, as she turned and dragged Reggie away, her short legs marching away with speed.

I couldn't let her just leave like this. I had to explain that I meant no malice ... they were just words ... and ... and ...

Yes. Words. The same words that carry hatred and deliver fear. Words that can build or destroy. Words that are used to defend, retaliate, or maim. Words are never 'just words', and should never be used to fill in time, or silence. Whether these chosen, or spluttered scribblings that become airborne are there to show affection, love, or used to pacify, they should be reckoned with. Words are powerful ... words are deadly and cruel and can also elicit joy. But what we should always remember is that we should use them with care. We should select with our hearts before our brains the right word, the right phrase, the right sentence to accompany our sentiment. If we are out to shock or hurt, think more deeply about the words you use. Is this a simple placing together of letters to create hurt or shock in others, or are we wanting them to come back and hurt and shock us in return? On the other hand, think about saying, 'I love you.' Why are you saying it? Is it to feel your emotion rattle through the air and bring happiness and elation to the party it is meant for? Or, is it to hear those three little words come back to you?

Therefore, the word I selected at that time was not up to standard. I had the whole of my vocabulary to choose from, and which word did I choose?

'Steph?'

See? Completely useless. Just like my legs were feeling at that point. It appeared that all I could do was watch as she marched away, and metaphorically kick myself. Why had I mentioned her job? Why? There were so many other interesting things I could have said, but I had to say the one thing I didn't want to mention. Especially because I knew deep down that I was a major factor in the way she was feeling.

By the time I had got myself moving, she was slowing down. Standing outside a museum, she turned to me, the anger almost gone from her face. 'Another day?' and a nod towards the entrance. 'We could do it after we visit Dove Cottage - the Wordsworth place, if you want?' I was stunned to say the least. Initially, I thought she had stopped to have a go at me ... but this? She was inviting me out for another day out, after all I had said and done. Those rascal words failed me for a moment, but when I saw the trace of a smile glance across her mouth, I couldn't help the relief flooding through me, followed by the smile of the exonerated.

'I would love that.' God. I would. I would.

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## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

It wasn't long after that we decided to call it a day. I didn't want to, but I understood that she had a long drive after she left me. I tried to get her to stay just a little longer so she could meet Brian, but all I saw was her beginning to withdraw from the situation, becoming more and more silent. The more she began to withdraw, the more I started to try to convince her that Brian was one special kind of pooch, resulting in her barely speaking a word for the remainder of the journey. Like before, now was no different. I thought if I spoke quickly enough, and made no sense whatsoever, then the silence in the car wouldn't become an issue. Unfortunately, the more I spoke, the more of an issue it became. It was with relief that I saw the lane where we lived appear like a mirage in front of us.

After parking her car, she walked me over to my patch. Then she was about to leave me standing in the front part of my garden, I couldn't resist hugging her. A friendly hug, obviously, as I knew she was still a little distant, but I had to accompany my thanks for a wonderful day somehow.

At one point I am sure I felt her relax into it, but as soon as I mentioned about going out again, she seemed to tense. In retrospect, I wasn't too sure whether it was because of mentioning going out, or that Reggie and Brian could keep each other company whilst we were out. The thing that confused me was that she said 'He would love that,' straight after. I was becoming more and more confused with what she was thinking in relation to her actions. Although, I am not one to point the finger, because as soon as I had thought that she couldn't seem to control her actions, I kissed her on the cheek and then fled for safety. Pot calling the kettle black, I think.

As I stepped, or skidded, inside my house and shut the door, I scurried over to the side window to look over at her house. But she was still standing where I had left her, one hand raised to her cheek. For a moment, I thought she might be wiping off any vestiges of spittle I had left behind, but no ... she seemed ... although I could be hugely mistaken here ... she seemed as if she was stroking her cheek. No ... she couldn't have been doing that, could she?

However, the sight soon left, or should I say she dropped her hand to her side, turned, and went inside her own house. I still watched, as if I was waiting for her to change her mind and come

back over.

Entering the kitchen, I felt a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Even though I had loved being with Steph all day, there was a feeling of having to work so bloody hard at being normal when I was around her. I wasn't usually as fucked up as this, honestly. The majority of the time saw me as an average woman, who took life as it came. No amateur dramatics, no acting out of turn. So why now? And why with Steph? Don't worry. I'm not asking you to guide me through my idiosyncrasies ... I was becoming all too aware of my eccentricities in the last six days, that I was trying to adapt to them, as living next door to Steph assured me that I would get lots of practice. Practice I needed to pull off the 'Idiot of the Year' title without much effort, that is.

Plonking down at the kitchen table, I flopped my head into my hands and groaned. What a day. What a bloody illuminating day. I had raced through a gamut of emotions in the last nine hours, and I had not had the opportunity to digest them ... any of them. All I knew for certain was that I was totally smitten with my next door neighbour. Not a bad assessment, if I do say so myself. But although I was quick to find the prognosis, I was having difficulty finding a cure for the unrequited longing I was feeling. Maybe it was true that I felt something other than neighbourly affection for Steph, although it still felt too soon for me, it didn't mean that anything would come from it.

There was one thing I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt, and that was that I needed to get out more. Living in the sticks was not an excuse to close up and away from the world around me. That wasn't the reason why I had moved here in the first place. The reason, or one of them, was that I just wanted to make a fresh start - come here and clear my head, write, and just begin to live again.

A sigh slipped out. I didn't mean it to. It was if it was commenting on my reasons for moving away from my family, and deciding that my reasons were not good enough. If I was a practical person, I would have sat down and made a list of the things I should do to make my life better, you know, give focus and all that.

Next thing I remembered doing was opening the dresser drawer and claiming a note book and pen. I couldn't believe I was doing it. Even when I was laughing at my own ability to be anal, I was writing a heading. To Live List. Quite catchy ... and the thought of using it as a new title for a piece of fiction popped into my head.

The pen hovered over the paper. What on earth would I write?

1. Get a life first?

Or should I start off a little less obvious? Maybe mention buying a few new houseplants ... or decorating my office in colours that would help my muse. Alternatively, I could write ... Widen your social circle. Meet new people and mingle.

However, when I looked again at the paper, I found I had already written something in the number one slot already.



1. Tell Steph about the article you wrote about her.

There was a start, and maybe the reason why I was acting all off kilter. It was guilt. Guilt that I had not told her the one thing I had been meaning to tell her since the very first time we had become acquainted. I knew I wasn't really a psycho ... or a stalker ... I was just guilty.

Now the realisation of being guilty of a deed would usually fill someone with dread, but not me. I felt relieved. I wasn't cracking up after all. I know that you might not think the crime I was guilty of was such a big deal, but it was to me. I didn't like hiding things from people, because when that happens, people get hurt. I liked to be upfront ... I don't mean completely tactless, but not behind in coming forward.

There was only one thing for it. I would go over now and explain. Tell her what I did, and then she would have the whole weekend to calm down, or not calm down. It was her choice how she reacted. But sitting at the table like a right big lemon was not going to get me anywhere.

Decision made, I stood up quickly, the chair tipping over and slamming onto the floor behind me. Glancing up at the clock, I knew it wouldn't be long before she left for Manchester, and my chance would be lost. I had to catch her before she left. Time had sped by since I had been sitting at the table with a pad and a pen and a philosophy on life, and now was the time for action.

However, I was too late. I saw the back of her car disappearing around the corner. Shit. It had been the perfect time to tell her ... and now ... and now ... another car was heading in my direction.

Initially I didn't know who it was, and it wasn't until the car nearly reversed into my car that I realised it had to be James Cullam, my publisher. I felt the grin start to spread across my face. Not just because I liked James, and that he was a good friend - that wasn't the main reason. The main reason came in the shape of a black Labrador that was howling with happiness from the back of the car.

'*Brian!*' I couldn't contain my excitement. It had been over a week since I had patted him on the head and moved here. To say I had missed him would be redundant.

'Thanks a lot, Erin. Nice to see you, too.' James gave me a mock pout, and slumped his shoulders like a ten-year-old schoolboy. However, I grinned at him and then tried to open the boot to release my man into the wild again.

Locked. But that didn't stop me. I tugged at the handle again, the logistics of the simple key, twist and turn an alien concept at that precise moment,

A voice behind me said quietly, 'Until I get a proper hello and a hug, I won't give you the key.'

I knew I had no other choice but to act sociable. 'Hey there, Priscilla. Good run?' As I was saying this, I was moving away from the boot of the car and towards the man who was grinning like an

idiot, his arms opening to receive the hug he knew I was going to give him. It felt good being held by someone, even though it wasn't the person whom I wanted to be holding me.

'Not bad. Not bad. Traffic was pretty clear.' His voice was muffled as his face was at the side of my neck. Now, don't jump to conclusions. There was no way that James, or Priscilla, as I loved to call him, was after more than just a hug. He was of the same ilk as me ... gay, if you were still at a loss. 'How was the move? How's the time been since you've been here?'

Pulling away, I looked directly into his face. I had missed him, even though I had only seen him the week before when I had dropped Brian off at his place.

'Long.' And it had been. His face showed confusion at the one word answer I had given him, so I decided to elaborate a little. 'Very long.' I know it still wasn't an autobiography, but I didn't want to spend time telling him of how the days seem to drag on forever when all I wanted to do was to get a grip on my furry pal, who was by this stage scrabbling at the glass of the back window.

Looking over my shoulder, Brian's eyes sparkled back and he let out a woof that indicated 'I want out.'

'I get the message,' James sighed. 'But on one condition.' I tilted my head as if to show I was all ears, and he continued. 'If I let out Brian so he can be reunited with his mamma again ...' I leaned forward, 'you will have to give me the dirt on the elusive Stephanie Stevenson.'

'Why I ...' didn't know how to continue that sentence.

'Come on, Mason. If there's one thing I know about you, it's that you would have been over there like a shot to see if the Goddess of news reporting was all that she was cracked up to be.' True. He did know me well, by the looks of things. 'And is she really the cold hearted bitch they say she is?'

It must have been the look on my face that alerted him of my discomfort, as I didn't say a word. 'What's up, love?' James tried to look into my eyes, but I avoided his scrutiny, yes ... scrutiny, as I knew at that precise moment if he were to look deeply enough he would have had the answer to all his questions. 'I didn't mean anything by it.' I tried to smile, but even I knew it was weak.

'Woof!' Thank you, Brian.

'Ok.' James let go of me and walked past towards the boot. 'But don't think this is over, lady.' I wasn't too sure of what he meant by that. Was he going to interrogate me about Steph, or the fact I had become a walking clam with a crap smile?

The boot had barely opened a fraction before Brian pushed the rest of it up with his head. Next thing I knew I was splattered on the floor being treated to an intense doggy wash. Laughter gurgled and burst from me, and the more I laughed, the more excited my fella became. It felt good ... so good ... to just let the laughter break free, as it had seemed that for too long I had been a miserable, and psychotic, little fu ...

'Could we go in? All this fresh air is making me turn butch.' James' voice came from above me, and I pushed Brian's overexcited face away from mine and looked at my friend. He was standing there with his hands on his hips, trying to keep a look of mock impatience in place. 'Then maybe you will spill the beans about why you thought moving to this Godforsaken area would incite your muse.' He finished by batting a gnat away from his face, making him seem as camp as Christmas, thus making me laugh even more. Obviously, Brian thought my laughter was because of him, and decided that his previous wash might not have been enough.

Ten minutes later, we were inside and I was giving James a tour of my house. Oohs and ahhs ... and ahhs and oohs accompanied us, as I think I convinced him just by the inside of my house why this was a perfect place to write. When we got to my office, I saw his face cloud over a little.

Turning to me, he asked the question I had been expecting ever since his arrival. 'Written anything?' I could have lied and said I had a few minor things going on ... bit of setting and stuff like that down, but following his gaze to my computer, I knew it would be pointless. Mainly because my computer was still in the box I had put it in when I packed it the previous week.

'Erm ...'

'Any notes? Ideas? Thoughts, even?'

'Erm ...'

'I see.' Walking away from me, I allowed him the space of the room. One thing I knew about my publisher was that he loved the melodramatic ... loved to *be* melodramatic, I should say. Stopping at my desk, he slid his hand across the empty surface, lifted his hand to check for dust, and then looked over at where I was guiltily standing in the doorway. 'I see.' Then next thing on his agenda was to crouch down by the side of the computer box, peek inside, and then slowly close the lid again, as if finalising his assessment. 'I see.'

'I've been busy.' Did my voice always sound so weak and feeble? And why was I trying to get out of a situation that I shouldn't really be in? I had been busy ... I had been unpacking ... As this thought flitted inside my head, I took in the rest of the room. I had done nothing in here. In reality, all I had done was the kitchen, the living room, dining room, and my bedroom. On my sweep of the room, my eyes met James'. His expression informed me that he didn't believe a word of it.

'I see.'

'And will you stop with the patronising, James. I will get around to starting a new book when I'm good and ready.' I didn't mean the tone of my voice to be as sharp as it was. Even Brian stopped sniffing the boxes and looked over. Therefore, I had two pairs of inquisitive eyes looking at me, thus making me feel like a git. 'Sorry ... I ... you know how it is?' No response, from either of them, although I wasn't really expecting Brian to say anything ... 'I have been getting to know

the area, you know, taking in the sights ... getting a feel of the lay of the land ...' I had been. Today, that is. But, what had I been doing for a week? I'd played with my bush ...

The grin shot to my face in a flash, and James looked even more perturbed than if I had continued to use the devil voice I had before. Thankfully, I didn't have to explain the reason why I had grinned like a maniac, because at that precise moment, Brian went crackers. His booming bark rattled around the empty room, before he shot out of the door and through the hallway. Somewhere deep inside I hoped it was Steph coming back ... although I did have a flash of the heebie jeebies too. If she had come back, I would have to tell her about the article ... like I had promised myself I would do as soon as I saw her again. And in front of James ... or with him in the vicinity. There was one thing I knew about my publisher ... he was like an old woman when it came to gossip ... especially if I was talking to the infamous Stephanie Stevenson. To use an old saying, he would stick to me like shit sticks to a blanket.

With all this internal monologue, James had the opportunity to beat me out of the room and to follow in the footsteps of my faithful canine, who was by this stage, pawing frantically at the front door. Maybe he could smell Reggie. That was it. It must be her ...

However, it wasn't. And I hoped beyond hope that my sister, Rob and the kids were not aware of the look of disappointment on my face as I raced onto the porch. James was there already, hugging Sue, and gripping onto Rob in the next instance. George and Daisy were happily tormenting the crap out of the overexcited Brian, whilst I stood there trying to get my emotions under control.

'*Erin!*' Sue's jubilant shout in my direction made the tears well up behind my eyelids. I was happy to see them all here ... all my family together again, but there was a part of me that believed there was someone missing from the gathering. Two, in fact. Can't leave out Reggie. And that's where the tears came in. They should have been happy tears, but I knew they weren't. I knew that these tears were tears of regret, tears of loneliness, and the tears of wanting something that I just couldn't have. But now was not the time to get all maudlin over something I couldn't control. Now was the time where I greeted my family and showed them how very special they were to me.

Before I knew what was happening, Sue's arms were about me, pulling me into those kinds of embraces that only sisters can pull off. 'I've missed you so much, sis.' Whether she or I spoke it, it didn't matter. I had missed her. Missed the closeness we had always shared. Missed the way she would always find the right words ... and also have the strength to give me the much needed kick up the arse that I more than deserved on occasion. 'Where's Steph?' Shit. Trust her to mention Steph at this point. I had finally swallowed down the sadness and replaced it with sisterly affection, only to have it slapped back into my face.

'Steph who?' Trust James to stop trying to get a grip of my brother-in-law and listen in at that precise moment. 'Stephanie Stevenson?' I didn't answer. Sue did. 'You are joking, right? You and Ms Stevenson ... You and the bit ...'

'Bite your tongue, James. You have an audience.'

Sue knew what James was going to say, although I think we all did to a degree. Turning, I saw the angelic faces of my nephew and niece looking on with interest. 'Careful what you say, James. Walls have ears.'

George seemed a little freaked by the expression and looked about in earnest. When he turned to us, his face the picture of innocence and asked, 'Which one, Auntie Erin?' I wanted to laugh aloud.

'Don't be stupid, George.' Daisy, like the madam she was, grabbed him by the arm and pulled him to her. 'The walls don't have ears ... they mean us.' George lifted his hand and touched his ears as if they were going to sprout wings and fly away. 'They didn't want us to hear Uncle Jimmy say that woman was a bit ...'

'*Daisy!*' The sound of four adults shouting her name, accompanied by a Labrador barking, made Daisy clam up. Thank the Lord. George, however, still looked mystified.

'I think it's about time I gave you the tour of the house, don't you?'

After all the adults trundled in the house, I turned to tell the kids to check out the garden, and what I saw made me smile. Daisy was whispering conspiratorially to George, obviously telling him the word that we hadn't wanted her to say. I should have been mad, but the look on George's face was definitely a Kodak moment. His mouth was open and I swear I could hear the air being sucked in.

Daisy let go of her brother and looked me straight in the face. 'What? Someone had to teach him.' Next thing, she was walking into the house like the prima donna she was. Bless kids, and their inability to show tact.

Wonder where she gets that from?

Not really much to wonder about. I was one of the least tactful people I think I have ever met, if that makes any sense whatsoever. But this, again, was not the time to stand about looking like a dumbshit. I had to get inside and give my family the tour. I just hoped that they would be more impressed with my efforts than James had.

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'You've not done a lot since last weekend, have you?' Trust Rob to be a git. 'Too busy trying to get to grips with the gorgeous blonde next door, I bet?' A huge git. A double git ... maybe even a platinum one for good measure. Sue was grinning supportively behind him, and nodding her head in agreement, as if she knew Rob was right. Her blue eyes twinkled and I knew that she couldn't wait to get me on her own so she could give me the Spanish Inquisition.

I wanted to say I had been writing, but James was standing in the doorway, and there was no way I would get away with that. So, the only thing I could do at that moment was to blush furiously

and deny everything and everyone. Rob just laughed his pseudo manly laugh and left the room, taking James with him. I knew why he had done that - and although I sometimes thought Rob was a can short of a six pack, he left his faith in his wife to get out all the gory, yet tantalisingly juicy, details out of me.

For the first time in my life, I felt uncomfortable being alone with my sister. Exposed, even. Warily, I watched her walk around the room, the air of the 'interested in décor' about her. However, I was ready for anything she was planning.

'Nice view.' Sue was standing at the window, her back to me. 'Although it's pretty dark out there now.' Was she leading me into a false sense of security? You betcha. I hadn't spent the whole of my life with this woman not to recognise her techniques. 'Do you think the kids will be ok out there in the dark?' She turned and looked at me with such innocence, that for a split second my guard went down, and like all good sisters, she spotted it. 'Steph seems like a really good neighbour ... reliable.' Just the mention of her name in this vulnerable state made the blood rush to my face as an instant declaration of embarrassment. Therefore, the only thing I could do was to turn away, even reach for a box I had no intention of unpacking for at least a year, and swiftly rummaged through the contents. 'Come on, Erin. Time to 'fess up, old girl.'

'Huh?' At this point, I really didn't understand what she wanted me to confess to. Therefore, the look of total confusion on my face was genuine.

'You know ...' Sue began to walk toward me, and the closer she came, the faster my heart raced. Maybe that little pumping organ inside my chest had an idea what she meant, because my brain was on sick leave by this stage. 'All I've heard this past week is Steph this ... Steph that. You can't tell me that all the yammering on you've been doing is just about your new neighbour.' She harrumphed at this, and I wasn't feeling too good about my chances of coming out of this conversation in one piece. All my life Sue had the ability to get me to crumble and spill the beans, and this was no exception. I did want to tell her - you know - ask her why I was feeling like this. But I felt like I would seem to be quite shallow, as if it was common practice for me to fall for the first piece of skirt to show me any interest in the slightest.

'Aunty Erin?' George was standing in the doorway as if he knew he was interrupting something. At that moment I wanted to kiss the life out of him, and my response seemed a little over the top.

'Hello there, honey ... Come in ... come in ...' The circus master. That's what I sounded like. If I had continued with, 'Come one, come all ... See the finest line up of acts this side of the Peak District' I doubt anyone in the room would have been surprised.

Tentatively, looking at his mother and then to me in alternation, and procrastination if the speed of his walking was any indication, George came begrudgingly into the room. I was expecting him to ask either of us what a bitch actually was, as to say he was the most innocent of the twins would be spot on.

'What is it, soldier?' Sue's voice didn't reflect the look of 'Oh for fuck's sake' she had given when he first suspended our one sided parley. Now it was gentle, as I think she thought he was going

to ask the same thing as I did.

Blue eyes looked at us a little nervously, and if I had been in his situation, I would have looked on with a bulge in the back of my knickers too. 'Where ... erm ... where are we all going to sleep?'

Fuck! And doubly fuckity buggery fuck! I hadn't made up the spare rooms! I knew they were coming tonight - all five of them, and I hadn't even made up the beds. What on earth had got into me lately? By the look on Sue's face she was thinking the same as me. Usually I was very organised ... and more than likely the beds would have been made up the day after I arrived. I had changed the sheets and duvet on Rob's after he left the weekend before, so why hadn't I remade it?

But that was ok ... because now I had a perfect excuse to leave the room and get stuck into all those hostessy things you are supposed to do when you had guests. I don't know how I didn't laugh aloud ... and as for the grin that wanted to bounce onto my face ... ahh ... that was a given. I was just about to say that he shouldn't worry about that, as I would go and do them straight away, when my sister butted in.

'Don't worry, George. Aunty Erin and I were just about to go and do them.' She began to walk past me, purposefully nudging into my shoulder so I would look straight into her face. 'And that will give me and your Aunty the *perfect* opportunity to have time to catch up on all the latest gossip.' A pause. 'On our own.' Bugger. Unlike George, by this time I was the one feeling nervous now, as I knew there was no way anyone would come to disturb us in case they were roped into helping. I also knew there would be no getting away from Sue until I had given her all the details of my infatuation with a woman I just couldn't have ... the same woman who would run a mile if she found out what I was like. Just to clarify for you: a stalker who couldn't find her arse with both hand, and a liar too. A shit stirring, article writing, career and life destroying stalker. 'You coming, sis?' Then a smile crept on to her face, you know like the ones cats tend to give just before they pounce on a mouse. 'Can't wait to get stuck in.'

I bet you can't. But I certainly could, and I was going to delay again by asking George if he wanted me to get him some ice cream ... It would've worked too if Madame Sue, the mind reader and medium hadn't butted in as I turned to George. 'Get gone, you. And make sure your sister isn't drawing around the picture frames again.' Huh? 'A new phase ... don't worry. She usually uses non permanent markers.' Then her face beamed at me, and I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that if there was one person who I could talk to about this crazy week and all the surprises, jolts, return to the living feelings I thought were long since dead, guilt, all surrounded by a sense of wonder, that person was Sue.

'Ok.' My voice indicated that I was ready to tell her what she wanted to hear. All in that one little word. And with that admission, she trundled off, with me following like a lamb to the slaughter. Again.

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She didn't ask me straight away. No. She made me wait ... and wait ... and then wait some more. We had gathered all of the spare sheets and duvets, even piled them outside the rooms, before she decided it was time.

'Do you want to just tell me, or are you going to make me work for it?' Sue's voice was light, friendly even, and I knew whatever I told her she wouldn't judge me. All the things I had done in the past had never fazed her, so why should now be any different? Even when I had finally admitted that I was more into the female of the species rather than the rugged manly type, she had just hugged me close before whispering, 'You're my sister, Erin. And even though I've always loved you, today I love you even more.' I know! Very touching, but true.

So why was I finding it difficult to spill?

'Looks as if I have to work for it then.' She sighed an overly dramatic sigh, stopped puffing and punching the pillow, before flopping onto the bed.

'No.' My voice cracked over the word, so I cleared my throat and tried again. 'No ... I ... need to tell you something.'

Sue's eyes twinkled, but not in merriment, or because she thought she had one over on me. It was just her way, you know ... just her way of opening herself up. I knew the look from old. It was the same look she had given me just before I had told her about me and Teri ... both times. The first when I told her that Teri and I were lovers, the second when I told her we weren't.

'Sit here.' She patted the bed in the space next to her. 'Next to me, Erin.' Reluctantly, I sat at the corner of the bed, and she patted the space again as if to indicate she wanted me closer still. I moved my butt over the sheet, not looking at her the whole time. All I seemed to be able to concentrate on were her hands. Such capable, motherly hands, so unlike my own, which seemed empty for some strange reason. 'Whatever it is, it is better shared, honey.' That voice. So soft. So caring. So Sue. 'I'll just listen, and if you don't want me to say anything I won't.' Tentatively I peeked upwards to look into her eyes, and to my surprise, they were so much closer than I thought they would be. She had tilted her head to peer up at me, and I knew she was trying to do what people do to frightened animals - make themselves seem smaller so the injured creature wouldn't feel so threatened.

It worked too. Before I knew it, I was regaling all the events leading up to my move to the Lakes. Not the Teri thing ... nope ... the article, and knowing Stephanie Stevenson before I had actually met her. Sue didn't, or couldn't, see the problem.

'But that was four years ago, Erin. God. I doubt she'll even remember what it said, never mind that you wrote it.' She tried to smile to make me feel better, taking my hand in hers and giving it a gentle squeeze.

'But that's what makes it worse.' It seemed as if at that moment all the puff left my sails, and my head fell forward into my hands. I knew Sue was waiting for me to continue, but I just wanted to think everything through one more time. Lifting my face, I looked back at her. 'She doesn't know



it was me.' I could tell by her confused expression that she wasn't too sure what I was talking about. 'Steph. She doesn't know I wrote the article.' Sue went to speak again, but I cut her off. 'And I have never mentioned that I tried with all my might to make her hurt as much as I was hurting.'

'I don't understand ... why did you want to hurt her?' I shrugged my shoulders. 'There must have been a reason. Think.' But there was no reason ... no magical solution to why I had decided to vent my spleen on someone who seemed to have everything whilst I had nothing ... turn my anger onto someone who seemed invincible, who had made someone suffer and got away with it. Someone, who until this moment, encapsulated everything in life that I lacked. Shit. It wasn't jealousy, was it? I wouldn't have done all that because Stephanie Stevenson was popular, good at her job, seemed to have everything going for her whilst I was still reeling from a failed relationship, would I? Nah. I had been, or still was, screwed up, but I doubt even I would have stooped that low. But I had. And there was no hiding from it.

'Why didn't you say in the article that the husband admitted it wasn't her fault?' If I knew the answer to that, I wouldn't be feeling as shitty as I was feeling right at that moment. So, I did the thing I found myself doing over and over again. I shrugged. Then began to cry. I think they were the tears I had tried valiantly to hold back when I had first seen everyone standing in the place I thought Steph was going to be. And with that thought, I began to cry harder. I tried to speak, but my throat wasn't having any of it. Its main purpose at this moment in time was to allow the sobbing noises to escape. Sue just slipped those capable motherly hands around me and pulled me into her. More tears. More attempts to speak. I wasn't used to crying, never had been one to let all my emotions tumble out unaccounted for, but at this rate I would be able to hire myself out for funerals. If I hadn't been so tied up in the 'poor me' act, I would have laughed at the last statement.

'Erin.' Sue's voice was comforting, yet not, if you know what I mean. I was content to finally allow myself the freedom to feel all the things I had bottled up for so long, but it just hurt, you know? The realisation that however hard you try to forget some things, eventually they will always come back to haunt you until you deal with them fully and finally. All the time I had known Steph, all seven days worth, I had promised I would tell her. That could have been my first step to redemption in a way. But like the ultimate coward I had avoided the issue - avoided the 'By the way ...' that I knew was inevitable. 'Erin.' The sobs were easing now. Tears were drying and crusting up on my face, and the pitiful sobs were turning into hiccoughs. The first wave was ebbing, and I was allowing some composure to grip onto me. Cautiously, I lifted my face to look into the caring blueness exuding from my sister's eyes. Patiently, she waited until I murmured a response before she continued what she wanted to say. 'All is not lost, you know?' I didn't understand what she was saying, and I think my expression told her so, either that or the huge sniff I mustered up from somewhere. 'Tell her.'

Fresh tears poked behind my eyes, but I think Sue spotted them before they were released into the free world once again. 'I know that sounds so simple. That's because ... because ...' I waited for her to continue, '... because ...' A grin shot across her face, 'it is.'

'Maybe for you, Sue. But it's not. She'll hate me.' The whine in my voice made me stop and take

stock of the person I was dangerously becoming. Was I a whiner? A whinger? A five year old? It was beginning to look like it. No wonder no one would look at me twice ... well, maybe twice, just to make sure they were in fact looking at a six foot whinging five year old in the first place.

Sue breathed deeply, hugging me again before pulling away. I missed the comfort she had given me, and it felt as if I was once again left there to defend myself from something unknown. 'Well ... when I say "*simple*", I mean, there is no other way.' Her face clouded slightly before she continued. 'You have something you need to get off your chest before anything can develop. That much is obvious.' I know. But it's the getting the stuff off my chest bit that was proving to be the problem in the first place. 'Do you love her?' And where on earth had that come from? I hadn't said anything about loving her ... just liking her ... lying to her ... writing vindictive articles about her ... nothing about love. All that besides, Sue knew I had only become acquainted with Steph for a week, so where did she get off with all this 'love' thing? 'It's just that you seem so much more involved with your next door neighbour than just fancying her.'

At this point I decided that standing up seemed the best thing to do. So I did it. And walked away, making sure that I wasn't facing her before I answered.

'No.' The lie slipped easily from my lips, as if I had coated them with butter. 'I like her, that's all.' My heart was beating inside my chest with the rhythm of the blood pounding through my ears. If Sue were to look at my expression now she would know that I was lying. I was surprised she hadn't detected it from the pitch of my voice. But then again, she hadn't answered me yet. She hadn't said all the things I had expected her to say when I had denied my feelings for Steph, you know, like 'That's ok then ... if it all goes tits up, it's no biggy.' And she still hadn't answered me. So, like the twat I am, I turned around. There she sat, the look of utter disbelief etched onto her face, a half smile playing along her mouth. But still silent. 'What?' The smile broadened. 'Why are you smiling like that?

'Like what?' I could hear the glee singing in the tone of her question. I half closed my eyes and looked at her searchingly, and she mimicked my action, her eyes closing in mock imitation.

'Like a cat who has not only got the cream, caught the mouse, but got the dog kicked out of the house as well, that's what.'

Sue threw her head back and laughed, slapping her hands on her thighs before standing up sharply. I took a step back as she walked towards me, but eventually, and quickly, I found myself up against the wall. Talk about a rock and a hard place. My sister approached me surely and carefully, the grin still firmly in place. As she reached the space in front of me, her height mirroring my own, she made sure she had my full attention before cocking her head to one side and purring, 'You might be able to hide it from yourself, lady, but remember one thing.' I think I gulped a reply. 'I know you better than you know yourself, ok?' And then she was past me, out of the door, and into the next bedroom before I had a chance to squawk out a response.

Funnily enough, I didn't follow. Usually, well especially when we were kids, we would taunt the other with sayings like that and spend the rest of the day trying to outsmart each other. However, maturity has taught me at least one thing. Never try to outsmart the person who actually does

know you better than you think they do ... or better still, better than you know yourself. Therefore, I found the only thing left to do was to make the bloody bed. On my own.

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All the bedrooms were finished in less than an hour, and in all that time I had seen Sue a handful of times. Each time she gave me a smug grin, and I blushed stupidly. There was no point denying my feelings for Steph, and that's the other point ... why was I denying them in the first place? Was it because I didn't want my sister to think I had gone crazy? Or admit that I was in fact crazy to love so quickly? Maybe it was one of those defence mechanisms that suddenly shoot up in front of you like the screens in a bank when someone was trying to rob it. That sounds feasible ... well ... kind of ... if you took away the fact that I wasn't made of metal, or was an inanimate piece of material. I was flesh and blood, and flesh and blood cannot keep those walls erected indefinitely. Unfortunately.

The rest of the evening was spent playing games with the kids, stupid games, but enough to keep the heat off me for a little bit. It was good to forget for a while ... fun, even though Rob couldn't resist *Gone With the Wind* when playing charades. I think that was the time everyone decided the night had come to a natural end, although the lingering smell in living room said more like *unnatural*. I am definite I saw Brian gag, and if any of you know what dogs love to sniff, you'll understand how rancid the odour must have been. Sue didn't mention anything else about our talk from earlier; even though I had come to the conclusion I would not deny how I felt about Steph if she asked again. I was tempted to just tell her at one point, but by that time we were all tired. I promised I would tell her the next day, and before Steph returned.

After we had all said goodnight and gone our separate ways, I felt the pangs of loneliness hit me once again. I was in a house with five other people, and even had Brian in the room with me, but I still felt alone. I know it sounds weird, and it was, but that's the only way I can describe it to you.

Showered, teeth and hair brushed (obviously with different brushes - just thought I would clarify), pyjamas on ... and I was in bed. Lying there in the dark I felt so awake. So many thoughts and feelings raced inside me that I was having difficulty concentrating on just the one. Everything I had been thinking about in the last forty-eight hours was jiggling and juggling for my undivided attention, but I just couldn't give it. Finally, and freakily, I had the most illuminating image of Steph flash up in front of me. It seemed like the same kind of one I had when I ... erm ... you know ... cough ... investigated the southern part of my anatomy, but not, if you get my drift. However, it didn't evoke the same kind of carnal longing it had previously. It was so much more than that. For some reason, as soon as the image appeared, the feeling of distress and disorientation left me, and I didn't feel alone anymore. This image was calming, delicate and bright. The light exuding from the shape of her felt warm and comforting, and although I didn't want it to happen, my eyes began to close. Valiantly, I struggled with sleep, even though mere minutes before I had been wide awake. There was one thing I had to check before I let the grip of the dream world take me, and that was if Brian could see what I could. I know I am beginning to sound more and more like a grade A nutter, but at the time, I was starting to believe my marbles were well and truly on a one way trip as far away from me as they

could get.

Lifting my head, I turned to the direction of where Brian's bed was, all the while hoping that the wraithlike image of Steph wouldn't disappear. He was lying on his side, his head turned in my direction, and looking at me questioningly. Thought so. I was cracking up. I could see the image as strongly as if she were in the room with me, but Brian appeared to be looking through it. Strangely enough, I should have felt one of two things. Firstly, I should have been shitting my pants at the thought of a ghostlike image hovering over my bed, but how could I be? Steph was so beautiful ... so bloody beautiful ... hovering there with her hair flowing outwards, her green eyes appearing to be the greenest they have ever been, her smile slightly crooked and emanating a sense of peace and joy. Therefore, the first thought should have triggered the second. I was a fucking head case. Lying there, in the dark, or light, which ever you believe, I was cracking up big time. Even my dog couldn't sense anything, and they were programmed by God to know if something is not quite right.

Flopping backwards and onto my pillows, I closed my eyes, believing that when I opened them I would face blackness once again. But no. When I flicked them open once again, there she was ... still smiling. Bugger. I was tired. That was it. Stressed and tired. Stressed, tired and cracking up ... no biggy ... just an excuse to go and see a shrink in the very near future. But you know the funny thing ... even funnier than imagining a beautiful woman in my bedroom? I'll tell you. The funnier thing than becoming an all out window licker was that just as I turned away from the image to try to dispel it, I heard my name being spoken. Quietly ... almost musically, and I wasn't sure I wasn't imagining it just like the figure. However, this may be the case, but when I turned over again the image had gone, but Brian was standing next to my bed looking at the space where Steph had just been, panting, his tail wagging in greeting.

Instead of feeling spooked, I felt justified. Is this the voice of the insane? Guilty? Or, more to the point, the voice of someone who was lonely enough to trigger out of body experiences from absent neighbours in a bid to feel some semblance of normality again?

'It's ok, fella. All gone now.' I stretched out my hand to pat Brian's nose and allowed him to lick my fingers. 'You'll meet her properly tomorrow.' Before mummy goes into the mental hospital, I promise. I couldn't help the laugh that gurgled up. And even though I wasn't sure whether I was a crackpot or not, I still felt the sense of peace I had when the hallucination had appeared. Gripping my pillow, I brought it close to my face and snuggled my head deeply into it.

Moments later I was away in a dreamless sleep, I think it was the best night's sleep I had had in over four years.

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Morning yawned her way through the crack in my curtains well before I was ready to deal with the day. However, even though I could easily turn over and catch another hour of sleep, there was no way the other members of my house were thinking the same thing. Well, when I say other members, I actually mean the spawns of Satan themselves - Daisy and George. When they burst through the door I felt the groan surge up from my throat and splat out into the air. Funny

how kids don't seem to notice that actually you don't want to get up ... you don't want to talk, or play with the dog. In fact, you don't want to do anything but go back to sleep. The worse thing was they seemed set on pissing me off as much as possible, and that was just the line '*Quality time!*' squealed at a volume loud enough to wake the dead, and get the already excited Brian to the 'I'm gonna piss on your floor' stage. Who on earth ever thought that those two words, quality and time that is, could ever make the recipient feel anything but an urge to throttle the life out of the person responsible uttering it is beyond me.

Nevertheless, it wasn't just the kids, who were now bouncing on my bed, or the woofing lab that made me get up. It was the evil plan I hatched as I was trying to get my bearings on the now spinning room that made the smile sneak up and a sense of retribution take effect.

'Why don't you go and wake Uncle Jim up?' That stopped them in mid flight. 'He would love to be woken up as specially as this.' All three looked at one another and then back at me, then at each other again. 'And if we can get him up and dressed quickly, we can all walk Brian around the lake.' I could tell I needed to convince them more. 'And then I'll take you to see the weirdest house you will ever see ...' I was winning them over, but I needed more. 'And get you sugar ... lots of it ...' That did it. They didn't answer, as they were all scrambling for the door. Even Brian, who loved sugar, and knew the word like he knew 'Walkies', was scrambling his paws over stripped wooden floors. I could hear their voices screaming out for James to get up - *now* - and God did that make me feel good. Stretching my legs and arms, I smiled a glorious smile. Today was going to be fun. For me, at least. The chuckle left my mouth like I had just planned to burn down and orphanage on Christmas Eve. And even though I should have felt some sense of pity for James, I couldn't quite muster it.

"I see", my arse.' The laugh was long and hearty, and it wasn't until I thought I couldn't breathe that I stopped and got my backside into gear. Steph was coming home today, and I wanted to be ready, whatever '*ready*' meant.

Breakfast, dressed, and Brian walked. All of the actions completed with a chuckle begging to be released every time I saw James' face. One thing I knew about James was he liked to sleep ... and liked to get up when *he* felt ready to. He spent the first part of the morning sporting sunglasses, and anyone who saw him would have suspected he had a hangover. Truth was, he was extremely vain, and like most people, he woke up with baggy flaps under their eyes when sleep was robbed from them. I felt good, in an evil kind of way, when I remembered it was me that made him look like that. I know. Small things amuse small minds.

Next on the agenda was to pack everyone into Sue's car. Thankfully, she had a people carrier ... you know, one of those cars that resemble a mini bus and usually driven by women taking their one child to school. Brian's cage was loaded into the back of the super van, and before long, we were on our way to Ambleside. The kids were singing travel songs, much to James' displeasure, and I couldn't help singing along. '*One man went to mow, went to mow a meadow*' became louder and louder, and eventually James joined in too. It must have been a case of 'If you can't beat them, join them' - even Brian started howling from the back, but I think that was more from fear than jubilation.

When we had parked and looked around the tiny village of Ambleside, we ended up all standing outside the crooked Bridge House that stood pride of place right in the centre. Memories of days before rocketed into my head, and I believed if I turned my head I would see Steph standing there holding a patient Reggie on his lead, explaining to me all the history of the building. A mix of emotions rushed through me, and I am still uncertain which was the most prominent. Sadness, happiness, joy, regret, all of them tumbling around and vying for top of the bill. But no. Still undecided. Sadness and regret were, obviously, because when I did turn, Steph wasn't there ... but the feelings of joy and happiness were because I had the people I loved around me, although not all of them ...

'Why'st over the water, Aunty Erin?' George was beside me, and when I looked down at him I could see innocence written all over his face. Eyes open in wonder and belief that every word that would spew forth from my lips would be the ultimate truth - pity that wasn't always the way. But before I could begin to feel sorry for myself, I felt a small hand slip into my own and tiny fingers squeeze in reassurance. 'S'ok if you don't know.' I was just about to tell him I did, when he continued. 'Because there is a leaflet here that explains it.' A leaflet with a picture of the house was thrust up at me, and I had to juggle with Brian's lead in order to take it.

Opening the green coloured pamphlet, I spotted a section titled 'History of Bridge House', and all the words Steph had told me flooded out in a the style of a classy font. 'Straddling Stock Beck, this once apple store used to be the home of a family of six ...' I remembered the banter I had shared with Steph ... remembered how I answered her when she told me to check out the local history, and the smile slipped onto my face with ease. There was a connection between us, however hard I tried to deny it. Two people couldn't act that way with each other and not have that *something*, could they? Deep down I wanted it to be true ... wanted the chance to actually get to know Steph ... become something more to her than a woman who she had taken around for the day once.

George was still looking at me, his face exhibiting the look only a child could give ... you know, the one that says 'Well?'

'Did you know that this house used to have a family of ...' And I was off. I explained, or regaled, however you want to define it, the history of the structure standing in front of us. Daisy sidled over ... then Sue ... Rob ... and I think you get the picture. The only one who wasn't interested was Brian, as he found a patch of grass that seemed more his style. 'And if you're good, I might even take you to see the floating island.' Even the kids looked at me as if I had either lost my marbles or was pulling their legs.

'Right. And then what?' Sue's voice indicated that she thought I was taking the piss, exactly the same tone as I must've used when I had first heard it. 'Flying pigs?'

I grinned fully at her before replying, 'Well, my dear sister. That depends.'

Initially, she looked confused at my response, but just like Sue, she took on the challenge. 'On what?'

'Easy.' I made sure the kids were paying attention before I spoke clearly and carefully. 'It depends on ... how much sugar you have.' Both George and Daisy cheered at this, even Brian woofed, as the grass was never going to top the feeling of the delight sugar gave him. The rest of the adults looked at me as if I were on the edge of sanity, but it wasn't long before they were aware that Daisy, George, and I had a secret. And that secret was once carried to the summit of Mount Everest, just before they raced down to put the wrapper in the bin at the base. At least it would perk James up.

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It would be too easy to say at this point that the kids loved Kendal Mint Cake, and even easier to write that they acted like fleas on a rice pudding after they had demolished a whole bar each. Sue, Rob, James, and Brian only had a piece, and after the events earlier in the week, I limited myself to just the one too. There's always something fulfilling about introducing someone to something new ... especially if it is a good thing. You have a sense of knowledge about the effects of it, and hope they like it too - almost like an expectation. I wonder if Steph felt that way when she was watching me make a total tit out of myself. Probably at first, but when the whole shebang of the high was flowing and flooding out of me, I doubt she had that feeling of elation that comes about with the understanding you have pioneered the onset of a sugar rush single-handed.

Before long, it was time to leave. Sue had mentioned that it would be a good idea if we had a barbeque for the evening meal, as it would save us spacking about trying to decide what everyone either wanted to eat, or where to go and eat out. There was no way I wanted to eat out anyway, as Steph was coming back sometime soon, and I wanted to be there when she did. Can't be a stalker if you don't plan ahead, can you?

We stopped at the local supermarket, the one in Keswick, and it was decided that Rob, James and the kids should go and look around Derwentwater. That way, Brian wouldn't be left alone in the car, and I wouldn't have the chants of 'Can I have ... gimme gimme ... I want' following me around each aisle. And that was from James. The kids were usually all right.

Once inside, Sue didn't waste any time. Straight away, she decided she wanted to continue where we had left off the previous evening, and in retrospect, I should have been ready for it. But as I said before, I promised myself the next time she mentioned Steph's name I would tell her the whole deal. Easier said than done, though.

I hadn't even got one foot in the door with the trolley (that had the wonky wheel of course) when she placed her hand on the bar and said 'So ... will you tell me now about the gorgeously absent Ms Stevenson?'

'Huh?' As you do.

'You know what I mean. And now's the time to tell.' She took control of the trolley, lifting it and slamming it down to align the wheels again before turning back to me. 'She'll be back soon, and you wouldn't want me to interrogate *her*, would you?' My face showed disbelief, and a little bit

of panic if truth be known. 'Because you know I will.' Sue softened the last bit with a smile, and I felt a prickle of safety slip along my skin.

'Ok ... but not here.' Sue went to open her mouth again, but I stopped her. 'In the café ... over a coffee.' The grin she gave me was huge; almost like she knew she had won in a way. That sounds callous, doesn't it? It makes out that my sister wasn't a very nice woman, when in fact she was one of the best. The reason why she acted this way was because she knew me ... knew that I was a bugger when it came to spilling my inner self. Knew that if I didn't spill my inner self I would become unbearable - just like the last time.

Tagging the trolley with us, as Sue said she had fixed it now so it was hers, we made our way to the café at the end of the store. After putting it into the compartment for safe keeping, although we didn't have anything to safeguard to start with, Sue went to fetch coffees and I got us a table. Considering it was a Saturday, the café was quiet, and I picked a small table out of the way. Sitting there, I allowed the things I wanted to tell Sue to make some kind of order in my head ... figuratively bullet pointing. As they say, 'Once a writer, always a writer', even in my private life. Because I was so intent with my own mental meanderings, I didn't hear her come back. Therefore the sound of her voice close to my ear made me jump and nearly knock the cups out of her hand.

'Easy, sis.' Plonk. Plonk. Two cups of steaming coffee sat on the table. And that's where my attention stayed for a minute. 'So. Are you going to answer my question, or what?' I looked up at her, and she was leaning over the plastic covered surface, as if she was trying to block out the rest of the customers. 'Ok. I'll make it easier for you.' I didn't like the sound of that, but then again, I wasn't feeling on top form anyway. 'Do you love Stephanie Stevenson?' Talk about getting to the point in record time. 'Or should I say, why do you love Stephanie Stevenson, because it's obvious that you do.'

The words I wanted to say were no use to me, and all that spewed out were one worders, 'How ... why ... erm ... what ...'

'No need to deny it, Erin. I know you. You know I know you. And in this knowing you, I also know the way you act when you don't know what to say or do.' Yes ... too many 'knows' in that sentence, but you can blame Sue ... it was her saying it after all. 'Look.' Sue caught my hand and pulled it to her, and anybody watching would have thought we were a pair of lezzas - a pair of clam smackers who were either incestuous or liked their mirror image. Either way, we were getting a few looks. 'Ignore them. Look at me. Tell me what's so bad about being in love, Erin.' I opened and closed my mouth a couple of times - I knew it wasn't going to be easy, but this was ridiculous. 'Is it because she doesn't know about your secret?' I nodded, then shook my head, then nodded again, before expelling air from inside my lungs into the steamy room. 'Whatever. Look at me for Christ's sakes. If they want to look, let them.' True. Let them. I would rather have the people in the café staring at me in disgust than have Sue pissed off with me. 'You shouldn't waste your time on the past ... that's where it should stay - in the past. You have the perfect opportunity to set the record straight, and all you seem to be doing is beating yourself up about something that happened four years ago.' It was as simple as she had said it would be, but that wasn't the only reason why I was reticent about telling Steph how I was feeling, but before I had



chance to beat myself up about falling too quickly for someone, Sue was there again. 'The very first time I met Rob, I knew he was the man for me. No ifs, butts, or maybes ... just the one. As soon as he introduced himself and I shook his hand ... bam. The connection was unmistakable ... like electricity racing up my arm and through my body.'

Instantly, my mind was back to the very first time I had met Steph ... the shock ... the tingling ... the weirdness that I just couldn't place. At the time I had thought it was just me, that no one else would, or could, ever feel the same thing. Was that connection? The same kind of connection Sue had felt when she had shaken hands with Rob? Slowly, I looked down at my hand, even turned it over to peer at the back of it. It was just an ordinary hand ... nothing special. So, why had it induced such feelings? Sue was still talking, and I came back to the present just as she said, 'There was no doubt about it. I knew from that moment that he was the only person I would ever want in my life.'

Did I want the same thing? From Steph, I mean, not Rob. Was it something out of my control ... like karma, or other forms of crap? I know I shouldn't talk about karma in that way, but when you don't understand it ... and yes ... I am going off the point.

'So, you see, Erin. You either know or you don't.' She leaned forward, conspiratorially. 'And the thing that we both know is ...' I leaned closer to her, expecting some form of revelation ... some form of advice that until this moment I never knew existed. 'You have to tell her.' Fuck. Why does it always come back to that? It was like a stuck record, repeating over and over again 'Tell her. Tell her. Tell ...' You get the message. And when you are told enough times, encouraged enough times to do something, a part of your brain seems to explode and release a part of you that says 'I can do that. No problem.' Then what follows is a kind of physical jubilation ... a surge of positive energy that gushes throughout and pants 'I can do it! I am invincible!'

Without warning, to either Sue, or me, I stood up, the coffee cups rattled and shook on the table as if they too had been touched by the higher being.

'You ok?'

I couldn't speak ... the feeling of wanting to shout aloud how exalted I was feeling was on one hand exhilarating, yet on the other down right frightening. All the doubts seemed to have cleared from my mind. I was going to tell Steph ... tell her everything ... and I mean *everything*. Well ... apart from the fiddling with my lady garden whilst thinking of her ... erm ... well, not right away at least.

'Let's go.' And I was off at a near run, collecting the trolley on the way. It was like a fucked up version of supermarket sweep, except at the end I had to pay for it.

By the time we had loaded the car, me throwing everything inside until a definite crunching sound was heard, I had babbled my way through a full confession. Sue was now definitely in the know about my feelings for the woman who she had yet to meet. At first she seemed a little freaked out by my behaviour, but when I turned around to look her in the face after launching a bag of hot dog rolls into the car instead of the boot and announced, 'I love her, Sue. Love her,'

her face broke into a grin.

'I know you do, Erin.' That's when she grabbed my arm to stop my javelin throwing, maybe because I was holding two bottles of wine, and made me concentrate on her for the minute. 'Now all you have to do is tell her as soon as possible.' I nodded. 'Invite her to the barbeque as soon as you see her. Don't take no for an answer.'

'Nope ... I mean yes. I'll invite her as soon as I see her, and I won't take no for an answer.' At that exact moment in time I felt so alive. Even *alive*. It had been so long since I had felt so uplifted about something in my life, and deep down I knew everything was going to work out for the best.

It still amazes me how stupid I can be sometimes.

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## Chapter Twenty-Five

Half past three. That's what time I spotted her car turn into the lane leading to our houses. As soon as the tyres crunched on the gravel, Sue was beside me whispering, 'Now ... go ask her now. We'll wait here.' Audibly, I gulped, as the determination I had valiantly displayed outside the supermarket was packed away with the battered rolls and squashed meat.

James was resting at the side of the house, as he was still griping that he felt drained because of his lack of sleep. However, that didn't stop him nearly leaping up and running to get to Steph before I did. Wanker. I wanted her to see me before him, so my voice box took control. 'STEPH!' Jesus. I wouldn't be out of place at a rugby match. Then I was off at a pace that would make a sprinter cheer. One thing I knew I had was longer legs, and more determination, than James. I had also had a good night's sleep. And if Brian would stop sniffing the compost heap, then maybe I would have had my faithful companion slowing him down by jumping up and thinking it was a game.

When I saw Steph climb out of the car, I nearly stopped. How could she become even more beautiful in the matter of twenty-four hours? The smile she gave me was radiant, and then she looked at James and it momentarily slipped from her face. Reggie was howling in the back, and when I saw him come whizzing towards me my heart lifted up and rejoiced. Why? I'll tell you. Because if her dog loved me, then I had a chance, get it? If her dog growled and went to bite me whenever he got the opportunity, then there would be no way in hell she would give me the time of day. However, although I thought the darling boy would want to spend time helping out his old pal Erin, he had, in fact, caught the scent of Brian ... or the compost rotting delicately in the back garden. That made a laugh gurgle up from somewhere deep inside, and for a moment, I forgot that I was nervous.

'Going to get to her before you, Mason.'

'You *git!*' Both of us spoke quietly, although James said his with glee, mine was definitely threatening. He laughed loudly at my response, and tried to get past me. There was no way I wanted him to get to her before me ... I loved James, don't get me wrong, but he did have a knack of embarrassing me whenever he got the opening.

Therefore, when I got to Steph, I didn't think twice about my actions. I just grabbed her into a tight hug and brought her as close as I possibly could. The 'I missed you, Steph,' didn't just come from my heart; it came from deep inside me ... a place I thought was ruined and empty. A small laugh came bubbling out, it was one of those delighted laughs that appear from nowhere but make you so damned sure you are alive. 'Weird, I know.' And I know it sounds weird to you, too. I barely knew her, as she didn't know me, but I did know her, if that makes any sense whatsoever.

Remembering my manners, and my situation, I pulled away. The feel of her had been so wonderfully perfect, and I wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of my life in her arms.

'This is ...' But she didn't give me time to introduce my publisher, best friend, and git.

'Brian. I know.' Huh? Brian? Had she just completely ignored the person standing in front of her, or had Brian turned up? Just before I turned to see if my canine crap sniffer had eventually made an appearance, Steph stuck out her hand in greeting. 'Good to meet you at last.' What the fuck? She thought James was Brian. James ... was ... Brian? Eventually, my brain decided this was funny, as brains tend to do, and I started to laugh. James seemed to wait for my lead before he started to laugh too. I can't tell you how many times James and I repeated the name Brian, before I realised Steph wasn't laughing along with us. In fact she looked pissed off. Big style. Talk about digging your own grave. Here I was, on the verge of spilling my all to her, when all I could muster was humiliating her instead of humiliating myself, as I had expected. The hand she had stuck out was firmly at her side by now, and if I wasn't mistaken, I'm sure it was balling itself into a fist.

Therefore, it was with great effort that I spluttered out 'I'm sorry, Steph.' Her face indicated that she thought I was lying, and she was becoming more and more flushed. Bugger. 'This isn't Brian.' I know that, you know that, but she, on the other hand, was still unconvinced. 'This is James Cullam. My publisher.' And side kick, by the looks of it. James had found his manners at last, and offered his hand in greeting. Steph looked at him and then at the both of us. Doubt flitted across her face, as she must have thought we were a pair of head cases, and she didn't take his welcoming hand - a bit like the way James hadn't taken hers.

Thankfully, Brian decided it was time to come to my rescue. Unfortunately, not in a gentle way. His greeting was more of a 'Let me jump up at you and nearly send you arse over tit ... and whilst I'm here, you need a wash.' I had barely introduced him before he had welcomed Steph, in the way dogs know how to welcome, and was off again chasing the now overexcited Reggie into the distance. James was still standing there with his hand outstretched - bless - and Steph seemed numb, for some reason or another. Maybe Brian had winded her, do you think?

When she finally came back to the land of the living, Steph grabbed hold of James' hand and

pumped it up and down. I honestly don't know why she looked so relieved? Could it have been that she had felt out of synch with the events? Whatever the reason, I was reassured that she had started to smile again, and this issued a thankful laugh from me, shortly followed by the sticky bob, James. She looked so beautiful ... so bloody goddamn beautiful, that I felt my heart crawl from the confines of my chest to absorb the woman standing in front of me. A sigh came out ... a soft sigh ... a wanting sigh ... and the most wonderful thing was she seemed to be looking at me in the same way. It could have been my imagination, who knows, but for that moment it appeared that we were the only two people in existence. But we weren't. One reason being, James was right next to me. I could feel his presence so strongly now I had remembered he was there. I wondered if he had either seen, or felt, the electricity I was sure passed from her to me, and back to her again.

For a split second, Steph turned to look at where the dogs had disappeared, and this gave me the opportunity to mouth 'Don't' to James. All I wanted was him to understand that I didn't want him to start his interrogation with this woman ... not now, actually, not ever. A curt nod was all he gave in reply, and I knew he had understood me. Thank the Lord.

Next on the agenda was to invite her over for a barbeque. And really, do you know how difficult that simple invite was to say? I think I had more connectives and chain words than actual lexicon, and if it hadn't been for James, I honestly believe we would still be standing there today.

'For God's sake, Erin.' Go on, James ... shout it. 'What she is trying to ask you ... *badly* ...' I couldn't resist it. I gave him a thump on the shoulder, and he tried to laugh it off and pretend it hadn't hurt him, but I knew he would be trying to show me a red mark as soon as he got the opportunity. Steph watched us both with fascination ... and I hoped she didn't think I always thumped the people I was close to all of the time. By the time the question was asked, it appeared to hover in the air right above her face for a while. Time seemed to stand still, and for the first time in a while I actually thought 'What if she says no? Sue'll kill me.'

'Another time, maybe.' She would. Sue would give me an ear bashing the likes of which I had never experienced before. Her exact words 'Don't take no for an answer' came back to echo through my vacuous brain. And even with all my mental windings, she still just looked at me. 'No worries.'

'T'd love to, Erin ... *erm* ... and James.'

Hal -le - lu -jah! Hal -le - lu -jah! Hal -le - lu -jah! Halle - lu -jah! Hal -le - lu -jaaaaaaah!  
Overexcited? Me? Briefly. As even though my whole body was singing hymns, my brain was whispering, 'You've got to tell her everything now. You promised.' But I didn't let it ruin the moment, because for some strange reason, I knew everything would be all right in the end.

'Reggie is more than welcome too.' And as if on command, the man himself came racing around the corner being chased by Brian. The look of total rapture etched on both of their faces, well, until they both disappeared again. 'I say that Reggie's welcome, although I doubt we'll see much of those little buggers tonight.' No. By the looks of the two new pals, they would be inseparable - and probably spend all of their time with either the kids, or bombing around like they had eaten

too much sugar. Again. Or was that just me?

In less than five minutes, Steph was gone. I watched as she walked away, unloaded her overnight bag from her car, and went inside her house. Reggie was still playing with Brian, but when he saw his mamma leaving, he yapped at Brian and ran off to be with her. Inside my stomach there were an army of butterflies, all wearing hobnailed boots, and river dancing. It wasn't painful, just different. All I hoped was that the constant movement from my gut didn't make me feel nauseous when I saw her later. Was it a date? I know I changed from performing butterflies to asking whether it was a date or not, but I just wondered. Would you think it was a date? Did you notice anything I missed? The reason I am asking is, I wasn't too sure. It wasn't, as she hadn't really given me any indication that she thought it was a date. And secondly, I hadn't really given her the impression that it was a date. But if neither of us thought it, then why did I feel deep inside my chest that it was?

Maybe because I am a knob.

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Sue had been itching to get over and finally meet Steph, and the look on her face when I got back to the rest of the group was something that usually would have easily wiped the idiotic grin off my face. James had been trying to rib me all the way back, jibing me to let something slip, but I kept my big mouth shut. And as expected, he tried to show me the inkling of redness that was on the top of his arm. Being me, I ignored him ... but that didn't stop his whining.

As I walked past Sue, she grabbed my upper arm, and released one word. 'Well?' I grinned my reply, making Sue pull me to her, and anyone listening, or watching, would have thought it was a gesture one sister would do to another. But it was the whispered 'You'd better not cock it up,' that made my grin spread wider, especially because no one around had a clue. 'And next time, bloody introduce me, you git.'

'Might do.' Was that my voice? That happy sound that appeared to be floating up and up and up? Even the kids stopped hitting each other with sticks and looked over at me. 'And if you want anything to eat today, you'd better get washed and changed.' I saw both of them look at Sue as if to say, 'But mum ... we are eating outside. Why do we have to wash?' However it was the sense that everything had to be perfect ... you know, even down to washing my sister's kids who would be playing outside again by the time Steph came over. I think at that point, I would have bathed Brian too if I could have actually got my hands on him.

'Do as your Aunty Erin says, kids. Don't want you embarrassing her in front of her new girlfriend.' Rob. As if you couldn't guess, although you might have thought it would be James, but my grinning brother-in-law beat my publisher to it. He was too busy inspecting the non-existent bruise on his arm, until he realised that Rob had embarrassed me. Therefore, I had to stand there and watch them high five each other. Naturally, I just gave them the two-fingered salute, obviously on the sly as I didn't want to add to my nephew and niece's education ... I think George finding out about 'bitches' was enough for one weekend.

'She is not my girlfriend.' A little voice from nowhere popped into my head and whispered 'yet', and unexpectedly, or expectedly, I flushed. Visibly, the redness across my face indicated to the rest of them that what I had said was a lie. Sometimes families can be more trouble than they are worth ... although I don't mean a word of it.

Turning, I made my way into the house. If they weren't willing to scrub up to meet Steph, then that was their problem. I, on the other hand, wanted everything to be perfect.

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Why does choosing an outfit always take so bloody long? It was not as if I had wardrobes and wardrobes of gear to select from, but all of them seemed wrong somehow. It was like her coming for dinner all over again. Maybe because she was coming for dinner. Yes. Rambling, in this case, could be considered a delaying tactic used by the socially inept. Me. But that didn't stop the truth about her coming over for dinner, and at this rate, I would still be in my Extreme Makeover stage whilst the other members of my family (yes - consider James family) were outside with baby photographs of me without a nappy, or showing her the worst haircut ones ...

That made me put a spark to my gait, and before I had the opportunity to conjure up any more images of embarrassing situations, I was downstairs preparing salad. I needn't have bothered, as the rest of the clan were still getting ready. But at least this gave me the opportunity to think about what I needed to say.

Firstly, I would tell her about the article.

No! I couldn't do that! Not in front of everybody ... What if she went into one and told me exactly what a waste of space she thought I was? Without a doubt ... that would definitely be the case, and definitely not the first thing I admitted to her.

Ok. Try again.

Firstly, I would tell her how I felt about her. Not too heavy ... just eno ...

Fuck no! If I hadn't told her about the article, there was no point in telling her I thought she was the epitome of all that was exquisite and wonderful.

This wasn't as easy as I am telling you it was. And yes ... I am being sarcastic. Why had I been so convinced that inviting her over to tell her everything was such a good idea? It was Sue's fault. She had made me believe I could do it ... and I could, but just not tonight. I would have to tell her tomorrow, or when I was walking her home. That sounded like a good plan. I would walk her home, and maybe ask to chat to her ... yes ... that would work, wouldn't it? Then I could get her on her own, and reveal all.

So. Let's have another crack at it.

Firstly, I would ... well, I couldn't ignore her all night, could I? And why am I making a list

when I should just let everything come naturally?

'Because you're anal.' I even turned around at this point, expecting Sue to be standing there and grinning at me. It wasn't until I saw I was alone that I realised it was my inner voice. Sometimes I even creep myself out.

'I'll show you who's anal?' Pity that by this stage I wasn't in fact talking to myself.

'What does anal mean?' George was standing in the doorway, his hair sticking up in all directions.

As well as being caught talking to myself, I had left myself wide open for even more embarrassment.

'You see, George ...' Sue's voice came from right behind him, although I couldn't see her. 'Anal is an adjective.' George turned to the space behind him, and I stood and waited for more of the conversation to come from what appeared to be the shadows. 'And what is an adjective?'

'An adjective describes a noun.' His face was innocent and clear. 'And a noun is an object or subject.' If I wasn't dying right about now, I would have been so proud.

'Good boy.' I could hear the amusement in her voice, and I wanted to throttle her. 'And the words "Aunty Erin" are nouns, did you know that?' I watched him nod. 'So ... anal is describing what?'

'Aunty Erin.'

'Fantastic, George. You are so clever.' But not quite clever enough, as he turned and rushed out of the room to tell his father that he was a child genius without actually finding out what anal meant.

Sue's face was beaming with mischief as she appeared in the kitchen, but I did see the smile waver a little as she spotted the huge knife in my hand. 'Don't worry, sis. He won't remember a thing later.' I went to say otherwise, but she leaned over me and grabbed a piece of red pepper. 'We need to get the barbeque started. Do you know how to light one, because none of the rest of us do?'

I'm sure she knew that would stop me. She knew damned well I had as much experience with a barbeque as I had with flying a rocket to the moon. I thought Rob would have been one of those manly types who knew how to make fire. But no ... by all accounts, they had a gas one at home, and they had never started one of the 'crap ones', as she so delicately phrased it, like mine. There was no point even contemplating James for the job. The nearest he would ever come to lighting a barbecue would be chatting up the person who was doing it.

But. It was worth a try. And that's when she came.

We were all deciding on what to do ... should we Google it? I know - saddos, or what? When

her voice drifted over ... I think my blood actually stopped flowing for a split second. Whether this was because I had been caught with a cold barbeque and no chance to light it, or the fact her voice was like honey. 'Need any help?' That's all she said. And I wanted to list the ways she could help me, but I greeted her in that schoolboy-embarrassed way that screams 'I fancy you.' Then Sue took over. As expected. There was no way my sister was going to rely solely on my ability to introduce her, and in all honesty, I don't blame her.

What did surprise me though, was the way Sue threw her arms around Steph as if she had known her her whole life. My sister was friendly, but she never usually hugged someone when she was first introduced. I remember when she had first met James. It had taken her a good six months to hug him ... and when I looked over to where he was standing, I could understand why. The person who had told him pink was his colour needed shooting. However, that wasn't the reason why I found myself, once again, blushing. Sue had intimated that I talked about her all of the time. As if! And if I did, this was not the time or the place to make that revelation ... 'Steph this ... Steph that ...' that did it. I was personally going to strangle her when I got her on her own for a minute. What is the rap now for murder? Was it worth it? But it was when Sue asked about her job that I forgot my embarrassment. The defensive look Steph donned was enough to alert me that talking about her job was not a very good idea. Like the woman she was, Steph tried to answer her, but even an idiot could guess that she wasn't happy about it. The words came out clumsy and ill phrased, and by what I knew of her, this wasn't the confident woman I met a week ago. I had to do something, anything to get her away from feeling uncomfortable.

'Come on then, Zeus ... get the fire bolts thrown, and let's get cooking.' The look she gave me was nothing short of relief, then it seemed as if the humour came back in a flash.

'Me make fire for woman.' This woman made me feel so bloody good, and she relaxed even more when everyone laughed. I wanted to say something equally as witty, but like usual, my humorous side was on vacation.

Rob had decided, after the barbeque was lit, that he would now take control. Funny how he seemed to know everything else about having one, but lighting one escaped him. Therefore, we had some time on our hands ... about an hour and a half's worth, to be exact. I could tell her now ... mention it in passing about what I used to do ... laugh it off ... say I was forced to write the article ... blame James. But remembering the look of fear on her face when Sue had asked what she did for a living ... nah. I would rather pull my nails out.

George and Daisy were racing around trying to catch the dogs. I didn't want to be the one to tell them then didn't have a cat in hell's chance. The only time those fellas would come near us was when food was on the table. So, I did the only thing a good hostess could do. I asked her if she wanted a game of football. Her face showed surprise, alongside mine, I think. Looking at Rob and James, I knew they would be up for it ... the kids would too ... and Sue wouldn't want to be left out ... and at least we would all be doing something rather than sitting on our hands and waiting for the burnt offerings that would be coming our way all too soon. 'I think the blokes have everything under control.' As I said this I spotted James farting about with the slice, trying to waft the smoke away and coughing like a silent film star (but not so silently, just trying to get you to envisage the melodrama). 'He's such a girl, don't you think?' I meant it in the nicest



possible way of course, and watching him there, flaying his arms and gripping his chest before deciding that Rob bending over to get more charcoal was enough to make him stop all his amateur dramatics, I felt the warm sense of belonging that I always felt with him. He wasn't just my publisher ... wasn't just my friend ... he was like the brother I had never had. For years he had been my support ... was the one who made me realise that being gay was not a disease, not something to be scared of. He was even the one to tell me that all women were not like Teri.

When I turned to face Steph, she was looking at James too. Her face was relaxed, and the events from earlier were nowhere to be seen. Those green eyes were wide and sparkling in the sunlight, and I had an urge to just lean over and kiss her. I know! Imagine that? Barely home from her parents, sitting here surrounded by my family, and me trying to kiss her. At least it would be something to write in my journal ... if I owned a journal that is.

I had to stop thinking like this ... had to stop the urge to just kiss her and be damned with it. 'Well?' I could tell by her expression I had interrupted her viewing of James, and his amateur dramatics, and for a fleeting moment I felt a pang of jealousy.

'Well what?' Had she been listening to me? Or she more involved with watching James fanny around with the coals?

'Footie? You, me, Sue, Rob and the kids.' I turned back to James at this point. Wanting to let Steph know that however beautiful she was, she didn't stand a chance with him. 'You're not up to playing footie are you, Priscilla?' James said no, and continued to be James in all his glory. That done, I plonked myself down next to Steph and started changing into trainers. You can't kick a ball as well if you are in shoes, can you?

It wasn't until I'd finished tying my lace into a safe double bow, did I look back at Steph. She looked green. Was she ... fuck. All the time I had been lusting after her, I hadn't really seriously considered that she might in fact be straight ... might be a little disgusted by the thought of people of the same sex doing things with each other that they shouldn't, in a homophobe's opinion, be doing with each other. That was classed as a free one-way ticket to hell in their book. Or was she offended that I had called her Priscilla? Maybe I shouldn't have used the moniker without putting her in the picture first. Hopefully, that was the case, rather than ... the unmentionable. So, with that nearly well thought through, I decided to tell her why I called her Priscilla.

When I had finished, she didn't speak straight away. Was she thinking I was a lesbian? Part of me hoped she was, and the other was shitting my pants. I looked down at my bare foot, and wanted nothing more than to put the trainer on, mainly as something to do whilst she was weighing up the situation. Eventually, I couldn't stand it any longer.

'I should have told you, shouldn't I?' Did I say this as an opportunity for her to say yes or no? And why should it be an issue? If she didn't like the thought of two people ... and am I rambling? Again? Too right, I am. Because when I think about people not understanding that we are all different ... that love comes in many shapes and sizes and doesn't always conform to what society deems to be 'fitting', then I'm allowed to ramble out my thoughts in any way I choose to.

But the real question should be 'Am I over dramatising?' or 'Am I jumping the gun a little?' there was only one way to find out.

'You're not ... how can I say this?' Quickly. Her face was motionless. 'You're not a ... please don't take offence by this will you?' Please don't. Because if you do, I am fucked. And if you are ... then I am metaphorically fucked. 'You're not a ... a ... homophobe, are you?'

To say the expression on her face was priceless would be redundant. It was as if she had been slapped, repeatedly, by a wet fish. 'Huh?' That's all she could muster, until I saw the colour rage into her cheeks. It was the way she delivered the next line that sealed her sexuality ... there was no way in hell that anyone who is straight can say 'Homophobe! Me?!' in that way without having the tendency to be interested in the topic. Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to see her reaction, because at that precise moment, Brian decided to say hello.

When I hit the floor all the air left my lungs in a huge puff. Brian wanted to lick me clean whilst getting me dirtier and dirtier. Trust my dog to come and love me at that precise moment. All the shouting in the world was not going to shift him, and it was a good job that Steph took the initiative and dragged him from me. I felt a mess, so God knows what I looked like. From the corner of my eye, I was sure I could see Brian laughing - little bleeder.

I looked down my frame, and all I could see were huge paw prints. All the effort of choosing the right outfit flashed in my head. What was the point when you had a dog? However much you tried, cleanliness was definitely not next to dogliness. For a split second I wanted to cry, but that doesn't make me look like I had any kind of control, does it? Therefore I swallowed my pride, and the huge lump that was forming in my throat, and looked over at the woman who had saved me for even more doggy breath than even I could cope with. Thankfully, she wasn't laughing ... that was a bonus. In fact, she looked concerned about my welfare, which was a bigger bonus.

A hand came slowly out, and she offered me help getting back to my feet. What a wonderful woman. If it had been her on the floor, after being greeted by Brian, I doubt I would have been so charming. Thinking about it, I would have laughed ... because sometimes I am even more of a twat than usual. But it wasn't just the way she looked at me with concern, it was more than that. As soon as I took her hand, I felt the all too familiar jolt race along my arm, but this time I wasn't freaked out by it. I was expecting it - or, to tell the truth, hoping it would happen. Steph didn't flinch. Did she feel it too? She must have, as there was no way the vibrations running down my arm, into my chest and all over my body by this stage, could be limited to just me.

Then ... God ... then ... she said something that I think I will remember for the rest of my life. 'No. Erin. I am very far removed from a homophobe. Believe me.' I know you are thinking, 'What the fuck is she going on about?', but it wasn't what she said, or how she said it ... it was the feeling inside me that proclaimed 'She's GAY!' that makes it memorable. It was the first real indication that she was of the same ilk as me ... trust me ... you had to be there. And if you had been there, you might have warned both Steph and I that a very excited black lab was on his way back to finish what he had started.

**BAM!** I think I heard her lungs collapse, even from my position on the ground. But like all

situations where you have no control of falling, or watching someone else falling, everything seemed to slow down. I could see the look on her face change from control to 'Oh fuck!' so bloody slowly, and even Brian seemed as if he was suspended in the air whilst grinning wildly. Her hand gripped mine so tightly, I'm sure the blood stopped flowing to the nether regions of my fingers. As for the other one, I could see it making its way to somewhere over my chest ... like my tit ... and a pervy part of me wanted nothing better than to feel her hand there. Steph's face showed shock, horror, resolution, shock and then back to horror again, just in the same way a scratched DVD would. Jerky movements, the missing sections of the show were apparent, and when she did land, she did so without grabbing an essential part of my anatomy. I should have felt disappointed, but I couldn't muster it. Her face was so close to mine, and the slowness had dissipated, taking us back to normal speed. When I saw 'normal speed', does the sensation of a freeze frame qualify for that? I know that seems to juxtapose what I was trying to get you to imagine, but that's how it seemed ... normal, yet ... not.

Let me explain. I know you want me to. Put it this way, everything else around us was moving at the normal speed of life, whereas as soon as I looked into those green eyes ... stop. Nothing else mattered. All there seemed to be was her ... and me. Me and ... *her*. Her mouth was close ... so close ... too close ... close enough for me to take those beautiful lips with my own ... close enough to sample the delights of Stephanie Stevenson. Close enough to ...

'You playing?' Bloody kids. Why couldn't they go and draw around the picture frames like I had caught them doing last night? I turned my head to give the spawns a glare, but on the way, my cheek brushed against Steph's. Momentarily, my eyes closed, and when I opened them I was greeted by two pairs of excited blue eyes staring at us with anticipation. 'We're all waiting for you two to stop kissing.'

'But ...' It was a toss up whose shout was the loudest, but the sentence was unfinished. I know the reason why mine wasn't ... and I was hoping that Steph's was the same. We were thinking about kissing ... both of us ... therefore, how could we deny it? With that thought, I laughed, and unlike James, Steph didn't wait for my lead, as she began to laugh at exactly the same time I did.

'And they call us kids.' Daisy's voice sounded peeved, and I knew I would pay for it later when she put her parts on. But it was her brother's comment that got my attention the most.

'Do you think Steph is anal like Aunty Erin?' The laughter stopped in my throat, and the noise coming out sounded more like a strangled turkey. Daisy turned and looked at the both of us, collected in a heap on the ground, and with me watching her like a mother who knows her child is just about to misbehave.

A shrug ... followed by, 'Dunno. Looking at them now I would say no,' before running off to get the ball.

Now ... the thing is ... I was on the floor with Steph sprawled out on top of me ... my face burning with the thought that Steph heard what my sister's kids discussed, and the only thought raging through my head was, how did she know what anal meant?

One of these days, I would have to have a long talk with that sister of mine. And this time, it would not be about my inability to speak my mind to the woman who was using me as a mattress.

Although I quite like that image. Comforting, if you know what I mean.

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It's always the way, isn't it? The way that time races when you want it to drag out so you can make the most of every minute, I mean. It seems as if you spend your time trying to savour each precious moment, and try to stretch it out, when something else comes up and you forget what you were trying to savour and start all over again with the next morsel.

What I am trying to say ... extremely badly ... is that the evening was wonderful, with too many 'precious morsels' to digest. Before I knew it, Steph was saying that she had to get going. Here was my chance to walk her back and tell her every thing I wanted to tell her. Part of me wanted to unburden my guilt, whilst the stronger part just wanted to snog the face off her and put the past firmly aside. All evening, I had taken sly looks at her ... and with every one of those images I savoured, she just became more and more beautiful ... more and more wonderful ... and finally, more and more unobtainable. But that wouldn't stop me from relishing every minute I had left in her company, because if my spine actually became strong enough, tonight would be the time I would finally let her know just what kind of woman I was. And that would probably be the last time she spoke to me.

So ... with a heavy, yet excited heart (I know - I couldn't even decide what my heart was going through), I asked Steph if I could walk her home. Well ... if you can call 'Hey! Wait up,' whilst grabbing her before continuing with, 'I'll walk you back. Don't want you getting kidnapped do we?' asking, then yes.

Ok. I'll confess. It wasn't really like that. I did want to walk her home, and was going to ask her, but it was Sue who grabbed me and loudly whispered in my ear, 'If you don't walk her home, I'll swing for you.' Talk about motivation.

Anyway ... Steph seemed pleased, but I knew it wouldn't be long before the smile she was giving me would turn into something a little less inviting. Sucking in a breath, I made my way towards her cottage, Reggie finally leaving the confines of Brian's legs to trot happily at our side.

The rest of the group was shouting their goodbyes, until I heard Sue tell them to leave us alone to chat. Quickly, I turned to see if Steph had heard what she had said, and in all truth, even if she had, she wouldn't have understood the implication. I have never known Steph's house appear so quickly, and I knew it was time. Pity my voice box didn't think the same way.

I just stood there. She just stood there. It was like the end of a first date, where you are contemplating a kiss, but don't know if it will be accepted or not. However, that wasn't the case. I was trying to build up the courage to just say what I had planned to say. As I was standing there, I could see different expressions flit across her face, until she stuck her hand out as a farewell.

This was it. This ... was it ... I had to grab that hand and pull her to me, and tell her. And I tried - God knows I did. The words were there ... there on the tip of my tongue, and if she had opened my mouth and looked inside, she would have seen the word 'Guilty' written in blood.

However, I took her hand. Had to. Just to feel the blood racing around this living breathing woman, even for an instant, would calm me ... and then I could say what I had come to say.

'Thank you for coming over.' Fuck! Where on earth ... 'Would ... *erm* ... would you like to come over tomorrow?' I coughed and started again. 'We are all going out for the day, and I'm sure they would love it if you could come along too.' Where had the 'I'm sorry for fucking up your life' gone? Where had the 'Henry Poole told me to tell ...' bugged off to? Therefore, upon the realization I hadn't said or done the things I wanted to say or do, I began the Erin babble I believe I have become famous for. Steph was grinning at me, and I babbled even more. I think a part of me was babbling in the hopes that in the midst of it all I would spill out my confession in my own confusion and lack of verbal control.

'I'd love to.'

'Really?' Relief flooding through me. Maybe because I believed I had got off the hook once again, or maybe because she liked me for just that little bit longer. The next part was totally unplanned, and I guess you know that my planning skills are shite by now, so I needn't have said the last part. I kissed her. On the cheek, of course, and I think it was either because I had to do something, or because I was so bloody happy that at that moment, I was free from confession. My lips stayed on her cheek for longer than the usual social peck. Maybe deep down my brain knew that if they were occupied in doing something more fulfilling, they wouldn't be able to get me into trouble. That thought out, I moved them ... closer to her ear ... 'I'll give you a knock in the morning, then. Ok?' The words seemed to shout out, and I'm surprised she didn't hold her hand against her ear and rub valiantly to stop the pain.

Steph pulled away and looked at me, her eyes seemed to be searching deep within, and once again I began to panic. Had she sensed I had something I needed to tell her. Her shoulders were rising and falling, like they do when you get anxious, or angry, and for a fleeting moment, I wondered whether my peck had been welcomed after all. I leaned closer, expecting her to say something ... expecting her to bawl me out ... expecting something that I knew I deserved but still wasn't expecting.

Well. Until she kissed me, that is.

Did you hear that?

She. Kissed. Me. Well, I think she kissed me, because at that precise moment I wasn't too sure if it had been her or me ... but I knew I was falling into her ... falling deeper into her mouth, her body, her soul with every second my mouth was pressed up to hers. In all my dreaming, I never knew it would feel as perfect as this. It was as if I physically felt myself lock into her, lock against her mouth, and her do the same. Part of me was stunned, the other unsure, when all I wanted was to keep on kissing her for the rest of my life. There was nothing I wanted more than

to open my mouth and taste her, but part of me instructed I should be content with this ... this perfection in my arms. Have you ever kissed someone and just knew that she, or he, were the one? That every thing you had ever hoped and dreamed of was there, in front of you, kissing you right back? I hope so. I truly do. Because, you see, it is the most elevating feeling you will probably have. Even better than sex ... better than the yearned for climax ... this was so much more. So much more. It was the epitome of coming home at last. And I, dear reader, believed for those few seconds that Stephanie Stevenson was the home I had been searching for all of my life.

Until she decided she had made a mistake that is. I felt it so strongly - this anger - this pain that was thrown at me, bringing with it all the love I had tried to show her in that kiss. Some people would be angry ... demand why they had been led on ... demand to know what they had done that was so bad, but I couldn't. Not because I am the kind of person who accepts, or is hardened to rebuff - no. It was the look of fear in her eyes ... the tears flooding down her face ... the look of desperation written all over her that stopped me trying to get her to explain why she had decided she didn't want me after all.

Opening my arms was involuntary. I only wanted to comfort her - tell her I understood ... tell her I was here if she needed someone to confide in ... no strings. All the blood had seeped from my face and was gurgling around in my stomach, and I was trying valiantly to keep it in there and not to spew it out of my mouth in confession, or even as a reminder of what I had previously eaten - eaten at the time when all I had to worry about was baring my guilt.

'No. Don't. Touch. Me.' Her voice was a mixture of anger and pain, and I knew it was my fault, but I couldn't quite grasp the reason why. I kissed her. She kissed me. But was it just the kiss that made her react in such a way? Although I can understand that some people would be abhorred by a kiss from someone they didn't want to kiss ... this was over the top, wasn't it? At this time, I was certain she had wanted the same thing I had ... hadn't she almost admitted she was in fact gay? There had been rumours about her in Manchester, but by the looks of her now, they were completely unfounded.

Then she was gone. The sound of the door reverberating through the emptiness of both the idyllic setting and my heaving chest echoed the emptiness I was feeling. I couldn't move, and like a twat I just stood there staring at the green door solidly closed in front of me, wondering what I should do. Should I knock? Make sure she was ok? Or should I fuck off back to my own side of the universe and forget every thing that had happened in the last few minutes? I turned to go, but the sound of crying held my feet in place. Should I apologise? Say it was a spur of the moment thing and it wouldn't happen again? But how could I? That would mean looking her in the face and lying to her - again.

It seemed like forever before I found the momentum to move, but in reality it was only the matter of minutes. The walk back to Sue and the gang was acted as if in slow motion, each footstep on the gravel racing up inside my body like an aftershock. My brain was completely fucked, and all the strength I had seemed to dissipate with every step. At least I didn't have to tell her anything now. Funny thing to think, isn't it? Almost like giving up on something that could have been so wonderful. The reason being, I didn't stand a cat in hell's chance with her. Something I knew all along, but was just too stupid to conceive.

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'So. What happened?' It wasn't just Sue waiting to speak to me when I walked through the door; it was Sue, James, and Rob. Thankfully the kids were already upstairs and getting washed ready for bed. That way, they didn't have to witness a grown woman cry. Me, if you were wondering. It still surprises me how I abstained from crying all the way back from Steph's, but as soon as someone asked me what happened ... bam. On came the waterworks. This was getting disturbing, not only for me, but for the rest of them too, as they had rarely seen me cry, which by now you are finding hard to believe.

Sue's arms were about me, and I felt her pulling me close, her soothing touch hurting my heart more instead of the expected feeling of safety. James and Rob left, I didn't see them, just heard them scuffling out of the door. I knew they weren't doing it because they were men, and men don't do 'crying'. They were doing it for me ... therefore ... more tears ... big fat juicy ones that collect at the corners of your eyes and then plop down onto your cheek before racing for freedom.

Next thing I knew I was seated. Couldn't remember getting there, but the sofa was underneath me, whilst Sue's arms were still about me. Aches raced across my chest and flowed mercilessly down my arms to the tips of my fingers. Each sob brought on a new pain ... a new ache ... a new reason to continue crying for the rest of my life. But although you always believe that the tears will never cease - they do. Thankfully, I had someone who cared about me to catch me when I think I was at the lowest point in my life. Why now? Why now as the lowest point? Why not when I split from Teri? Or Rob's illness ... Or any other reason or obstacle I had been faced with in my life? Because now was now ... and the present always hurts more, doesn't it?

Hiccoughing sobs indicated that the crying was on the wane, and before I had completely stopped, Sue asked me the one thing I didn't want to answer. 'Did you tell her?' Ah. She thought I had spilled my guts to Steph and then got a whack and sent home. I wish I had. I wish that's all it was, because at least I would know why she had acted the way she had, instead, or surmising that she hated me and everything I stood for. A lesbian who had forced herself into a place where she was not welcome, that is. 'Come on, honey. She'll come round.' My eyes hurt ... burned, even, and when I looked at the concerned face of my sister, the pain didn't just stay there. I wanted to smile, even sardonically and blurt out that Steph would never come round to the fact I was gay ... would never come round to the idea of being with someone whom she despised. But I didn't say a word. Just sat there and waited for my sister to either leave or ask me again what had happened. I was hoping she would just leave, but the latter was part and parcel of the sister I knew and loved. She would never just let me be ... it must have been because she was that few minutes older - something about always being the older one that made her try to defend, care, and protect me at all times. But you see, that is not always feasible, is it? No one can stop you getting hurt, especially if the person doing the hurting is yourself. 'It will be a shock at first, but she'll come round, I promise. Do you want me to have a word with her?'

'NO!' The word shot out of my mouth with the power and tone of defiance a child would force upon a parent. 'No ...' More gently now, as I knew I had to explain what had happened when I

had taken the bull by the horns and kissed the woman next door. 'You see, Sue ... it wasn't her, it was me.' See? Lame. 'What I'm trying to say is ... I kissed her.' Sue looked at me with that spark of hope that comes with a revelation. 'She's not gay ... I ... I ... made a mistake.' Now what I expected Sue to do was to say something along the lines of 'Oh Erin, I'm so sorry', but she didn't. What she did say made the expectant tears I had welling up at the wings slip back inside my head.

'Fuck that for a game of soldiers.' Huh? Where's my pity? Where's the 'There there there' I needed? 'If she's not gay then I'm a pig's nipple.' Funny turn of phrase, granted, but what made her so adamant? 'She's *gay* ... that much I know for certain.' On one hand I wanted to ask how she knew, whilst on the other my mind was saying 'If she is gay, then why did she react the way she did when I kissed her?' 'I clocked her staring at your backside enough times tonight to know she is definitely not straight.' And that makes me feel better ... how? 'It must have been something else. Think. What makes you think she's not gay? What did she say?' Should I tell? Should I use the pitch and tone of the 'No. Don't. Touch. Me.' Steph had used? No. Because it was so much more than pitch and tone - it was the whole package that illustrated that Stephanie Stevenson didn't think the way Sue believed she felt. The anger ... pain ... desperation. All of it.

Slowly, I turned to look deeply into my sister's eyes. 'Sue. She doesn't like me that way. Trust me; I know a knock back when I see one.'

'But.'

'No buts. Let's leave it, ok?' Standing up, I looked back to where she was sitting on the sofa. 'Thank you, sis.' Then I turned and made my way up to my room, where Brian was already waiting for me. There was nothing else to think about ... nothing else to do ... it was over. Why drag it out?'

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Dreams don't understand you don't want to think about things anymore, do they? They believe they have the right to invade, conquer and unnerve, and they do. Usually, I couldn't remember the details of my dream, and I won't bore you with the details of this one. Let's just say, I woke up feeling even worse than I had the night before. My face seemed bloated, as I knew I had been crying on and off all the way through the night ... problem was, I wasn't too sure why. The dreams I had were not nice ... not nice at all. One of the images that stood out the most, the one I tried my hardest to dispel, was one where I was begging Steph to reconsider ... to give me a chance, but she just laughed at me and turned away.

As you may gather, motivating myself to a day as tour guide and hostess didn't fill my heart with joy. All I wanted to do was to hide away in my room until everyone had left, but that wasn't the done thing, was it? A whimper from the foot of my bed alerted me to the fact Brian was awake. I could see the twinkling of his eyes from the scrap of light that had sneaked into the room from the window. It was early, and maybe too early to wake everyone up to go for a walk, so I would just take him by myself.



I was half way around the lake when I spotted her and Reggie on the other side. Even from a distance I knew that Steph had probably slept as badly as I had. It was the slowness in her gait, the way her shoulders slumped, and what made it worse was the speeding figure of a little black and tan body whizzing all around her that told me so. Made her seem slower somehow. There was one thing I was not ready for, and that was catching up with her and having to deal with last night. I could've, I suppose, but I just couldn't muster the energy to discuss something that I already thought I knew the answer to. To make matters worse, I noticed that Brian had stopped walking and was sniffing the air. I'm sure he could smell Reggie somewhere in the distance. Click. Lead on, and under control. No way was I going to allow my dog to alert Steph I was there. Brian wasn't a happy boy, but then again, his mother wasn't a happy girl either.

Back home, Sue was up and dressed, and so were Rob and the kids. I knew this as soon as I approached because I could see Daisy and George already out playing in the garden, and Sue was waiting anxiously at the back door. Rob's face briefly came to her shoulder, and I saw her turn to him, say something, and then swiftly kiss him before turning back to me. This was not the time to become all melodramatic. I had to suck it in, as they say, and forget that I was feeling worse than shit, if feeling worse than shit is possible.

Lifting my hand up, I waved wildly, and anyone watching would think I was a long lost relative returning home after years of active duty. Even Brian turned to look at me, as if to say 'Yeah. Cheer up now.' But it wasn't just my dog that I stunned, I stunned my sister too. She didn't know how to respond to the gesture, as I'm sure she thought I would come in almost suicidal. Click. Brian back off the lead, and now running with abandon towards Steph's house, probably in the off chance he would at least catch his pal before it was too late.

Sue was by this time walking towards me, her face twisted into enquiry. 'Morning, sis! Sleep well?' That threw her. She stopped. Started, and then stopped again. 'I hope you've got the breakfast going. I'm starving.' I should get an award ... a BAFTA, or something just as prestigious. Reason being, I actually got past Sue, got to the door in fact, before she came back into the land of the living and raced to catch me up.

'You ok?'

'Never better. You up for another day out?' I couldn't look at her ... couldn't. I knew if I stopped fannying around and turned to face her, she would know I was lying. I did all I could to stop myself ... looked in the fridge for the eggs and bacon ... clicked the kettle on to boil ... even started to sort out the plates. It never occurred to me that getting the plates out in anticipation to dishing out the breakfast was something a person would normally do *after* the breakfast was cooking.

'It's ok you know.' And that's where my resolve slipped. Call it distraction, but I turned to look at the place where my sister's voice had been only to find her standing right behind me. 'You look it, Erin. Ok, I mean.' Did I? That was a bles ... 'If you call puffy eyes and a face that could curdle milk ok, that is.' Her hand came and gently landed on my shoulder. 'If you want to talk, I can get rid of the kids for a while.' Mute. That's how I stayed. Completely devoid of words. 'Why don't

you go and speak to her ...' I shook my head. 'At least try. It could be completely different this morning, but you won't know until you ask, will you?'

Placing the plates carefully onto the side, I half turned back to her. Slowly, I began to shake my head. 'No use, Sue.' A weak smile raised itself onto my lips. 'There's nothing to ask. I already know the answer.'

'But ...'

'To be honest, I would rather forget it for now.' As if I could. There would be no forgetting for me, not now, and I wasn't too sure about the future either. Swallowing the lump that had decided to sneak up my throat, I lifted up the spatula. 'Want to help me make breakfast?'

Thankfully, Sue nodded, knowing that once I had made up my mind about something, it was unusual for me to change it. Well, something big, that is. So, without another word, we cooked, and it wasn't until we had the brood around us that we decided conversation was ok to start again. There wouldn't be any mention of Steph, not then anyway. Although she did have another go as we were getting into the car. But, like the martyr I was, I dug my heels in and opted for abstinence. You can't be a martyr without suffering, can you?

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The day seemed to fly by as we took in the beauty of the Lake District. George and Daisy were as good as gold, even after pestering the life out of us all to give them more Kendal Mint Cake. Just watching them eat it evoked this feeling of missing out on something again. Yesterday, I had been so happy to watch them consume the sugary treat ... watching in expectation of the joy it would bring, whereas today ...

Was it only twenty four hours ago I had felt such a positive rush ... a need to spill all to Steph? Yes. A lot can happen in a day ... too much ... and unfortunately, it wasn't always a good thing.

Before I knew it, they were all getting sorted to drive back to Disley, and I knew I would finally be allowed some semblance of quiet to mourn. Strange choice of words, don't you think? Mourn. That's something you do at a funeral.

'I'll give you two rings when we get back, ok? Just to let you know we arrived safely.'

And they did. Both Sue and James. And the sound of the phone shrilling out 'You are officially on your own' allowed me to sit on the sofa and cry away all the emotion I had been welling up since breakfast. To be perfectly honest, it felt good.

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You must be bored stupid by now. All you've had is me whining on and on about things that you probably don't give a rat's arse about. And you are probably wondering why it was such a big

deal in the first place. If you are, then I'm sorry - if you're not, then I'll continue.

Two weeks. That's how long I avoided her for. Call me spineless, I did on many occasions, but I just couldn't go and ask her why she had reacted the way she had. Even if she wasn't gay, there was a way to tell someone to back off, wasn't there? And part of me wanted to think that somewhere along the line I wasn't totally out of order. If I had kissed her, and she wasn't up for it, then maybe she could have reacted the way she had, but obviously, it shouldn't last for two weeks. Should it?

When I say avoided her, that's exactly what I did. Considering we both lived in the back of beyond, but right on top of each other, it wasn't an easy feat. I would wait to see if she would come out of her house to take Reggie for his walk, and I would then wait until she was back and on her way to work before taking Brian for his. There were a few times when I was nearly caught out, as she would return home before I had the opportunity to get back in the house, and just as many times when I found myself hiding behind a tree thinking 'Erin Mason. You are a fucking idiot' as I watched her and Reggie start off on their evening walk. It would have been so easy to just casually walk past her and say 'Good evening' before carrying on. It would have been her decision to ignore me, thus tossing the ball in her court. But like me, I clutched onto the ball, as in a fucked up way it gave me something to hold on to. No wonder I was single.

Then it happened. The opportunity for me to speak to her again without pulling down any barriers either she or I had erected. It was something that could've happened at any time, I suppose, especially to someone who owns a pet.

It was first thing in the morning, and as usual I had watched her take Reggie for a walk. This time, when she returned, I was still wet from my shower so didn't go out straight away. But when I did, I found something I knew that Stephanie Stevenson would be looking for. Reggie. Bless him. I found him near the fallen down tree about a quarter of the way around the lake, and I knew straight away that he wasn't all right. He was sitting on the ground, his paw nearly rammed into his mouth and gnawing at it as if he had something wedged in there. When he spotted me, or should I say Brian, I believe that dog actually sighed with relief. Hobbling over, he sat at my feet and held his paw up for me to inspect. It was wet and sticky, and I wasn't able to diagnose the problem, because it seemed as if all the hair had clustered around the pad. There seemed to be something different about it, but for the life of me I couldn't place it.

Scooping him up into my arms, I decided that it was time to go and speak to Steph ... and not just about Reggie either. This had come too far ... I had let things get way out of hand, and I knew she had too, but that was irrelevant, wasn't it? The ball needed to be tossed, and I was ready for her to either bat it back or keep it. I was fed up living my life waiting, mourning, anticipating, and sneaking around. I lived here too, and if we didn't get on ... we didn't get on.

Big words from a woman who was literally shitting her pants as she made her way back to the clearing, back to the place where a certain Ms Stevenson was soon to get a piece of my mind. By the time I arrived, I was livid. Amazing to think that one moment fear can grip you around the bowels, when the next you were ready to take on the world. I was going to pound on that door and tell her exactly what I thought of her and her knock back ... tell her I thought she had acted

despicably ... and I liked that word too, as it was making good use of my idiot brain. I hadn't forgotten the wiggly mass of black fur in my hand though, and I would say that first ... of course I would ... I am an animal lover after all. And after I had sorted out Reggie's paw ... by the God, she was going to get it. And no, I wasn't procrastinating. Much.

She was out. Can you believe it? Fucking out! And I had all this energy to spill over her ... all these words that needed saying ... and she was out. I knew this as I hammered and hammered on her door. Her car was there ... so she must've been in. So bang bang bang again. Nothing. Except a little boy who had started to whimper and wriggle and want to get down and see his mamma.

After placing him on the ground, I spotted something red on my arm. Blood. Not my blood. Reggie's. I couldn't hang about here all day waiting to see if she could be arsed to answer the door or not, I had to get him to the vets ... that would show her. If you're going to have a pet, you should at least have an idea that maybe he or she might get out and get hurt. Reggie decided to inspect his foot again, and Brian wanted to have a look too, licking along with his pal in the hope he could heal it.

After telling both of the dogs to stay, I raced back to the house to write a quick note. *'I have found Reggie and am taking him to the vets.'* That would get her attention. I could have started by telling her not to panic, but what the hell ... Grabbing my car keys, I then ran back to where the boys were sitting on the porch, and before long we were all on our way to the vets.

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Hopefully, you haven't just eaten, as what I am about to tell you made my stomach do cart wheels. Remember when I said there was something different about Reggie's foot? Well, the reason for that was because he had ripped the nail out at the root, and it was hanging off. Poor little chap, eh? The vet said he probably did it by scrabbling on the ground and caught it on something, but after that ... fuck knows what she said. My brain had screamed 'Too much information!' and closed off.

But. He was ok. He would live. Thankfully. However much I was now angry at the woman who lived next door to me, the mother of this poor little mite, I didn't want her to hurt or worry about his welfare. But to tell you the truth, even though I was angry, I was still nervous about seeing her. Of course I would be ... it had been two weeks without as much as a nod in recognition when passing.

Therefore, when I was driving back, I didn't put a spark to it. It was more like a Sunday drive, if truth be known. Make her wait. That's what I thought ... although in reality, it was more like 'Oh shit.'

When I turned into the drive I saw her looking through the doorway. Her face was a greenish colour, and the anger I had been hanging onto rapidly escaped through the open window. What did I do now I had been deserted by my good old pal anger ... the one who had been sitting on my shoulder for the best part of two hours, but now decided I would be better off dealing with this on my own? Did I mention anything about the kiss? Did I plainly ask her why she had gone into one that night? Or did I concentrate on just telling her about Reggie? However, I hadn't

foreseen the other scenario. The one where Steph appeared at the side of the car and was trying to yank it open. The joy of having anti hijacker locks ... I felt a little more in control ... pity my hands didn't agree. They were shaking like a shitting dog, and I was finding it so bloody difficult to unclip my seatbelt. When I turned and spotted Steph grinning at me, honestly, my fingers were as much use as a chocolate tea stirrer.

'Hey.' God. That voice. So soft ... so beautifully soft and warm. Inside, my stomach and heart were waltzing, and there was nothing I could do to stop them. I tried breathing slowly, but in fact that incited the little buggers ... oxygen doesn't go well with over active organs - yes ... I know the stomach isn't an organ, but why split hairs? Or is it an organ? And who gives a flying fuck? 'Is he ok ... erm ... *everything* ... ok?' I couldn't answer. My heart had split from my stomach and performed the salsa all the way up my throat. My brain was growling, 'Get back down, you son of a bitch.' Bless. Good to know one part of me was holding firm. But it was because I was feeling smug that my brain had bollocked my heart (yep - totally screwed up), I didn't realise the strength I put behind my arm as I thrust the door open. Erm ... until I heard a squawk ... a squawk coming from Steph.

'Shit, Steph! God. I'm so sorry!' And I was too. Jesus. That must have stung like a bitch, and that's why I didn't think the next bit through. Before I knew it, I was holding her hand in mine - well, her wrist, and I was rubbing it, almost like I was wanking it off. I know I can be crude sometimes, but I just wanted you to get a picture in your head. All the while I performing 'wrist masturbation', Steph was releasing pockets of pain into the air and I was apologising with abandon. Pity I didn't pay more attention. I knew she had spoken my name, but I had the rhythm going now, and if I stopped, I would actually have to confront her about everything. So, onwards and upwards, as they say. That is until she tugged her hand away, waved it, and then promptly smacked me in the face. Looking back, I probably deserved it, but that didn't stop me yelling out, 'Shit!' at the exactly the same time as she did. Talk about nearly having your teeth shoved down your throat ... I thought for an instant she had knocked my front two out, and quickly slipped my tongue over the place where they should be just to check. Thankfully, they were still there - throbbing, but still there.

*'Fucking hell fire! Erin! Fucking hell fire!'* Nice turn of phrase, and one I would have used if I could have moved my mouth. - I was too busy rubbing it to speak. But it was when her hand touched my cheek ... when those fingers caressed me so tenderly; I think that was the key reason why words were redundant. I actually felt my whole body open up to her ... let my face, my eyes, my everything open up for her to see. Fingers curled around my jaw, and as if by some law of physics I wasn't aware of, my face began to move closer to hers. I could have stopped it, I'm sure I could. But you see ... I didn't want to. Her other hand was also cupping my jaw, and the look in her eyes was something I doubt I would ever forget. This wasn't a woman who didn't feel something for me ... no one could imitate that expression. A part of me whispered 'What if you are reading it wrong again?' But I couldn't be ... no way ... she wanted this as much as ...

And then everything was forgotten. A kiss ... so perfect, had taken away any vestige of doubt. A kiss ... so encapsulating, that whatever happened after this moment wouldn't matter. The pain in my mouth was forgotten, even though I could taste the irony taste of the blood from my lip. I didn't care. Nothing mattered. Past or future, this was now - the here and now, and I was living

instead of existing for once in far too long. My hands decided they needed to join in, and I felt them trickle along her arms until I reached her hands which were still on my face, and then I moved them over to cup her cheeks, as if this movement could bring her closer into me.

Then it all began to slow down ... slow down ... drown ... and slow down ... and then cool air separated us, and I realised I had my eyes closed. It seemed as if it was a great effort for me to open them, and I think part of me was a little scared, too, just in case I discovered she was standing there like she had been the first time I had kissed her.

But no. She was smiling. 'God.' Was it relief or the feeling of exultation that made me speak to the man in the sky? I don't know, but one thing I did know was I wanted her to look at me the way she was looking at me for the rest of my life. 'God.' I had to tell her ... now was the time ... tell her how I felt ... 'Steph?' ... before I bottled it again. 'Do you know how much I like you?' Should I have said love? I still don't know, but the thought escaped as soon as she nodded at me ... and I mimicked her action. Don't know why, but I did. Everything else could wait. All that mattered was the here and now.

'Yap!' Bugger. Reggie. I hadn't thought about him sitting there all injured in the back of my car ... but then again, do you blame me? Yes, I hear you say.

'He's ok. Just a pulled nail.' A flash of the vets entered and exited my brain, and momentarily I felt the urge to vomit again, but I didn't want to worry her. 'Although I think he wants to see his mamma.' Nice touch. We, all of us who have pets, love to think that our pets need us, when in fact we need them.

Pulling away, I missed her immediately. So, to stop myself from gripping hold of her again, I went around to the back of the car and opened the boot. Reggie and Brian just sat there, and I believe the injured waif had been practising his 'I'm injured. Love me' face all the time I had been ... erm ... otherwise engaged. I have to admit, his foot looked fucking huge - I hadn't really noticed when I had trundled him into the car after coming out of the vets - must have been all the anger I was toying with. So when I spluttered, 'Don't let that worry you ... it's not as bad as it looks. Believe me', I don't know who I was trying to convince. However, I doubted Steph heard what I had said, as she let out a little whimper and scooped the little chap into her arms. If dogs could smile whilst still looking pitiful, Reggie pulled it off - although I think I could have too if I was going to receive the amount of kissing and crooning he was by the totally engaging woman standing in front of me. Also, I knew that she wanted to check him over ... that's what any mother would do in that situation. So, why was she still standing there? Why was she holding Reggie close and looking at me quizzically.

'Are you coming in?' Thank God she said that ... as I don't know what I would have done if she would have said thanks, and then presently trundled inside the house, slamming the door in my face.

'Do you mind if Brian comes in too?' Couldn't I think of something a little more original? Something like, 'Try and stop me, baby.' But, you see, I'm not the 'oh baby' kind of woman - I'm the more, 'Would it be ok ...' - totally British to the core. An element of charm value, I think, and

by the way Steph was staring at my mouth, I believed she was thinking the same thing.

Lifting her hand, she gently stroked my lip. I wanted to smile ... wanted to charm her some more, and also purse my lips to tempt her to kiss them again. She was looking at me with such softness, my heart was contracting and expanding within my chest.

'Come on. I'll get you some ice for that.' Bugger. She was checking out my lip to see the damage her back hander had caused me. And there I was believing I was the answer to all her prayers. Serves me right for running before I could walk ... one kiss doth not a relationship make. I know. It does sound like Shakespeare, and I honestly believe if he had thought of it, I would be quoting him, instead of basking in the knowledge I was in fact turning into a poet.

Collecting Brian was easy, as he wanted to see what was happening to Reggie. Steph had already gone inside, and she had left the door open in invite.

Now was the time to deal with my overwhelming urge to spill all.

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## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

All the time it took us to sort out the boys had been spent with me taking sly looks in her direction. The urge to just grab and kiss her was synonymous with the feeling of apprehension racing through me. This would be an ideal time to tell her about all the things I wanted to tell her. Mainly, the article, but also how I wanted to be with her ... wanted this to be the beginning of something special.

It happened, the kissing I mean, after all was done. I was sitting on the sofa, playing with the swollen part of my lip, when she came in sporting two steaming mugs of something that turned out to be hot chocolate. It was a delaying tactic, wasn't it? Hot drink - mouth occupied - not being able to speak, although I believe she thought the smile I gave her was for the drink, it was in fact for my stay of execution. My face was aching, but it was nothing in comparison to the aching I was feeling in other parts of my body. I mean my chest, if you were wondering, or had taken the other route of aching bits. However, I noted that she didn't seem as comfortable now as she had about five minutes ago. Therefore it was up to me to do something about it. Plonking my cup on the side, I opened my arms in invitation. In my head I was frantically trying to bullet point all the things I needed to tell her whilst I had some semblance of bravery lurking within me. Steph slammed her cup down in haste, and I saw a wave of it shoot out and splatter on the table. The laugh I let out was one of those ones that are not really laughing at the situation, but make the most of the situation to allow a laugh to pop out. And we all know that laughter is a way to show fear, or nervousness, don't we? And of course, this is the time where I was going to go off the point, but decided not to in case you swung for me.

Let me continue ...

Steph slipped effortlessly onto the couch, and even more so into my arms. I am surprised I didn't hear an audible click as we connected. Nothing else was needed. Nothing. Here we were, snuggled and connected together on the sofa, both our men on the floor in front of the fire, all warm and cosy on a cold April day. Perfect. But when I say perfect, can I add more to that statement? You see, just as I was feeling that everything was wonderfully faultless, I kissed her. Yes. I took the initiative and kissed her ... and I think that was what surprised her most - not that I kissed her ... that I took the initiative. Although the action wasn't completely altruistic ... as well as being divine, it stopped the freedom of conversation. However, the need to discuss anything evaporated as soon as she started kissing me back.

Then ... bam. I was on my back and she was above me, her lips not leaving mine for a second. It was wonderful. The feeling of her on top of me was more than I ever dreamed it would be. Her body was firm and toned, and I had a flash of what it would feel like to be underneath this woman when she made love to me. My kisses became more ardent, more demanding, and there was a point where I tried to stop things developing. Not because I didn't want them to, it was more that I needed to clear the air between us before I could allow things to go to the level where the rest of my body was racing to. Hands were wrapping in hair, stroking curves, familiarising themselves with the coveted skin of desire. Nothing else mattered but this ... nothing else came close to this feeling ... nothing ... anything ... nothing ...

Until her hands slipped, tentatively underneath my top, that is. A gasp left my mouth, and was caught inside hers, whilst fingertips danced on my flesh. A line of fire collected around each tip and the sensation was driving me to ditch the need to tell her anything, let alone tell her to stop. All this was accompanied by the connection of two women who had a need so powerful, nothing could halt the inevitable. Opening my legs wider, I wrapped them around her and pulled her body closer, her lips on my neck making my hips surge upwards to allow this growing agony of want to find its asylum. At this rate I knew I would cum even before she touched me where I needed to be touched, and I felt the vestiges of rationality slipping away from me, slipping into the place where admissions of guilt didn't exist, and where everything was exactly the way it should be.

But that wasn't how I wanted our relationship to start ... even though, in reality, it had. I had to clear things up ... explain to her the person I was then in comparison to who I was now. Tell her that it wasn't her I was trying to hurt four years ago; it was me. Her hand was holding my breast so tightly, so completely, her mouth was suckling my throat, devouring me, and here I was underneath this wonderful woman contemplating ending everything before it started. Nevertheless, it had to be done.

'Steph.' The pitch of her name was low, and I believe that there was something inside me that didn't want her to hear. So, I tried again. 'Steph.' She still didn't hear me, and the little voice inside me whispered 'Good. Now forget it.' But how could I? 'Steph.' For God's sake, conscience - shut the fuck up. Steph was making little mewling noises, as if she had heard me, but had decided that this was not the time to stop and make conversation. I wish the angel who was on my shoulder thought the same thing. 'Steph ... we need to ...' I felt her freeze, as if she had been caught doing something she shouldn't. However, that was me, as it happens. I shouldn't have let things get as far as this without telling her. I know you're thinking, 'What's the big deal?', but it



was to me ... it meant that we could start again ... start afresh ... be the thing that I believed both of us needed. And to get that, all cards must be on the table.

It wasn't her freezing that surprised me, no. It was the way she threw herself backwards as if she had been burned that made my eyes shoot open and my hands shoot out to catch her. Pulling her towards me, I realised I had used a little too much force, as when she landed I felt the air explode from both our mouths in a whoosh. My heart was racing so much, and not just from all the kissing we had been doing. I was scared - so bloody scared that this would be the last time I would hold her in my arms. The sensation of having her there was the most perfect sensation I believe I have ever had, even more so than all the other ones I had experienced in the last half an hour. I had to say something ... anything ... something that would start the downward spiral of her attraction for me.

'Steph ... I ... really like you.' Way to go, Mason. All the one liners since the creation of man, and you repeat one you have already said. But I did feel some semblance of peace when I heard her sigh and then begin to nuzzle her face deeper into my chest. 'I have done since I first saw you.' Another fantastic one liner from the queen of romantic one liners, I believe. Slowly, Steph's head turned to look up to mine, and the expression on her face made the breath I had valiantly been trying to regulate go stupid once again. Green eyes were full of something bordering on hunger, yet they were dreamy at the same time, almost an after sex look, if you understand. But that didn't stop me worrying that she hadn't answered me yet. The time between me admitting my attraction from the first instance, to her actually responding seemed like an eternity. If this was so difficult, God only knows what it would be like to say the bad stuff.

'Same here.' Kick start. Well, that's what it feels like when you honestly believe your heart has stopped beating, although in fact it has been racing ahead of the game without you noticing. Funnily enough, I still believe that me waffling on to you could actually stop the next part I had to play in the saga that was increasingly becoming part and parcel of my life. Told you I am as thick as shit, didn't I? Or did you work it out for yourself? 'This isn't just a fling for me, Erin. Believe me.' Part of me wanted to whoop with joy, as here was the woman who had become to mean so much to me in such a short time (most of which we hadn't even been speaking - and ok ... I'll stop with the delaying tactics) admitting she felt the same way I did. Or similar, I should say, as she hadn't said she loved me. But, alas, the other part of me knew that because she did feel something more than friendship, the next part I had to deliver was going to hurt her.

'Good.' I was readying myself for disaster. I couldn't even manage a smile, and Steph's eyebrows drew together briefly, as she had been expecting a different response than the one I had given. An urge to hold her as closely as I could took over, and I felt her bones move under my grip. I had to say something to soften my admission, anything. "I don't want to rush us ... rush into this. You mean too much to me, Steph." I wanted to continue, but I am sure I saw green eyes glisten with unshed tears. Was this happiness? Of course it was - I hadn't told her anything bad ... yet.

Steph leaned up on one hand and looked deeply into my eyes, as if she was making sure she had my undivided attention. As if it could ever be anywhere else but looking at her, looking back at her with all I could muster. I wanted her to see the real me, the one I chose to hide, the one who would never hurt her intentionally ... or should I say, hurt her intentionally again?

'And you mean more than the world to me, Erin Mason.' I couldn't look away. She had me caught, hooked, entranced, anyway you want to say it, I was hers. My hand moved on its own volition, and before I knew it, my fingers were tightening in her hair, her face mere inches from mine. I was so in love with her ... so absolutely, positively in love with this woman, all thoughts of admission froze inside my head. Just one more day, they whispered, one more day of her believing you are a nice person. One more day of having her in your arms ... showing you the one thing that you will never ever get again for the rest of your life. Her.

So once again, I kept mute. One more day of being a liar. What harm could come from that? If we didn't do anything more, then she couldn't say I took advantage of her, could she? Well, physically at least. The emotional part was something I would deal with tomorrow. I would invite her around for dinner ... go back to the start and try again. Begin at the beginning, even though the beginning is in fact a little too late to stop the damage of omitting the truth from the start.

Confused? You and me both. And when I finally tried to tell her, told her we needed to talk, I knew I had left it too late, as the sound of her breathing had dropped an octave, and I knew she was asleep. Tomorrow it would be. And this time, no amount of back peddling would stop me from being honest with her. I owed her so much more than that.

Lying there in the darkening room, I planned what I would say. Not for one minute did I ever think of telling her when she woke up, that never came on the cards. I needed time to get my explanation straight, as if four years hadn't been long enough.

Looking back, it's a pity I didn't shake her awake and tell her then and there. Maybe it would have stopped everything that happened. But that is another story. Hers, to be exact.

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## *Part Three*

### *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

Lying there on top of Erin was magical. Perfectly magical. Waking up with her warm, firm body so close to mine that it would have taken the skills of a micro surgeon to insert a hair between us, was the experience I had wanted to feel for such a long time. I don't just mean the last three weeks since I had known her, no. I mean the time since I was born until now.

When I lifted my face to look at her, I expected her to be asleep, but she was looking right back at me, those blues eyes dark in the firelight. The shape of her face was classic, an almost

squareness, which softened to allow the feminine beauty of her to ooze out.

'Good evening, Erin.' Nothing. She either didn't hear me, or was thinking about something else. 'Sleep well?' Doesn't hurt to try again. I felt her stiffen underneath me, and for an awful moment, I thought she was regretting letting things develop as fast as they had. Please let that not be the case.

'What time is it?' Her voice was soft, and I felt the tremors of the timbre of it race through my body. Those blue eyes were so bloody blue ... so bloody blue, and all I wanted to do was to stare at her. 'Steph?' Bugger.

'Erm ...' I started struggling to get my hand from its position, which was underneath her hip. Eventually, with an over dramatic pull, it was free to let me squint and focus on the tiny dial. Fires are good, but they are bastards for allowing you to actually see anything properly. Erin laughed a short laugh, and grabbed my wrist to bring my watch to her face, whereby she began to squint just as much as I had. Did she wear glasses? And where did that come from? It was okay for me to squint, but for her to, she had to wear glasses, didn't she? Sounds like my logical way of thinking. I wouldn't care if she wore deep sea diving goggles, as long as I could still see her, feel her, and be with her on this sofa for as long as I could.

'Seven-thirty! I didn't realise it was so late!' Late? Seven-thirty? 'I am supposed to be calling James ... ah bugger.' Erin didn't give me the opportunity to ready myself before she began to sit up, and before I knew it I was sprawled out on the wooden floor. Reggie and Brian were up like a shot, and both of them were giving me Doggy First Aid - which, if you didn't know, was a full face wash. 'Shit! Sorry, honey.' Honey? I liked the sound of that. An endearment said with no thought attached - just popping out ... mmm. Even the smell of dog's breath didn't wipe the smile off my face. 'Here. Let me help you.' A strong, firm hand was in front of me, and just as I took those capable fingers in my own, her other hand was cupping my elbow and lifting me to my feet. Jesus ... she was strong. I don't think I had the opportunity to bend my knees before I was winched onto the sofa next to her.

We sat there, side by side, like a couple of bookends, actually. Was she regretting the 'honey'?

'Sorry about that.' Thought so. 'I just panicked a little.' It's no big deal, Erin. It was only one word. 'I bet that must have hurt, huh?' Huh? 'Wooden floors are not as forgiving as carpet.' I am a knob. She was talking about throwing me off her onto the floor - and I bet you already knew that, didn't you?

'I'm good. Used to falling splat on my butt when playing with the demon seed there.' As I said it, both Reggie and Brian looked my way - and it appeared to suggest that they both had the tendencies of being a demon seed when the mood took them. A soft stroking sensation fluttered along the base of my spine, and the tingling seemed to seep all over my body.

'Does it hurt?' If I said yes, would you keep on stroking me? 'Can I see?'

'Su ... re.' Yes. My voice box was in the Land of Erin, and it was having difficulty formulating

the one word response that had ratta ta ta ted from my mouth. I felt a waft of cool air light upon my skin and the hairs salute the evening. Delicate touches from tantalizing fingertips danced on the base of my back, almost like a fingertip adaptation of Swan Lake. But as much as this sensation was sublime, it didn't equal the absolute ecstasy of the feeling of her lips when they brushed over the skin in a breeze of wonder.

A muffled, 'It looks a little red here,' followed by another kiss. The shock of it raced up my spine, then back down, only to be sent away again with another kiss. God. I wanted to turn around so much ... so much, but part of me was scared that if I turned around there would be no going home for Erin Mason that night. Wetness began to pool between my legs, and the ache was agonisingly blissful. Her mouth was moving over my skin, collecting me like a bee collects nectar, and her fingers were tracing patterns on to my skin and leaving an ache in their wake. Slowly, as if by wishful thinking, I saw one hand sneak around the front of me, and I prayed to a higher being, that she would continue on her quest of discovery. Fingers played with the hem of my top, and a voice inside me tried to warn me ... tried to tell me to stop this now before it was too late. But how could I? I had waited too long to feel this.

Inside. That's where they were now. Inside my top and slipping up my stomach ... slipping higher and higher ... toying with the base of my bra ... toying with the last vestiges of reality. I wanted this. I wanted her so fucking much. I could feel my hips rocking, allowing my need to find some purchase on the sofa ... allowing the ache to continue ... to rise ... to build ... the climb to that place where the real world fades and the world where you have craved your whole life is waiting with open arms. Still kissing ... still searching ... my hand covered hers and moved it over my breast, where I pushed it down, hoping she would feel the hardness of my nipple underneath her hand. Her mouth was at my side now, sucking the skin, nipping the pliable flesh, and her ragged breath was escaping and splattering itself all over me.

Leaning back, I allowed her to move more to the front ... I needed her mouth more fully on me ... needed it on my breasts ... suckling my nipple ... taking me and feeding from me, as much as I wanted to feed from her. Twisting slightly, she was on top, my leg circling her waist, pulling her closer. I couldn't help the tempo beginning from my hips ... I needed her inside ... needed her above and below ... needed her ... ached and yearned for her ... wanted nothing more than to give myself to her.

Erin's body was moving with me, her thigh between my legs and pushing into the place where I wanted her to be. Her hands were gripping and grasping, her lips devouring, and I loved it. This is it. The place where I should be. The place where nothing else mattered - only her and me ... me and her. Groaning sounds spluttered from her mouth to hit my skin to burn a surge of desire so strong inside me that I thought I would break if she didn't take me there and then. My top was thrust away in a kind of desperation, not by me, but her, and I saw the gleam of longing sparkle in her eyes. Yes. Take it. It's yours. And when I felt her mouth cover my erect bud, I couldn't help the gasp that left my mouth. She was feeding from me ... God ... she was feeding, and I was on the verge of cumming. Bodies drummed against each other, the pace becoming uncontrolled and frantic. I was gripping her backside trying to force her into me ... I needed her inside me ... needed her to rip off my jeans and fuck me there and then on the sofa. Needed to feel those strong, firm fingers make me hers ... delve inside me ... deep ... then deeper ...

needed to feel them thrusting ... fast ... then faster ... needed to know she knew it was me as I came ...

'Erin!' God. Please. Let her take me. Let her take me now ... I need her ... need her ... need her.

But she didn't. She stopped. Stopped and looked into my face with a look of confusion, as if she had just re entered the real world, well, before the look of horror gripped her that is.

'Shit! Sorry Steph!' Fuck the sorry ... why are you stopping? Why don't you make me yours? 'I ... I ...' You can't tell me she didn't want this as much as I did? No way. There was no fucking way she wasn't as into this as I was. I may be an idiot sometimes, but I can guarantee I know when someone is into it. 'I ... I'm sorry.' Stop apologising and tell me. Do you want this? Do you want me? Do you want to stop before we have had a chance? As you can tell, I was feeling a little angry by this point, as I was as horny as hell and totally unreasonable. Well, until she said the next thing that is. 'I want this to be special, Steph. Not a fumbling on the sofa.' Amazing to think how anger can subside so quickly, isn't it? Maybe because by what she had said I knew she wanted more than fling. The look on her face did look apologetic too, and I felt vindicated in a way. She did want me. And God, did I want her.

'Hey, honey ...' I had to get the endearment in, didn't I? 'Look ... I want this as much as you do ...' You bet I do, and that was not just the voice of my flower speaking. 'We can take our time, ok? I want this to work.' But even as I said it I saw something like pain flit across her face. What could have incited such a response? Did she know something I didn't? Not that it would take much ...

Erin leaned over and kissed my cheek, and I felt a jolt surge again in my lower regions. At this rate I doubted I would survive another five minutes with her if my body didn't calm down.

'I'd best be going.' She delivered this statement as she was rising up from the sofa, and Brian was next to her in a flash. It was all so sudden, you know. One minute we were making out, then stopping, and then declaring that we both wanted something more ... then nothing. She was leaving without even commenting on anything I had said. Talk about an anti climax ... literally.

When she turned at the door, I was deep in thought, and it wasn't until I felt her hands on my face that I realised she wanted my attention. Her face was so open ... so honest ... and there was a purpose written there that made my blood race, yet stay cold. It was weird ... one of the weirdest feelings I have ever had, if truth be known.

'Steph?' I looked up at her, only to be totally entranced by her gaze once again. 'Would you like to come to dinner tomorrow night?' Of course I did, but there was also a part of me that wondered why her expression was so distantly wracked with determination. However, I still nodded and said yes, a thing she seemed to take in deeply. 'We'll have a chance to discuss where our futures are heading.' Huh? 'And hopefully they are heading in the same direction.' Huh - again - big time. What was there to discuss ... unless she did know something about my past. Fuck. She did. I could tell. There was no way she would be blowing hot and cold if she didn't, was there? Should I tell her now? Get it over with? Tell her I wasn't the same person I was back

then ... that I had changed ... 'Hey ... nothing bad. Don't look so worried.' Incredibly her expression was back to the Erin I loved, and I felt a weight lift from my shoulders.

Another lingering kiss and she was gone.

And yes. I did say loved. Do you want to know why? Easy. It was because of my reaction to her, you see. The way I wanted to be a better person because she was in my life ... the way I believed what she thought of me was the most important thing in the world, rather than dwelling on events that happened four years ago.

Closing the door on her seemed like completely the wrong thing to do, but there was part of me that needed to pump my arms and exclaim a 'YES!' into the air. Reggie hadn't moved from his patch on the rug in front of the fire, and I felt a jolt of guilt, not about my past this time, but something definitely in the present. Here I was nearly skipping and hopping with joy around the house, and there was my little injured soldier doing his finest 'Shell shocked and wounded in battle' look. All thoughts of confession, worrying about what we would discuss the following night, and why Erin had made the excuse to leave early, left my head, as I made my way to the main man in my life, who by this stage was staring dramatically at the oversized bandage on his paw.

'Does baby want a cuddle?' Why do we insist on talking to our pets in that patronising way? 'Do you want mamma to give you a kiss?' And even when the previous thought had flashed through my mind, I still had to go for the sickly sweet voice you would never ever use in public. 'Come here, honey.' Even if you weren't over keen on our furry pals, you would hear the cracking sound within your breast - or the sound of tiny violins creaking out the kind of music that would make your soul weep when you clocked his little battered foot held limply up for inspection.

But before I had a chance to scoop him in my arms, he was off ... racing through to the other room, and then back in a flash with a ball wedged firmly in his mouth, the look saying, 'Nah. I'd rather play, mum.' A laugh shot out of my mouth, and that made his tail wag even harder.

'So ... you wanna play do you?'

'Aarroughh!'

And that's how we spent most of the evening. Reggie playing hard to get, and me getting knackered in the way only dogs can knacker you. In a word ... heaven.

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Sleep came easily, and I think it was the most wonderful night's sleep I had for such a long time. There were no dreams, or nightmares, it was as if my brain had been stored in a black room for the duration of the night. Waking up was easy, and the very first thought on my mind was Erin. Lying there under the duvet, the gentle snores of a contented dog the only other sound in the room, I allowed myself the opportunity to run through the events of the previous night. A smile

slipped effortlessly across my mouth, and I released a sigh. How perfect. Her kisses, I mean. The feeling she evoked in just a kiss was blinding, therefore the next thought was 'I wonder what it would be like to do more than kiss?' Another bigger, wider smile lit my face. Would I be able to handle her? Thoughts of her here with me began to build, and so did the feeling between my legs ... even my heart rate had begun to liven up. More images of our time on the sofa decided to make an appearance, and I had the urge to sort out the ache before getting out of bed ... just like the previous time. 'That's enough of that, Stevenson.' But it was spoken in a light hearted way. Hopefully the thoughts stirring more than my imagination would soon become a reality ... thus inciting more butterflies, and definitely more of that buzzing sensation I was experiencing from my pelvic area.

It wasn't until I was brushing my teeth did I remember what else I had to do today. I know! That should have been the first thought on my mind when I woke, not the need, or feel, of her waking up next to me ... or of waking up something deep inside me, for that matter. Today, or tonight even, was the time where I would tell her everything about my past - the time we would discuss our future. Bollocks. The smile that had been jumping on and off my face seemed to make an excuse and abscond to leave room for the groan of frustration to quit my mouth. Bollocks - again. Why couldn't I have just told her when I had first got to know her? Why did I have to be a twat? Only a few more hours before I could reveal to her the real me, or the 'me' I used to be, as even I had come to realise I was no longer the same person I was.

With that thought, I spat and rinsed. A metaphor? You bet.

It was less than two hours later that everything I thought I knew suddenly disappeared - or be whipped from under my feet, to use a cliché of the banal variety. Weirdly enough, it was not the way I thought it would be ... far from it, in fact. Some people would call it fate; others would say I deserved it - whatever. All I knew was that I knew nothing at all until the moment Pippa walked into my office.

Pippa. Known to many as the News Room bike. Fat, forty, and forever getting on my tits. I know this sounds cruel, but believe me, if anyone deserved my wrath at any time of the day or night, it was her. Her ultimate achievement in life was to ruin life for anybody else. Most of her day was spent dodging work - well, delegating it, as she put it. Her job was to oversee the rest of us when the sub editor was busy, and when the sub was busy, Pippa became Eva Braun instead of Mae West.

I knew it was going to be a fuckster as soon as her blonde permed head wedging itself around my door, the pig like eyes sparkling with an incessant need to be a twat of the highest order.

'Hello, sweetheart.' Words that should have made me feel comfortable and happy seemed to be bitter coming from her, and I knew it would be a while before I could stop my skin crawling. 'How is my favourite reporter this morning?' I grunted a response, wanting nothing more than to tell her to shove her 'favourite reporter' slur up her big fat ar ... 'So ... are you busy?' Where's Eva? We want Eva. We can *deal* with Eva ... and not some extra from the Muppet Show high on helium. Did I tell you she had a squeaky, as well as irritating, voice? Believe me - if you are of the age where they used to have black boards in classrooms, and someone would scrape their

fingers down it ... you got it. Can you remember the feel of the hairs all down your neck standing up in fright? I think you get the picture that my life was a damn sight better if she wasn't in it. 'Well, honey ...' She came closer, and I was leaning away from her - even Reggie's growling didn't put her off, '... have I got a delicious job for you.' Licking the toilet bowl? Picking flies from dog shit? Giving her a bed bath? Please ... if there is a God ... let it be one of the first two.

Ok. I'm being a bitch. I am also trying to procrastinate my way into somewhere where the next bit never happened.

'I have just found out about your celebrity neighbour.' I looked at her with my 'Why don't you just fuck off' face I had perfected over the years. And by the looks of it, she either chose to ignore it, or was even more stupid than I gave her credit for. 'Ellen Michaels ... real name Erin Mason.' Short, simple, to the point. And there was something deep inside me that wanted to get up, slap her, and growl into her face, 'Don't you ever soil her name with your voice again', but I didn't. For obvious reasons. But there was a part of me that wanted to know what she was going to say next - call it masochism, as after all I did bring it on myself. I didn't even question that she had said 'real name' - just took the information in.

'What about her?' I couldn't resist.

'She's your neighbour, isn't she?' Der. She had already qualified that. 'Jeff was wondering ...' Why he employed you in the first place? '... if you would write a special on the Lakes' new resident.' You can gather that I didn't stop her. Well, who would? The idea of writing an article on Erin appealed to me on more than one level. Imagine the look of surprise on her face when I showed it to her ... 'You know her, right?' I couldn't help smiling, then coughing sharply, and finishing with a flamboyant nod of the head. If she only knew ... 'Well, you could get an interview with her, couldn't you?' I wanted to say I was seeing her tonight, but there was no way I would be wasting my time getting to know the writer - I was more interested in getting to know the ... 'There is not much going on today, so you could start doing a little background research now, if you want to of course?' I pursed my lips, as it was always good to play hard to get. 'I think she would like it if you knew a little bit more about her - these arty types are like that.' Plonking her big fat arse onto the corner of my desk, which of course groaned out a '*please ... no!*', she leaned over to get closer to me. 'I have already started, being the professional I am.' Pro is the right word, but I'm not sure about the 'fessional' bit. 'She's come up through the ranks has this one ... used to be a lowly reporter like you. Went by the name of Ellen Michaels then.' No. I can guarantee she was never as low as me. And why would she use a pseudonym? 'So ... can I leave it in your capable hands, Stephanie?'

I wanted to tell her to shove the job up her big wide loading backside, not because I didn't want to do it, it was more a case of because *she* asked me to do it. But I didn't. Unfortunately. They always say you should never listen in on other people's conversations, as you would never hear anything good about yourself - also, you should under no circumstances try to get an eyeful of someone's life without them knowing ... pretty much for the same reason, I suppose. Nevertheless, I took the job, feigning boredom of course, and not knowing that the layers I was about to peel off Erin Mason's, aka Ellen Michaels', life would be as illuminating as they were.



But the past has a way of coming back to bite you, and you either have to bite back, or fall victim. I was fed up of playing the victim ... therefore I was baring my teeth and ready for the attack.

However, I am jumping the gun here, aren't I? Bitchy Poo had not even slammed the door before I was spilling my worst case scenario to you. I think I should give you an insight of exactly what I did uncover.

Ok. I did what most people do when researching someone or something. I Googled her. Erin Mason, of course. Most of which I already knew from the time I had researched a little bit more about the woman who was taking up all my waking moments - even though she wasn't speaking to me at the time - but this time I didn't just look for books. Do you know there are over a million hits for Erin Mason? A million. Over. And too many of them were concentrating on either a hockey star or a man. That did make me laugh ... only for a little bit though. Then I thought 'Fuck it', as you do, why was I going in the hard way when I also knew her pseudonym? So, I tried another way ... cross referencing Ellen Michaels and Erin Mason ... and am I boring you? I was getting bored by this stage, and just wanted to call Erin and ask her. But that's not what you do when you are writing a surprise article about someone, is it? Don't get me wrong, I wasn't just going to spring it on her - I was going to show her before I published it. Thought I would clarify that snippet of information, as I didn't want you to think I was going back to my old ways.

It wasn't so bad at first. Just a couple of things popped up. There was more information about Erin Mason than I had first thought, and when I saw her Myspace page, I thought I was onto a winner. However, that didn't pan out, and neither did the other three Myspaces I found, as they were all written by fans, and by the looks of it, they knew just as much as I did. But the Ellen Michaels information was right on the money. Initially I didn't worry ... but as the information and articles she had written started to appear, I must admit, I felt a wave of agitation wash over me.

Then I saw it. Saw IT. Saw the search indicator that suggested I click on the link to read the whole thing. I can't tell you how long I sat there with my mouse hovering over the hyperlink, watching as it highlighted and then stopped with the movement of my cursor. Both our names were there ... both of them. But it wasn't in a 'Steph loves Erin' kind of way - it was very far removed from anything with any amount of affection attached.

#### [Ellen Michaels dishes the dirt on Stevenson](#)

Read archived articles here from any city in the UK. Ellen Michaels takes on top notch reporter in a bid to expose suicide was in fact murder. Email this article to a friend.

[www.articlearchive.co.uk/news/ellenmichaelsreportstevenson](http://www.articlearchive.co.uk/news/ellenmichaelsreportstevenson) - 32k

You can imagine how I was feeling, can't you? Seeing those words strapped together in a little pocket that was floating somewhere in cyberspace was enough to transport me back to a time where I had tried so valiantly to pretend I had never been. They say to let the past rest ... and I understood that more than ever at this precise moment, but I had to know ... I had to find out if it was actually me she was writing about. Echoes of her saying, 'I've heard that name somewhere before, but for the life of me, I can't place it,' seemed to bounce inside my head. But how could it

be? Not once had she said she knew me ... not once. And all the times she had mentioned my career ... Was she trying to get a follow up story? Was she inching her way into my life under the pretence of actually liking me? Kissing me ... promising me a future, when all she wanted was to continue something that was dead and buried? If this was true ... Jesus ... if this was all she wanted ...

Click. And there it appeared in all its glory. A part of me wanted to throw up there and then, whereas another part of me knew this was the time I faced the truth ... faced up to the person I was, or had hoped, had been up until two minutes ago.

### ***Murder, She Wrote***

*How could one person continue to devastate, deceive and destroy a family after they had already been through hell? How could one person take it upon herself to bleed, then suck, the life from a woman whose whole world had already been ravaged by violence? How could this one person have the conscience to sleep at night?*

*Easy. Well, if your name is Stephanie Stevenson, that is. Yes. We are talking about 'the' Stephanie Stevenson, illustrious reporter for the Daily News Manchester Edition - the same Ms Stevenson who picked up last year's award for Headliner of the Year. We doubt she'll be getting any more trophies for her bulging cabinet after the latest scoop ... that being the sole catalyst to the downward spiral of a woman who had been to hell and back, and then sent smartly back to the nightmarish world of rape.*

*Mrs Lisa Poole, mother of three, was savagely attacked in her own home, and not just by group of teenagers. After a brutal assault, that left the poor twenty-eight year old in tatters, Stevenson decided to finish the job. As if having your dignity shredded wasn't enough, the celebrated journalist knocked the last nail into the housewife's coffin with a tortuous two hour interview, firing questions at her until she crumpled.*

*Henry Poole, the victim's shattered husband, was, as expected, beside himself with grief yesterday, and willingly spoke out against the barbaric and callous conduct his wife underwent in the hands of the media. Or should we say Stevenson? After agreeing to the interview, Stevenson hammered home questions to the distraught couple, even when it was obvious she should stop. Mr Poole, 31, said, through floods of tears, that he couldn't save his wife from the bombardment of questions Stevenson heartlessly delivered. 'When Ms Stevenson left, Lisa went totally to pieces,' the grief stricken husband told us. 'I felt completely useless.'*

*With his three motherless children at the side of him, the broken man tried his hardest to explain the events leading up to his wife's suicide four days after the interview with Stevenson, until, eventually, he asked the children to leave us for a while. Obviously, his children didn't want to leave him, but he assured them he would be alright - it wasn't like the last time.*

*Through choking sobs the man spluttered, 'I came home and found her. In the bath. I was too late.' We asked him if he would like to continue with the interview, something*

*Stevenson should have done, but he said he wanted to tell the truth. 'I went to see Ms Stevenson the day it happened. Tried to tell her, tried to show her how her actions had taken away from me the only woman I will ever love. But it was so hard to confront her, as she didn't seem to care what her actions had done to me, Lisa, or my children. She was laughing when I turned up.' All the time the man was trying to get his words out, it was evident that here sat a man ravaged by a pain only time will help ease.*

*Stephanie Stevenson, 35, has been unavailable for comment. In retrospect, we believe she will want to keep her head down for a long time to come. With good reason, too. However, Ms Celebrated Journalist, Ms Anything for a Story, we have a few questions for you to mull over. Do you have a heart? Do you have a conscience? Do you know what it is like to lose someone you love? Better still, do you know how to love?*

*And finally, a question from Henry Poole to the conveniently absent reporter, 'What do I tell the kids?'*

*Yes. What should he tell them, Stephanie? As sorry doesn't come close.*

I can't tell you how long I sat there. Can't tell you the pain I was feeling ... it wasn't as if I was feeling overwhelmed by it all ... all the hate and anger that was directed at me, I mean. It was the deceit. The lying. The pretending she liked me ... pretending we had something to reach for. It was all the above and so fucking much more. Yes. I had reported the story, and the way I had gone about it was not something I would like to announce whenever I met someone I liked, but *this!* *This* was something you would definitely tell someone, isn't it? Usually at the moment you recognised their name. Not try to woo them ... make them feel you are beginning to be their everything ... trick them into believing you were genuinely falling for them too.

I don't know how long I had been crying ... don't know how long Reggie had been trying to get my attention. The next thing I realised, Pippa was standing next to my desk reading the article over my shoulder, a tutting noise coming from her mouth.

'Makes you wonder how a woman could do that, doesn't it?' Did she mean me or Erin? 'To write something like that and then play the perfect neighbour.' Turning her face around, I could see the traces of a smirk playing along her lips. 'When I found that this morning, I thought "That'll get Stevenson's back up. And maybe give that queer a helping hand in fucking off back to the city where she belongs."'

Words jammed in my throat. Words so painful and vitriolic struggled to free themselves ... struggled to splatter themselves in kamikaze defence on her fat fucking idiot face. She knew ... she *knew* that Erin had written the article about me and wanted me to find it. What had I ever done to her that was so bad that she would want to crush my world like that? I know I told you what I thought of her, but I had always been professional ... I had never allowed my personal feelings to get in the way of my job. Even when I had been the person I had despised ... the job always came first.

'And ...' She stood erect now, all the vestiges of the smirk gone. 'It might make you leave too.'

So, that was it. She wanted me out. But why? Why would she stoop so low? Was it because she could never pin anything on me - never get a reaction from me over anything she tried to do? I tried to ask her, but those words were still trapped, and all I could do was flap my arm flaccidly in her general direction. Reggie was growling at her, and I knew if she took even one step toward me he would lunge at her, and there was no way I wanted her to get the satisfaction of having my dog put down. Therefore, the flaccid hand grabbed onto his collar, but that didn't stop the menacing noise emanating from deep inside his chest.

'We can do without your kind here. Fucking fags and queers don't belong living amongst decent people.' She made a move to go, but stopped, as if she had just remembered something. 'In my opinion, people like you should be drowned at birth, or at least shot when your filthy inclinations decided to crawl out.'

Snap! That's what it sounded like. A huge snapping sound like a beebee gun going off inside my head. Before I had a chance to think the next part through, I felt my hand tighten around her throat, squeezing with just enough strength to make her worry, and to have difficulty breathing. I hadn't even realised I had moved, until I felt the folds of her skin on my palm.

'*You fucking homophobe!* It's people like *you* that make *me* wish I had been drowned at birth. That way, I wouldn't have to look at your pig face everyday. Or listen to your whining voice ... smell fish every time you walk by ... pretend you have an ounce of common sense ... an ounce of humanity.' By this time she was against the wall, and her eyes watering. Yeah. Where's the strong woman you thought you were now? Where are your opinions, Pippa? 'And as for being a fucking queer, as you like to put it ... at least I don't fuck people to keep my job.' With a slam, her head connected with the wall, and my once full hand now hung there empty. All it would take was a little momentum, and I knew the fist would find a spot right between her eyes.

But I didn't. Pippa, and all those like her, were not worth the effort. There were too many Pippas in this world that would never accept that we are all different, that we love in our own way, and not have to follow the rules of convention anymore.

Walking over to the computer, I pressed print and began logging off. Enough work for one day ... enough information for a morning, don't you think? Finding out that the woman you loved was a backstabbing cunt would have been enough, but to also be reminded you were in fact a social outcast was definitely worth leaving early. The office could do without me for the rest of the day, as I had other things to do - the main one was to confront the lying twat who pretended to be my friend.

'I'll get you the sack for this.' Her voice was raspy, as I knew her throat would be aching.

I didn't even turn to look in her direction when I answered, 'You still here?' Leaning down I scooped the page from the print tray and folded it the best I could. My hands were shaking, but not through fear. Reggie was at my side the whole time, and I leaned down and patted his head. 'Come on, fella. Let's go home.'

'I said, I'll have your job for this, Stevenson.'

Stopping next to where she was leaning against the wall, I looked directly into her eyes. 'I think you mistake me for someone who actually gives a shit.' Then I made a move to leave, until her grubby hand grabbed my arm. Turning once again to her, I knew my look would be enough to stop any comment, so I made the most of the silence. 'And by the way ... I think it will be *me* having *your* job.'

A nervous laugh snorted through her nose, but her hand slipped from my arm all the same. 'Prejudice and discrimination in the workplace is a sackable offence. Not to mention all the *'extras'* I know about.'

'But *you* attacked *me*!'

'*Really?*' I stopped again, the coolness of my former self covering me like a blanket. 'Tell me. Where are your witnesses?'

Her eyes were frantically searching around to see if anyone else had seen what had transpired a few minutes before, but I saw the light fade from them when she noticed I had my blinds pulled down in front of the window that looked into the rest of the news room.

'Jeff won't believe you.' Her voice was low, threatening, but I didn't give a rat's ass. I didn't even answer her. I had wasted enough time on that fuckster for one day. Now it was time to see the second fuckster, and the way I was feeling, she wouldn't be as fortunate as Pippa. This time the teeth would sink in ... there would be no flaccid arm ... no more surprises. Clutching the piece of paper closer to my chest, as if it gave me strength, I clicked my tongue at Reggie, wanting us both to get out of there and get the next bit over and done with as soon as possible. That way I could put everything to rest ... RIP ... Rest In Pieces.

I could still hear her shouting things after me. Insults. Threats. Words that you would never repeat in front of your mother. But I didn't say a word ... not because it would make me look bad in front of all the people who were witness to her abuse, although that did come in handy. It was because all the venomous words I had, I wanted to save up to throw at Erin Mason, aka Ellen Michaels. Now that was worth my muteness, don't you think?

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In the car, all I could see were distorted images of the webpage, maybe because tears were struggling to escape again, but I don't think that was the main reason. Images of Erin and me the previous night were duelling with the article, and the more I saw them jousting for precedence, the more angry I became. I felt like a fool ... a stupid fucking idiot who had believed that the past had been firmly laid to rest. Touching the piece of paper on the seat beside me reminded me that whatever I believed, there were still a lot of things that were all so raw. Everyday for four years I had lived with my guilt over the death of Lisa Poole. Every ... *fucking* ... day. But when

Erin had come into my life, I thought maybe, just maybe, this could be the time when I could put those demons aside ... move on ... become the 'better person' I thought I could be when I was with her. And look where that got me.

I was home in no time. Tyres screeching onto gravel alerted Bassenthwaite I was home, and I was not happy. You would have thought she would have taken heed by the ferocity of the arrival, but no. She had the balls to smile in welcome as I marched over to her where she was in the garden, clutching the now crumpled piece of paper into my fist. Brian ran toward me, but I ignored him and strode on.

My throat was tight, yet loose. My arms were aching, yet supple. My legs were taking me toward her at the pace of a race walker, and my brain was with her before my body was. She tried to welcome me ... tried to shout out a term of surprise and endearment, but I got in before her.

*'You fucking backstabbing cunt!'* I saw her freeze and a look of panic wash over her face, but I didn't give her time to react. *'How could you? How fucking could you?'*

'I ... I ... what ...'

*'Don't fucking pretend you don't know ... don't you dare fucking pretend to me again, do you understand?'* I was in front of her now, and although I had images of me wiping the look off her face as I was driving home, there was no way I could actually hurt her physically. Emotionally, well, that was a given. I could hear Reggie howling in the distance, as I hadn't let him out of the car ... I couldn't - I was too focused on telling her exactly what I thought of her writing. Brian began to sympathise with him, but I didn't give a flying fuck. It was her and me ... me and her ... but not in the same way I had thought it would be last night. *'Thought you'd heard my name before, did you? Couldn't place it? Well, I think you have definitely heard the name Stephanie Stevenson ...'* I held out my tightened fist with the article securely inside and I saw her flinch. *'If this is any indication.'* Her face became even more pale than it had, and for a moment I thought she was going to faint. As her feet staggered, I tried to stop her from falling. Images of Henry Poole doing the same to me after I had destroyed his life flashed in my mind. Instead of feeling pity, more anger raised its head. *'Read it. Although you probably know it by heart.'*

One swift shove and she had it. And like Henry Poole I was there with nothing to hold onto ... nothing. But instead of pleading, *'What do I tell the kids?'* I went for the slasher ... right for the jugular ... anything to make me feel some semblance of peace once again. *'I wish to God I had never laid eyes on you, and I hope beyond hope that I never have the misfortune to see, speak, or hear your lying voice for as long as I live.'*

Then I left. The same speed. The same anger. The same everything, well, except I didn't have a future now. Didn't have anything but the pain and desperation I had felt four years ago. Erin didn't try to stop me, not that I blame her. I had not given her the chance to explain ... to tell me her side of the story, and as we all know, there are always three sides to every story. Mine, yours, and the truth. Nevertheless, I knew the truth. I knew that I wasn't fit enough for her to wipe her boots on me ... had done from the start. I also knew that the article she had written was the truth ... just from a different perspective, a perspective I hadn't wanted to acknowledge. I think that's

why it hurt so much, you know. The reason why the ache in my chest was becoming unbearable. I had worked so hard trying to get my life into some kind of order, some kind of balance. When I had seen her for the first time, I had physically felt the scales tip in her favour, and that had been the vehicle by which I believed the last stage had begun in my recovery. But, as you can tell, I was only in remission, and I knew I would have to start all over again.

By the time I slammed the door and was standing in my hallway, part of the fight left me. Looking around I knew once and for all that everything was gone ... spoiled ... ruined. The Lakes held nothing for me now. Peace and tranquillity, the place to mourn and mend, was gone. My job would probably be advertised by now, if Pippa had anything to do with it. As for starting afresh ... finding hope ... that was in ashes. I had been searching for a miracle and come up with a pocketful of sand.

Reggie was sitting on the floor in front of me, his tongue lolling out, mewling noises coming from deep within him. Dropping down onto the floor, I gathered him in my arms and pressed my face against his neck, his bandaged paw sticking upwards. Tears came easily, and Reggie tried his hardest to lick them as fast as they were flowing. At least I had one good thing from moving here ... one person who loved me, understood me, never judged who I was or whom I had been.

Looking past his head, I saw the picture of my family on the stand, a picture I didn't even remember putting there. Smiling faces were looking back at me, and I knew all I wanted was to go back and get a hug from my mum. But that wasn't all ... There was something I had to do ... something I should have done at the time, but I was too busy licking my wounds and feeling sorry for myself. That something was to visit Henry Poole and tell him I was sorry. Such a weak word, don't you think? Sorry. Easy to spew out, as it was just letters and air. However, there was no going forward if I didn't ... no reason to try again, if I ever wanted to of course, as it would always come back to this moment.

Within half an hour I was packed and loading the car. I could see Erin still standing where I had left her, the paper scrunched up in her hand. I knew she had read it - could tell by the abject distress written all over her. Funnily enough, a part of me wanted to go over and soothe her ... go over and tell her everything would be all right again. But it couldn't. She had deceived me, nearly as much as I deceived myself.

Without a backwards glance, I slammed my car into gear and was on my way to face my past.

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My dad was surprised when he opened the door, but not as surprised as my mum was when I grabbed hold of her and nearly squeezed the life out of her. But it wasn't until she said, 'Hey there, lady. What's brought all this on?' did I allow the sobs to break free. My dad didn't know what to do, and decided to try to give me something ... a lamp ... a picture ... something for the house ... anything to see his daughter smile again. I tried to tell them, honestly, but the muscles in my throat were too busy pumping up the sobs to consider the art of conversation.

Eventually, I was led into the front room and gently placed onto the sofa. My mum sat next to

me, whilst my dad decided if he couldn't give me a gift, the least he could do was make me a cup of tea. Once again I was amazed by the feeling of being at home. Erin Mason and her article couldn't hurt me here ... I could block it all out. Everything. The tears I had been so free with suddenly decided to stop, and I acknowledged my surroundings. My mum was seated quietly; her expression was of concern, but she was in no hurry to find out why I had turned up like Cerberus was chasing me. My lip began to quiver once again, and she half-smiled and tapped her chest. 'Come here. Let mum take care of you.' Just as I began to cry and move forward, I heard my dad come back in, then opt for the safety of the kitchen again. He was good like that ... knew when it was time to let women do the things that they needed to do without the embarrassment of him looking hopelessly on.

'Do you want me to call Ju?' I shook my head. Why involve Ju in all this? All I needed was a good blub, a shower, and then go and see Henry Poole. That was enough for one day, wasn't it?

Quietness pervaded the air, apart from my crying that is.

After ten minutes I knew I couldn't just sit here in the safety of my mum's arms, I had to get myself into gear and make a visit. Lifting my head, I looked up at my mum's worried face. That was the last thing I had wanted to do ... Why should I come here and worry them both stupid over something that was my fault? Swallowing deeply, I moved my lips to speak ... then swallowed again. 'I'm fine now mum ... just had a row with a woman at work and needed to get away.' I knew she didn't believe me, but she didn't press home the point. 'Could you do me a favour?' She nodded, and I felt her breast wobble. 'Could you look after Reggie whilst I pop out somewhere ... I ... I ...' Should I tell her? 'I have to pop into my old workplace and pick up some articles I need.' Looks like a no.

Her brown furrowed, and for a minute I thought she was going to say no. 'Sure. But ...' She squeezed me tightly to her. 'Wouldn't you like it if I came along with you? For a bit of company.' A light kiss landed on my forehead before she continued. 'And then maybe you might tell me the real reason for you coming here all upset.'

'Honestly, mum. I'm ok now. It was just a woman at work.' My mother's green eyes twinkled with understanding - especially that she didn't believe a word I was saying. 'It was Pippa ... you've heard me mention her before, haven't you?' She shook her head - and I'm not surprised, as Pippa was the last person I would talk about when I had the opportunity to discuss more interesting things. 'She said some nasty things about me.' I felt my mother stiffen, and a flash of guilt charged through me. 'Looks as if the Lakes are not as accepting as I thought.'

'What did she say?' Where was the comforting tone? All I could sense was an iciness I usually didn't get from my mum.

'*Erm ... about me being gay.*' The last word came out slightly higher than the rest of the sentence, as if it was trying to formulate itself into a question but left it too late. 'She thought I should be drowned at birth, or even shot.'

'*The cheeky good for nothing waste of space!*' So she did know her. '*How dare she force her*



*ignorance on you ... I'll have her job for this!*' Hearing my mum's raised voice alerted my dad that it was time to come back into the room.

'What's up? What's happened?' Sometimes I wish I knew when to keep my big mouth shut, because as soon as my mum told him, he grabbed the phone and was punching in the numbers to my news office in Kendal.

'Dad ... no. I can handle Pippa ... honestly. Stop.' Thankfully he did, and when he pulled the receiver away from his ear, I could hear the receptionist's voice asking if she could be of help. Therefore the action of him clicking the call off was done in silence, almost like a mime act. When I was sure we were alone - yes - I checked the phone - I decided to come clean with them. Well, a little more than I had.

'She wants shooting ... never mind you. What have you ever done to upset her?'

'Pippa is a nobody; a nothing. I let things get to me, that's all.' I tried to make my voice soothing, and all the initial thoughts of not wanting to upset them came back. 'I have to check some articles I have written, and then visit an old ... client.' Do you call someone a client even after you have torn their life apart? 'I think it was a mixture of both things ... so don't worry, ok?' They weren't convinced. 'Ok?' Still stony silence. 'I promise I will tell you more when I have sorted it all out.' A flicker ... then they turned and looked at each other before looking straight at me. At that moment, Reggie decided to come back in. 'And it will give you time to play with your furry grandchild.' Reggie played his part to the max, and went to sit in front of them, his expression saying 'Feed me ... play with me ... love me ... take care of my poorly paw.'

An hour later I was leaving, and my stomach was in knots. This was the time I had avoided for over four years ... the time I went to face my mistakes ... the time when I faced the reason why I couldn't quite fit in. In a fucked up way, I believe part of me was looking forward to it - because it was a time when I could stop playing the wounded soldier and get on with my life.

I did have to pop into the old news room before I went to see him, and it was good to see the faces of my colleagues after such a long time. Some of them I had seen on flying visits, but not all. But it wasn't a social call ... by no stretch of the imagination. I was there to get Henry Poole's address and get out as quickly as I could. Anyone would think I would have that address etched into my memory, but to tell the truth, things like that hadn't been of importance when I was working on a story before. As soon as I drove away from any place, their address was filed with 'Over and done with.'

Before too long, I was sitting in my car outside a modest semi in a quiet suburb of Manchester. Nothing was moving in the house ... there were no lights on in the front room, but I could see one on in the kitchen. Then a silhouette of a person moving around ... then a smaller one ... which was soon joined by two more. They were all there. All of them. Henry Poole and his children. Was this also the time when I found the words to answer his question? Should I tell the kids what had happened to their mother? All the while I was thinking this thought I was making a move to actually getting out of the car and knocking on their door. What if he slams it in my face? Should I knock again?

But he didn't. He just stood there with a look of uncertainty, as if he should know me but he didn't. This surprised me, and I was taken off guard for a moment. I thought he would have my face carved into his memory with a slogan saying 'Kill On Sight' written underneath.

'Can I help you?' No. It was definite now, he didn't recognise me, and that made matters even worse, if that can be possible, because now I would have to explain who I was and why I was standing on his doorstep. My mouth was opening and closing and the words wouldn't, or couldn't, free themselves and say what they had been determined to say. 'I'm sorry ... I don't have the time for a survey, or need anything you are selling.'

But as he was just about to close the door, two words escaped and I saw the wooden barrier stop before it clicked shut. 'Stephanie Stevenson.' That's all it took for him to ease the door back, the look of recognition clear accompanied by a silence that was making my ears hurt. 'I need to speak with you, Mr Poole.' So few words, but so difficult to utter. The strangest thing though was that instead of seeing obvious hatred in his face, it was more like acceptance. Had he known I would one day turn up knocking at his door pleading for forgiveness?

Without a word, he opened the door more fully to allow me to enter, which I did. My stomach was deliberating an appearance all over his hallway carpet, but I had the gumption to make the few steps into the house that was becoming more and more familiar. Waiting for him to shut the door and lead the way into the living room was agony. I wanted him to yell at me ... scream abuse ... do something except walk ahead of me into the cosy surroundings of a family home.

'Take a seat.' He was avoiding eye-contact; well that's how it appeared. 'Would you like a coffee? Tea?' My mouth was so bloody dry, but I doubted I could keep anything down.

'Water would be lovely, thank you.' With a nod of the head, he was gone. I could hear him talking to the children in the kitchen, couldn't grasp what he was saying, and just heard the grumble of voices. I took this opportunity to look around the room. It was so homely, so warm and full of love. Pictures of the kids grinning back at me were all around - pictures of Henry Poole and his children looking happily into the camera, and that made me feel so fucking bad. However, the worst bit was when I spotted the main one over the fireplace. There she was - Lisa Poole - arms circling younger versions of her children, and before I knew it I was standing directly in front of the portrait.

'That was when she was not depressed. Such a difference, eh?' I hadn't heard him come back into the room, and I felt like someone who had been caught with their hand in the cookie jar. Plonk. He placed the glass of water on the table next to where I had been sitting and then made his way over to where I was standing to lift up the picture and look at it more carefully. 'I took it. Last picture we had together before ... before ...' What should I say? Before I ruined your life? 'Before she went down again.' Down where? 'I think that was a couple of months before her first suicide attempt.' Her first what? Suicide attempt? God, I wanted to ask him what he meant by that, but it's something you just don't ask isn't it? Although it's a pity I hadn't thought of it four years ago.

Placing the picture carefully on the mantelpiece, he turned back to me, sorrow written across his face. 'I keep it there mainly for the kids ... they like to see their mum how she used to be.' For the first time he looked straight into my eyes, and it wasn't how I expected. There was no haunted look that I had come to associate with this man. All I could see were a whisper of regret, a tinge of sadness, and a hint of melancholy. 'Where are my manners? Please, Ms Stevenson, take a seat.' He had forgotten that he had already asked me to sit down, but I didn't want to reassure him about his manners, I was there to apologise for my lack of them the last time I had set foot in his house. 'So ... how can I help you?'

Help? Well, yes ... it was help in a way. Helping me to stop having nightmares about what I had done, helping me to acknowledge how I had been to who I was now ... so ...

'I ... well ... I ...' Easily said inside the head, but coming off the tongue is a different matter. I felt my hands ball into fists and I knew I was physically pushing the words out from deep within me. I had to get them all out in one foul swoop or else they would be forever locked inside. 'I want to apologise for what I did ... What I said, that is.' Was that enough? By the look on his face, no it wasn't. 'I didn't realise what I was doing - didn't realise that I had gone too far. I ... should have seen it was too much for ... Li...sa.' Saying her name in front of him seemed like a sin, and I believed I didn't have to right to become familiar with her now. 'All I wanted was to get the story ... I had no consideration for what she had already been through and ...'

'Can I just stop you there, Ms Stevenson?' Here we go. This was the time he told me exactly what he thought of me and my fumbled apology. 'Your article helped to put those three teenagers behind bars. If you hadn't got the facts out of my ... wife ...' he swallowed rapidly before continuing, 'they would have walked free, as she was ... not ... here ... by the time the case came to trial. She hadn't given a full statement to the police before ...' His voice cracked, and momentarily his face crumpled, before he hurriedly looked at the door to check his children were not there.

'I'm so sorry, Mr Poole ... so so sorry.' I was apologising for the words he couldn't say ... the words that I had helped create - the suicide of his wife. 'I wish I could turn the clock back and know then what I have learned now.' But that's all retrospective, isn't it? If onlys don't change the world, knowing what your actions can do before you do them is one way to have some semblance of control, although sometimes ignorance can be a good thing. Ask my heart.

'Please. Don't apologise anymore.' But I wanted to ... needed to until my mouth bled. 'I'm not saying you were right in how you got your story, and at the time I was so angry with you ...' Anger seemed such a tame emotion for what this man had gone through. 'But you didn't kill my wife, Ms Stevenson. Whatever you might want to believe.' I couldn't answer him - just sat there trying to formulate a response. 'She suffered with depression for such a long time ... and her taking her own life was something that she had tried a few times before. It was just a matter of time before she succeeded.'

'But ... I ...' I didn't know what else to say. I knew deep in my heart that the death of Lisa Poole was my fault. Had felt it every day for the last four years. There was no way that, after all the years of conditioning, the only thing I had been sure of was being ripped away from me. Most

people would have felt some kind of elation about being let off the hook, but I didn't. I wanted to take the blame. I knew what I knew. I remembered the look ... the vulnerability ... the breaking ... the shattering into a thousand pieces as I pushed and pushed and pushed to get my spread. The image of Henry Poole, of how incompetent he must have felt as his flaccid arms tried to give comfort to a wife who had reached the stage of total devastation and then felt as if she had been shoved over the edge. Shoved by me, actually.

'I'm surprised the other reporter didn't tell you. I asked her to.' Asked who, what? 'What was her name? Begins with an e, I think ... no ...' he stood up quickly. 'Just a minute, I'll just check.'

Whilst he was out of the room, I tried to process all we had said, or not said, if that makes any sense. This was not going the way I thought it would ... by any stretch of the imagination. I thought by this stage I would be turfed out of his home, maybe nursing a broken nose, but this? This was nowhere near anything I could have ever dreamed up. And what other reporter? I always worked alone, actually, I still did. So what was he going on about? Had he spoken to someone at the news paper after I had left? Shaking my head, I knew that if that would have been the case, I would have found out - one way or another.

Coming back into the room, he was gripping onto a small business card. Unusual. None of us ever gave out business cards, as they always knew where to find us.

'Here it is ... here you go.'

Do you know about the laws of physics? Do you understand the concept of time and how it works? I don't. But one thing I knew at that precise moment was as soon as I stretched out my hand to grasp the small card, everything seemed to slow down ... everything seemed to have an omen attached. Part of me was screaming 'Don't take it! Let things lie!' whilst the other was eagerly awaiting the end of my world as I knew it.

The card felt like fire as I slipped my fingers around it, and I can still remember how I smiled at him in thank you before lowering my eyes onto the neatly presented words. It was two of the words that stood out more than the rest ... two. And these two words made my blood run like ice through my veins, and a hatred I never thought I could feel sweep through me.

*Ellen Michaels.*

God only knows how I didn't lose it there and then. And the next thing was something I doubted I could ever repeat for as long as live. My voice was almost tender as I asked Henry Poole, 'So ... you told this ... erm ... Ellen Michaels what exactly?'

He looked surprised that I didn't know. 'Asked her to tell you it wasn't your fault. She came here to write an article on Lisa and ... erm ... you, as it happens, and I told her about Lisa's depression.' A slight shrug. 'Funnily enough, I never got to see her article ... thought they had scrapped it.'

I can't tell you what went through my mind, not because I believe you can't understand the

loathing I allowed to curse through me at that time. No. The reason why I can't tell you is because I can't really remember it. Emotions had welled and swelled and vied for dominance to such a degree the space between my ears seemed to shut down. All I can remember doing was gripping onto that tiny piece of card as if it held all the answers to life's mysteries.

'Ms Stevenson ... Are you ok?' I couldn't answer. If I opened my mouth at that precise moment I knew I would be like Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, and I didn't think I would stop. Henry Poole leaned over and took my hand in his, pulling the fingers away from the card in the process. 'Look. I don't know what's happened ... and I don't really want to know.' Neither did I. 'But you can't let the past haunt you ... or let it eat you up.' I felt a squeeze on my hand, and this was enough to enable me to tear my eyes from the card and look at him. His face was earnest, and he was waiting for me to acknowledge his presence. 'When Lisa ... when ... it all happened, at first I blamed you. Understandably, given the circumstances.' I stiffened, and he hurried on. 'But then it all shifted. Then I began to blame myself ... believe I wasn't enough for her ... hadn't given her the support she needed.' The image of him looking beaten flashed through my head, and I wanted to tell him it wasn't his fault - but once again, the 'It isn't you, it's me' seemed so lame. 'It wasn't until I spoke with the second reporter, Ellen, that I seemed to come to some kind of understanding. Do you want to know what that was, Ms Stevenson?' Slowly, I nodded, although for the life of me I didn't want anything that she had said or done to be anything that would ease this rage inside me. I wanted this to continue until I had confronted her again. 'Life throws us many curve balls, and sometimes we catch them, and other times they fall from our hands. Sometimes they injure us in a way that we think we will never recover. But what we must always remember is that we can't foresee the future. Can't stop what is meant to be. If Lisa hadn't taken her life then, she would have done it later. I know that now.' He paused for a moment. 'So, you see, Ms Stevenson. It was no one's fault. Maybe we all learned a lesson from this, or maybe we didn't. But we all experienced the same tragic event. It is up to us how we interpret it, and how we allow it to affect our lives.'

What could I say? Thank you? Or start a debate? The man had opened up his soul for me to see, told me how the death of his wife made him feel a failure, and all I could do was sit.

'Do you know what I think you should do?' Once again I didn't answer, but I did move my head in some kind of affirmation. 'The first thing you should do is forgive yourself. Without that, you will never move on. And that's something you need to do ... move on with your life.'

I wanted to cry. Wanted to hang my head in shame and cry. Here was a man who had gone through so much, suffered so much, telling me to forgive myself. How do you start that? Do you say, 'I forgive you, Stephanie' and then everything's good? How can you just stop four years of blaming yourself in one sweeping statement? You can't ... and deep inside me I think there was an element that was wedged there and thriving on the knowledge that I had something to cling on to, even though that something would destroy me in the end.

'It won't be as easy as just telling yourself you forgive what you have done.' Can he read minds too? 'You have to show it ... mean it ... treat everyday as a new beginning. See the good in life ... the good in others. Not always look for the black ... the bad ... the thing that you believe everything will come back to. Trust yourself again, Ms Stevenson. You are a good person.'

Can you imagine how I felt hearing those words from this man? Him telling me that I was a good person after all I believed I had put him through. As soon as he finished speaking, I felt something crack inside me ... something break and release the tears that I had been holding back for so long. The tears for Lisa Poole and all the other victims of my pen ... the tears I felt for my life, and how I had spent the most of it being indifferent to everyone and the world around me ... the tears I felt for losing the only person I knew I could ever love. There was no way I could be with Erin Mason now ... no way. Right from the start I knew she was different, knew she was someone I would remember for the rest of my life. But never in a million years did I think it would be because she had stabbed me in the back and then lied about it. The tears flowed easily, and sobs wracked through my body. Then I felt Henry Poole's arms come around me, hoping to offer some comfort. Unlike the scene I had witnessed four years ago, I allowed this man to take away some of the burden from me, and with this, I felt a strength begin from within and begin to ooze outwards and throughout my body. These arms were not flaccid - they were strong and sure, and they allowed me to start to pick up the pieces from my shattered life, piece by miniscule piece.

'And if it makes it easier, Stephanie, I forgive you, although there is nothing to forgive.' Gripping onto him even more tightly, I cried even harder.

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## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

Two days later saw me heading back to the Lakes, Reggie firmly locked in his cage in the back of my car. The last forty eight hours had been difficult, but I had come through the other side. I can't say I was whole though, that would be a miracle, but at least I was trying to get my path sorted.

After I had left Henry Poole, I had gone for a drive ... nowhere in particular, just driving around the city to see what I had been missing. It wasn't long before I realised that I no longer felt at home in Manchester. My family were there, that's true, but everything else seemed so big and cold, and I wanted to return to the tranquillity of my Lakeland home. I know I said that it was all lost to me, but I missed it. Things said in the heat of the moment are just that, aren't they? Heat of the moment epithets that should be taken with a pinch of salt. And I was trying valiantly to uphold the 'New Beginnings' mantra I had playing in my head.

Being with my parents, and then with the rest of my family, was hard work, as I tried my hardest to hide everything I had experienced in the last few hours. No. I wasn't shutting down, or becoming a recluse, I just needed time to work through everything before I opened my big fat mouth. There is one thing I truly believe in, and that's to work through everything before I give it a voice. Either that or you find yourself eating your words at one time or another. However, I can't always say I succeeded. Look at the way I treated Erin, for example. I didn't give her a chance to tell me her side of the story.

Whoa ... hold those literary horse a wee while. Are you thinking 'What is she playing at? One minute she loves her, the next she wants to throttle the life out of her, and finally she believes the woman who hid away the truth should be given a voice?' Yes. Simply put. Because *her* truth is different to *my* truth, and by knowing both sides to the story, there may be a chance that eventually *the* truth will be uncovered. She acted badly, true. I acted badly, true also. She lied - true. I lied - true again. I could go on, but I believe you know more about what's going on than I do. And there were lots of 'times' within the last part, and it was 'time' I acted on them.

Therefore, back to my beginning.

I was on my way back to the Lakes. My home. The place where I would see Erin Mason again. The place where I would discuss the past in a rational manner. The place where I hoped there may actually be a future for a sinner like me. All I had to do was believe in the impossible, and then sprinkle a handful of forgiveness over the both of us. Or maybe two handfuls for good luck.

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When I arrived back the last thing I felt like doing was having a discussion, but I had made a promise to myself that I would be rational and ask Erin why she had done what she had. Thoughts of the article popped into my head, and I wondered why she had been so vitriolic when Henry Poole had told her that it was no one's fault. Only she had the answer to that.

However, the discussion would have to wait, as I saw a car parked outside her house that I didn't recognise. She had visitors, and that was one thing I didn't want to happen - you know, going over there and waiting to talk. It had to be just her and me.

After unloading the car of bags and an overexcited canine, I went inside my home. And it felt just that. Home. Mail was scattered on the floor and I sorted through it to find a card which said 'Sorry - You were out when we called'. Bloody Royal Mail. Why couldn't they just shove the parcel down the side of the steps - it wasn't as if I was overlooked and it would get pinched. I doubted the nearby squirrels would be interested in anything I was having delivered, unless it was a bag of nuts. For the life of me I couldn't remember ordering anything, and promptly decided to go and collect it whilst I was waiting for Erin's visitors to bugger off so I could scuttle over and have my 'talk'. Or 'our' talk, I should say.

Just as I was leaving, I noticed the answer phone flashing. Four messages. Click.

*'Hello there, Stephanie. Jeff Goodings here. Can you call me as soon as you get this message?'* Bollocks. I'd forgotten about my outburst at the office. I bet Pippa had a field day without me there to defend myself.

Next message. *'Hi, Steph. Jeff here again. Can you call as soon as you can?'* Buggering bollocks. What did he want? My head on a platter? Click again. *'Steph. Jeff here. I need to speak to you as soon as possible. If you get this before the office closes, can you pop in?'* Aw fuck. I was hoping to just take the bollocking on the phone, but now I would have to go and face them all. Somewhere deep inside me I was hoping the fourth message would be another one telling me

everything was ok and I didn't have to pop in after all.

Click. Silence. Then a clearing of a throat. *'Hi ... erm ... Steph.'* Erin. And I knew by the timbre of her voice she had been crying. My heart started to speed up and my breathing became laboured. *'I need to explain ... need to tell you why I did what I did. I am so sorry ... so sorry.'* Yes. I need you to explain, too, Erin. *'And that's not all of it. I need to tell you something that Henry Poole told me, but I'm not going to leave it on your answer phone.'* So, she was going to tell me it wasn't just because of my actions, eh? A little late, but eight out of ten for effort. *'If you don't want to see me, I understand, but I don't want to leave without telling you why. Take care.'*

Leave? Leave and go where? She lived next door.

Racing to the front door, I looked at the car again. Not a flicker of recognition. But when I saw the woman walking around the outside of the house, I knew exactly who it was. Abigail Smarts, of Smarts Estate Agents. Fuck. Fuck again. Double fuck. She was selling her house because of what I had said. Giant FUCK. I couldn't let her do that ... couldn't let her think I hated her and wanted her to leave. I know I said I felt hatred before, you know, when I found out about the undelivered message, but that was a reaction. I didn't hate her. I could never hate her, and that thin line between love and hate would never be crossed if I could stop it.

I made a move toward her house, as I knew I had to do it now ... tell her to reconsider selling ... tell her that she shouldn't run away from her past, just like I had, that it would always come back to this moment. As my foot hit the last step of my porch, I stopped. Nope. I should stick to my guns ... not race in there with them half cocked. It wasn't as if she had buyers there, it was only being valued. No. I would go to the office, speak to Jeff ... sort out part of my future ... nip to the post office ... come back ... then casually walk over and talk.

That decided, I led Reggie back into the house and told him to be a good boy. He looked totally fucked off as I closed the door, and I knew he would be sulking all the time I was out. But I needed to get things done quickly, and when Reggie was there, I spent most of the time waiting for him to stop sniffing, or peeing up trees.

Twenty minutes later I walked into the News Room. I expected to have the hanging mob waiting for me, but no. Everyone seemed happy to see me back, and unusually, everyone said hello. When I say 'unusually', I don't mean they are a bunch of miserable sods ... it was a case of not having the time to socialise when the reports were still being sorted. As I approached Jeff's door, his secretary was there to greet me, and as she told me Jeff was expecting me, I felt very unnerved, even more so when I looked behind me to see everyone nodding in support. Was this something out of a David Lynch movie? And where the fuck was Pippa? I had at least expected her to be there to railroad me into the office to accuse me of attempted murder.

My knuckles had barely time to leave the door, as Jeff shouted come in. He was behind his desk, paperwork scattered all around him, a grin spreading over his face. Huh? This wasn't what I had expected. Far from it, in fact. 'Good to see you, Steph. Pull up a pew.' Tentatively, I pulled the chair over and sat on the edge of it. I had my apology all ready to go, but he stopped me in my tracks. 'Had a very interesting chat with Pippa Howard the other day. Very interesting.' Bugger.



This was all show, wasn't it? The friendly faces, the greetings. It was to make it easier for me to leave when I got kicked right up the arse and sent on my merry way. 'But not as interesting as the chats I had from the rest of the workforce.' Huh? Again. Was I becoming an idiot? Or had I always been one? 'Seems as if Ms Howard has been a very naughty girl.'

It was over an hour later that I left the office decidedly happier than I entered. The talk I had with Jeff was illuminating to say the least, and I found out things about Pippa that even I hadn't known about. Susie, the receptionist, had gone to speak to him first, and that was straight after the showdown between me and Miss Piggy. She had informed Jeff of what she had heard, Pippa shouting abuse at me as I left the office, and there had been no evidence of me retaliating at all. Also, Susie had more information to give ... mainly to do with calls Pippa had been making to other news rooms in the area ... some of which she had inadvertently listened to. Pippa, by all accounts was giving away some of our stories before they had hit the news, accompanied with personal information about the people who worked there. I mean, how thick can you be? To use the office phone to give information to other papers! Told you she was as bright as a ten watt bulb.

It didn't stop there, though. After Susie had been in, other people followed suit, and in all this time, Jeff kept Pippa waiting to speak to him, and by the time she got to see him, he had enough evidence to sack her. When she told him how I had tried to strangle her, he said that he wanted to tell her he wished he had thought of it first. However, he regaled all the information about her that had been passed onto him and said 'I think rather than Ms Stevenson trying to strangle you, Pippa, you have actually done enough to hang yourself.' By all accounts everyone heard her reaction, as she went ballistic and gave him a dose of what she had given me ... finishing with 'you can stick your job up your arse' before storming out. That was two days previously, and no one had seen sight or sound of her since. I doubted that it would be the last we would hear from her, but at the moment, it was just good to know she wouldn't be there shit stirring for a while.

So ... my job was safe. And that was one less thing to worry about. Next stop, the post office. Three quarters of an hour I waited in the queue to get my parcel, and not even an apology for the wait ... and I think I am turning into one of those old people who stand at bus stops and moan about the price of everything. Anyway, to cut a long story short (I bet you wish I thought of that about an hundred pages ago, don't you?), the parcel contained the books I had ordered. *Into the Light* and *Rainbows and Shadows* were sitting on my lap, all new and unread. Turning over *Into the Light*, I saw a very familiar face smiling at me. Blue eyes seemed to sparkle even though they were made of paper, and I felt myself stroking my finger along the curve of her mouth. I had kissed that mouth ... that mouth had kissed me back. I moved the finger to my own lips as if to join the two mouths together and then felt like a fool for doing it. Moving the book to one side, I turned over *Rainbows and Shadows*. Her picture was still on the back, but it was a different one. She looked changed ... the sparkle had left her eyes, the smile was forced for some reason, and there was a definite sadness in everything about her. Why did she look so sad? What had happened between the first book and the second that could make that beautiful crooked smile shift to one of unhappiness?

Opening the book, I had to check something. An idea came to me so quickly that I felt my fingers slipping over the pages until I found what I was looking for. Two years ago ... that's

when this book was copyrighted. Three years ago ... was it because of Rob and his illness? Could have been, but it seemed so much more - the change, I mean. I turned the book over and read the blurb, hoping that it would give me some kind of indication.

*Love is a myriad of colour, all the shades of the rainbow, blending into one and making life beautiful. And that's how I saw her - she was my rainbow, my colour and light, my everything. Lighting up the sky for me; lighting up my world with a prism of promise and awe, as I would sit there in her shadow, becoming a shadow myself. And like all shadows, I would wonder when she would see me, when she would allow me to join her in her world of colour.*

*But like all rainbows, the colour fades and they disappear, however hard you try to save the image, you suddenly realise it is only ever an illusion - only ever something that is there only for a perfect moment.*

*Love is a rainbow. Life is the shadow. Longing for the two to meet is the impossible. And like all illusions, love is the ultimate, especially when one side of the equation wants to find the elusive pot of gold, whilst the other just wants her. Wants something that she just can't have.*

Now, I'm not literary critic, but even to me that said that she had been burned by someone badly. Although the book was fiction, there was an element of truth in there. She had been in love when writing the first book, and by the second it had all gone awry. No wonder she had been bitter ... If what I know about the time it takes to write a book, which isn't a lot, and getting it onto the bookshelves, she would have had to start writing this at the time she had written the article. Or before. But would it be a very good reason for her to be so acerbic in her report of me? Now, I'm no psychologist, but even I could understand her reasoning behind her attack, because that's what it was - an attack on me. At the time I had written the article I had been quite popular in the news reporting world, and by her wording of her article, she knew that. It appeared that I had everything going for me, whilst her world had come tumbling around about her ears. I know that's no excuse for doing what she did, but I could understand it better. At least I had a basis to work from, something to build on.

I know it sounds callous, but I felt better. It wasn't just a blatant assault, she had been jealous and angry and disillusioned with the world, and my circumstances came along at just the right time. Maybe she thought I would respond ... like attack her back. Yeah. That sounds about right. If she attacked me, who was supposedly the SS, then obviously I would wipe the floor with her, right? Thus making her certain that she was a piece of crap, and deserved to be treated like scum. If I could get my hands on the person who made her feel like that, I would let them have a piece of my mind.

But ... this is all conjecture. I might be completely wrong. The picture may have been taken on a bad day ... the story might just be fiction ... she might have wanted to put me in my place because I was getting too big for my boots and needed slapping down a little. I ignored the voice that said, 'Or you deserved it.' But whichever side of the argument you agree with, or was the truth, neither explained why she never told me after she found out who I was. The only way I would ever know was to ask her.

Placing the books carefully to one side, I started my engine. Now was the time to permanently put the past to rest ... whether she wanted to or not. This was the time for answers, explanations and apologies. And I wasn't leaving until I had all three.

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## Chapter Twenty-Nine

By the time I returned, the car had gone. This was it. I was ready.

Clutching the books in my hand, I went back to my home, and I know what you are thinking. 'Why is she going home? I thought she was going over to Erin's?' I was, but I had to collect my man beforehand, as he would be a great distraction for Brian. See? Sometimes I do think ahead.

When I reached her front door, my stomach was in knots. Big, huge boating knots to be exact. And I felt the sensation people feel just before they literally shit their pants. But this wasn't the time to back down, and even if I had to wear a nappy, I was going in.

Three sharp knocks, then a glance at Reggie for luck, before another three. Waiting for her to answer the door seemed like forever, and if I hadn't heard Brian barking I would have believed she had taken him out for a walk. Then I heard the chain rattle, the knob twist, the sweep of the door ... and there she stood. Jesus. She looked like crap. Her face was white, but I wasn't too sure if that was because she had suddenly faced the woman who had called her a back stabbing cunt three days ago. Her mouth was moving, but nothing was coming from it. I could see her physically begin to shake, and her hand gripped harder onto the door handle. She must have thought I had come for a showdown, which I had of course, but not in the same way as she must have been thinking. Christ ... I'm waffling like a good one, aren't I?

'We need to talk.' My voice sounded so in control, and for a fleeting moment I felt proud of myself. Erin didn't answer, just nodded her head. Brian and Reggie were play fighting on the porch, Reggie's bandage making his paw look huge. I nodded my head in the direction of inside her house. 'Shall we?' Still cool and collected. 'I think its time to get some answers, and maybe a few explanations, don't you?'

'Steph, I ...' But she couldn't seem to formulate the rest of the sentence, just dropped her head lower and moved aside to let me enter, the boys stopping fighting for a split second to charge ahead and through to the kitchen. 'Would you like a coffee?' I didn't really, but I knew it would give her time to collect herself after the surprise of me knocking on her door unannounced, so I said yes.

After she went into the kitchen, I made my way into her front room. Everything was exactly how I remembered it, and it wasn't long before I was standing looking at the picture of James and Brian. A laugh popped out of my mouth when I remembered how I had mistaken her publisher for her partner. Sometimes people can assume the most ludicrous things all because they just haven't the balls to ask. Next stop ... the bookcase, and after a quick perusal, I lifted *Rainbows*

*and Shadows* from its place. This is how she found me, holding her book in my hands. A good place to start, I think.

'She must have hurt you pretty badly, Erin.' I lifted the book so she could see it. Her face showed panic, as if I had hit a very sore spot. Raising the book higher I started to read snippets from the back, ending with '*And like all illusions, love is the ultimate, especially when one side of the equation wants to find the elusive pot of gold, whilst the other just wants her. Wants something that she just can't have.*' Erin didn't answer, just plonked the coffee cups on the table and flumped down on the armchair, lifting her hands up to her face. I thought for a moment she was crying, but no sooner had she done it, she stopped and looked squarely at me.

'I'm so sorry, Steph. So sorry I took it out on you.' So I was right. She had done what she had done because she was hurting. 'Teri and I ... well ... we were friends more than anything, and when she said she didn't ... didn't feel that way ... didn't think life with me was what she wanted ... well ...' that must have been the illusion part 'I just wanted to prove that I was as worthless as I thought I was.' When she paused, I walked over to the sofa and sat down, and as soon as I had done this, she stood up and came to sit next to me. 'When I wrote that article, I thought you would finish me off good and proper ... expected you to read it ... expected you to wipe the floor with me.' Am I good or what? 'But you didn't ... and truth be known, after Rob was diagnosed with cancer, I forgot all about it.'

'So why here? Why next door to me? There are many places you could have moved to.' You know, she was even more beautiful than I remembered. Her eyes were perfect, captivating, illuminating and everything I ever wanted. I could easily drown in them ... be swept away by them, and never want to stop being enamoured by their intensity.

A sigh slipped effortlessly from her mouth, and for a fleeting moment, I wanted to capture it in my hands and hold it close to my chest. 'It wasn't intentional ... I mean, I knew *a* Ms Stevenson lived next door, but I didn't know it was you.'

True. Stevenson was a common name after all. But that didn't stop her telling me everything after she had put two and two together. 'I meant to tell you. Everyday. But everyday saw a different excuse to put it off.' I can empathise with that ... that was something I definitely knew about. How many days had I been promising to tell her about my sordid past? 'Then when I finally got the balls to tell you, you already knew.'

I hadn't even realised, but when she had been talking, I had taken her hand into mine. It wasn't until she looked down at our entwined fingers did I do likewise. But there was no way I was going to pull away, if she wanted to break the contact then she would have to be the one to do it.

'I ... have to tell you something else.' Warily, she looked from our hands to briefly glance at my face. 'Henry Poole told me to tell you something ... and ... I ...'

'I know.'

'I didn't tell you. What? You know?'

'Yes. But I'm still not too sure why, though.' Making sure she was looking at me, I continued. 'Why didn't you include him telling you that it wasn't my fault in your article?' Blue eyes opened wider in surprise. 'Was it because you wanted me to hunt you down and then tell me?' I held my breath waiting for her to reply. And when it came, her answer saddened me more than made me angry.

'I wanted it to take the pain away. Thought I knew what I was doing ... thought you were someone who needed to feel like I felt just for one minute.' I could see the tears glistening in her eyes, and there was almost a pleading tone in her voice. 'But it wasn't long before I realised that you were just doing your job, whereas mine was just a way to take away the feeling of hopelessness.' A sniff, followed by a quick swipe at her eyes indicated that Erin had paid the price dearly, and by no fault of her own. We all do stupid things that we live to regret, and sometimes they come back to bite us, but usually that only happened to the good people - the bad ones don't usually get caught. I wanted to reassure her that I deserved every single letter she had written, but I had something more important I needed to say.

'Do you still love her? Teri, I mean.' I had to know. Erin had poured so much into her relationship with Teri, it had nearly broken her apart, and I didn't want to intrude on her memory, if you understand what I'm rattling on about. She must have loved her so much, if she would react like that to the breakdown of their relationship. And if she still loved her so much, would there ever be a chance ...

Erin didn't pause. 'No. I thought I did for a long time, but then I realised that I didn't really know what love was.' Strange answer. If you love, you love, right? 'It had all the qualities I thought being in love would have, but it's nothing like ... nothing ...like ...'

'Nothing like, what?'

I saw her swallow. Saw her swallow again. Felt her grip my hand more tightly, and pull me slightly toward her.

'Nothing like I feel for you. I love you, Stephanie.'

My mouth claimed hers as soon as the words were out. How could I resist? The softness, the wonder of her taste ... the knowledge that this woman loved me as much as I loved her. And God, how I loved her. Everything that had happened between us in the past was put aside as I fell more deeply into her ... my hand breaking loose to cup the back of her head and pull her even closer. Erin returned the kiss ... her tongue seeking entrance to my mouth, something I wanted just as much. And the feel of that soft wet muscle entering made jolts of expectation race through me. I wanted her so much ... so goddamn much ... this kiss ... this ecstasy ... didn't quell the need building inside me. When I say I wanted her, I wanted it all. I wanted her ... everything ... her kisses ... her body ... mind ... love ... soul, and I knew I would want them for the rest of my life.

Breaking away from her was agony, but I had to tell her, had to explain to her how I was feeling.

Her mouth was still searching, and the once closed eyes peeked open to look at me. With my left hand, I stroked the side of her face, and cupped her jaw, holding her gaze to mine.

'I love you so much, Erin. So much.' I saw tears glistening in her eyes, and a sob broke free from her mouth. 'Love is the ultimate, and you are my rainbow. You light up my world, and I want to spend the rest of my life making your life beautiful.' The tears flooded from her eyes now, and I knew somewhere along the line I had eventually said the right thing. I wasn't a touchy feeling kind of person, never wanted to spill my life onto the mat and let everyone take a peek, but Erin wasn't just anyone. She was my all.

Gently, I pulled her to me once again. Part of me wanted to hold her and comfort her with strokes and kisses and tender words. But a bigger part of me needed her ... needed to feel this woman ... needed to show this woman how much I longed for her ... yearned for her ... desired her. Teri had hurt her badly and made her feel unloved, unwanted and worthless, although not from the start. I wanted to show her that life with her would be perfection. Wanted to give my all to her in every way I possibly could. And I wanted to do it every day for the rest of my life.

Tilting her head, Erin looked up at me from the safety of my chest. Those blue eyes were full of honesty and truth, and I knew deep inside my aching breast that this woman would never hurt me ...

Leaning down, I kissed her eyelids, her forehead, her wet cheeks, before landing on her mouth. Soft, warm and inviting lips opened slightly, and the kiss was long and sure. It was as if we were both promising something without words, as by this time words were surplus to requirements. When she pulled away, I didn't feel any sense of panic, or even when she stood up in front of me. I knew this was the way it had to be. Stretching out her hand in offering, I knew what she wanted. And when my fingers grasped hers, I was on my feet and in her arms in an instant. More kisses. More nestling of faces into hair and on throats. More murmured words of want and love, as we moved slowly to the doorway. Everything was so gentle, so unrushed, that I felt all the world slipping away from me. The floor was a means to be next to her ... the walls were blurring, and all I knew was Erin ... all I wanted to know was Erin.

Then we were at the bottom of the stairs, still kissing, still loving. Half way up ... hands stroking and guiding. The landing, fingers popping buttons to blouses. Inside her bedroom, the buttons of jeans were open, and zips were slowly undone. Both of us together, no words needed, we knew exactly what we were doing and where this was leading. It seemed as if I had waited my whole life for this moment, and I can assure you, I would wait it over again just to be with her.

Underwear. Bras unclipped, panties slipping down thighs. Hands stroking pliant flesh and mesmerised by the movement; only to follow with tender kisses, and licks, and nips. Naked. She was a vision ... toned arms, legs, stomach ... breasts firm yet soft ... and the taste is something I could never describe to you ... not even if I had all the time in the world.

Lying her down on the bed, I stood at the base just to look at her. Erin was waiting for me, her right hand held out in invitation. I slipped my fingers into hers and allowed her to pull me onto her. The sensation of her skin on mine was so fucking intense. It seemed as if I morphed into her,

and when she wrapped those long strong legs around me I felt a contentment I hadn't felt for years. This was home ... being with her was home ... she was my destiny, I knew that now ... knew that I had been searching for this my whole life but hadn't known it until this moment.

Bodies began to move together, skin slipped along skin, as mouths searched and hands treasured. Moans lifted into the air, and gasps hit flesh as if to hurry everything along. But I didn't want to rush this. This meant too much to me ... to us. My hands were sliding along her thighs and circling her knees, only to move back to the place they wanted to be. Grazing one finger along the triangle of hair, I heard one word slip from her mouth. 'Please.' So I circled it again, and joined the errant finger with my lips. Another 'Please' broke into the air. I leaned back and looked at her underneath me, her legs open, and her core glistening with want. I felt my mouth salivate just for a sample of that wetness ... salivate to taste the essence of the woman I loved. But not yet. Now I had to show her how I felt ... and look into her face as she came. Had to let her know it was me that was loving her ... me that was showing her I would never hurt her ... leave her ... cast her aside.

Tenderly, I slipped my hand so it nestled her mound, and just held it there for a moment. Her eyes flickered closed before opening with such a fire of desire there it made me catch my breath. One finger broke loose from the rest and slipped along her folds, the wetness coating it. Erin shivered and then tried to push down on my hand, but I pulled away, only to put it back and repeat the process. Leaning down, I kissed her stomach, my finger still making tracks along her wetness. My tongue trailed along her skin, and I could feel goose bumps rising in anticipation. Breasts were there for the taking, and I did. Opening my mouth, I captured the erect nipple and sucked hard. A gasp left Erin that was enough to make the wetness pooling between my legs slip out and begin to trickle down my thighs. Her hands were on my head and pulling me harder into her, and as if by forces unknown to me, the finger I had been teasing her with decided to slip inside.

God. The feeling of her walls hugging that lone digit ... the feeling of the wetness coating it completely as I pushed in more deeply was truly wonderful.

*'Yes!'*

Yes. Yes. Yes. My heart was racing and my mouth was frantically sucking her breast, as my finger stayed static within her. I wanted her to feel its presence ... know it was me inside her ... relish this moment even half as much as I did. This was perfection ... something I had never known existed until this delicious moment. Tearing my mouth from her breast felt like a crime, but I knew I wanted to kiss her mouth again ... nuzzle her neck ... watch those eyes with rapt fascination as I began to push further inside, before pulling out, only to push inside again. Over and over and over again, the lone finger danced inside and outside her body. Over and over again, her moans pumped into my mouth ... into the air ... onto my throat. A second finger begged entrance, and suddenly there were two inside her. Two slipping and sliding and giving her everything I wanted to give her. Her hips were rising and falling with each stroke of my fingers, and her mouth was making divine o shapes as the feelings of pleasure took hold. I needed to be closer to her, needed to feel the length of her running down my body as I was inside her, over her, taking her. Adjusting my hand, I lowered myself, and the sensation I felt is beyond

compare. Sweat coated our bodies and enabled the movement between us to be bliss, if being with this woman wasn't more than that to begin with. Metronomic movements ... synchronised with need ... mapping our future on wet flesh and gasping want ... created a feeling of contraction. Her walls were pumping my fingers ... pulling them further and further inside ... gripping onto them with a compulsion to keep them there forever ...

'*Steph ... Steph ... Steph ...*' She was on the verge of cumming ... she was chanting my name ... chanting my name ... looking into my face and chanting my name. My arm was pumping; my fingers were rubbing on her walls as they plunged deeply inside her, a place where I longed to crawl into and stay there forever. Her lips tightened and became slack in a moment, and the growl that left her mouth nearly made me cum with her. Hands were gripping my arse and pulling me into her, nearly crushing my hand. But I didn't care ... she was cumming .... cumming ... cumming ... for me ... cumming ... '*I ... I ... love ...*' you, Erin ... I love you .... '*you.*'

Tears rushed down my face. Don't ask me why, because I couldn't tell you. All I know is when she came and told me she loved me, and it was the most magical feeling I had ever experienced. It wasn't the 'I love you's' of sex ... the ones that slip effortlessly from the mouth in the heat of the moment. It was real. I knew it. Could feel it as surely as I could feel the spasms of her walls and the trembling of her body underneath me. Gently, I slipped my fingers free, and lowered myself onto her heaving chest, her breathing was erratic, and I could feel the shuddering of breaths leaving her mouth. I was in the place I wanted to be. I was with her ... she was with me ... totally with me ... a part of me ... *the* part of me I wanted to cherish for the rest of my life.

Hands stroked and calmed. Kisses were soft and full. Nothing else mattered. Nothing. It was just her and me ... me and her. And that suited me just fine. Slowly, the kisses became more ardent. Hands became more insistent ... and still nothing mattered. Just her. And me. Then she was above, her frame towering over me, and the need in her eyes exciting and frightening. Erin kissed my throat, sucking the skin into her mouth and held it there, her hands trickling down my sides and making my flesh stand to attention. Every part of me was aflame, and I couldn't decide where I needed her the most. I wanted her everywhere ... inside and out ... and want filtered through every pore. Her body was moving downwards and her hands were cupping my breasts, as if they were made of glass. I wanted her to suck them into her mouth ... pinch and nip them ... take those buds and make them blossom just for her. And she did. One at a perfect time. I couldn't focus ... the room was spinning around me, and I felt all semblance of control evaporate into her.

A hand. A firm sure hand was between my legs, and I opened them to let it in ... let her in where I craved her to be. When her fingers slipped between the folds of flesh guarding my innocence, I felt the wetness slither onto her, and gather in a clinging mass of need. God. I wanted to feel those fingers take me ... feel those fingers fill me ... feel the sensation of her inside me and making me hers.

Wish granted. One ... then two ... and moving steadily. Opening my eyes, I saw her staring right at me, the top half of her body moving in rhythm to my hips, her breasts swaying slightly. The image made another jet of wetness shoot out and slink over her hand, making the contact



between us even smoother. Watching her was something I will never forget as long as I live. Blue eyes were hooded, and her mouth was half open, lips moist and inviting. I wanted to kiss them so fucking much, but I didn't want her to stop.

Using her thighs, she pushed my legs open wider and then lowered herself between them, her fingers still pumping rhythmically inside me. A soft mouth covered mine, and the coupling of the movement of her hand and her lips were perfection. Skin touched skin, breasts rubbed against breasts, and I knew that she was making me hers, just as I had made her mine minutes before. The pressure of her thrusts made little pockets of contentment shoot from my mouth to be captured in hers, only to come back into mine again. Shocks of desire raced along all my nerve endings, and I could feel tremors pulsate all over. My hands were gripping onto her back, nails scraping and digging into taut skin, making her moan and press more firmly into me. It was ecstasy ... pure unadulterated ecstasy being underneath her, allowing her to take me ... allowing her to fill me with her.

More. I needed more. I wanted her to climb inside me and love me from the inside out. Wanted her to feed from me ... wanted her to need me as much as I needed her. Lifting my hips up, I opened up even more, and I felt her curve her fingers to stroke the wall inside my core. Fuck. I was going blind. Blind. Everything was blacking out ... all I could sense was her ... but that meant I had everything I needed. Hips were frantic; I was thrusting and pounding into her, and she was gripping onto me more firmly. I felt safe ... wanted ... needed ... revived ... refreshed ... loved.

Teetering on the brink, I craved that final push into the land where everything fades into light and colour ... fades into sweet release and oblivion from life's worries and fears. Then I felt her thigh shift to go behind her hand to push her fingers in deeper. And ... and ... and I was over. Tumbling over the precipice into the state of awareness where I was completely lost, yet found, numb, yet could feel everything. Her name spilt from my lips and into hers, and tears once again found purchase on her skin. So this was it? This was love ... making love. Not something that we believe is love but in reality is sex. And when you have experienced that feeling of being loved by someone who holds your heart, you will understand what I mean, although I hope you already know, because believe me, it is the most exquisite feeling in the world. Miraculous, even.

Erin was calming me with soft stroking movements, and I lay there with the world at my feet. I felt as if I could do anything, be anything, as long as she was with me. Call it a sense of delirium, or whatever you want; I just knew from that moment on, I had found my reason. And her name was Erin Mason.

Lying there in her arms was perfect, and the aftermath of our lovemaking was spent in the sweetness of touching and kissing for what seemed like forever. Finally, sleep took us, and we slept contentedly, with the feeling of finally coming home at last.

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In reality, we only slept for an hour, but it was the best hour's sleep I'd had for far too long. Waking up to see her silhouette next to mine seemed like a dream, and I had to stroke the length

of her nose with the tip of my finger to make sure it was real.

'You awake?' Her voice was husky, and I felt the surge of desire again. God. This woman made me feel things I never knew existed. Clearing my throat, I answered her, and she giggled and snuggled more tightly against me. There was no shame in our nakedness, and I bet you are wondering why I would even say that at this stage. Sometimes, even when you have been with someone, you still feel a kind of reservation about letting them see you afterwards. Maybe because at the time you were getting naked, the last thing on your mind was embarrassment. But not with her. I wanted her to see the real me, blemishes and all. 'How are you feeling?' Perfect. Elated. Fantastic. Wonderful. Blissfully happy ...

'Good.' Shit. 'Better than good.' Do I get the prize for being a knob head? Turning to face her, I stroked my fingers along her chest, playing with the tops of her breasts. Erin was smiling that gorgeous crooked smile of hers, and I tried for a third attempt. 'I feel as if I could walk on air. You make me so bloody happy, Erin Mason.'

The smile turned into an all out grin, before she said, 'Good. 'Cos being with you is the only thing I'll ever want - or need.' Then she leaned down and kissed me, gently, and then more firmly, and before I knew it, she was slipping her thigh between my legs again. I was wet already, and that was just by the sound of her voice.

'Aarruff!' Huh? Was that my animal instincts coming out to play? Or her animal magnetism? 'Arrrruffff!' Or was it my stomach? I hadn't eaten all day ...

'Looks like the lads have realised we are in here.' Bugger. Reggie. And Brian. I bet they wondered where the hell we had slipped off to. 'They probably want a tink. I'll just let them out.' With a kiss, she was off the bed, and I felt her absence all too clearly. She slipped her shirt on before opening the door, and to my amazement, neither dog came bounding in. They just stood there, like partners in crime, wagging their tails. 'You wanna be good boys, eh?'

Flopping down on the bed, I allowed the events of the afternoon to flush through me. Who would have thought three days ago I would be lying here in her bed feeling totally at peace with the world and everyone in it. Even Pippa. She wasn't that bad after all. Yes. I was totally loved up and bowled over by my gorgeous woman, enough to think even the Miss Piggy wannabe was ok. And in my daydreaming, I didn't hear her shouting for me to come and check the presents our children had left us. When it finally dawned on me that in fact I wasn't dreaming it, and it was her voice shouting up the stairs, I shot out of bed and raced out of the door, turned and raced back to put something on, and then went down to inspect the present.

It was in the kitchen. The gift, I mean. And no ... they hadn't left a poo parcel, or even a puddle of gratitude. They had both been in the bin and decided there was definitely something at the bottom that smelled good. Looking at Erin, then at the two grinning canines I wanted to laugh too. Rubbish was everywhere ... even trailing out of the door, which I had initially missed in my hurried attempt to get to the site of the emergency. But, I didn't. I was trying to be grown up about it all, because when all is said and done, I believed the instigator of all the mess was in the form of a black and tan brown eyed ball of mischief, commonly known as Reggie. Lifting up his

injured paw, he gently licked the bandage as if to say, 'But you can't tell me off. I'm sick.' Bless.

It took us nearly an hour to clean up the mess and feed them, and by the time we had finished, we both smelled of cabbage. Therefore, the only thing we could do was to shower ... and honestly, I did offer to pop back home for mine, but it didn't take a lot of persuading to make me want to conserve water. Now ... showering with another person is not all what it's cracked up to be. Believe me ... it is so much more. The intimate 'Shall we?' whispered in the doorway to her bathroom was enough to send shivers up and down my spine. But watching her slip off the shirt she had been wearing and stand there completely naked was enough to make me sharply intake a breath. Nearly six feet of woman was on display ... six foot of skin that felt like velvet, tasted like summer, moved with the fluidity of water, and the best bit was, she was all mine. All ... mine. And I was going to take every inch, every centimetre, every molecule and atom that she had to offer, and then take it all again.

Warm water hit my skin and rushed down my face in an avalanche of refreshing bliss, but the ultimate was when I felt her silk like body slip in next to mine. Pushing the water backwards and off my face, I saw the water gush over her, and droplets cling to her eyelashes. Leisurely, I slipped my hand over her stomach, delighting in the sensation of the tautness of muscle there, marvelling in the bumps that appeared on her flesh wherever my hand touched. A sigh left her mouth, and I desperately wanted to lower my hand to see if she was as wet between her legs. However, she had other plans. Leaning over my shoulder, she grasped the shower gel in her hand and squirted some on her palm. Slowly, she rubbed her hands together to gather lather enough to push along the tops of my breasts. Unhurried strokes over my body created a feeling of delicious delight; deliberate swipes at gasping skin left me breathless and wanting to perform the same service to her. The feeling of the lubricant on my body was all-consuming, that and the constant motion of her hands were making my knees tremble, and for a split second I wondered if my legs could take it.

Gently, she pushed me back against the wall, her thigh parting my legs, the coolness of the tiles refreshing. Soap suds covered me by this stage, and the way she was pushing into me, it wasn't long before she was covered also. Mouths met, and tongues danced: lips captured, and teeth nipped. All mixed together with the motion of the woman who was taking me slowly with her thigh. Then I felt her hand slip down my body and rest at the apex of my groin. Her mouth moved to my neck, those lips sucking my throat, pulling me into the dream that was her. Bodies moved rhythmically, helped along by the water, the soap, and definitely the momentum of wanting this to continue for ever.

Lifting my right leg, I wrapped it around her waist, and prayed to God that I didn't slip ... not that I would have cared, as long as she fell on top of me. But I didn't, and the next stage is where things become a little unfocused. Her fingers slipped further between my legs, and I felt them toying with my entrance. *God*. I didn't want to wait ... I needed those fingers to be inside me ... needed those fingers to show me what they wanted ... show them what I wanted. A slight push and the tip of one slipped in, only to be pulled out again. I pushed again ... inside ... and then out. Gripping her shoulders I pushed her downwards, and down she went, her hand leaving the nest between my thighs. She was on her knees in front of me, almost as if she were praying. Blue eyes looked upwards, and the water was cascading from her hair and face. Rivulets of water

danced on my skin and slipped effortlessly down my abdomen, and as I watched I noticed her attention turn to it. Then her lips parted to expose her tongue, a tongue that gently licked a line of water up my stomach ... a tongue that sent shivers of desire up and down my body. Licks turned to kisses and licks, then kisses, licks and nipping of skin that was ready to explode if she didn't take me. Her hands had cupped my ass by this stage, and I felt a pressure to open my legs further apart. Granted. Erin dipped her head and swiped her tongue just at the top of where I needed her, and a groan left my mouth. I felt her mouth widen into a smile and knew that she was going to tease me.

Slipping my hands over her wet hair, I gently guided her to the place where want was becoming unbearable. Instead of torturing me, she pushed her tongue firmly along my folds.

*'Jesus!'* A flick at my entrance and then back to the top. My fingers gripped into her hair, and inadvertently I pushed her face into me, hoping that she would continue doing exactly what she had done. And she did. God ... she did. Each stroke from her tongue made me crave more, and my hips were pushing into her face as my hands gripped her hair, whilst water splashed all over my face and body. Sensations were in overdrive, as every part of me was over stimulated and ready to burst open and splatter all over the tiles. I could feel the tentacles of an orgasm waiting there ready to detonate and make the world slip away into the dreamlike world of perfection. Being with her was perfect ... absolutely, positively perfect. Letting her take me with her mouth was blindingly wonderful, and all I wanted was her to slide that tongue of hers inside me ... inside and then out of me ... inside and stay there. I could feel a circling motion around my core, and it was becoming an agony waiting for her to fill me.

But she didn't. She stopped ... pulled away, and I still tried to push myself into her. Focusing wasn't easy, as the longing I had for her to continue was working with the water in trying to blind me. Why had she stopped? What had made her take that exquisite tongue away? Looking down, I saw her grinning widely. 'I think that's enough for now.' What? But! 'We can continue this after we get ourselves showered.' I couldn't answer, and that was because all the moisture from my throat and mouth was somewhere decidedly lower.

Standing up, she brushed her mouth over mine, but I was still too much in a daze to respond. 'Come on, slow coach ... Or don't you want to get back into bed?'

Talk about motivation. I grabbed the shower gel she had picked up out of her hand and squirted a huge blob onto my palm. Rubbing frantically, it wasn't long before I was covered in bubbles. Erin just grinned even wider and said, 'Nice to see such eagerness,' before reaching for the shampoo. Turning, I lowered my hand between my legs and decided to give my lady garden a thorough cleaning. Just as my hand slipped between my thighs, I heard a huge farting noise. Fuck. Fuck. And fuck again. My flower had farted because she was so wet. The shame! Shooting my head round, I looked to see if Erin had noticed, and if she hadn't, check if she was deaf. She was still holding the shampoo bottle, but by this time it was upside down, because she had squeezed a generous sized blob onto her hand.

'What?' Water was hitting the side of her now, as she had side stepped out of the jet to lather up her hands. Maybe she hadn't heard it. 'It wasn't me.' Shit. How embarrassing. 'It was the bottle.'

See?' Picking up the bottle, she gave it another squeeze, and the noise was the same.

'Thank God for that. I thought it was me.' And I admitted it! Can you believe it? I could have just said, 'Oh ... I knew that.' But no. I had to indicate that I thought I had done a fanny fart, and then promptly go red. The laugh Erin delivered was one of those that make the initial redness deepen and become an almost purple hue. 'What I meant was ...' I couldn't even begin to think of another ending for that sentence, as there was no way she would believe otherwise - the twinkling in her eyes told me that much.

'Riiiiight.' And the one word answer she gave me nailed it home. Therefore, there was only one thing to do ... continue showering, and then get her back once we were in the bedroom. An evil grin spread across my face when I thought of all the things I could do to her. 'What's that look for?' I shrugged, paused, and then smiled at her, and I could tell she was feeling nervous. Slowly, I stretched out my hand, and I knew she thought I was going to do something bad ... but I wasn't ... just taking the shampoo bottle. A girl's gotta wash her hair, right? Erin gave me one more suspicious look, and then turned to grab the washing scrunchy from the side, dropping it in the process. As she bent over to reclaim it, I couldn't resist. Bottle right next to her ass and ... squeeze .... The loudest farting noise you have ever heard came out of that small container; followed by the quickest standing up I have ever seen anyone do. Ever.

Erin's face was scarlet, and I couldn't resist the laugh that came out.

'You ... you ... *git!*' More laughter ... initially by me, and then she joined in, just before she pinned me to the wall. 'I am going to get you back for that, gitster.' Her breath was on my face, and I felt the laughter halt in my throat. Blue eyes were so close, and I could feel the warmth radiating from her body. Nothing else mattered ... nothing at all. Leaning over to cover the last couple of centimetres, I brushed my lips over her mouth ... then brushed them over again before she tried to catch my lips with her own. So, I did it again, letting it linger, before I pushed my body right up close to hers and moved it slowly over the wetness. Releasing her mouth seemed like an agony, and all I wanted to do was to continue this. But I had other plans for this gorgeous woman who was pressed up against me in a shower cubicle on a Wednesday evening. Much more.

A sigh slipped from her lips, a sigh so soft it tickled my skin and taunted my longing. Eyelashes fluttered open, and I saw darker blue eyes. I knew that if I kissed her again at this precise moment, there would be no jumping back into bed for a while.

'I think that's enough for now.' I meant it to come out jokingly, but it came out showing her just how bloody much I wanted her. Maybe the bed could wait for a little while longer ...

Pulling herself back, I felt the rush of cold air between us. Her hands were either side of my head and her face was still close. A voice thick with need spoke straight to every part of my body, 'Well, come on. Or I won't be able to control myself.'

Neither will I, Erin. Neither will I.

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Back in the bedroom, we didn't bother dressing. What was the point? Towels did their job, and it was wonderful to take the huge mass of cloth and rub it over her back as she sat on the bed in front of me. Hair was towelled dry, and it seemed as if we were grooming each other. Without warning, Erin grabbed the dark blue material out of my hand and tossed it on the floor, her eyes glinting with wickedness. Electricity sparked in the air, and I knew for a fact that this time the lovemaking we had shared before would not be a gentle coupling. No. This was going to be anything but. And I felt the shivers of expectation shoot through me.

Pushing me backwards, I allowed her to climb over me, her hands gripping my hips. Her fingers dug into the flesh, and she lifted my pelvis upwards. Cool air whipped between my legs, and the flurry of want was back with vengeance. Lips pressed hard against mine, and shocks sparked between us. All the longing I had when showering returned, and it felt as if it had never left.

Erin's mouth was on my neck and she nipped the skin more demandingly than she had the first time we had made love. Words pattered onto my skin, soft sounds, but beautifully harsh in the effect they had over me. Moisture was slipping from inside me, slipping down the crack of my backside and onto the sheet. All I wanted was for her to gather it in her hand ... her mouth ... her tongue ... anything, but for her to touch me just there. Just where I needed to be touched. Her pelvic bone thrust into me just as she suckled the part of my neck where it meets the shoulder, and a gasp left my mouth. Then again ... another thrust, but this time my hips rose up to meet it. Fuck. Sensations ripped through me, and for a moment, I felt numb ... until she did it again ... and again ... her back rising up to allow her to push back into me ... and into me ...

My hands were gripping her arse and trying to pull her more in, but she kept on pulling away just as I began to rotate my core on her bone. Wetness gathered and clung onto her, and I'm definite it was mixing with her own. And that made me even wetter. A roaming mouth captured my erect nipple, the hardness sharp and so fucking satisfying ... until she let it go, the coolness of the air teasing it. I could feel her breasts on my stomach, breasts rubbing and swirling on my skin, and in turn, her own buds were flowering and scraping along my eager body. Fingers danced over her back, and it felt as if her skin was stroking me in return, enhancing the jittering fluttering expectation and allowing it to race rampantly within me.

Lips pressed to my ear and I felt the gasping breath before the words tumbled over me. 'I'm ... going to ... fuck you now.' A shot of more wetness left me in anticipation of what was to follow. Fingers. Toying ... delightful fingers, pressing themselves along the source of my need. Digits. Blissful ... erotic digits, circling the core of my want for this woman. And God, did I want her ... need her ... love her. Blue eyes lifted up and caught my hooded gaze, before she pushed her fingers inside. No teasing, no taunting ... just in. Full and firm and whole. Two - in deep. Two long, agile fingers deep and pulling outwards, only to thrust back in ... and out. Then to push and push until I thought I was suspended onto her hand, then out. I needed them to be in ... but I craved the feeling of them dragging themselves to freedom, only to want them back in the prison of my walls.

'Harder.' The word was coarsely spoken, as I could barely think, never mind speak. And she did.

The thrust pushed me up the bed and into a sweeter place. 'Harder.' Again, harder still, but I needed more ... I would always need more from this woman. 'Fas ... ter ... *please* ... harder and ... *fas* ... *ter*.' The effort that took still surprises me to this day, and I was so glad I didn't have to repeat it. Erin's arm was crooked to enable her to push and pull and thrust and drag everything into and out of me. She was fucking me ... she was fucking me just like she said she would. Hard and fast ... fast and hard ... And my hips were bucking underneath that crooked arm, and trying to get her to fuck me even harder than she was already. Why didn't anything feel enough? Why did I feel I needed her to plunge deeper inside ... increase the speed in which she was taking me?

Sweat covered me, coated her ... kisses became unrestrained and clutching onto swelling lips ... fingers tore away at the welling of insanity as I rose and fell at her command ... rose and fell at her touch. It was building. It was coming ... I was tightrope walking over the precipice of oblivion and I wanted to throw myself off ... throw myself over into the blackness of fulfilment, knowing I had her to save me. Walls were beginning to contract ... to spasm uncontrollably ... and I felt my body lift as if I were jumping ...

... and over I fell. Over I tipped into a blazing mass of lights, my body contorting and twisting with the impact of this cumming ... my cumming ... my all consuming completion. One word slipped through my clenching mouth ... One word followed by a nest of words ... All telling her how much I loved her. All telling her I much I wanted her to be with me ... and all of these words being the truest words I believe I have ever spoken.

Gentle strokes calmed me ... whispered words softened the sparks racing throughout my shivering body. I had never had an orgasm like that before ... never felt anything like that ... never loved anyone like I love her ...

Opening my eyes in the dullness of the room, I felt as if I could see for the first time in my life. Erin was above me still, her hands stroking my body in leisurely strokes, blue eyes hooded and full of need too. Lifting my hand, I cupped her face, and she turned to embrace it, tender kisses hitting the palm.

'I love you so much, Steph.' Could this get any better? Could my life suddenly go from nothing to this in the matter of hours? 'I have done since the very first time I saw you.' Yes. It could. And the best thing was, I loved her just as much, and now was the time to tell her.

Sitting up sharply, I felt her tilt back with the force, so I gripped her wrist and pulled her to me.

'Erin.' I had to make sure she was looking at me. 'Erin. I ...' Blueness engulfed me. 'Love you ... love you ... and love you.' The look on her face showed me I had hit the spot with my fumbling around to get the right words, words that struggled to pass all the emotion that was ravaging my body. A slight quiver of the lip, followed by rapid blinking of the eyes showed me that if I continued to say exactly how I felt about this woman she would start to cry. Therefore, I had no option. I had to show her.

Pulling her into me, I kissed that beautiful mouth with as much love as I could muster. Then

kissed her again. Slowly, through kisses, I pulled her downwards, and turned her body so she was underneath me. Skin of velvet lay before me, and I could have happily just spent the rest of my life stroking it. But, I could see that would not be enough for her ...

Moving to the bottom of the bed, I heard a quiet, 'Steph?', but I didn't answer. Taking her feet into my hands, I began to massage, before I suckled each toe in turn. Gorgeous little groans came from the top of the bed, and I knew I had chosen the right way to show her exactly how I was feeling. Then the suckling went to licking and kissing her shins ... calves ... kneecaps, all the while my hands were stroking the rest of her legs, hovering over the now trembling limbs. Then thighs ... kisses ... nibbles ... sucks ... A tongue flicked over the place where I knew she wanted me to be, but I didn't want that just yet ... I needed her to want me just as much as I wanted her. Slithering along her body, I pressed my skin against hers ... my breasts against her thighs ... before slipping one breast between her legs. An erect nipple grazed her clit, and her hands shot out and grabbed my back, trying to push it in more deeply. Separating her legs even wider was easy, as she was as eager as I was to alleviate this growing hunger building up in both her and me. The muscles on her stomach were tense, and I could see droplets of sweat gathering there. Swipe. I captured some on my tongue and relished the salty sweetness that was her. Another swipe, this time further up her torso ... then a gentle flick underneath the curve of her breast ... then the other one ... before I opened my mouth and captured an errant nipple inside, glorifying in the hardness. Slowly, I sucked hard, and then brushed my tongue rapidly over the bud. Another moan came from above my head, so I did it again, only to be treated to the same magnificent noise. A swift movement and I was on the other breast, exacting out the same promises ... the same suckling and teasing. My hands were gripping her hip now, trying to hold her in place, as she had started to buck underneath me.

Leaving her breasts was tortuous, but I had other places to discover ... other spots of infinite beauty to explore. Her collarbone ... the dip in her throat ... the nape of her neck ... her ears ... jaw ... her arms ... fingers ... fingers that tasted of me ... tasted of the desire I had for this woman.

Grabbing my head, Erin kissed me hard, her tongue thrusting into my mouth and claiming me for her own ... although I was already hers - and it seemed I always had been. I felt myself falling into her ... falling even more under the spell of this woman whom I thought I could take ... thought I could control. But I knew for sure that this woman would always hold the cards ... always be able to turn the tables on me, and for once in my life, I didn't care that someone else was in charge.

'Please, Steph ... Please ... take me ... take me ...' How can a woman refuse a plea like that? Whoever she is, she is stronger than me. Erin's wish was my command ...

Pushing her legs open with my thighs, I was in the place I knew I wanted to be. Still kissing her, I moved my hand along the curve of her side until I reached the place where I would cross the silken territory of her abdomen, before dipping into the paradise between her legs. God. She was so wet, so bloody wet ... and I knew it was because of me. With this knowledge, I believe I became even more aroused than I had been, if that is ever possible. Erin was beginning to push upwards, hoping that her movements would illicit some kind of penetration ... and momentarily



... I made her wait.

But not for long. It wasn't her, it was me, and for once in my life the expression didn't sound lame. It sounded perfect.

Inside. I was inside her ... three fingers deeply inside and living in the wonder of the gasp she emitted as I thrust them there. And then thrust them again ... and again ... and again. To take this woman - to show this woman - to be with this woman - too much ... too much ... as my fingers ploughed and planted themselves fully inside her, I knew for a fact I had never in my life ever felt this before this moment. This feeling of total connection ... this feeling of satisfaction and completeness I felt by taking her ... the feeling that I believed in all truthfulness that just by entering her ... delving into her ... I could cum without her touching me, something I believed could never occur.

Feeling myself rubbing all over her, as my hand pushed into her faster and faster, was something I know I would never tire of. It was as if we had clicked together ... joined together in one fluid movement, that nothing could slip between us. Nothing could come between this ... between us ... ever ...

Pushing and thrusting ... thrusting and pushing ... inside and out ... God ... in ... side and out ... her body pulsating and slamming back into mine ... her lips like fire, her body like liquid gold running preciously underneath me. I could hear the sound of her breathing becoming more laboured, more needy, the staccato whispering of words losing momentum as they left her mouth only to be captured inside mine and given life. But this wasn't enough ... I needed to give her more ... give her everything.

Lifting up from her frame, my fingers still fucking her, I saw the desperation on her face. She thought I was going to stop, but there was no way I would ever do that ... I couldn't ... I knew it would kill me to stop now. 'It's ok. Trust me.' Her face changed to one of total faith, and I knew that she had given control over to me. Dipping down along her body, I kissed a path along her skin, my fingers still thrusting deeply into her. Then I met my goal ... my Eden. Wetness glistened along my fingers, and for a moment I was mesmerised by the movement. Stroke after stroke after stroke ... deeper and deeper and deeper ... the bundle of nerves at the top were quivering with the movement, and I couldn't resist.

Opening up my mouth, I captured the bud inside and sucked hard at exactly the same time I thrust hard into her.

'Sweet Jeeeeesssus!' The moan came out semi short semi long, both accompanied by a buck of her hips enabling me to plunge my fingers in and hold them in place, whilst I continued to roll and suckle her clit inside my dedicated mouth. Gripping my free hand onto her hip, I held onto her as she thrashed out her cumming on my face and hand. Thrashed out her desire for me onto my ready and waiting skin. It was at that moment that I knew for sure. I was found. And I was where I knew I should be. With her. With my one. With my miracle.

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## Chapter Thirty

Six months later. No. That isn't a misprint, and no again ... we didn't stay cooped up in her bedroom for all that time. But many things did happen in the interim - *that* I can guarantee.

Today witnessed my new neighbours moving in. Lorries and packing boxes have been up and down the lane for the best part of three hours, and I am almost tempted to go over and offer a helping hand. Even take the new occupiers a corkscrew.

I bet you are wondering about Erin, aren't you? Isn't she the person who should be living next door to me? Well, she used to. She moved out of the property about a month ago, give or take a few days.

But let's not race ahead too much, shall we? I don't want you to think you have been cheated after sticking with me for all this time. Where should I start? Let me think ... should I begin right after the lovemaking? Nah ... I think you've had enough of me getting my kit off to last you a lifetime, because that's what we did on and off all night long. And however much I tasted her, loved her, took her, it felt like I could do it all over again. So we did. Those poor little boys were so patient, waiting for us to give them a pat ... let them out for a tiddle ... and feed them, obviously. At least they had each other for company, although the amount of mess they left would make a two year old blush.

Ok. So ... you don't really want to hear about that. Sorted. So what's next? Pippa? Go on then. Pippa didn't return back to the news room, as she thought she had been badly treated. Cheeky fucker. However, last I heard she was working at the Free Ads paper, bossing the people around with as much fervour as she ever did. I thought she might go back to the stage, as it was rumoured that the Muppets were set for a comeback. Maybe in time for Panto ... Christmas is always buzzing for Miss Piggy lookalikes.

What else? Let me think ... Henry Poole ... that should be of interest to you. He is getting remarried in the early part of next year. Wonderful news, don't you think? He actually called me to tell me himself, as he had gone to my old workplace to ask for my number ... and they gave it to him! Can you believe it? Usually they can't find their arse with both hands. By all accounts he had met his youngest daughter's teacher at parents evening, and bingo. The rest is history, as they say. Good to know that he had a second crack at life ... a little like me, in a way.

I know this is the bit you've been waiting for, so I won't delay you anymore. Ok. Here goes.

After that night, it just got better, even though I couldn't believe it could - shows how much I know doesn't it? Each day we would see each other, and not just a 'Hello, neighbour' kind of way. I'm not saying it was a bed of roses ... far from it. Years of being on my own, and Erin too, had made us a little set in our ways; therefore we would have tiffs about the smallest of things. But that's expected, isn't it? I mean, you can't just stroll into someone's life and expect it all to be perfect, can you? I had gone through a kind of metamorphosis when Erin had come into my life,

and when we finally got together we were both still adjusting. It's a tad much to expect things to be just swept under the carpet and forgotten. We still had quite a bit of catching up to do. On life, I mean.

But, that makes out that we didn't make it doesn't it? You couldn't be further from the truth if you climbed on a rocket and read this from Mars, through a telescope of course. Each day brought new struggles, yet each day brought us closer together. Simple. If you want it bad enough, that is. I think the problem was that I wanted her with me all of the time ... and to continue this train of thought ... I didn't know how she felt about it. Call me a chicken ... spineless ... call me anything you want, but it didn't change the fact that I was in all honesty a wuss and I couldn't just ask her outright. I know we had told each other we loved the other so bloody much, but that isn't the same as spending your life with another person, is it?

Everything was perfect - when we were together I mean. The tranquillity I thought I loved seemed to echo in my ears, and I began to want to answer to someone other than just myself. As for walking around the house naked ... well, that wouldn't be a problem. Shite movies were a must, and when they were sad ones, we would take turns in crying. It was bliss.

Then I started to wonder where it was going, where *we* were leading, but, again, I didn't have the balls to just ask. A huge part of me wanted to sit Erin down and just ask her if she wanted to move in with me, whilst the cowardly part would sit shivering in the inner recess of my brain warning me to take things more slowly. All through the summer season in the Lakes, I wanted to ask her ... and sometimes I would find it difficult to speak in fear of blurting it all out. I didn't want to scare her away, I mean. It wasn't as if I was actually worried of taking that final step ... just petrified that she would say no.

Days out were wonderful, and the Lake District blossomed into the green and life filled England once again. Every time we went to Derwentwater, I would stand and stare at the family of swans now swimming about, the two cygnets following closely behind the proud mother and father. I wanted that ... I wanted that stability ... that loyalty ... that commitment ... the rebirth that comes along when you give yourself a chance. Sly looks at Erin, and then back at the swans ... I wanted that forever love ... that partnership for life. I wanted that idyllic life ... that certainty and knowledge that the other would be there through thick and thin. Spending everyday with the person you loved most in the world ... what more could a woman ask for? All in all, I wanted her to be my swan, and I wanted to be hers. So why on earth was I not doing something about it? Why wasn't I actively seeking out this perfection?

Because I'm a twat.

Four months after we had finally shown and told each other how we felt, it was all taken out of my hands. The reason I say that is because Erin took it upon herself to put me out of my misery once and for all. I knew there was something on her mind for a while, but I was too scared to ask in case it turned out that she didn't want to be with me anymore. And when she hardly spoke after we had been out for the day at Ennerdale, I thought my ticket was up. I did question asking her to move in before she dumped me, as where was the harm if she was going to give me the push anyway? I say that quite candidly, but in reality I was sick to the stomach. I didn't want her

to say 'It isn't you ...' I didn't want to be let down gently. I wanted her. Full stop.

So when we pulled up outside my cottage and she told me she wanted to talk, I thought, 'Here we go, Stevenson. Time to grin and tell her you understand.' She was shaking as we led the boys into my house, shaking as she slipped off her jacket, shaking more as she bent down in front of me. Her fingers were cold and clammy as she took mine into her own, and I wanted to help her out - tell her that I didn't think we were working out, just to save her the pain of having to go through it. Good job my voice box decided to freeze at that precise moment, because what she wanted to say was completely different to what I had been thinking.

'Steph ... I ...' her eyes were fluttering like crazy, and the lump in her throat was doing an excellent impression of an out of control elevator. 'Steph ... I ...' This is where I nearly stepped in ... nearly made a tit out of myself. Squeezing her hand, I tried to give her the strength to continue, tried to make everything all right for her, but in reality, I think I nearly broke her fingers off. 'I ... I ... have something I want to ask you.' Why I was born? Why I'm still here? 'Do you ... erm ... would you consider ...' she stopped. I couldn't believe it either. Her blue eyes were open wide and pleading with me in a way, but for the life of me I didn't know what she was trying to ask, so I shrugged the shrug of the socially inept and continued to stare at her. Open mouthed, I might add. After clearing her throat, she repositioned herself on the floor, her knee becoming more fixed, her grasp firmer. The look on her face changed from fear to determination, and I could feel the atoms in the air shift about me. 'Stephanie. Would you consider moving in with me?' My mouth dropped even further open, before doing a fantastic impression of a fish out of water. Move in? With her?

'Move in? With you?' I didn't mean it to come out as high pitched as it did - high enough to alert both Reggie and Brian, who had been snoozing by the fireplace. But not now. Now they wanted to know why I was shouting them, and both scurried over to pounce onto the sofa, knocking Erin off her bended knee in the process ... and because she was holding my hand, taking me down with her.

Landing with a thud on top of her, I cringed at the sound her head made on the floor. A hollow banging noise that must have stung like a fucker, and as she lifted her head up sharply, she head butted me in the nose.

*'Fucking hell fire, Steph! Fucking hell fire!'* The crack of my nose moving to the wrong side of my face accompanied the spurting of red stuff over my hands that had shot up to protect it. A little late, I might add. My eyes were watering like crazy, and I was swallowing rapidly to alleviate some of the pain. But I didn't care about noses ... and head butts ... and blood. Erin Mason had asked me to move in with her ... asked ME ... to move IN ... with HER. Get it? She asked me. And all I wanted to do was to throw my arms around her and scream yes, but I couldn't ... couldn't let go of the pumping throbbing siphon that used to be called my nose. The room was quiet ... eerily quiet. Both Reggie and Brian had followed in Erin's footsteps and stopped breathing. Everyone was waiting for me to show I was ok ... even me.

It seemed like hours before I could move my hands from my pulsating face, and I only did so because I felt Erin move away from me and leave the room. Did she think I didn't want to move

in with her? That I had instigated the bleeding nose to flamboyantly say no? Just as the thought entered my head, she reappeared, a bag of frozen carrots in her hand.

'Here. Put this on it. Couldn't find the ice.' Tentatively, I placed the bag over my face, sighing in the relief it gave me. Trust me to fuck things up when everything had come around to exactly the way I wanted. With this thought, I looked over the pack of carrots and at Erin. She sat there, concern written all over her face and body. Or was she waiting? Fuck.

'Yes.' The answer was muffled, and she leaned closer to me and asked me to repeat myself. Moving the ice pack, I tilted my head and smiled the smile of the deformed. 'I said yes. I would love us to live together.'

Instantly the smile was there, and she attempted to throw her arms around me, then stopped, then said, 'Aw fuck it. Come here.' And at that perfect moment I knew once and for all, being in her arms was the place where I would be for as long as she would let me. And with a kiss, my fate was sealed. Thankfully.

Oh ... and I also knew my nose was broken. You win some, you lose some, but on the grand scale of things, who wants a straight nose anyway?

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You may be wondering something right about now. You are probably thinking 'I thought she was moving in with Erin? So why is there a removal van outside?' I know. Thought I would lure you away from the facts for a minute, although I think you are far too intelligent to fall for that old red herring. After discussing it, we both thought it would be better if Erin moved in with me ... maybe because she still hadn't unpacked all those boxes in the spare rooms. So, Abigail Smarts got her sale in the end, and Erin loaded up her boxes and moved both her and Brian over to live with me and my boy just over a month ago. The very first thing she gave me on the day of the move was a packet of batteries for my doorbell. See? What a woman.

I love watching people move house, although I hate doing it myself. It gives you an insight to who they are and what they like. Now ... the people who are moving in next door are a very nice couple with two children. I know this for a fact, as I have met them on more than one occasion. It would have been better if I could get off my lazy arse and help them unload, but I think for a little while longer they can live without my efforts - even to stop Reggie and Brian dancing about their feet and trying to knock them over at any given opportunity. I'm too comfortable talking to you, and also getting an eyeful of the woman lifting a sofa from the back of a van. Strong capable arms, a firm backside, long legs, and a smile to die for. Very tasty. And very mine. If you hadn't guessed already, Sue and Rob were going to be our new neighbours, as they had fallen in love with the Lakes. After everything Rob had gone through, both of them decided life was for living, and they wanted to do their living in a place where the biggest scandal was scribbling on toilet doors. I just hope Daisy's drawing around picture frames phase sorts itself out before she starts at the new school after half term break. At least she would have me on her side, and I would write a very positive article about her artistic talents.

No. You didn't think I was eyeing up Sue, did you? Come on! As if! Don't you know me by now? My woman is Erin Mason - the very same Erin Mason who was by now helping Rob with a side board- why would I ever look at anybody else? This was my life, she was my life, and my life was more than I ever thought it could ever be.

So. Why Miracle? Why did I call my tale such a weird title? Many reasons, actually ... some of them obvious, some of them not quite so ... *erm* ... obvious. We use the term miracle for many of the things we don't quite understand, but are overjoyed they have happened. It could be classed as a marvellous creation, a gift from God, or even an event that is astounding, amazing and extraordinary. But there are other definitions for the word that don't appear in dictionary underneath the term 'miracle' that are classified as a noun, an adjective or a verb. Words like hope, trust, compassion, forgiveness and giving, life and living, and the big one, love. All these typify the act of the miraculous, and in some way or another, my life was touched by them all ever since Erin Mason walked into it. She is in fact a living breathing miracle. She *is* a marvellous creation ... a gift from God ... she is in herself an astounding, amazing and extraordinary woman. And when all is said and done, this is as much her story as it is mine. Without her there would be no words ... no pages or sentences ... no paragraphs that link to each other, all chapters would be blank, and punctuation would be out of a job. It would be empty. Just like me.

Therefore, one final thing before I leave you to live your own miracles. Don't give up on life. Don't give up on hope and compassion. Take each day as it comes and always consider your actions to others. Give. Smile. Laugh and sing. Forgive others ... forgive yourself. Enjoy every single minute ... tell the one you love how much they mean to you. Show them. Hold them and cherish this person who is in your life. Treat every breath like a miracle in itself. Because every breath you take, is one that you take in this wonderful thing we call life. Love it, and it will love you in return.

Right. I think you've had about enough of what I have to say. You can go and turn your water into wine, part the Red Sea ... even vote for Labour again. Your call. Me, on the other hand, am being beckoned by my woman. She wants me outside, to stop being a lazy work dodging git, and help her and Rob carry out the pinball machine. Pinball machine? Is that hers? Aw fuck.

What are you waiting for? Go. Grab your miracle.

The End

There you have it ... and I hope you enjoyed reading. If you did, let me know ... if you didn't, erm, well ... erm ... sorry? I owe you one? Two, even? Or maybe I should just throw in the towel.

[Fingersmith](#)

However, if you are at a loss for what to do now, you could check out my printed work. *Hearts and Flowers Border* is available, and so is *Beginnings*. I'll even save you the trouble ...

[PD Publishing - LT Smith](#)

Be good.

PS Did you try to click on the link in the third part of this story? If yes ... gotcha ... grin.

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