

# ~ Once ~

by Fingersmith

## **Disclaimer**

Here I am again ... been a while, but finally I got the chance to finish this.

The characters do not resemble a couple of ladies from a very well known TV show; THEY are all mine. Took me a while to get away from those blue eyes, but I did it. Therapy helped. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those fantastic writers out there that have filled my head with images, stories and fantastic plots for so long. I just hope you get a millionth of the joy I have received from them from reading my story. I would also like to thank all of the people who have supported me with their kind words of encouragement - making me carry on writing. You are bloody fantastic!

Thank you to my beta readers who were fantastic at spotting my many mistakes. Dec and Heike ... you are stars ... and I definitely owe you a drink.

**Language:** English! My kind of English. So, be prepared for some good old-fashioned 'effing' and 'jeffing'. My characters are the ones to blame ... they should have their mouths rinsed out with washing up liquid and scrubbed with a yard brush.

**Violence:** Depends what you mean by 'violence'. Does a punch up denote violence? What about a 'bit of a slap'? There are some sensitive issues though, so be warned. It is all not sweetness and light.

**Sex:** Do I have to fill in this box, Miss? I've gone all red. Ok. My fault, eh? Let's tick ... yes, just to be on the safe side. Therefore, if you are under the legal age to read such '*filth*', or live in a place where this is illegal ... I'm sorry. Believe me ... I tried to avoid it, but my fingers slipped. Not like that ... tsk. All you have to do is wait until you are a little older. You could even move - but that is a bit extreme just to read this. You could go out of town for a while ... Fake ID ...

This story is set mainly in Norwich ... but I do flit about a little. If you find any spelling mistakes please put it down to one of three things. Firstly, I'm English. Secondly, I can't spell. Thirdly, I'm just too lazy - number three being the main reason. And for crying out loud, don't check my grammar - in through the head and out through the fingers. Good motto to have.

Please let me know what you think about this story ... try not to be too harsh, as I am really sensitive and will probably cry for weeks ... months ... are we talking years here?

**Acknowledgements:** I have quoted now and again, but not too much. All music, sayings and stuff quoted have been used without the permission of the artist. This is not an attempt at plagiarism: just a tribute to their great words.

**Special thanks:** To friendship. A true friend is one who, when I am worried, will tell me horrible stories about how much worse it could be until I stop whining. And by the way - my house is not haunted! Get over it!

Once

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Once upon a time, in a land far far away, there was a young woman ... ah ... fuck. I can't start my story like that. Let me think.

What about ...

It was a *lovely* day ...

What a load of bollocks. Here am I, waiting to spin you a tale and I can't even decide how to begin. Should I start at the beginning? The middle? Or even begin at the end and then go backwards? I think I'm digressing into some kind of literary cul de sac. Before you know it, I will be using tired old clichés and quoting Shakespeare. Like usual.

What about if I set the scene? You know, paint a picture with words (number one of the tired old cliché brigade). Setting is important though, isn't it? Gives the reader a feel for the story. Without it they will be visually bankrupt ... just like how verbally bankrupt I'm feeling now.

Ok. Here we go. Setting the scene. Readyng my reader. Just a minute ... you are ready aren't you? I don't want to waste ink starting and you are still fiddling around in your handbag looking for a mint.

Consider this the beginning ... the setting ... the start.

Now ... to set the scene. Shall I set it with time or place ... or shall I go for the gold and set it with emotion?

The latter, I believe (metaphorical pushing of glasses up to the bridge of my nose ... gives a look of intelligence, even though I don't wear them).

Right. I'm ready.

Cough.

On your marks ... get set ...

The Start (or formally known as The Introduction)

She said she'd love me forever. For *e* ver. Three syllables. Seven letters. Go on ... count them. And those three syllables and seven letters turned out to be a one syllabled, three-letter word.

Lie.

If forever was to mean it was ok to treat me like pond life and then shag her work mate, then I'm sorry, I'm wrong ... it is forever. But in *my* dictionary, forever means something completely different. Let's just check ...

**Forever** /*fôr evvar* / *adv* 1. *also* for ever FOR ALL TIME for all future time. 2. *also* for ever FOR A VERY LONG TIME for a very long or seemingly endless time (*informal*).

See? 'FOR ALL TIME', and even a 'VERY LONG TIME', if you want to be informal.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not a pedant. I don't usually carry a dictionary around with me and contradict people on their use of the English language. But come on... when someone tells you they will love you forever, it usually means longer than three and a half years. Doesn't it?

In my own way I did love her, didn't like the way she treated me, but I did love her all the same. We had only lived together for just over three years when I came home to find her rolling around our bedroom floor with a woman I'd met briefly at her work's dinner two weeks previously. The only thought bouncing around my head was 'I hope I don't have to steam clean the carpet', before I turned, walked down the stairs and out of the door.

I'd barely grabbed the handle on my car when she was behind me, gripping my arm, throwing accusations. Words splattering on my face ... literally, words like 'cold', 'heartless', and the blinding one that charged me with 'indifference'.

'Even when you catch me fucking someone else you just walk away.'

Yes. What else did she expect me to do?

'Why can't you show any emotion?'

Why? Will that change the fact you said you would love me forever?

In hindsight, I should have asked her that, but all I wanted to do was get out of there, flee the scene of the crime, and block it all out. I couldn't see the point in exposing all my shortcomings to all and sundry at something nearing a hundred shrill decibels. Loud enough to make dogs weep.

And that's truly where my story begins.

### The True Beginning

Sue was the longest relationship I'd ever had. Forty months, to be precise. We met through a friend of a friend of a friend, nearly making it an urban myth. It was lust at first sight and we barely knew anything about each other before we were inside the other's underwear. We scarcely even made it inside my house before we were at it. The front door clicked and so did her bra strap.

Sex had always come easy to me - or used to. I wasn't the type of person to form long lasting relationships, and that suited me just fine. I preferred it to be just my little boy and me. When I say little boy, don't get me wrong. I'm not a single mother ... never slept with a man. My little boy had the most gorgeous brown eyes and wet nose any mother could wish for. Unlike most mothers, the 'child' in question had four legs instead of the customary two.

Dudley. Duds for short. Black and tan ... fuzzy ... with a tail that wagged liked crazy, taking his whole bum with it. His smile was the perfect over shot jaw of the classic Border terrier. We'd been a team long before Sue came on the scene, and I knew we would still be when Sue had gone.

It was weird how it all kicked off ... the relationship with Sue that is. Before I knew it, we were seeing each other every night, and if I said I didn't enjoy having sex with her, I'd be lying. It just grew. We became dependent on each other, a bit like smoking - you know it's bad for you, but you believe you need it to feel normal.

Duds was suspect from the first moment he clapped his beady eyes on her. The first time I introduced him he went to bite her tit. Well, we were in the hallway, and he was just protecting his property. I should've asked her to leave there and then, because dogs are never wrong. But at that moment in time I wanted to bite her tit too, so I kind of ignored the gesture. I can guarantee that kind of ignorance will not be repeated.

After four months, Sue began to apply the pressure. Why couldn't we move in together? It would be so much easier ... cheaper ... fun. And on and on and on ... and then ... on and on and on some more.

I can hear you saying 'Why didn't you just tell her to sling her hook?'

Ah ... easy for you to say, but you weren't the one receiving wonderful, mind-blowing sex were you? You weren't the one who steadily began to believe that actually you couldn't do all the things you used to do ... you had suddenly become dependent on another person. Even to washing up ... I couldn't even do that right. Systematically she broke me down until I thought I would even have difficulty trying not to drown in the bath.

When I agreed, she was in, unpacked, and settled in less than twelve hours. She must have been half packed and waiting for me to give her the go-ahead. Duds was not a happy boy, as she banished him from sleeping at the foot of my bed from the very first night, claiming it wasn't healthy.

I missed him. Missed the way I would wake up in the night and stretch my arm down to feel a warm wet tongue lavish my fingers with kisses. Missed the way I would inadvertently tickle his winkle because he was sprawled on his back snoring away.

Now the relationship wasn't easy from the start. You might have guessed this. But when she moved in, I began to see a different side to Sue than the one she had presented to me over the previous six months. At first I used to argue (especially when it came to Duds), but then it just

became easier to go along with her, and that infuriated her even more. Arguments would start as soon as I got in from work. She didn't even wait for me to take my coat off before she was accusing me of the usual things ... not appreciating her ... not telling her I loved her all the time ... loving that damned mutt more than I loved her (erm ... well I ... nah ... you get the picture).

Eventually I didn't have the energy, or inclination, to argue back. Just took it on the chin, rolled up my sleeves and began to wash up. Badly. Sex went out of the window after the second year, and I spent more time in the sun room with Duds reading or just 'arsing about', as she so delicately phrased it.

I truly believed I did love her. Honestly. Thought it was a blip most couples went through when they eventually moved in together.

Because, you see, she had told me she'd love me forever. And I, like a fool, believed her. I didn't even know why I wanted her to.

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Self-confidence was a thing of the past. I was beginning to believe I was a worthless piece of shit. I'm not saying Sue purposefully set out to make me feel this way, all I'm saying is I felt vacant. The only thing I believed was that she would always love me. The most sorrowful thing was I hoped she was lying.

I felt trapped ... caught like the poor fox in the woods ... legs stuck in a mantrap and waiting for the end to take it. The pain wasn't physical, more emotional rendering of the helpless, if you get my meaning. Vacancy developed into hollowness, and hollowness seeped into an abyss, trickling away and leaving me clutching at straws.

Then I came home one day and saw her. Saw her on the bedroom carpet with another woman. It was only after a few weeks she finally admitted she had wanted me to catch her ... wanted me to do something to prove to her I loved her like she loved me.

What could I say?

The only thing I thought that made any sense at the time.

'Bollocks.'

The word conveyed an inner strength I thought had died, but it also sapped me of what little self-respect I had left. She had taken everything else. Most of the furniture was now stacked in her apartment - unused for the best part, and collecting dust.

When she demanded visiting rights for Duds, I knew she had gone too far. Duds hated her. At the time I didn't know why, because it isn't in a dog's nature to hate - only humans have that capability. But as time went on I began to get the whole picture.

Answer me this. Why would a dog that has been loved from the minute he wiggled his fat little arse into your arms until now, dodge when you lifted your hand up suddenly? And why would a dog hide when you slapped a newspaper on the side of the chair?

Mmmm ... is this rocket science? Methinks not.

This is the moment where things start becoming interesting. This is the moment when I thought I could choke the fucking life out of her.

But I didn't.

Nope. That wouldn't have been satisfying enough for me.

Imagine the look of surprise when she opened her front door and I smacked her right in the face. The satisfying crunch of her nose under my fist will live with me for the rest of my life. I revelled in the sight of the once straight feature leaning to one side and pissing blood like a soda siphon.

*'Cold? Heartless? Fucking indifferent?'* I grabbed her by the front of her shirt and felt the buttons tear away from the cloth. Then stopped. This wasn't me ... wasn't who I was. I didn't fight, for whatever reason.

Grey eyes looked into mine. One thing stood out above all others.

Fear.

And I had put it there. Duds was going crazy in the car, howling and scratching the window in a vain attempt to join in. I was distracted for less than a blink of an eye and that's all she needed.

Bang!

Knee up and meeting my crotch with the speed and precision of an all-in-wrestler. And down I went. Flat on top of her. Face to face. Smearing her blood onto my cheek.

'You haven't heard the last of this, Beth,' she spat into my face. 'I'll get you ... and your little dog too.'

What the fuck was this? A twisted version of The Wizard of Oz? Were munchkins going to clamber out of the flowerbeds and start singing as if they were spaced out on helium?

I tried to pull away, but she pulled me back so she could then push me away with force. I clattered onto the paving slabs trying to stop myself from skidding even further. Sue shakily stood up and wiped the back of her hand across her nose. And winced. I just sat there. Dudley howled. The neighbourhood had an eerie silence, well apart from the demented howling of my little wolf man.

Slowly she stepped forward, and I cowered, lifting my hands to my face believing she was going to hit me. Her shadow loomed over me and stayed ... and I stayed in my protective shell.

'You're not worth it.'

And then the shadow left, the sun warming the backs of my arms and drying off the tears that had trickled down my face after the introduction of my private parts to her kneecap.

I can't tell you how long I sat there, but when I struggled to my feet both my right leg and my backside were numb. I looked ancient as I hobbled back to the car to be greeted by a very concerned bundle of fur. Duds washed my cheeks of all the dried tears. He even cleaned all the new ones that raced down my face. Bless him.

Unconditional love. If only humans could do that, I'd be set for life.

But we can't. Can we?

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Things went down hill from there really ... if they could get any lower than they already were. I stopped going into the office and did all my work from home. The only time I went out was to take Dudley for his walks, or to collect more work to do. My boss understood, as drawings and ideas came from within, not from your surroundings. His words.

He believed in me. More than I did. Told me to take some time to get my life in order, however long that would take.

Everyday I found it more difficult to get out of bed, and if it hadn't been for the necessity of taking care of someone else, I don't think I would have bothered. What was the point? My life had taken a swan dive off a cliff and hit concrete.

My mum was forever phoning and trying to get me to 'Get my backside' round to hers, as mums tend to do. So did my brother, Will. He wanted to come over ... take me out ... fix me up with a work mate ... do anything to take my mind off things. But I couldn't face them at the moment ... felt too fragile. Even friends came out of the woodwork after realising Sue was no longer on the scene, only to discover I was 'unavailable for comment'. I just wanted to be left on my own to simmer and stew ... and sink deeper into myself.

Wait a minute. I need to think.

Let's get the facts of the case on the table. A quick mime of me arranging my papers ... shuffle shuffle.

Right.

Firstly, she said she'd love me forever. Secondly ... she didn't. Shall I say thirdly? Nah ... I should bullet point.

- She hit Duds (fucker)
- I hit her (sound of cheers from the crowd)
- She kneed me in the lady garden (and it still throbs at the memory), and wiped blood and spit all over my face
- The grabber nicked half of my furniture (robber)
- She made me feel worthless and stupid (erm)
- *And* I had to steam clean my bedroom carpet.

Sorted.

Now all I needed to do was to make a similar list to counteract that one.

- Shower
- Dress
- Feed Duds
- Eat
- Go for a walk.

And this is when we get to the Development stage of my tale.

### The Development

Earlham Park. Beautiful. The greenness of the lolling fields matched perfectly with the clear sky. I would say blue sky, but this is England. October. Therefore, we have a clear sky ... maybe greyish. Am I deviating? You bet I am. I am the epitome of a deviate: socially, sexually, and emotionally.

So now that I've been caught, I'll get on with it shall I?

It was cool, but not cold. Cold enough for a jumper, and the ground was wet enough to wear boots, but all in all, it was a crisp autumn day in Norwich. The field was filled with butterfly dogs and their owners, you know, people who only walk their dogs when the sun is shining.

Duds didn't know what to do first. Chase his ball or chase around yapping happily with the biggest dog he could find. I was lost in thought, smiling occasionally at his antics. I ignored the first rule of walking a dog ...

### **Always be alert.**

But you know how it is ... thoughts pop into your head and you just go with them, and before you know it, you're thirty minutes down the line and have no idea how you got there. Scary how we can ignore time, considering how we dwell on it so much.



Obviously, I was thinking about Sue, and how things had deteriorated. I was trying to put it all in perspective, from how we met to the final punch out in front of her house. The blame was continually shifting from her to me, and then back to her again. It was so unlike me to be violent; I would do anything to avoid conflict ... well, since I lived with Sue that is, and physical contact of the bodily harm variety was not my style. Or hers, for that matter.

What had happened to both of us? Where had the chink in the veneer of our relationship started? I know what had triggered off my outburst, but why did I feel the need to punch her, especially with no concrete evidence?

The thought of Dudley being hurt brought me back to reality with a crack.

I couldn't see him.

Couldn't see him.

Panic raced through me and choked my throat. My heart was thumping into my ribcage in an attempt to help me search him out.

'DUDS! COME ON FELLA!' The shout broke the dam clotting inside me, and I felt the tears start to gather. 'DUD ... LEY!'

I was running ... my head was whipping round trying to spot his little black body. But, he wasn't there ... anywhere ... gone.

Sue's words rattled around my head, you know, the ones I laughed at, '*and your little dog too.*' I can guarantee, I wasn't laughing now. She had him. As sure as I was racing down the hill screaming his name, I knew she had him. If she hurt him in any way, I would rip her apart. Limb from fucking limb. All the thoughts of physical violence not being my style were rapidly flying out of the window. But all the smacking in the world wouldn't bring him back would it?

Then I saw it. Can't believe I hadn't been on my guard. Can't believe I didn't follow the first rule of dog walking.

The river.

Fuck.

The river.

Duds loved the river, and in the summer I always took him to the shallow part so he could jump in a fetch sticks. I can't tell you how many balls he has dropped in there to sink to the murky depths and a watery grave. Now Duds had followed them. He would drown in there this time of the year, as the current would be too fast for him to get back to the bank.

The pain shot through me as I reached the river's edge. No sign. Then my knees gave way and I sank to the ground. The cry that came from within me felt like it had been ripped up with a coat hanger. I had lost everything ... everything ... he was my everything ... and he was dead.

A whimper. Distant, but definitely a whimper. I didn't think twice, just jumped up, and vaulted into the freezing water. It seeped through my jeans and jumper to meet rapidly cooling skin, and I found the weight of it pulling me under. The sheer force of the water made me realise that if Duds had whimpered a second ago, there was no way he would be whimpering now. It would be impossible for him to get back to the bank in this current.

It didn't stop me though. I had to find him, alive or ...

'Excuse me.' Someone was calling me from the side, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the water. The sound of the water was nearly deafening, and it was taking me all of my time not to be whisked along with the rage of the water. He had to be here somewhere. 'Excuse me!' A little louder, a little more insistent.

'Can't you see I'm busy?' I didn't even look back ... didn't even ask the voice for help.

'Is this your dog?' The first thought in my mind was that his body had been washed to the side and the voice had found it. But then I heard the whimper again.

I steadied myself and turned to the bank. A woman stood there holding something black, wriggling and *very* dry in her arms. The bundle was whimpering around a bright red ball that was clamped inside his mouth.

Do you know what I did? I bet you're thinking I sloshed to the side, clambered up the muddy bank, and had a tearful reunion with my little man.

Nope.

I stood there and cried. And cried. And cried. Relief? Maybe. Anger? A little bit. Shock? Almost guaranteed. But I think it was just everything pouring out at last. Everything I had bottled up since splitting with Sue, or even from before that.

Words seeped into my consciousness, but I couldn't respond. Words asking me if I was ok, did I need help ... to sit and stay. Sit and stay?

Noises of water splashing and splashing, and the feeling of arms enveloping me, pulling me into a solid chest. The closeness jolted me out of my misery-come-happiness for a brief moment, and I looked into the most glorious pair of brown eyes I had ever seen. A sob, which was in the process of being launched from my slackened mouth ... stopped ... mid ... way.

The woman just pulled me closer to her and held me for a split second before pulling me towards the side. Her arms left me briefly as she scrambled up, and then a hand extended and hovered in front of me, offering me safety.

It was a strange feeling. Tingling. Her fingertips seemed to trigger something deep inside, and I couldn't grasp the implication. My brain, as was the rest of my body, was frozen. Everything apart from my hand. One tug and I was on the bank, an excited Dudley licking my face, his ball rolling towards the edge. Shit. He would follow it.

But she was there again, catching the ball swiftly in her hand.

The funny thing was I hadn't really had a good look at her yet. I had only seen her close up and then the back of her head. One thing I knew though ... her eyes were brown ... such a mesmerising brown. I was flat on the ground, soaking wet, hair going all directions and completely covered in mud. Not to mention being thoroughly loved by my boy, which if you've ever seen a dog really excited by being reunited with his mum, you will know it is not a flattering sight. So, when she turned to look at me, ball in hand, I felt rather dishevelled to say the least.

'You must be freezing?'

'Huh?'

She stood straight and I felt myself looking upwards so I could see her eyes again. The way she strolled over, totally controlled, her jeans flapping wetly against her legs, made my stomach tighten a little. Shock, I think. You know, about Dudley ...

'I said you must be freezing. You need to get out of those clothes.'

'Huh?'

A smile flickered briefly over her face, and then disappeared. 'You're all wet ... erm ... the river ... erm ... water.'

I was surprised the heat emanating from my face didn't dry my clothes. Duds had decided to just lie across my chest and stare into my face, his breath cool against my glowing skin. All I could hear was his panting ... my panting ... and a rapid clattering inside my chest that I put down to exertion.

'Are you ok?' Her face came down towards mine, and I felt my focus moving from her eyes to her mouth, watching the words come out. 'Come on ... let's warm you up.'

Now there's an offer ...

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We ended up in the café in the middle of the park, and the people who ran it gave us towels and a blanket to wrap around our legs as sodden jeans, underwear, and boots dried in the kitchen. Duds curled up in front of the fire and dozed, his ball between his legs.

'I'm Amy, by the way.' When I took her hand again, introducing myself, I still got the sensation I had before, but this time it seemed stronger. I just looked down at our intertwined fingers, maybe to try to rationalise what was happening, and before I knew it her hand was gone. 'Here ... drink this.' She passed me a steaming mug of hot chocolate, and I wrapped my hands around it willing the heat to travel through me.

The only sounds to be heard were the clattering of the workers in the café and the slurping of our mouths on hot drinks. Time seemed to drift along, and the warmth I felt from the fire, and the drink, made me want to just curl up and sleep.

'Are you feeling warmer now?' Amy's voice was filled with concern.

I nodded, not wanting to break the calmness I was feeling. It had been too long since I had just allowed myself to relax.

'Can I ask you a question?' My gaze shifted to her face, and I saw nothing threatening there. So I nodded. 'You don't have to answer if you don't want to.'

'Go on.' The words coming out of my mouth seemed crackly as if I hadn't used my voice box for ages. A quick cough and clearing of my throat ... 'What do you want to know?' I placed my empty mug on the table before turning to face her.

'I was just wondering ...' She looked embarrassed, and inside I was thinking 'shit', but I just stared at her and waited. 'Erm ... I was just wondering ... why on earth were you in the river at this time of year?' A nervous movement came next ... leg shifting and bum crunching on the plastic seat. 'I mean ... it's freezing in there.'

'Tell me about it. But I didn't have time to think, just wanted to save Dudley.'

'But he was with me.'

'I know that *now* ... but at the time...' and then I started to cry all over again.

'Hey ... come on. Everything's ok now.' I tried to smile and stop the flow of tears, but it just got out of hand. I felt so low ... so low ... so beaten. My head slumped forward into my waiting hands and I just let it all out ... let it all out.

Hands slipped around my shoulders and arms caught me, even though I wasn't falling. The warmth and smell of her flooded inside me, and the tender murmurs trickling over my hairline made me want to stay there indefinitely.

'Come on, Beth. He's safe. Look at him ... come on ...' I lifted my eyes to look at Duds, who by this stage was at my knee, one paw resting on the blanket, his eyes full of worry. 'I was having a cup of tea when he came in a while ago ... I think he was trying to get some treats.' Duds' eyes shifted guiltily for a split second. 'And then he wanted to play ball.' Did I see my dog lick his lips as if he was going to deny it? 'When I came out to find who he was with, I couldn't see anyone.'

But he went ballistic ... kept on racing ahead and then running back to me as if he wanted me to follow him.'

I lifted my hand and stroked his fuzzy head; tender licks covered my fingers. My dog is Lassie. Or Skippy the bush kangaroo.

'Next thing I knew, we were both at the river, and I had to hold him to stop him coming in after you. Didn't I fella?' Amy stroked Dudley's head and he loved the attention from the both of us. Then our fingers met, just briefly, but the feeling was there again.

'I'd better go.'

I stood up sharply, wanting to flee the scene, not even realising I was naked from the waist down. Well, until the blanket fell from me of course.

'Shit ... erm ... sorry ... and ... oh crap!' I clutched at the blanket, which made her laugh ... such a musical laugh. Her hand tried to grab the edge of it and preserve my innocence, but it inadvertently grabbed my crotch.

Amy fell backwards onto the floor, exposing herself in the process. What a pair of lemons. Both of us ... flashing our girly bits in the middle of a café in the centre of Earlham Park. Could things be anymore embarrassing?

Only time had the answer.

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How do you follow that? You can either, run for you life (dressing quickly to save further humiliation), or you can laugh. Amy chose the latter as I was opting for a quick getaway. She sat on the floor, trying to pull the blanket over her, but the laughter was making her go weak. My blanket was FIRMLY in place by this stage and I was on a one-way trip to gather my belongings.

But I just stopped ... and looked at her ... laughing. She kept on throwing her head back, her brown hair flying backwards and then forwards as she was shaking. I felt the tickle of a chuckle rise up my throat and rest, patiently, on the tip of my tongue. Then she tried to get up and tangled her legs in the blanket, hitting the floor like a sack of potatoes. Unfortunately, I had tried to help her up at this stage and she willingly took me down with her. I landed awkwardly half on, half off her jiggling frame. An opportunity not to be missed by Dudley, who thought it was a game.

All four paws landed on the centre of my back at the same time, his ball thwacking me on the back of my head forcing my face forward. The crunch of her skull against mine stopped her laughing for a moment, and she opened her eyes to look into mine. Jesus. We were so close I could feel her breath. I knew my eyes had widened in shock, as had hers, but when a very wet nose poked itself around and licked my face ... then hers, she was guffawing with the best of them.

And so did I. Real hearty laughs, you know the ones good for the soul. I tried to get up, but I couldn't. My legs kept tangling with the blankets and bringing me back down on top of her. Buster Keaton springs to mind.

'Hold up ... hold up ... I ... I ... can't breathe.' Amy was trying to control herself, panting and laughing ... laughing then panting. 'If we just ... stop.' She froze and so did I. 'Then maybe we could do this properly, before we completely lose our dignity.'

Slowly, and gradually, we tore ourselves apart. The cool rush of air reminded me of where I was and what I was wearing.

'I'm so sorry.' What else could I say? 'God. I can't believe this.' Not the most coherent of gestures, but I wasn't feeling very coherent or rational. How *do* you apologise for making someone jump into icy water, sit half-naked in a café, and then be the perpetrator to her exposing herself for all and sundry? Yes ... like you, words failed me.

'What for? I haven't had this much fun in ages.' Her face was so open and honest, and so ... beautiful ... natural ... and waiting for a response.

'For ... for ... *this*.' My hand gestured wildly at her dishevelled frame and half-covered torso. 'For getting you all wet ...' she sniggered, 'erm ... and erm ... ah shit.' My face was beetroot. I wouldn't have thought twice about commenting on how wet I'd made her if she hadn't sniggered. 'I'd ... I'd better go.'

It was amazing how quickly and nimbly she got to her feet, kind of surprised me at her swiftness, sureness of foot. I shook my head and then turned to get my bottom half of my clothes.

We dressed in silence, as Duds watched patiently from the wings, red ball clamped in his mouth. His little eyes looked from me to Amy and then back, his head comically moving at the same time.

After thanking the owners and trying to pay for the drinks and help, we made our way back to the car park. Amy walked me to my car and stooped to ruffle Dudley's hair.

'Thanks.'

Two sets of brown eyes looked into mine.

'I don't know what I would've done without you. You're a lifesaver.'

'My pleasure.' The smile that she gave me radiated a truly genuine happiness and I felt my chest heave and relax. 'And you stick by your mum ... don't want her jumping in rivers too often do we?'

And then I left. Left her standing in the car park waving and laughing. Dudley stood on the parcel shelf of the car and wagged his tail until she was out of sight.

If I had a tail, I would have wagged it too.

But then it dawned on me. I didn't even know her surname ... didn't know anything except she was called Amy. No address. Phone number. Nothing.

So my imaginary tail stopped wagging and I drove away, taking one last look in the rear view mirror just in case ...

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Where do I go from here? Should I move on and race ahead? Or should I drag it out?

Let me think?

In the middle sounds good. So we are still in the development stage.

I bet you're wondering, 'What happens now?' or even 'I don't give a shit? Where's the sex?' Patience ... patience. Like me, of course. I had to be patient too. I couldn't believe I hadn't asked her a little about herself, but at the time it just felt right to just sit and be. If more people just made time to sit and be ... Christ! I'm off on a tangent again.

Right. Where were we? Car? Okay ... Let me get you out of the car, get you sorted, and then take you back to the park again ... and again ... and again.

For about a week of this, actually. Park. Park. Park. Like a dog with a speech impediment. Every afternoon, about the same time as before, Duds and I trekked to the park in the off chance we would spot Amy and maybe just have a chat.

No such luck.

But I persevered, and Duds thought I was the bee's knees and the cat's pyjamas for taking him out for walks in his favourite place. It was funny, but I was beginning to make an effort to look half-human. You know, not wearing my scruffiest jeans and even combing my hair. It didn't matter though, because within five minutes of being with the exposed elements I always looked like something the cat had either dragged home or sicked up.

Obviously, I was definitely following the first rule of dog walking, and the one for bird watching ... always on the lookout for something ... or should I say someone?

It was exactly a week later when Duds decided it was high time he dropped his ball into the river and expected me to go in and get it. Thankfully, it was in the shallow part, although the string of non-biodegradable words coming from my mouth would have said otherwise. The stick I had found was huge ... almost a caber, and way too big to be fishing for a little ball with.

Wrestling with the barked beast was no easy feat, especially when you have a very excited dog spurring you on with high peeped yaps of encouragement. I was in mid flow, and the ball seemed to be laughing at me, when I heard a familiar voice behind me.

'You're not jumping in again are you?'

I spun around, nearly losing the battle between woman and stick and going arse over tit into the water again. Amy grabbed my arm to stop me, and the branch escaped.

'Thank you ... again.' I could feel the blush overtake my face and hoped she hadn't noticed.

'You've gone all red.' Shit. 'Do you think you should sit down? Maybe you over did it a little.' I nodded, taking on the role of 'She who is close to passing out' with gusto.

Amy helped me lower myself to the ground, and then plonked herself down next to me. Dudley looked at us both with disgust and then continued to stare at where his ball had fallen.

It was lovely just to sit there, taking in the surroundings, listening to the birds. The view was beautiful ... absolutely breathtaking. The park wasn't bad either. Amy was facing the river, profile in view, fingers draped over her raised knee. And I was mesmerised.

It was a good job that Dudley whimpered, because just as I was about to look away from her, she was turning to face me. A split second earlier and I would've been caught gawping.

But I didn't get up ... she did. Without a second's hesitation she kicked off her trainers, pulled off her socks, and waded into the water to get Dudley's ball. She bent down out of my view to suddenly appear with the errant ball clutched tightly, water splashing off her hand. My little man went mad, excited mewling noises clambering from his mouth.

'Here you go fella.' The ball whizzed by me, shortly followed by a black and tan streak. Her laugh was heart warming, and my face nearly tore in half with the smile that came from the place deep inside which is reserved for smiles for perfect occasions.

Before I knew it, she was beside me, trainers and socks in hand, her feet glistening and looking decidedly blue.

'How did you know?'

She turned to me, brown eyes so deep and enchanting I nearly missed the half smile on her lips. 'It didn't take a genius. You with a huge stick stabbing the water, and him,' her head nodding towards the returning hero, 'whinging at the side the whole time we were sat here.'

True. Simple when you look at it like that.



I watched her wiping the water off her feet, the moisture clinging to it and preventing her from putting her socks back on. Then I thought of the clean white handkerchief sitting idly in my coat pocket. 'Here. Use this.' I passed the linen to her, and nodded to her feet. 'The least I can do.'

Why did I feel like a teenager when she smiled at me? Full of self-consciousness and hormones. Then I said the only thing I could think of.

'He loves his ball.' Classic me. I wanted to tell her she had the most enchanting eyes I had ever seen, and her smile could warm the coldest hearts, but I was still in teenager mode. I was surprised I didn't shove her over, or worse, get her in a headlock.

She was finishing tying her laces and didn't see me silently slap my hand to my forehead.

'Fancy a coffee?'

'Yap!'

Trust Dudley to get in there before me. Thinking about it, he was just as entranced as I was. His eyes were full of adoration, his ball almost forgotten. Almost.

'Well that settles it. Coffee it is. Isn't that right, Duds?' I chuckled him under the chin, stood up, and offered her my hand. She paused before she took it. Or should I say hesitated? Then she grinned and slipped her fingers into mine, nearly pulling me over as she got up.

'Let's see if we can stay dressed this time, eh?'

Bugger. Blood red. The image of her sprawled on the floor with her bits and pieces exposed and then me, being me, ending up on top of her, was nearly my undoing.

'I'm sure you're coming down with something. You've gone all red again.'

Double buggeration.

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One coffee turned into two. And it was bloody wonderful. Amy was so entertaining, so attentive ... so full of life. And for the hour we spent together I forgot how shit my life actually was. Unlike the previous visit I found myself asking questions about her and her life. For the first time in ages, I felt I had some semblance of control. And it felt good.

Thirty-four. Single. Full name Amy Marie Fletcher. Single. Part time lecturer of history at the University. Single. Originally from Stratford, or just outside of. Did I mention she was single?

And straight.

I didn't ask her that; I just knew. There was no way she was like me. She was just too ... too ... and I don't know how to finish that sentence. I can't typify the classic lezzie look, or even what they sound like. I have never had gaydar ... it always failed me. I usually waited until someone picked up the invisible rays I was sending out into the world unbeknownst to me. You know ... the gay juju vibes.

Therefore, I should change my statement to 'I think she was straight.' Although I hoped she wasn't.

Before we knew it I could see the owners of the café clearing their stuff away readying themselves to close up. Amy, Duds and I were the only people there by this stage, so I made a move to go, thanking the owners for letting Duds come in, as I knew it was usually against the rules.

Back at the car, I hovered half in and half out of the door. I wanted to ask her if she would like to meet again, but something held me back ... my confidence, or lack of confidence more than likely.

'Do you fancy meeting up again?' Thank God someone took the initiative. 'Maybe take Duds to the beach ... erm ... or something?'

'He'd love that.' Huh? 'I mean - we'd love that.' She just laughed and fished in her pocket to pull out a pen.

'Have you any paper?'

The only thing I had was a receipt from the local pet store, but it served a purpose. Within less than a minute she had given me her home number, work number and mobile, with a comment of me calling her when I had a spare minute to make arrangements.

I had too many spare minutes ... that was the problem, but I didn't let that phase me as I slipped the paper into my inside pocket.

The smile I sported on the way home could be described by some people as a 'shit-eating grin'.

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I have realised something. I go on too much. I can sense you nodding your head in agreement, but you must remember, you can't rush a tale. I should be writing 'Climax or Dramatic Scene' by now, but instead I'll opt for ...

### Extended Development

Me being me, looked at that slip of paper a thousand times. Me being me, slipped that same piece of paper into the side pocket of my purse, only to sit and stare at same side pocket of my

purse for God knows how long before getting the same, slightly worn, piece of paper out to repeat the process all over again.

I wanted to just pick up the phone; sluice sexual vibes down the slim black container, and make a time to meet. But, truth be told, I was scared. Petrified even. I hadn't even gone out with old friends since the split, and somewhere deep inside me there was an element of fear ... fear of forgetting how to just 'be' with other people.

I know I had shared a few coffees, and even allowed her to grab my girly bits ... seen hers too, for that matter, but they were all circumstantial. They were spur of the moment gestures, however nice.

Yes. I remember I purposefully went out to see if I could spot her again, but it wasn't the same. She might never have turned up. This time it would be a *definite* meet.

And I still didn't know if she was gay. What if I went along and got the wrong message ... you know - ignored the little red flags that spout 'Back off!'? I would feel a right tit (when I was trying to feel the left one too).

She wouldn't be interested in me, anyway. What did I have to offer her? Even if she was on my team, it didn't necessarily mean she would fancy me.

I didn't feel strong enough for any of it. The waiting ... the deliberating ... the uncertainty ... the fact she may be another Sue in sheep's clothing. I think that was it. I wasn't ready for anything that needed an emotional attachment.

But I liked her. Liked her to talk to. Duds liked her too, and that had to be a sign, hadn't it? Dogs are never wrong. And I had promised myself I would never ignore the gestures from my little man again.

'I'm doing this for you, Dudley.'

Yeah right.

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Saturday. Nine o'clock. Up. Showered. Dressed. Duds fed. Me fed. Picnic made. Stomach in knots.

I had done the deed. Called her. Put myself on the line for my child.

Amy had answered after the third ring, and sounded out of breath. What was initially supposed to be a quick call lasted fifty-six minutes ... I checked. We arranged to go to Wells Next the Sea, a huge beach that allowed dogs in both the winter and summer. And she was picking me up at eleven thirty.

I know it was only nine, but I was nervous, ok? Ask my bowels. Ask my stomach, if it stayed still long enough and wasn't practising a rolling hitch or a sheepshank. Though at times I believed it would be better serviced to get some time in on a noose ... my large intestine was free for training purposes.

By the time eleven fifteen had strolled around I was white and sweating. The carpet in my living room seemed to have lost its lustre, and footprints made by my boots had scuffed all the shag. Duds just lay next to the door, his harness on and ball wedged as far as he could get it in his mouth. For once he wasn't yapping and trying to open the door himself. He seemed calm ... serene even. Maybe because I was like someone who had attempted to OD on caffeine that everything seemed calm in comparison.

When the doorbell chimed, I nearly peed my pants. She was early. Fifteen minutes early. I wasn't ready. Didn't feel it. Felt exposed and naïve.

My fingers refused to act naturally, and the usual lifting off of the chain took longer because I couldn't seem to grip the bloody thing for long enough to slip it back out of its slot and then turn the handle.

She looked beautiful. Her long hair was tied into a loose ponytail, and stray bits came down and played at the side of her face. Or maybe it was the wind that was whistling past her. Her smile was stiff, and I wondered if she had second thoughts about meeting, but then I realised she was nervous too.

I'm not saying I thought of that straight away. It was her voice that exposed her. Slightly high pitched with a noticeable quaver at the end of her greeting. Call me old fashioned, but that made me feel more relaxed. Not by a lot, but decidedly more relaxed than I had been feeling a couple of minutes before. Even my stomach had opted for a simple bowline knot.

Things were looking up. It's a pity the English weather didn't think the same.

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The beach was empty. Not surprising really considering the huge black cloud progressing at a steady pace towards us. Being on the beach at the end of October was not the best choice of venues to have a day out. We could barely hear each other above the din of the wind.

But we were there. And that's all that really mattered. That, and the fact Dudley was having the time of his life. There were so many holes all over the beach; people would begin to think there had been an invasion of moles. He looked so cute with his backside stuck in the air, his front paws going ten to the dozen, both accompanied by little snorting sounds. When he looked up, his face was covered in sand and he honestly looked as if he was grinning.

We walked for miles, or so it seemed. The car park was quite a trek away from the beach in the first place, but at least we were sheltered on the way in, but standing on the sand we were totally exposed. And in more ways than one.

I did feel a little out in the open, for some strange reason. Maybe because I wasn't too sure what I should call this outing. Was it a date? Or just an innocent walk along the beach? And why did it matter? Why couldn't I just accept things on face value and enjoy them? I'm asking too many questions again ...

Amy was fun, for what I could hear of her anyway. She really spent time with Duds, quality time ... ball throwing ... chasing him ... or letting him chase her. I joined in, and laughed, really laughed, at both their antics. In no time I was sweating inside all of my layers.

But fate decided it was time to move things on a little.

Black clouds gathered over us and it seemed like night. The wind dropped. Kaput. Gone. And the scene changed from a crappy English day, to something found in a Stephen King novel. Seagulls had buggered off, and their previous squawking was painfully missed. Air was full of tension, and if I had brought the proverbial knife with me, I can bet I could have spliced through the collecting pockets of electricity.

Splat. A huge drop of rain hit me right in the face. Ice cold and out to shock.

Splat. Splat. Splatter. More quickly now, and seeming to increase in size and weight.

'Shit.' Both Amy's and my word melted into the growing wetness. Duds just looked at us, as if to say 'What's the problem?'

'Run!'

And we did. Like greyhounds. Soaked greyhounds, in less than twenty seconds. The problem arose when we realised we didn't have anywhere to go. The beach was just that ... a beach. No cafes nearby. Not even a public toilet where we could shelter. But we kept on running, and the sky kept on pelting us with gobbets of water.

After a few minutes, Amy began to slow down ... then stopped. I caught up with her (ok ... she could run faster than me - she had longer legs. Got a problem with that?) and just stood in front of her, the rain running down my face in waves.

Then she did something that surprised even me. She took off her coat and covered our heads with it. I couldn't understand why because we were drenched already, so why didn't she just keep it on and keep warm? I know ... ungrateful.

But the thing is - have you ever been underneath a coat with someone ... especially when you have to huddle together closely to make sure you are both covered? If you have, you will understand how close we were. I could feel her breath on my face, warming my skin. And you will also know it is nearly impossible not to look at that person in the face, and at that close proximity it could be described as nothing short of intimate.

The sound of our breathing was deafening. More like panting. I don't know if it was the exertion of running or ...

'Errrrrrrruummmmmmmmmgh.'

That broke the spell.

Dudley was between our legs trying to stop himself getting blown about by the elements, and he did look a sorrowful sight.

'Here ... bend down.' Amy's words seeped into my head, but I couldn't quite grasp ... 'Like this.' Her left hand landed on my shoulder and I felt a gentle pressure pushing me downwards. Then the penny dropped. She was trying to get us closer to the floor so Duds would get more shelter, both underneath the coat and from our bodies.

It was like being inside a tent, and the sound of the rain on her coat was like we were being pelted with stones. But the atmosphere inside was quiet and expectant. Amy lowered her arms so the coat was draped over us, resting her forearms on her knees. I was holding onto Duds, rubbing along his wet back to try to warm him up. I was freezing. Soaked and freezing.

'You're shaking.' And I was. But I couldn't figure out if it was because of the cold, or because I was underneath a coat with Amy. Nerves are funny things at times, but I just couldn't shake off the feeling of being so close to her ... and feeling that I wanted to be closer.

It was hard. Hard because I had no idea if she felt the same way, and hard because I knew it was too soon to be wanting to become involved with someone else. Everything was still so raw. I didn't want this to be a reaction to what had happened with Sue. I was still in the stage of getting on with my life, and trying to cope being me again. I didn't have the strength to start it all over.

'Here.' She didn't wait for me to question her, just slipped her arms around me and pulled me close. Duds was stuck in between us, so I didn't get the full impact of her body next to mine, and I can honestly say I am glad I didn't. The feel of her arms around me was initially uncomfortable. Hey ... I'm being honest. It was. I wanted to pull back and run. But thankfully, I didn't, because within less than ten seconds I felt like I belonged there ... *really* belonged there. Nothing could hurt me whilst I was in her arms. It was a feeling of safety I had missed for so long ... not just the warmth of her, the essence ... it was the *every thing*.

It was just her, me ... and Duds. Nothing else mattered. Being stuck on a beach in the middle of a storm was nothing. Being underneath a coat, in her arms ... was everything.

And believe me, the smell of wet dog had never smelled so sweet.

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The storm lasted all of fifteen minutes. Rain petered away to drizzle, and then to a memory. Wind lashed against our frozen legs and made jeans truly uncomfortable. All I wanted to do was

strip off and climb into a vat of steaming, bubbly bath water ... soak and relax. But that was at least an hour and a half away, as we had to get back to the car and then drive back to Norwich.

We were all chilled to the bone, and Wells being anal about health and hygiene saw us being refused entry to cafes to get a much needed coffee and warm. Not because we were wet ... this is England remember. It was on account of Duds: 'No dogs allowed'.

Not all was lost though, as The Ark Royal Public House let us all in without complaint. Thirty minutes after getting off the beach, Amy and I were tucking into a hearty lunch, drinking coffee and toasting next to the fire. The landlord even made Duds some meat in gravy ... which was devoured in less than two minutes. I didn't care that I had prepared a picnic ... I was getting warm.

After our plates were clean, we sat in silence ... totally at peace with the world. Life seemed perfect. The day seemed perfect. All was well and good in the Bethany Chambers world once again.

'So tell me about you. I hardly know anything apart from you've just split up with someone.' Fuck. 'What was his name?' Double fuck ... even a fuckity fuck fuck fuck. 'If it's still painful ...' she must have seen my reaction. You know, the one where all the colour drains from your face and you squirm like you've just messed your pants.

'No ... it's ...erm ...'

'Hey. No problem. You can tell me when you're ready.' She sounded so sincere, so honest and open.

Should I come clean? Should I come out? Should I run?

'It's a little more complicated than that.'

'Was he married?'

'Erm.'

'Never mind ... Look, it doesn't matter. Fancy another coffee?'

I nodded. And she was up and at the bar ordering whilst I sat a stewed. Would she be disgusted? Shocked? It's amazing how we respond to people finding out whom we sleep with. I mean - does it change the person they liked as a friend? Unfortunately, yes. Some people can't accept the fact that when you leave them, you have a life different to their own.

She was barely back in her seat when I began.

'Sue.'

'Excuse me?'

'Her name was Sue. My ex. Sue.' I tried not to look at her face ... tried not to spot if she reacted in a way I would add to the growing list of insecurities I was collecting. But I couldn't. I had to know.

'Sue?'

A nod.

'Like as in a female Sue?'

Another nod. 'And the fact I said 'her'.'

Amy sat back on her chair, her lips in consternation, until they broke apart to reveal a brilliant white smile. 'Good. We're not that different after all.'

The relief was overwhelming. I didn't want to lose this budding friendship, and I didn't want to lie to her either. Then it dawned on me. She was gay. Amy was gay. The woman sat in front of me was gay. Gay. Relief was replaced by ... erm ... relief? I want to say joy ... happiness ... euphoria ... but I won't. Not that I didn't feel those things, but because relief was still the most overpowering emotion racing through me.

'I can't tell you how much better I feel by telling you that.' I grinned at her and picked up my cup. 'You too, huh? I would never have guessed.'

'Why? Don't I look like the average lesbian?' It's amazing how a room suddenly goes quiet just as a word like lesbian appears. I could feel the stares from a couple of people in the pub, and I wanted to say 'Why don't you pull a chair up ... you'd be able to hear everything then.'

'I'm gaydar retarded.' Then took a sip of my coffee.

'We're not that different after all.' The coffee I had in my mouth decided it preferred being catapulted in the air and landing all over Amy, who just sat there, coffee clinging to her face because it didn't want to fall onto the floor. And that made me laugh again. 'Go on ... laugh at my expense.'

So I did. Head back, and emitting throaty laughs, until she had to join in. It felt so good ... so good. Amy made me feel so bloody fantastically good.

After we had allowed the relief to come out in the form of a good old laugh, yes ... about something that in the light of day could not be seen as that funny, we settled down into comfortable silence.

Amy decided that ten minutes were enough to sit and stare into the fire.



'Do you want to tell me what happened?'

I turned and looked straight into her face, and I knew I would be safe.

So I told her. No elaboration, just the facts. Clinical. Removed. And she sat and listened, sipping her drink and nodding at all the right places. It felt good getting things off my chest, as I had bottled them up for so long ... not told a soul about what had happened ... really happened. I usually said that Sue and I just drifted apart, thought it was for the best. I didn't believe people needed to know the nitty gritty ... or that they would be interested in my shortcomings for that matter.

'You know what you need, don't you?'

I shook my head. A spine?

'Fun. Something totally distracting. Do things you would never usually do.' Her face became animated and I was definite I saw a gleam of the devil dancing behind those gorgeous eyes of hers. 'And you know something, Bethany Chambers?' I shook my head again. 'I'm good at fun.'

I bet you are.

And I couldn't wait to find out.

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I know what I'll do now. I'll introduce a chapter heading, although there's no point calling it chapter one, as I've bypassed that long ago.

## Chapter Two (ish)

After the day on the beach, Amy and I spent some quality time together ... Duds was included on most excursions, but you don't see many dogs at the flicks. Well, except on the screen, that is.

It's redundant to say that the more time I spent in her company, the more I liked her. We 'got on' as friends, but nothing more. I was relieved that 'nothing more' had developed, as I didn't feel capable of beginning a new relationship so soon after the breakdown of the pseudo relationship I had shared with Sue. I know I shouldn't make comparisons between the two, but until you have been as badly burned as I had, you won't know how totally mind fucking it can be. The sorry thing was when I was with Sue, I didn't even realise I was becoming fucked up - just lost a sense of self.

I knew my self confidence was on an all time low - even off on vacation without the sniff of a postcard, but the more I tried to lift myself out of it... ah ... you know the drill. I'd catch myself looking at her, absorbing her, her laugh, her smile, the twinkle in her eyes, and I would feel myself melting and nearly believing I was whole. But then I would remember. Remember that I wasn't worthy of her.

Utter crap. I know. It should come with the slogan 'I can't believe it's not utterly butterly crap' - or I should come with the slogan? Considering I come out with the most imaginative crap conceivable. Even though it had been a couple of months since Sue had physically left the picture, I was still acting as if she would suddenly crawl out of the woodwork and demand to know why I was doing anything that she had not given me full permission to do. Now and again, I would catch myself looking over my shoulder and then feel confused when there was no one there. I had lived this way for three and a half years, and in retrospect, it seemed like a lifetime.

Yes. Once again, I have gone off on a tangent. I was supposed to be telling you about fun, but as usual, I veered off down Self Pity Street, this time on a skateboard with three wheels. Why a skateboard with three wheels? I hear you ask. Well, if it had four it would make things a hell of a lot easier wouldn't it?

So. Skateboard aside, and on with the skates.

Fun. With a capital F.

I won't bore you with all the details of our days out, or evenings at the pub with impressions of Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett that sounded more like Andy and Lou from Little Britain. I'll just tell you about the biggy. The weekend away. A trip to Blackpool and its Pleasure Beach - the last weekend of the season. A place that can evoke vomit just by the smell of the beef burgers. A place where I went with the beautiful Ms Amy Fletcher sans Dudley. I know we hadn't known each other for very long, just a few weeks, but when Amy had suggested a fun trip to the seaside, I hadn't even given it a thought. Just said yes ... which, as you know, is so unlike me. My way was to deliberate for days, weeks; even months over something like that. So when the answer came out, I think I surprised us both.

But not as much as it surprised Duds.

Let's start with the look of absolute rejection on his face shall we? Set the scene once again. God. That dog can twist my heartstrings around his paw with just a look from his adorable brown eyes. I mean, it's not as if I left him to find for himself ... a slowly dripping tap for water and a sack of dry biscuits. He went to my parents for the three days, totally kitted out with his overnight bag, bed, toys and every other conceivable thing a spoiled pooch would ever need. My parents doted on him too, and treated him as their furry grandchild, as they had come to terms with the fact they were never getting a real one from me. And I knew Duds would be walked extremely well, as my Dad had the knack of knackerling anyone who said they would go for a walk with him. He was like a speed walker, and my mum said she felt as if he didn't want to be seen with her as she was always left half a mile behind.

So, no calling the RSPCA. Dudley had it made.

But when I said goodbye to him for the thousandth time and then went back for the thousandth and oneth kiss, my Dad hoisted me under the armpit and nearly threw me out of the door. Charming.

Amy picked me up on the Friday at two o' clock, and to tell you the truth we both must have been mad to go to Blackpool in the middle of November. I mean, in the middle of the summer it was usually pissing down and freezing. And we had the added disadvantage of it being the last weekend before everything began to close up for the winter. But ... Amy had said we were on a fun quest - so Blackpool it was.

It wasn't just the fact we were going to the epitome of British Garishness in all its glory that put me on edge. It was the fact Amy had made all the arrangements for the accommodation, and I didn't know where we would be sleeping, double - single - twin. I didn't know her expectations for the visit. What if she wanted to share a bed? Was I ready for that? Even if it meant just sleeping? What if she thought this was the ideal time to make a move. Hark at me and my animal magnetism. As if she would be interested in someone who was as screwed up as I was.

That didn't stop me wondering and worrying all the way to Blackpool, though. And even when we played 'Who could spot the tower first and win 10p', my heart was not in it. All the way along the M55 Amy strained to glimpse the mini Eiffel tower that symbolised the seaside town. I began saying 'Pylon ... pylon ... nope, pylon' without even looking at what she was claiming to be it. It was the usual mistake everyone makes when searching for it, but when you actually see it ... it doesn't look like a pylon at all, and usually appears from nowhere, like Brigadoon.

And there it was ... surrounded majestically by gathering grey clouds against the blackening sky with a fake orange glow that comes with urban life. What an image. I swear, if I'd have rolled the window down I could guarantee I would have smelled the grease from the fish and chip vendors ... even at five miles away. My stomach was in a dilemma too ... whether to come up through my throat, or slip through my bowels. Decisions ... decisions.

When we entered Blackpool, we had the interminable job of searching out our guesthouse. No easy feat, as everywhere you looked boasted 'The Best Guest House in the North West', and sported bill of fare as 'Full English'. Nearly an hour after entering the town, we stumbled on the place we would be calling home for the next three days, so eloquently named 'The Beachcomber'. I mean, if you have ever visited Blackpool you would know that if you combed the beach all you would find are turds, used condoms and tampons ... usually in that order. It played out like a Scooby Doo chase ... you know, when they are running and keep passing the same things over and over again ... 'Turd ... condom ... tampon ... turd ... condom ... tampon'. Now and again you would spot a broken bottle or an empty beer can, but other than that there was no sign of buried treasure.

The next thing you have to look out for < a little bit of advice for anyone visiting > is the Blackpool Landlady. A law unto themselves, honestly. They always made out they were doing you a huge favour by letting you stay in their house, and charged you through the teeth to be a guest with them. They all looked the same too. They always looked like they were getting ready for a night out on the town ... hair in curlers, but faces completely decorated like extras from the Mikado. Footwear came in the shape of fluffy mules - pink, usually, and the torso sported an ample bosom that pushed and shoved its way out of a top that was two sizes too small.

The usual greeting was 'You all right, my lovely? Come far?' as they were stitching you up like a kipper for your stay.

I didn't even listen to the convoluted gibber as I was worrying myself stupid about what I would see when we opened the door to our room. I can't even tell you honestly what I wanted to see, but when Amy pushed the door back and I saw twin beds, a feeling of disappointment tore through me.

'It's all right, isn't it?' The question she has asked was merely rhetorical, as she threw her holdall on the nearest bed, only for it to bounce in the air and land with a thud on the floor. 'Good, springy mattress.' I laughed the laugh of the relieved, and nodded.

'It's a bit small isn't it?' 'Bit' was an understatement. Swinging a cat would be murder.

'I prefer cosy.'

We decided it would be best if we left the Pleasure Beach until the morning, and just went for a stroll up the Golden Mile. I should explain what the Golden Mile is, really, shouldn't I? No. It's not like a Golden Shower ... at least that would be warm. The Golden Mile was the three quarters of a mile of shops, arcades, and lights that ran along the seafront. I know it wasn't a mile, but the Golden Three Quarters of a Mile doesn't have the same ring to it.

Shower time was fun, to say the least. At least the box room we had got was en suite, so there would be no ducking down the hallways flashing bits and pieces to all the other tourists doing exactly the same thing. Amy let me use the bathroom first, and I was in and out before she had gathered her toiletries. Her face showed her surprise on my quickness. 'I'm not one for messing about,' I grinned, water still trickling down my face.

I sat on the edge of the bed and continued to dry myself off and Amy went to have a shower, leaving the door partially open. I know I shouldn't have peeked, but come on ... blood does run through these veins after all. And it's not as if I was leering at her when she was in the shower ... erm ... well ... not exactly. I didn't look at her directly, I ... erm ... well, I could see her in the reflection of the mirror, which, thankful to the crap heating systems in crappy guestrooms, didn't steam up.

The bathrobe she had been wearing when she went into the bathroom was slowly peeled off and my eyes followed each movement of the material. She had her back to me, and it was flawless ... flawless. My mouth began to water with the expectation of the taste of her. My eyes were glued to the spot wishing for her to turn around so I could see more. I watched her hang the robe on the hook at the side of the door, and then as if in slow motion, she turned.

Fuck me.

I felt my jaw grow limp and sag. The vision in front of me was nothing short of perfection. Perfection. Her breasts were full and round and the nipples were slightly erect from the coolness in the bathroom. The skin was creamy and smooth, the same as her back, and I could feel all my

sense of reason leaving me ... could feel myself standing up and being drawn to where she was. Then she stretched her arms up to pull her hair back and those wonderful breasts did her bidding and raised themselves to her command, her stomach flattening and becoming taut, the line of her muscles taking my eyes lower ... and lower and lower ... until ... I could see the top of her innocence. Black and inviting. Beckoning. I could almost taste her.

'Beth!'

Shit.

'Beth! Are you there?'

Double shit. I looked down at my feet and they were one in front of the other in the stance of making their way towards her, my towel had fallen and I was naked.

Amy's head poked around the door at that very moment of realisation. I watched her eyes leave my face and glide down my body ... hesitate slightly before making their way back. It must have taken a second, but I felt as if I'd been fully digested.

'Could ...' she cleared her throat. 'Could you pass me my towel from the bed?' I just stood there. Staring. 'Beth?'

'Huh?'

'Towel?'

In my jumbled thoughts I thought of towel ... thought of me and my nakedness and swooped down to claim it back, wrapping it tightly around myself.

'My towel. Oh, never mind.' And she came out of the bathroom in all her feminine glory, breezed passed me and picked up her towel, which was about two feet away from me, and then waltzed back in.

In all the time she had been outside, I hadn't moved once, well, except for my eyes, which had followed her progress intensely, devouring everything and anything, even down to the small gold pendant hanging around her neck.

It wasn't until I heard the click of the bathroom door that I realised what I had done, or hadn't done, for that matter. The colour raced to my face and I felt light headed. Stumbling to the bed, I fell face first onto the candlewick covers, burying my glowing face in the indentations of the fabric. I felt like a right twat. Gawping at her like she was a prize heifer or a slab of meat, and not even hiding the fact that I was doing it. Aw, fuck. What would she think when she emerged?

Nothing. That's what she thought. She came out of the bathroom thirty minutes later glowing and full of beans ready for our walk up the prom. I was decently dressed by now, you know, clothes on - fixed firmly in place. I tried to act normal, but the underlying current racing through me was

one of foolishness. Well, more like exposure. I had shown her in those few seconds what I had wanted. I wanted her. It was so obvious, yet so bloody out of reach.

'Ready?'

Now that's a loaded question.

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Hustle and bustle, bustle and hustle. That's what the seafront was like. Gangs of youngsters stalked the streets omitting the signals that they ruled the world. Smells of beer, candyfloss, and onions clung to the air and finished the ensemble. It was freezing cold and the wind was whistling in from the exposed coastline. Amy grabbed my arm and nearly frogmarched me passed all the street vendors who were toting deals on all the latest crazes ... all at knock down prices, mainly because they were mainly knocked off.

After nearly an hour, and fifteen quid later, Amy had 'won' me a teddy from the grabbing machines. Honestly, she could have bought it five times over for the amount of twenty pences she had slotted into its greedy money grabbing mouth. But it was the thought that counted. She had purposefully set out to win it for me, and I hate to seem ungrateful ...

I looked down at the fluffy shape of the puppy in my hands, the black and tan cuddly toy, and knew she had wanted me to have it because it looked like Duds. Well ... the beady eyes were the same, especially when he wanted to go for a walk.

'What are you going to call him?'

I looked at the fake fur and a myriad of names sprang forth, but one kept on coming back over and over again.

'Charlie.'

'Charlie? Why on earth Charlie?' She laughed as she said it, and I felt a little foolish. But when I looked back at her, I could see no malice in her face, only a kind of wonder. It was such a simple expression, so innocent and curious.

'He just looks like a Charlie, don't you think?' I lifted the toy up to her face and wiggled its head, making it seem animated. The laugh she omitted rang through the arcade and people began to look. It's amazing how something so simple can embolden you and make you begin to act the fool. 'Give us a kiss, lady.' Fuck. Where did that come from? It wouldn't be so bad, but I insisted she kissed him by jamming the whole thing in her face. She grabbed the toy and yanked it from my hands.

'Mwah!' The slap of her lips on the toy made me halt in my tracks. Then she crushed it to her, sounds of deep throat emerging beyond the black and tan tuff made my southern regions wish

they were made of material. 'Satisfied?' She held Charlie out to me, and I swear to God that dog was smiling. I think if I'd been in his position I would have been laughing my pants off.

'It'll do,' I think I mumbled it, but knowing my luck I probably bellowed it so everyone in the vicinity of two miles would have heard it.

'You've gone red.'

Is that all the woman ever noticed about me?

Bugger.

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The evening ended early, as we were both tired from the journey and the smell of the sea air. We ended up having a nightcap at the guesthouse, and then sloping off to bed under the scrutiny of the landlady and a few other guests. I knew we would be the talk of the evening even though we were in a twin room. People always have to have something to talk about. I was once again worried about taking my kit off in front of her, and her getting hers off in front of me. Two things should have calmed me down. One. I could use the bathroom - or she could. Two. Hadn't we already seen each other's bits and pieces? In the café? Not the usual place, I know, but hadn't we? And earlier when we had showered. Too bloody right we had, but it still didn't stop the anticipation did it? I mean, we were getting undressed and staying like that all night - well, apart from sleepwear.

Did she wear something in bed? Aw, crap. More things to worry about.

I worried about it all the way up the stairs - even as I was staring at her arse. There was even an essence of worry as I stood behind her as she wiggled the key in the lock to get the door open. I even worried as I grabbed the key off her, tugged, and shouldered the door whilst wiggling the key like crazy. It wasn't until the door shot violently inwards taking both her and me with it did I stop worrying. I was too busy trying to get up off the floor, which isn't an easy feat when you have someone on your back. Why is it that when I'm around her I always end up sprawled on the floor? Her too, for that matter.

To add insult to injury, as we were huffing and puffing trying to disentangle ourselves, a voice drifted into the room. 'You would have thought they could have waited until they shut the door.' The voice sounded put out, and as I looked between my legs, and Amy's too for that matter, I could see the disgruntled faces of a middle-aged couple standing in the doorway.

'Instead of standing there, you could help us,' Amy choked out, maybe because my elbow was in her throat.

'How dare you!' And the door slammed back into place making us both jump and fall into a heap again. We lay there for a couple of minutes, the sound of our ragged breathing the only noise in

the now dark room. She was on my back still, the whole length of her body against mine, and to tell you the truth, it felt wonderful.

The coldness that greeted me was agony as she slowly but surely lifted herself up from me and sat back on her haunches. Still quiet. Then a snigger. One from her, then one from me. Then another ... and another ... until we were both in stitches on the floor.

'Did you ... did you see the ... the look on that woman's face? "How dare you!"' Amy laughed loudly, 'It was worth the ... the carpet burns.' I could see her silhouette moving upwards and towards the door. The room pulsated with light, and my eyes burned with the impact. I swear the landlady had put the brightest bulb that she could lay her hands on ... maybe surplus from old lighthouse stock.

I struggled to my feet, ignoring her extended hand, and began brushing the front of my clothes, ridding them of imaginary dust and fluff.

'Don't you think?'

'Eh? Think what?'

'It was worth the burns. Look.' She lifted her sleeve and there it was. A huge red welt running up her forearm. Now. I don't know if you know this, but I have a thing about forearms ... not a fetish ... a *thing*. I love the shape of a woman's forearms - the strength, the contours of the muscle, but also the femininity.

Therefore, it was no surprise that my hand reached out to stroke it. Trail my fingers alongside the mark and gingerly caress the skin surrounding the burn.

'It's a cracker, isn't it?'

I carried on touching her skin.

'Beth?'

Reality came crashing back down, you know, like it does, and my finger inadvertently slipped and poked the sore part. 'Jesus, Beth! Are you trying to kill me?'

My hand shot away from her, even more scorched than her skin.

'You've ...'

'Gone all red. I know.' I turned away from her and rummaged around in my bag. 'Here. Put some of this on.'



And that was that. She went into the bathroom; I changed into my nightwear like an athlete and dived under the covers. I don't know why, because as soon as she came out I had to go and brush my teeth.

When I emerged, she was under the covers to her bed, on her side, facing my direction. Bugger. I thought I was quick getting my kit off, but that woman took gold.

Then it was lights off and a muffled goodnight. Sleep was an age coming, but I was soothed by the steady rhythm of Amy's breathing, and before I knew it, morning was smiling through the thin curtains, announcing another day of fun.

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Chapter Two was rather long, don't you think? I should really break this up ... maybe this could be the overly anticipated development stage, because the way I was feeling there was definitely something developing. But then, it would be all one sided, wouldn't it? I was no nearer to finding out if Amy liked me in that way. She had given no indication ... just friendship. And in the beginning that is all I had wanted. Someone who I could just be 'me' with. You know, the Beth I used to be without someone thinking I was acting weird. Thoughts of Sue were becoming less frequent, less intimidating, although she was still there lurking on the sidelines waiting to send another jolt to my self-esteem.

You may be wondering why I haven't mentioned her much since Amy came on the scene. But that's the whole point, isn't it? Amy made me forget to a degree what had transpired in those months I had spent being with Sue. Amy made me want to move forward and become a whole person once again. At times, just recently, I've wanted the same thing. To I'll begin that sentence over. I wanted to step into the light and feel the sun on my face once again.

So, yes.

This is now The Overly Anticipated Extended Development Stage of my story.

### The Overly Anticipated Extended Development Stage (Or Chapter Three)

After breakfast , we piled on more layers and ventured out into the brisk November air. First port of call was the South Beach ... or the Pleasure Beach.

What a day. I screamed so much on most of the rides I was nearly hoarse by lunchtime. The worse one was the Big One. Fuck. That was BIG. And fast ... and pant fillingly frightening. I tried to act cool, but come on! I thought the bastard thing was going to derail. It was the highest rollercoaster in Europe, and I was on it ... screaming like a girl, waiting for death in a very loud way. It was the thunking sound as it attached itself onto the rail that first alerted me that things smelled rank in the State of Denmark, and my underwear for that matter. Have you ever been on a roller coaster and when it reaches the top began to scream in a culminating way? It starts like a low moan then increases rapidly into a shrill banshee wail, tears pissing from your eyes and spit

drooling from your mouth. Then they have the audacity to try to sell you a photo of you looking at your absolute worst.

And then the woman who you fancy buys it as a memento. And she looks relaxed and happy, like she's reading a book on the picture whilst you look like death is chasing you. She even looked cool and collected although I was gripping her carpet burned arm. Tightly. Like a parrot on a perch. A squawking parrot that is faced by next-door's cat wearing a bib.

Let's put it this way, it was a while before I went on another ride, and then they were tame ones.

On the way out of the funfair I spotted a new attraction. Wish I hadn't bothered. It was called the Paseje del Terror, and the word 'Terror' should have triggered warning bells. But no. I think all my screaming from the Big One had deafened me to the jingling that should have been increasing like wildfire as I paid the bloke on the counter. I didn't even know what entailed, and if I had, I can guarantee it would have been a brisk walk along the seafront for me.

We had to wait for a few more people to join us as we were going to be in groups, and I distinctly remember thinking 'I want a wee', but by the time I had registered the imminent bladder problem, we were being ushered inside.

And I heard the guide, lock the door. There were about ten of us in a room that was the size of an air raid shelter. There were three groups of people ... a group of four, a three, Amy and I ... and the Dracula fetish bloke.

'You are now locked in. You can only go forward ...' As he was speaking, I heard someone fart and hoped it didn't smell. No such luck. I could feel myself gagging and I lifted my scarf up to cover my nose and mouth whilst watching others do the same. Apart from Drac and a very tall lad standing to the left of me ... glowing with embarrassment. 'You will encounter some very unpleasant sights ...' and smells, mate ... don't forget smells ... 'But you must keep going forward. No running or hitting the people you encounter.' Huh? There were people in there? 'If you don't touch them, they won't touch you.' Dramatic pause. 'Good luck on your journey, and I hope to see you on the other side.' The other side of what? Was he being spiritual? I was hoping literal was more his scene, but looking at his garb I was in two minds. A door to the right of us opened with a creak ... how quaint ... and people rushed through, mainly to get away from the smell of the lad's bowel emission.

In retrospect, I should have stayed with the fart.

Safer.

There was a corridor leading downwards slightly, and Amy grabbed my arm and pulled me along. Screams were heard in the distance ... and I knew they were from the people who were recently standing next to us.

Black. The bastards turned the lights out on us and I was frozen to the spot wishing for the light bulb from the guesthouse. Or a match, although that would have been a bad idea with the smell of methane still lingering in the air.

'Come on ... let's catch them up.' Amy's arm was tightening around mine and I could feel the pee begging to get out. We stumbled along the corridor, feeling the walls with our hands.

Click. Blue light shone on Pinhead. Yes, Pinhead from Hellraiser, who was standing right in front of me, his face mere inches away and fucking leering. The scream shot out of my mouth and a little bit of pee shot into my drawers. I tried to back up but Amy was behind me, screaming just as loudly in my ear, her arm was now around me pulling me closer and into her, and if I hadn't been so terrified I would have loved it. But that wasn't on my list of priorities at that moment in time. Click again ... lights off. I grabbed her hand and ran, dragging her with me, bumping into the wall but using it as a guide too.

I won't tell you everything about the experience ... you have to experience it for yourself, but I will say that when Reagan out of the Exorcist screamed at me, I screamed louder. Laughing and screaming ... or should I say, laughing, screaming and peeing. I ended up on the floor, as did Amy, with sheer laughter, so many times ... you know, when your legs are so weak they can't hold your weight any longer. We held each other so tightly when things got a little too much, and even when it wasn't that scary ... but I think that might have been the aftershocks.

But there was a time when we were in the dark and she had me in her grip and I felt so safe ... so contented just to be in her arms, even under the pretext of being frightened ... although I was frightened for most part of the experience. I knew, as she held me, that her mouth was mere inches from mine. I could feel her breath skip along my face - ragged and hot, and I just wanted to lean in and kiss her mouth ... softly ... kiss her soundly, yet softly. And if it hadn't been for the lights clicking on again and someone looming over her shoulder, there were no doubts that I would have. Instead, I broke away from her and almost fell backwards, the wall stopping me hitting the floor.

She looked startled, whether it was the figure's presence or she knew what I had intended to do. The ache in my chest was agony, and it had nothing to do with what was going on around me. No. It had everything to do with the woman standing with her shoulders slightly stooped and her hands dangling by her sides that had brought it on. I didn't know how to react. I didn't know if this was the moment I should tell her that I wanted more than just her friendship. So I did what I thought I should do. I pretended nothing had happened.

I knew she was expectant. I knew she was holding something behind those eyes ... some kind of question. And then it faded. Snubbed itself out as I was standing there, as the actor was standing there waiting for us to scream or run or just to react in some kind of way. But I just felt despondent. I think we would have just kept standing there, like a stale mate, if the lights hadn't clicked back off again.

I felt her hand tentatively search out mine and grip my fingers. 'Come on. Let's go.' Her voice was quiet, resolved. A short tug and we were on our way through the blackness once again.

Although the attraction became even scarier, I don't think either Amy's or my heart was in it. Don't get me wrong, we screamed and laughed like before, but it seemed hollow somehow.

A masked Jason blocked our exit. Or should I say Jason with a chainsaw? The bloke in front of us calmly said 'That's a hand held Hoover, that is.' But he still stayed there, just in case, I think, but then him and his wife made a run for it.

Then it was our turn. Both of us standing there, dodging the battery powered suction device like it would suck the very soul from within us. Amy slipped in front of me and curled her arms around me, edging me towards the door and into the light. I know I said I wanted to step into the light once again, but I meant it metaphorically, not the dingy lights of a pub.

I nearly pushed Amy over and raced across the pub looking for the toilet ... although I think most of it was now in my underwear. But the sense of relief when I sat down was tantamount to an orgasm. I would have died with embarrassment if I had come out of the experience steaming at the vee juncture of my jeans.

Not that I wasn't feeling something along the lines of embarrassment already. I mean - I had nearly kissed her. Nearly crossed the line. Nearly made a fool of myself. Again.

I lifted my hands to cover my face and could feel the skin burning the palms. How could I have even thought she would want me to kiss her? I relived the scene over again in my head and I felt worse. My stomach was rolling by this stage, and I could hear Amy flush the chain to her toilet and then begin to wash her hands in the basin just outside my door. Then the hand dryer. Then nothing. Quiet. Still.

I just sat there. I wanted to cry. I wanted to shout 'I'm sorry!' I wanted to curl up and die.

The door opened and closed. I knew she had left. So I sat there even longer. It must have been fifteen minutes I sat there, with my jeans round my knees and my head in my hands, but I knew I had to get up sometime ... or else I would get piles.

When I walked back into the pub, Amy was sitting near the exit of the Passage del Terror with two drinks on the table.

'I was just about to come and look for you.' She looked worried. 'Are you ok? You look pale.'

I nodded and sat down in front of her. 'I knew it was scary, but I didn't think it would frighten the shit out of you.' The half smile was there and I saw the twinkle in her eyes.

'You cheeky bugger.' She threw her head back and laughed, and suddenly what had happened before seemed to fade and fizzle. I had to remind myself that Amy was not Sue. She wasn't the kind of person who would drag out a situation and feed from misery. Amy was the kind of person who moved on, harbouring on mistakes was not her scene.

We had a couple more drinks before we moved on. Needed them, I can tell you. The next few hours were spent messing about on the seafront ... daring each other to take our shoes off and allow the brown seawater to touch bare skin, even staring at the bungee jump on the pier because we didn't have the balls to actually get on it.

It seemed like an age before I realised we hadn't eaten since the candyfloss, burgers and toffee apples from the funfair, and then I felt starving. So we decided to grab something to eat.

It was half way through the meal that I thought of kissing her again. Not the one from earlier, but right there and then. She was in the middle of telling me about one of her lectures and she was laughing and talking, looking so animated and beautiful, and all I could concentrate on was her mouth. The attraction I had for her was so strong I thought it was going to choke me. I had to know how she felt. Had to ask her if I ever had a chance with her. It was at the precise moment I opened my mouth that her mobile started singing from somewhere at the side of us.

She dived down to the side of her and reached and rummaged inside her bag, mouthing 'I'm sorry' before clicking to accept it. I watched her expression turn from concentration to happiness in the matter of a split second. 'Jane! How the devil are you?' The smile broke her face, and I felt disappointment clutch at me. I had been so wrapped up in the way I had been feeling that I never stopped to think she might be seeing someone by now. I know she had been single when I had first met her, but with her looks and personality there would be no way she would have stayed long like that. She was the ultimate catch. The perfect woman. And I had been so fucking self-absorbed I hadn't thought about it.

I realised I had missed most of the conversation by the time I came back to the land of the living, and I only heard her making arrangements for the following evening. That put party to that. The growing attraction had been definitely one sided. The look inside the terror ride had been in my imagination. It wasn't expectation of her thinking I was going to kiss her; it was expectation of her having to tell me she didn't think of me that way. She was already taken.

'Sorry about that.' She grinned at me. 'Are you going to eat that?' I shook my head and forced the smile on my face. Her fork came over and nabbed the last roast potato on my plate and she lifted it to her mouth and shovelled it all inside making noises of the contented. When she had finished chewing, and was trying to swallow, she tried to splutter out something about dessert ... then coffee as I shook my head.

'To tell you the truth, I'm knackered.' Her head tilted to the side and she looked at me inquiringly. 'Must have been all that screaming and sea air.' A nod. 'Think I might ring Duds and then grab an early night.'

'Erm ... ok.' She tipped her wine glass up and drained the last drops of her drink. 'You can use my mobile if you want?' I shook my head and then got my own from my pocket.

'I'll ring him when we get back to the hotel. Or should I say I'll ring my parents?' I grinned, and Jesus it hurt to pretend that everything was ok.

Bedtime was the same as the night before except for the worrying about seeing each other naked. What was the point? She was already involved with someone; it wasn't as if she would be interested in staring at my body, was it? Amy still undressed in the bathroom, and I was in bed by the time she returned, but there wasn't the anxiety as there had been when I thought there might have been a chance.

A muffled goodnight crept up from the duvet of both our beds, but I knew in the darkness she was staring at me. So I turned over and faced the window, hearing her bed creak as she turned too. And that's the way the morning found us, lying with our backs to each other.

Before dinnertime we were on the M55 and heading back to Norfolk. Don't get me wrong, we didn't say or do anything different to make us leave early. It was because I knew she had to get back to meet 'Jane'.

And it was also because I knew I couldn't keep up the masquerade of being happy for very much longer.

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#### Chapter Four (Regression Stage. Bugger)

That was the beginning of The Overly Anticipated Extended Development Stage. I should really call it The Anti Development Stage or even The Two Steps Forward and Three Back Stage. Could even stretch to The Feeling Like a Total Twat Stage, as the only thing that had developed was my attraction for Amy, but as you can see, that was going nowhere. Furthermore, I don't think I was emotionally ready for anything to happen anyway, but I can only say that because there was no chance of it *actually* happening. So it is the Regression Stage. Unfortunately.

Amy dropped me off at my house with the promise to call, and I threw my bag inside the doorway, turned around, got in my car, and went to get the man in my life. At least Duds was pleased to see me. Bless. I honestly thought he would pee all over my feet when I walked through the door to my parents' house, just like he used to do when he was a pup.

I was in the midst of tickling his belly as he lay flat on his back groaning around the bright red ball clamped in his mouth, when my mum finished the day off.

'Sue called.' Two words. Short. Simple. To the point. Two words that made my stomach clench and heave. I opted to ignore the statement. 'Oi. Luggy. I said Sue called.'

I turned and looked at my mum, who was by now trying to unstick the newspaper from the table as it was glued to the surface with something my dad had spilt. Like usual. 'And?' I hoped I sounded neutral, indifferent. But mums know, don't they? They know when you are trying to hide something from them, and they act one of two ways. Firstly, they could give you a break and go with the flow. Or they could be like my mum when Sue was concerned ...

'Told her to sling her hook. That was the best thing you have ever done getting rid of her.' I knew it was coming, the lecture, and I knew it wouldn't be long before my dad came through and gave his two pence worth. 'She was no good for you, and you know it.' I could see her preparing to sit and arrange herself for sermon mode, and I just couldn't handle it.

'Did she say what she wanted?' I turned my attention to the now still Duds, who was splayed on his back waiting for me to continue to tickle him. Which, of course, I did. Just another way to stop the churning of my intestines.

'Said she needed to get hold of you. Tried your place but there was no answer.' Mum stopped there, and I sensed there was something else. I could hear her fidgeting in her chair, and I could also hear my dad making his way through the kitchen, his wellied feet clomping mud on the floor. Still nothing coming from my mum.

'Hiya, sweetheart.' Dad leaned over, kissed my cheek, and then rubbed his stubble over my skin because he knew it irritated me. His laugh was nothing short of evil. 'Did your mum tell you the wicked witch has been on the phone?' I nodded, still rubbing my face and scowling. 'Bet she didn't tell you she told her you were away on a dirty weekend though, did she?'

'You are joking?' My head snapped over to where mum was sitting, sitting and glowing by this stage. 'Mum. Please tell me you didn't say that.'

Still nothing. A lot of wriggling, but no sound.

'Of course she did. And called her a slapper too.' Dad was yanking his wellies off by this stage and didn't even notice the thickness of the air and the absence of the proverbial knife that usually accompanies these kinds of situations.

'Mum?'

'She deserved it. And you were.'

'Whatever went on between Sue and me ... was exactly that. Between Sue and me.' The quickness of my movements from floor to standing jostled Duds from his euphoric haze of mummy love. Pity I couldn't say the same thing at that moment. 'And for your information, there isn't, and never will be anything going on between Amy and me.' It was at the moment that the full weight of my unrequited feelings for Amy crashed down on me and I didn't know whether to run or cry. So I did both, calling Dudley to follow.

I could hear both of my parents trying to catch up, even the staggering movement of my Dad trying to put his wellies back on ... hear my mum's voice breaking as she was trying to apologise. Hiccapped breaths telling me she loved me. But there was no way I could have stayed. And it wasn't just about the Sue scenario. I felt fragile all of a sudden, and being with my parents and all the sympathy they would flood all over me would send me definitely over the brink.

Duds was in the back of the car, ball ensconced, and pacing along the backseat when I slammed the engine into gear and performed a perfect screech out of my parents' road. I saw him hit the back of the seat and guilt engulfed me. What was I doing? I could have an accident and lose him. Lose the only person who loved me as much as I loved him.

Slowly, I eased my foot on the brake and slowed the car down until I stopped. 'Come here, fella.' And he was over the gap between the seats and on my lap, kissing my face with licks and nuzzles. 'You still love me, don't you?' I was crying by this stage, big fat salty tears that he lapped away as I stroked the rough fur on his sides and back. We just sat there; the only sound was my sniffing and his snuffling, until I thought I couldn't cry any more.

'Do you want to go to the park?' His ears shot up making his face seem comical. 'Come on then. In the back.' And over he popped, nestling down in the blanket I kept on the back seat.

As I placed the car in gear, I knew one thing for certain.

I loved my dog and he loved me. And at that moment in time, that's all I needed.

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Walks, as walks tend to do, distract you to a degree about how utterly shit your life is. I opted to avoid Earlham and took Duds to Mousehold Heath instead. He loved racing through the trees and up and down the embankments. Squirrels fled the scene as he yapped and chased them into hiding. The sun was going down rapidly, and I knew it wouldn't be long before the familiar paths would appear like something from the Blair Witch Project.

Images of Amy poked and prodded into my conscious thought; images of her laughing and joking; images of her screaming on the Big One. But worst of all, images of her doing the exact same thing with her girlfriend, Jane. A mixture of happiness and sadness whirled around me, and I couldn't decide which one was the strongest. I just knew that I missed her, and for once in my life, I felt lonely. I hadn't even felt lonely when Sue had moved out, even though, truth be known, in my screwed up mind I'd had doubts whether I was doing the right thing.

Duds was absolutely knackered by the time we got back to the car, and his panting kept me company on the journey home. Strange thing was that when I indicated to turn into my road, he bolted up and started growling. I couldn't even see what could have made him react that way, but it steadily increased to a more deep throated and threatening sound.

As I stopped the car and turned the engine off, he was over the gap and standing protectively on my knee, his eyes fixed to the alleyway that separated me from my neighbour's house. There was nothing there. But it didn't stop him becoming more agitated and pressing against me as if to stop me leaving the car.

'Come on, Duds. There's nothing there, mate. Look.' He *was* looking. Eyes staring into the gap between houses, and the heckles at the back of his neck making an unusual appearance. I didn't know what to do, as I had left his spare lead at my parents. What if it was next door checking



something and then Duds went all macho on them? Or it could be Mrs Foster's cat trying to catch birds in my garden? If I opened the door he would be out and at them before I could blink, and at this moment in time aggravation was something I didn't need.

So, I popped him in the back with the order to stay and took my chances out on my own. I did feel unnerved because it could just as well have been a burglar trying to get in - or coming out. But if it was, I doubt Duds would have made much difference, although he would think otherwise, and he could get kicked ... And there was no way I was going to let him get hurt on account of a DVD player or computer. Those kinds of things were replaceable: Dudley wasn't.

I didn't skulk around the side, as I wanted whoever to have the opportunity to piss off and take what they needed. I know I could have called the police, but what would I say? 'Erm ... excuse me officer, but my dog is growling at an alleyway. Could you send a squad car ...and maybe the SWAT team?' Nah. I decided to do it alone. Well ... for now anyway.

There I was, marching towards my fate, covered in mud and determination. But when I turned the corner, I can honestly say the clichéd 'blood turning to ice' came about.

'What the fuck do you want?'

Sue.

I should have guessed by Dudley's reaction it was her. He could sniff her out anywhere, and as you already know, there was no love lost between them.

'And why are you hiding behind my bins?' I stood with my hands on my hips in the stance of the warrior. There was no way I was going to let her intimidate me again; after all, it was her that was hiding behind bins.

'I'm not hiding ... I was just writing you a note and needed something to lean on.' I looked at her hands and there was no sign of paper, or a pen for that matter. So, I gave her the raised eyebrow look as if to say 'Yeah, right.'

'I haven't got time for games, Sue. What do you want?'

She came towards me raising her hands in submission and trying to charm me with her tilted head smile, but there was no way that was going to work. I'd fallen for that before and look where that had got me.

'Can't I just come and see how you are once in a while?' My face said it all, but she didn't get the message. 'Just a coffee and a chat ... that's all I'm asking.'

I don't know what made me agree to it. I should have done what my mum did and told her to sling her hook. But ... I can't explain it. Just one of those things I guess. I had to physically restrain Duds and put him in the spare room before Sue could even come into the house. He wasn't happy. Neither was I, for that matter.

When she came in she acted as if she had never left, even offered to put the kettle on whilst I put my feet up. Obviously, I said no and told her to go into the living room and wait. I should have also known that that woman never did anything I ever asked her to do, as I found out when I was checking my messages on my answer phone. The first two were from her, purring in that breathy way down the phone about her just wanting to touch base. But it was the third one that got both her attention and mine.

'Hey, Beth. Amy. Just wanted to say I had a fantastic time this weekend, and that you don't snore ... too much.' Then her laugh. 'We'll have to do it again soon. I'll ring you in the week. Take care ... bye.' Then the sound of silence. Then the sound of Sue right behind me.

'Amy, eh? New conquest?'

I turned to face her, and I was glowing, for what reason I don't know. It's not as if anything had happened between Amy and me. Even if it had, it had fuck all to do with Sue.

'Seems like you're getting over me better than I thought.'

'There's nothing going on between Amy and me. We're just friends.' But I could tell she didn't believe me. Her whole countenance became smarmy. I could feel the flirt vibes radiating from her in waves and I had to conjure up the anti Sue force field that lurked under the surface.

'Coffee?' And I turned and shot into the kitchen, shutting the door behind me.

Five minutes later, I was walking back into the front room with two coffees and a deep-seated resolve to tell her to fuck off, and she could take her coffee with her. But what I didn't expect was to see her sitting on the sofa, head in hands and crying.

I experienced a mixture of emotions, as you can guess. I mean, so many things had happened between us, so many shit things, but I still didn't want to see her upset. My hands began to shake as I placed the mugs on the table, and then I sat on the other end of the sofa, totally at a loss as what to do. I didn't want to touch her: didn't want to give her the wrong impression. So I said the lamest thing you can say.

'Are you ok?' Why is it that when you see someone sobbing you ask them if they were ok? If they were ok, they wouldn't be sobbing would they? They'd be grinning, or rolling around laughing, or smiling, even a little bit. I clutched a few tissues from the box on the coffee table and shoved them underneath her chin. A shaking hand came out and tentatively took them, folding them into a mass and covering her face.

It was a few minutes before her staccato voice came bumbling out, 'I just miss you so much, Beth.' And then a minute more of crying, whilst I sat there feeling uncomfortable. What could I say? I don't miss you? Glad you're out of my life? So I kept silent and stared at the cup of coffee I had wanted her to take with her minutes before, wishing I had the spine to still tell her to do it. 'It was just a shock to hear you were with someone else ... and then to hear her.'

'But why, Sue? We're not an item anymore.' More tears. I really wanted to twiddle my thumbs and wait for her to stop, but it seemed out of place. It was only a few minutes later that I realised that I should have been feeling guilty; should have been apologising; should have been acting completely different to how I was. Because that would have been the way I'd have been feeling if we *were* still an item.

It felt good. I felt good. The whole situation, although uncomfortable, felt good. I held back the smile that was trying to creep onto my mouth, as there was no point rubbing it in. Or was there? Too right there was, and I was just about to tell her to take her pitiful, manipulative arse off my sofa and drag it as far away as possible when the phone rang. I should've ignored it, but it was instinctive. My hand was around the slim grey receiver, the button clicked, and I had said 'Hello' before I knew what I had done.

'Hi, sis.' Bollocks. It was my brother, Will. I know I haven't mentioned him much, but you know how it goes ... I was too wrapped up in self-pity to think about anyone but myself and my own misery. 'Can I come and see you?'

I looked at Sue, who was once again wiping her face dramatically on the crushed tissues and looking at me quizzically.

'Sure, Will. When?'

'Right now. I'm outside yours as we speak.'

'Now! But ...' Sue began shaking her head and gesturing frantically with her hand that she wanted us to be alone and talk. 'But ... that would be great. Sue was just leaving.' Honestly, talk about a turn around. She was like Lady Macbeth ... could have played the part with no primping. On one hand, she was the fragile, wronged party that quickly swapped that face for the face of a conniving little fu ...

'Great. I'm on my way up your path.'

And the phone clicked off to be replaced with the sound of the doorbell.

'Sorry, Sue. Family business.' She was in her feet and smoothing the front of her blouse with one hand whilst stroking a finger under one eye to remove smudged mascara. I didn't like to tell her it just rubbed it in more and made her look like a losing boxer. I smiled and turned to go and let my brother in and she followed me to the door.

As it opened and he stood there grinning like an idiot, Sue pushed in between us, blocked my view of my brother to whisper conspiratorially, 'I'll call you.' Then she pushed past him and flounced down the path.

'Bye, Sue! Lovely to see you!' Will called, and then turned to face me, finishing with, 'Not.'

After a bone-crushing hug, we were in the kitchen and I was making a fresh cuppa. I should have known there was a reason behind his visit, and I didn't have to wait long before I found out what it was.

'Been to mum and dad's tonight.' A pause. I didn't say anything. 'They were upset.' I still ignored him and heaped the four sugars into his cup. 'Beth? Are you listening to me?'

'Yep.' I stirred the milk in slowly.

'Aren't you going to say anything?'

'Nope.'

A heard him release a deep sigh and then pull a chair out from the table. The squeal of the chair leg on the floor grated my teeth. 'Mum was crying, Beth.'

'And?'

'Oh for fuck's sake ... can't you answer in more than one word?'

'Yes.' I tinked the spoon on the side of the cup. 'I can.'

When I turned, he was sitting with his arms dangling between his legs looking at me as if I had sprouted an extra head. 'I can't believe you. Mum was crying and you make jokes. Bad ones.'

I did feel bad, but I didn't want to give in just yet. Will knew me from old and saw the crack in my blank faced veneer. 'She's sorry for upsetting you. Said she didn't know where it came from. Before she knew it, it was out.'

Slam. His cup of tea was in front of him, a quarter of it now trickling over the tabletop. 'Look, Will. She shouldn't have said anything to Sue, or anybody else for that matter, about things that have nothing to do with her ... or dad.' I began to sloppily wipe up the mess. 'I think I'm old enough to look after myself.'

Then I remembered. 'Shit.' And I was gone. Out of the room and running.

'What's the matter?' I barely heard him. And the reason why was because I had forgotten something much more important than silly family squabbles. I'd forgotten I'd locked Duds in the spare room.

His little face lit up as I opened the door and he came skidding off the bed and charging to me, making a dramatic bounce just before. He was in my arms and licking my face, telling me off, I think. 'Sorry mate ... give mummy some kisses.'

Will had come behind me and ruffled Duds' head saying hello and making a fuss. The scene descended from there really. Duds always stole the show.

The subject about me upsetting my parents wasn't raised again until he was just about to leave, and by that time I had calmed down enough to agree that my behaviour was childish and silly. Even promised to call them as soon as he left. And I did. Like a good girl.

I knew why my mum had done and said what she did. She loved me. I loved her ... and my dad. But I did sometimes wish that they would treat me as an adult.

It wasn't what they had said about, and to, Sue ... in retrospect, which was funny. It was the fact they had made me look at me and my life, how crap it was ... the fact I had feelings for someone and I knew they were one-sided. The fact I never had, or ever would have a chance with Amy. And it stung.

Bedtime was a sombre affair, with me bathing for nearly an hour beforehand. I hadn't even unpacked my bag from my trip to Blackpool, as it would make me think of her. As if I needed reminding.

Thoughts of her haunted me when I closed my eyes, and when I opened them I had the strangest sensation that I could almost see her at the end of the bed. Fuck me. I must have been totally screwed up if I was beginning to hallucinate. Or was it just wishful thinking?

One thing I did know, and that I needed to get to sleep because I needed to get up early in the morning. But the odd thing was I didn't know why I had to be up early.

Unnerved? I was beginning to unnerve myself with my prophetic powers, so you're not on your own.

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### Chapter Five (Could this be the Climax Stage?)

I dreamed of her. Images of her poured into my subconscious even though I had tried to block them out. To say I woke myself up as dawn was breaking feeling horny would be an understatement. My lower half began to wriggle and I heard a grunt from the bottom of the bed. I couldn't do anything with Duds there, as I would feel embarrassed. I know. He was a dog and I should have just carried on and not bothered. I could have even lifted him off the bed and put him in his basket. But he looked so contented, his tongue slightly out of his mouth and emitting rasping little snores.

I couldn't shift him so I could fiddle with my lady bits, could I? That would be cruel, wouldn't it? Nope. You're right. I couldn't. But I could shift myself ...

Decision made, I was up and out of the door and into the spare room before Dudley could stretch out his paws.

As I lay on the bed I closed my eyes and thought of her face. Her smile. Her skin ... the softness of it. Thought about what it would taste like on the tip of my tongue ... feel like on the tips of my

fingers, and I could feel the growing sensation of arousal build once again. There was a brief moment where I felt a pang of guilt about thinking of her that way, but just let's say it was momentary. She would never know, would she? I mean ... a girl has to do what a girl has to do ...

I slipped off my sleeping trousers and sprawled out, my fingers loitering just a few inches from where I needed them. My other hand snaked its way inside my top and began to swirl slow circles around my left breast. The cloth of the t-shirt was getting in the way, so I pulled it off.

Naked. Naked and wet. Naked and wet and horny ... with one person on my mind. Her eyes captivated me, even though they were definitely in my imagination. Brown. Rich. Moist. And if I had to imagine them as a smell, I would say they would smell like freshly ground-roasted coffee. Definitely a stimulant.

My left nipple perked and peaked, and I grasped it gently with my index finger and thumb, all the while believing it was her fingers. A shock of arousal raced from my gut to my groin, and I felt the moisture pool and collect. Gently I slipped a finger between my folds and pushed down. The gasp left my lungs and forced my body to spasm once. I pulled it up, grazing my clit as I went. Another gasp. Another spasm. My eyes fluttered closed and open with each movement of my finger, and I allowed a second finger to slide down the other side of my folds, trapping the engorged clit between them.

Tug. Pull. Tug. Pull ... push. Tug, pull ... push. Over and over again, the rhythm steady, yet increasing in tempo. The sensations were all-consuming, encompassing my need and feeding the desire raging throughout me. My other hand had cupped my breast by this stage and was pumping the skin and soft flesh with unrestrained motions. I was bordering on delirium. I was bordering on that deep-rooted ecstasy that growls beneath the surface impatiently waiting to be freed.

I lifted my knees and spread my legs further apart, releasing the hold on my breast to slither along damp skin and between my legs. I was open and exposed. I was ready to separate and indulge. The cheeks of my arse clenched the cover of the bed and I lifted my hips to open the bulging bud at my centre. One hand to divide and unlock the entrance to the burrow within me. Slow and sure. Sure and slow, one finger inside, prodding and poking and excavating. Then a second. I could feel the walls inside clasping and gripping, tugging the fingers deeper.

Then out.

Then in.

Out and in.

Out and in.

Over and over again ... steady thrusts. Wet thrusts. Squelching thrusts that were increasing to plunges. God. I needed more. Needed to feel pressure on top of me... around me ... at the sides ... everywhere.

Fingers still buried deep, I grabbed a spare pillow and placed it between my legs. Then another, which lay on my stomach.

It wasn't enough.

I moved the pillow from my stomach and put it between my legs with the first, and my thighs clutched as my fingers pumped. Hips were bouncing on the bed, making up the rhythm of the missing piece. The missing person. The missing ...

Amy.

A gasp, as the flutter of orgasm announced its impending arrival. I worked harder. Plunged faster and deeper. Gripped the objects between my legs and rode my hand, her hand, till the lights appeared and the sound of my cries hit the walls and bounced onto my convulsing body. Reality was a blur. The room was distorted. The ache had subsided for now.

I dressed quickly, washed my hands, and then silently made my way back to my bedroom. Two beady eyes were staring at me from the middle of the bed. Dudley was sat bolt upright, glaring, as if to say 'Where the hell have you been?' his ball between his front paws. The embarrassing thing was that he gave me the impression that he knew. Must be the same as what your parents feel ...

Stop! I am NOT going down *that* road. Our parents do not do it. Only did it when you were conceived ... and other siblings. Artificial insemination? Jesus... now I'm thinking about ... forget it ... let's leave that train of thought, shall we? My dinner is swirling around in my stomach.

Where was I? Getting into bed. Right.

Cough.

When I clambered under the duvet, Duds sprawled himself across my neck and rubbed his face against mine before falling back to sleep. And it wasn't long before I followed, his red ball jamming into my side. But I didn't mind. Felt right somehow.

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As you may recall, I mentioned the getting up early part and why I didn't know why. Remember? Well, I found out ... very early indeed.

Duds got it into his head that he would bug the arse off me to get up and take him for a walk. This included whining little noises followed by a thudding on my chest where his ball hit me and

rolled off. I can't tell you how many times he did this, and no matter how many times I told him 'In a minute', he insisted that my minutes were definitely a lot longer than his.

Eventually, I gave in. He didn't. Talk about being stalked! He followed me around the house, slipping and slouching onto every piece of furniture so he could keep his eye on me. When I came out of the bathroom, there he was. Waiting. I offered him breakfast. He refused. His eyes noted every movement until he heard the magic word 'walk' slip from my lips. He didn't even need the word, as the squirt from my deodorant was enough to send him into an excited frenzy.

He dived onto one of my slippers and re-enacted a kill, shaking the poor thing from side to side and then lying on his back kicking his legs in the air.

We went to Earlham. Don't know why. But that's where we ended up. As soon as I opened the car he was off and running down the green sloping hill leading to the river. I watched his bum jump up and down as he ran, and then watched as he did a detour to the left towards the café. Little bugger. No wonder he didn't want dry biscuits. He was hoping for a sausage or bit of bacon.

I grabbed what I needed and chased after him, huffing and puffing and swearing to take more exercise. When I arrived at the café the owner was there trying to distract Duds with titbits, but he was having none of it. All he wanted to do was sneak past the man in any which way he could, his little tufty head looking past him as if he was searching for something.

I offered him his ball. He ignored me. I tried to pull him away ... he tugged me back. I ended up putting him on his lead and dragging him. He only got distracted when he was out of sight of the café, but I knew he had it on him so I kept him firmly attached to me until I could be sure that he was more interested in his ball than running off to the café again.

We walked for miles, and although it was freezing, I didn't care. Even though it was Monday, I didn't have to go into the office to pick up any more work, as I was still working on the 'Promoting Positive Mental Health' campaign, which was quite apt, to say the least. My head was so full of crap I couldn't begin to wade through it all. Thoughts of Amy were plaguing me. So were thoughts of Sue, for that matter. They took on the roles of angels and demons, you know, like the ones you see in Bugs Bunny cartoons when they would hover over his shoulder and give him advice. Then you, as a viewer, would know he should listen to the angel, but want him to take the advice of the demon because it was more fun. And in cartoons it wasn't real ... everything turned out ok in the end.

I'm sure you can imagine who played what part. Amy looked so angelic in white ... so pure ... and fuck ... I was getting turned on by my hallucinations. Give me strength.

A feeling of unsettlement slithered through me, and not because I was thinking of my life in terms of a Warner Brothers cartoon. It was the feeling that everything was so unpredictable; life was so bloody unpredictable. It had been over two months since I had split with Sue 'I will love you forever' Granger, but it still felt as if she had a hold over me.



I know the last time I had seen her I had felt strong and been able to block everything out, but my frame of mind was like the English weather - it never knew what it wanted to do. I had spent the last two months living under the black cloud of a broken relationship, shying away from getting stuck out in the rain, and what for? Saving myself for another rainy day? But wasn't the majority of the three and a half years I'd spent with her one storm after another, until it constantly seemed I was windswept and half drowned?

There were good times ... there had to have been, or else I wouldn't have stayed, would I? But at that moment in time I couldn't think of one half decent sunny day, not even a gentle warming breeze.

But we can't predict our futures, can we? That would take all the 'fun' out of getting screwed over from the dealers of the fate cards. I think that was where my problem really lay ... I didn't know what my future held - what to expect, and I was feeling wary that I would get myself into the same situation as I had before. For the last three and a half years everything had been done for me. I was told exactly what to do, who to see, what to say ... even how to bloody wash up, and now I felt naïve ... felt I couldn't quite cope in the adult world.

Then it hit me. I was coping. Wasn't I? My bills were getting paid every month - I fed, washed and dressed myself every day - and took care of Duds ... But - it didn't feel real, somehow. It seemed as if my relationship *very loosely* with Amy was like I was rebelling against something ... rebelling against everything, except I didn't know what. I know. Totally fucked up. And therein lies a load of bollocks. Rebelling? Frigging rebelling? Bollocks with a capital B. I wasn't rebelling - I was, until I found out about Jane, enjoying every single moment with Amy, and what I was trying to do now was qualify why she wasn't interested in me. Why she was interested in Jane and not me. And in the words of an Abba song ... 'the Gods may throw a dice ... the loser has to fall ... It's simple and it's plain'. And I was the loser. A loser. So I should just shut up and get used to it.

It's amazing how you can change your thoughts without even noticing. I was thinking about Sue and my relationship and suddenly - bam ... Amy. I shook my head, called for Duds, and then made my way home. Away from all the elements.

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The rest of the day went quickly with me wading through thumbnail after thumbnail of potential ideas and slogans, and before I knew it, Duds was in front of me, his harness hanging from his mouth.

Another walk. Another set of thoughts. Then back home again - shower - then bed. I drifted off with the image of Amy laughing ... and I felt the crease of a smile slip onto my mouth, then felt Duds curl up in the crook of my legs and release a contented sigh. And so did I.

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Chapter Six (The Anti Climax - has to be, doesn't it)

I kept myself busy ... very busy. Even went into the office a couple of times that week. It felt strange at first talking to people I had worked with nearly everyday for the last seven years. I felt like a stranger ... almost an impostor. My work colleagues treated me in exactly the same way they always had - poked fun - took the piss - showed me the designs they were working on. It was good - eventually. The feeling of normalcy crept in ... I felt normal, whatever normal actually means.

Duds spent his time at my parents and I bugged the arse off them with phone calls to check he was ok. I knew I was obsessing, but in retrospect I think it was transference. I was only out of the house the matter of hours and I now believe he would have liked the time on his own - a bit of peace and quiet. He used to be perfectly happy staying at my parents when I used to go to work full time - and I didn't ring them ten times a day then.

I'm rattling on again, aren't I? Well spotted. And the reason I'm going off on my very own personal tangent is because Amy hadn't called. No more messages on my answering machine ... my mobile ... not even a text message. I was text free. I think I went out so I didn't have to sit waiting for the phone to get off his arse and do his job. Then when I came home I did everything I possibly could do to not look at the non-blinking light on the answer phone display.

It wasn't until Saturday morning that the musical sound of my muted friend thrummed through the house once again. I was making a coffee, or should I say, I was tipping coffee grinds all over my work surface when it announced her reappearance? There was a mixture of emotion whirling inside me - I was happy to hear her voice; but anger because it had been nearly a week since she'd said she'd call; and finally, an overwhelming sense of sadness and loss. She was with Jane. The same Jane who I'd taken an instant dislike to without even meeting.

My tone evened out to indifference.

When she asked whether I fancied doing anything, going anywhere ... did I fancy meeting up, as she was already in Norwich. I had to bite my tongue so I didn't spit out, 'Why don't you ask your girlfriend?' But I restrained myself ... told her I was working. I could feel Duds glaring at me as the lie slipped from between my lips and I mouthed 'What?' to him as if he understood.

She did sound disappointed, I give her that. Tried to talk me round ... tried to make arrangements for the evening - pictures - meal - her treat. But I stayed firm, and I'm buggered if I know why. The call ended with a promise to do something soon, but it felt strange, and I felt like a right cow.

As soon as I placed the receiver on the handset, regret washed over me. What was I doing? I was jeopardising the first real friendship I had had in years because I couldn't handle the fact she was with someone else. I was blaming her for finding someone other than me, even when I had never given her the indication I even thought of her that way.

I snatched the phone back up and called her back. Busy. So I left a message telling her work could wait and what did she fancy doing. Inside I felt like a weight had been lifted from me ...

like I was actually doing something constructive instead of mooching around feeling sorry for myself.

Fifteen minutes later, she called back, her voice happier than the last time we had spoken. 'Glad you changed your mind, Chambers.' I grinned, but I felt it slip slightly as she continued. 'Is it ok if Jane comes with us?' Bollocks. 'She called just after I had spoken to you and as you said you were busy ...'

What could I do? Say 'Oops ... sorry. Just noticed a huge pile of paperwork I have to get done before tomorrow.' Or even 'Why don't you two just go out? You don't want me spoiling your fun.'

And I did. Said the last one ... told her to go out with Jane, as I didn't want to act like a gooseberry. The end of the line went extremely quiet for a few seconds, and I thought she was deliberating, but then she said she wouldn't hear of it and they would meet me at the Bar Tapas in town at one. No arguments.

After I had said goodbye with the promise to be on time, I dropped my head into my hands. It was ok to be all-accepting when you didn't have to face the 'other woman'; anyone can play the martyr from a distance. But I was meeting them as a couple for the first time, and I was regretting ever calling her back.

Duds was shipped off to my parents, who made more of a fuss of him than they did of me - like usual. They didn't even notice I was positively green about the gills. Dad was slipping on his wellies and promising my excited pal a long walk. So. I was ignored by all and sundry as I went to meet Amy and her bird. Yes. That does sound a tad bitter doesn't it?

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They were both there when I entered. Amy was facing the door and stood up excitedly to wave dramatically as if she was on a buoy bobbing in the ocean waiting for a lifeguard to pick her up. Her grin was splitting her face and she left the table to come and give me a hug. The smell of her made me automatically close my eyes and just ... inhale. It was as if I was sucking her right in. I could hear her saying how good it was to see me and she was glad I could make it.

Slowly, I opened my eyes and saw Jane looking at us with a welcoming smile on her face. Unfortunately, she was gorgeous. Long dark hair and olive skin, and her eyes were brown and enveloped with long dark lashes. Her smile was so white, and she looked the picture of health and happiness. No wonder Amy preferred her to me. I certainly would.

'Beth. This is Jane. Jane - Beth.' Jane stood and held out her hand in greeting, and I knew my palms were all sweaty, but I couldn't avoid shaking her hand - that would be rude. So I quickly swiped my hand down the side of my jeans and prayed she wouldn't notice. Hers was cool, but not clammy. Just right. A firm, yet friendly, shake accompanied by a 'It's lovely to finally meet you.'

'Jane can't stay long. She's got to be gone by two.'

I felt the cheer well up inside me, and I knew it seemed childish - I had no chance with Amy whether Jane was here or not - so I gulped it down and said, 'Oh ... that's a shame,' as you do.

'Yes. I have to meet my future mother in law in Jarrolds' house ware department to pick out pan sets and other wedding presents from our list.' She turned to Amy. 'I can't see why you get out of this ... she's your mother after all.'

Fuck me. They were getting married. This was getting worse and worse. I was totally at a loss for words, I mean - they were getting married for Christ sakes. And there I was ... sitting playing gooseberry when they should be picking out pan sets and duvet covers together with mother. I didn't know how to react ... didn't know whether to join in the conversation and wish them luck, or pick up the menu and try to decipher the Spanish. So I just acted coy, or was it vacant? Maybe it was village idiot, because before I knew what was happening they were both staring at me waiting for me to say something.

But, I'd missed the question. I was too busy thinking of an excuse not to listen to anymore of their banter. I gave them the 'I'm sorry - could you repeat that?' face and Jane leaned over the table conspiratorially, but with a degree of humour.

'Do you think that Amy should get out of shopping with *her* mother ...' she glared at Amy, who lifted her hands in mock defence, 'and her future sister-in-law, because she hates being dragged around all the shops?'

My face said it all. Or maybe it said nothing. I can't even gauge the expression ... it felt stunned, like a wet fish had been slapped repeatedly across my cheeks ... fins and all.

'Huh?' Fuck. At this rate, they would both think I was dim, dumb or deaf. And then the classic line ... 'You're getting married?' No shit, Sherlock. 'To Amy's brother?' Elementary, my dear Watson.

'Well, I wouldn't be marrying her sister ... she hasn't got one. I'm marrying James, her little brother.' And they both laughed, and I just sat there, waiting for my face to melt. It was hot enough. The realisation dawned on Jane after nearly a minute. 'Did you ... me and Amy ... together?' She sounded like Yoda. Then she started laughing again, but Amy just sat back in her chair and smiled at her, one eyebrow raised.

By this stage I was feeling like a total dick head. Like usual. Both feet in - not even hitting the sides of my mouth. It was amazing how stupid you can feel without actually saying anything *really* stupid. As they say, actions speak louder than words, and lately I had been acting stupid. I had automatically assumed that Amy was dating Jane ... assumed she was with somebody and hadn't told me. And you know what they say about assuming don't you. You guessed it ... another cliché - to assume, you make an ass out of u and me. And I felt like an ass.

'Come on ... let's order.' Amy leaned forward and gave me the Special's List, followed by a wink and a smile. 'You've gone all red.'

You bet I had. Inside I was glowing ... and it wasn't from the heat of the place.

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Lunch was good. It was stimulating to mix with people ... to socialise and have fun. It had been too long since I had been out with any of my friends ... months in fact. Come to think of it, it must have been over a year. It had been too much like aggravation to go out with them before, and it was just easier to not see them. Shallow, eh? Sometimes I couldn't quite believe how far I had let things slide ... how much of myself I had lost trying to keep the peace. And what for? So I could end up walking in one day and seeing her screwing someone else, that's why.

I know it takes two people to make a relationship work, and any relationship worth its salt needs attention ... needs nurturing ... both parties need to know they are loved. And I was as much to blame as anybody for allowing things to get as far as they did. Thinking about it, I believe that if I had put my foot down and actually grown a spine, things would have been a whole lot different. Maybe Sue and I would have had a chance ... maybe she would still be here loving me forever as we planned. Or she planned.

But it was too late for maybes or what ifs. Too much had happened, even the clichéd water under the bridge had flowed past.

Jane left at ten past two, saying she would be in the doghouse with the mother in law even before she had entered the family. And that left Amy and I. Alone. In a café full of people at lunchtime. Not quite the desolate setting I wanted, but it did feel like there was only her and me in the whole place. And it felt wonderful - especially now that I knew she wasn't with Jane.

There might be someone else, though. She might have a girlfriend - just because one has been taken off the 'other half' list, didn't mean there wasn't another waiting in the wings - or even centre stage. Bugger. All I wanted to do was ask her if she was seeing someone ... was interested in anyone ... if I had a chance. But I just couldn't pluck up the nerve. It would have been different if I didn't like her so bloody much, I would've just asked her and took her answer on the chin. However, if I asked her and she said she did have someone else, I would be back at square one again. And for the moment I just wanted to pretend that I did have a chance in hell.

After paying the bill we decided to have a walk around the market and then catch an early film. Amy's mother and Jane were staying at her house for a few more days, as they had come from Stratford to get some shopping in without men hanging about. I did tell her she didn't have to entertain me, and that she should get some quality time with her family under her belt. She wouldn't hear any of it. Kept insisting she'd seen enough of them, and Norwich shops, in the last week to last a lifetime.

'And I want to spend time with you.' A pause. 'Missed you.'

I stopped mauling the dog bed on the stall and just turned to look at her. She seemed so sincere and open. There was something just below the surface in her expression that made my heart giddy up and rear excitedly. I swallowed a couple of times just to try and clear the lump that had suddenly announced itself before mumbling I had missed her too.

'Well, that's ok then.' She tilted her head to the side and looked at me, the smile creeping out and easing the tension between us. It was a weird sensation. The tension, I mean. It wasn't like I was worried, more like expectant. I wanted to see more in the smile ... the expression ... the feeling, but I didn't dare to. So I just turned around and bought the dog bed for Duds without even giving it the thorough examination I usually did. Another multicoloured accessory that he would sniff before jumping onto the sofa. He had three already.

We skipped the film. Too much to carry, thanks to me and my aversion techniques. We went back to my parents to pick Dudley up and take him for a walk, and Amy came in my car as she had walked into town.

He went crazy when I walked into my parents' house. Gave me a quick lick and then was all over Amy like a rash. Had her pinned on the sofa in less than a minute. The funny thing was, she wasn't even sitting down, or even attempting to get on the sofa when it happened - the little bugger knocked her clean off her feet.

Have you ever noticed how your parents act when you take home a date? I know Amy wasn't a date ... and I'm sure you've taken someone home who wasn't, but your parents think they are the new love of your life. Talk about embarrassing. They keep grinning, winking and nodding at you every time the person looks away, mouthing 'She's nice' or 'keep this one'. And they suddenly stop when the person looks at them, making it really bloody obvious. This time was no exception.

It had the essence of the Spanish Inquisition: Mum asking questions with Dad adding detail. I expected them to ask to see her bank details at one point, and I was trying every trick in the book to steer Amy and Duds to the door, but to no avail. They were on a mission.

Eventually I gave up the idea and accepted another cup of tea and the invitation to look at Dad's garden. It was pretty, although most of the colour was gone. He was explaining how he was preparing for the onset of winter, and you could never be too early when Mum asked me to help pour the tea. I went in mumbling about how many people did it take to pick up a teapot and pour in a splash of milk.

'She's lovely, Beth.' Ah. She thought separating us would weaken us and I would spill the beans about how fantastically in love I was. 'She thinks the world of you.'

I looked at her with surprise, changing my expression to 'And how on earth do you make that out?' in an instant.

'Mum's just know.' Cryptic, and also annoying. Especially when she turned and made the tea herself, not even asking for me to pass wine never mind the milk. I just lounged against the

kitchen work surface and watched with admiration sprinkled with laziness. I wanted her to continue, wanted her to explain what she actually meant by Amy thinking the world of me. Did she mean the 'thinking the world of' me like one friend feels for another? Or ...

'For God's sake. Don't let the girl see you looking like that. You look gormless.'

I straightened my face, and my shoulders for that matter, before rolling my eyes. Amazing how much you change as you get older. If I'd still been the stropky teen, I would have rolled my eyes first.

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It was too late to take Duds to the park. Well, too dark, as the evenings were upon us so early now. He didn't seem to mind a walk around Amy's neighbourhood. I think he enjoyed finding out who was about by sniffing every single lamppost and gate.

The walk was refreshing and comfortable. We chatted about what we had been up to in the week, and Amy said she had gone to Earlham early on the Monday to see if she could catch me. Had a coffee and waited for a while, but she had an early class and couldn't wait long. The rest of her week was spent working or playing tour host.

I couldn't concentrate on what she was telling me, because all I could think about was Duds' behaviour on Monday. Remember? When he raced off and tried to get in the café? Thought you would. It must have been a coincidence, as there was no way he would have known she had been there. Was there?

Just as the thought meandered around my head, Dudley turned and looked at me, and for all the world he looked as if he was laughing.

And they call them dumb animals. Makes me wonder who is the more intelligent species. Actually ... there is no comparison.

'Yap.'

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~ Once ~  
by Fingersmith

## Chapter Seven (The Climax)

You've been waiting for this haven't you? The Climax Stage ... or just a climax, full stop. Firstly, you have to consider what has to be The Climax of this story. Is it your kind of climax, or is it mine? Maybe we are way off kilter in our connection - maybe we are on the same plane. Who knows?

Me.

And I'm going to tell you what I consider to be the climax - the dramatic bit ... the section where the 'events' take place. But what are the events? Are they 'exciting', 'thrilling', or even 'racy'? They could be mediocre ... and I bet that's what you're thinking about this story to date, aren't you? Mediocre, with a splattering of cute for the dog lover.

I also guarantee you are thinking 'for fuck's sake - get on with it!'

So I will.

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I left Amy with the promise of picking her up at nine thirty the following morning. She wanted to come out with me with Duds for his early morning run - or 'the pissing off with the ball' walk, as I thought of it.

When I climbed into bed that night, I felt like I would never be able to get to sleep. But before I knew it, the alarm was screaming and Duds was on me with excited licks.

Up. Showered. Fed. Both of us - well, Duds declined the shower, and killed my slipper instead.

As I hovered outside Amy's door, the butterflies were vying for front row seats, and I kept on lifting my hand up to knock, then dropping it again. Eventually, the door sprang open and a woman in her late sixties stood there grinning.

'Are you going to knock or are you going to keep threatening the poor doorknocker?' My hand was lifted and inches away from her chest (the knocker should have been there - well it was - erm two of them - oh fuck - I'm not going there). 'You've gone all red. Are you all right?' Bugger. Like mother like daughter. I nodded, and she smiled at me confirming my thoughts of her relationship with Amy. 'You must be Beth. I'm Marion, Amy's mother. Come in, you'll catch your death out there.'

Dudley had waited patiently at my feet all this time, his ball gripped in his mouth, looking like a little angel. 'Aw ... bless. You must be Dudley.' She bent down and ruffled his hair on his head, whilst he emitted a low gurgling noise of contentment around his ball. 'Aren't you a gorgeous little man ... yes you are ... yes you are ...'



'Mum! For God's sake, let them in.' Amy had appeared at the end of the hallway, her coat and scarf in her hand. I smiled at her and she returned it with knobs on. Dudley made a howling noise of excitement and pulled me full force into the hall trying to get to her. I nearly bumped into her mother, and turned to apologise. She was looking at her daughter and nodding, whilst mouthing something. I looked to Amy, who had flushed scarlet.

'I can't let you two girls go out without giving you a cuppa to warm you up,' Marion said as she was closing the door. And I'm definite I heard her say something along the lines of 'But by the look of you, I doubt you'll need it,' as she passed Amy. I saw her grimace and look apologetically my way.

'Ignore her. She's going senile.'

'I heard that, madam.'

The laugh burst from me. I couldn't help it. It was just like being at home. I felt like I had come home at long last.

Tea was an illuminating affair, especially along the lines of Amy's relationship with her mother. They were so close and the banter came easily. Jane joined us after a little while, rubbing the sleep from her eyes and fumbling around the teapot until Marion tutted, took it and poured her a cup. Duds kept on going from one person to another hoping one of us would remember that it was walk time. Eventually, he lay down in front of the Aga and placed the ball protectively between his feet.

We must have been there for nearly an hour before Amy decided enough was enough and said we were leaving. Just as I reached the door, accompanied by Jane, she asked if I would like to attend her wedding in February. She looked back, as did I, to Amy, who was busily trying to button up her coat. I felt strange, you know, like I was intruding. I didn't know what Amy would think about me tagging along to her brother's wedding. They were family get togethers and I was someone she barely knew.

'Just asking Beth if she fancied coming to the wedding.'

'And?' Amy was looking at me expectantly, but I still didn't know what to say. 'It would be great to have you there. You could meet my obnoxious little brother.' Jane mock glared at her and linked my arm protectively.

'Ignore her ... she's just jealous that he can keep a girl ...' and she laughed as Amy stuck two fingers up at her. 'We'd all love to have you there ... you can stay at our house - both of you can.'

'Ok ... thank you, that'd be great.' My answer sounded rather lame when I come to think of it. Almost textbook.

'Amy will give you the details, although I'll send you an invite as soon as the bloody printers sort them out.'

I thanked her again and she hugged me. 'Lovely to finally meet you Beth.' Finally? 'Probably see you at Christmas, if you're free.'

Then we left ... Amy, Duds and I. Inside my head were questions and suggestions about what had happened, but for the life of me I didn't know why. It wasn't as if there was a hidden message lurking under the invite or the comment, but something just seemed out of place. Maybe it was because Jane had said 'finally', especially because I had met her the previous day.

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The walk was fun ... a word and an emotion I had come to expect when I was around her. The air was crisp and cold making our faces glow and appear the picture of health and well-being. We went to Mousehold Heath, and the ground was crunchy underfoot with frost. Duds didn't seem to mind the coldness. He spent his time chasing squirrels and his ball, stopping occasionally to make sure we were close by.

When we came to the clearing, we sat down on the bench to catch our breaths, Dudley lying down at my feet panting. The view was amazing from the top of the hill, and we had a perfect view of the cathedral. It seemed to glow against the grey winter skyline.

Amy was explaining about the civil war and the evidence of bullets in the nave of the cathedral, but I found my gaze drifting from the topic of conversation and looking at her instead. She was truly breathtaking. The ache in my chest pounced on me and I caught the gasp before it released itself. It felt like my heart was flooding, and the warmth from it started to seep and creep along to every nook and cranny of my body. I knew this was moving on from attraction ... knew the feelings I had tried to contain were breaking free and there was nothing I could do about it.

She turned to me and smiled, radiantly. I desperately wanted to lean over and take her face in my hands and kiss her ... or even be content to just hold her in place and look into those beautiful eyes so she would know without me having to tell her.

I couldn't tell her. I couldn't take her face in my hands. And there was no way on earth I could make the first move and kiss her ... no way. I didn't feel able to ... didn't feel strong enough if she told me she didn't feel the same way. And mainly, I didn't feel I could lose her friendship - not now - not now that I'd found her.

Inside I had the mix of elation and sadness. Elated because I knew I could move on from what had happened between Sue and I: sad because I also knew I was no further away from what had happened than I was three months ago.

'Yap!'

'Come on. Someone wants us to move along.'

Yes. And that someone was me.

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Days turned into weeks and our friendship blossomed. Being together seemed the most natural thing in the world, and being without her was beginning to hurt. I felt as if I was getting stronger - emotionally and mentally - and I was back at the office full time. Much to Dudley's displeasure.

Sue had called a few times - both on the phone and also banging repeatedly on my front door, but I'd let her bang. There was no way I wanted that woman in my life again, because every time she made contact, or tried to, a feeling of guilt would creep over me. Don't ask me why, as I haven't a clue - I still can't understand why I would feel guilty around her. It wasn't as if I had anything to feel guilty about - I wasn't the one who had shagged another woman in our bedroom. I can't express it very well, it was just a feeling that would wash over me and made me feel vulnerable. And I had spent too long feeling vulnerable where she was concerned. Thankfully, her attention was weaning off, and I hoped it would eventually flutter, putter and fade.

Before I knew it, Christmas was upon us in all its resplendent, garish glory, and I found myself in a social bind once again. What on earth could I buy her that wouldn't be over the top or not enough? I wanted it to be special ... I wanted it to tell her how I felt. I wanted it not to expose me ... I wanted ... Fuck. I didn't know what I wanted. I hate shopping at the best of times, and this scenario was taking the biscuit. I even tried tricking her to find out, but she didn't take the bait. Eventually, I gave up and decided on book vouchers. Forever the romantic - that's me.

But I didn't get them. And you know why? My mother. Jesus! When she found out I was planning on buying book vouchers, I honestly thought she was going to disown me or keel over. It wasn't as if I had told her how I felt about Amy, and it wasn't as if my mum had asked. But as you are aware - mums just know. That led to a shopping trip to Norwich, with my mum metaphorically holding my hand and dragging me around the shops.

It was hilarious to watch the other mothers with their kids as we walked around, and I felt myself cringe at the memory of my own teenage years. One set of confused parents were calling over one shop's clothing department asking their child if they had enough money to get home, and the girl answered in the usual way, '*Noooooo! Leave me alone!*' The parents were trying to offer money, but the girl just stomped away with her friend, leaving the parents standing there.

'Brings back memories, eh?' I grunted response. 'Although you still have your charming way with words.' I grunted again. 'Or not.'

Interminable. That's the only word that springs to mind. Shopping in the city centre with Christmas just around the corner was just that. Interminable. Queues and queues greeted us wherever we went, and I was thinking more and more fondly of those lovely book vouchers that would allow me to get home and put my feet up.

And then I saw it. Saw the present. *The* present. Sitting in the window of an out of the way shop. Looking innocent. Looking like it was waiting for me to buy it.

'That's perfect, luv.' I turned and looked my mum in the face and we both smiled the same smile ... slow, yet building into a huge grin.

'Yes. It is isn't it?'

Twenty minutes later had both me and my mum heading for a much-needed coffee, a carrier bag clutched possessively in my hand.

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Yes. I know you want to know what I bought for her. But you'll have to wait, like she did. It wasn't expensive, or glamorous ... it was just right. And I couldn't wait to see her reaction.

Jane, James and Amy's parents came down for Christmas and I wouldn't see her until Boxing night. We had decided to give each other our presents then, as the rest of the time was to be spent with family. But the day didn't go without a phone call, and the customary talking to every member of each other's families.

The day also didn't go by without contact from Sue. Unfortunately. She must have timed it to perfection. After lunch ... washing up done and dusted; parents sleeping through the Queen's speech; Will and his new flame flagrantly absent. The only ones knocking about were me and Duds, and even he was ready for a nap after eating so much turkey.

I usually would've checked who was calling, but I just flipped the lid on my mobile thinking it was Amy. When I heard her voice, I felt the sprouts I'd eaten for lunch whirling around trying to escape her voice. After I realised it wasn't Amy, the tone of my voice could be described as nothing short of icy. 'What do you want, Sue?'

She made the excuse she just wanted to wish me all the best and was hoping I was enjoying my day, but I just felt pissed off that she had bothered to call. I know. Ungrateful. The call was short, but long enough to put a dampener on my mood, and when I hung up it was as if she was still there. And there was me, thinking I was getting better.

A warm wet tongue slicked itself over my knuckles, and I looked down into Dudley's concerned eyes. It always amazes me how dogs know that you are upset. And I was upset, for some reason I couldn't quite place. It was as if I went along pretending everything was ok and then - bam. A reminder that I was still fucked up. I know - I know! Let it go. It is one of the weirdest sensations anyone can experience. I kept on telling myself that my future was in my hands and I had the power to change the way I thought about me and my life ... So why did I prefer to beat myself up about things I could ultimately change?

I'm beginning to sound like those old ladies who complain about anything and everything and I'm getting on my own nerves. Let's skip the soul searching and move things along to Boxing night, shall we?

Ok. Let's.

She arrived at six twenty five, and by six thirty two I had eventually pulled Dudley off her. He was all over her like a rash - licking her face, his paws on her chest, kissing her like mad. And at that moment I wished I were him. Amy's laughter rang through the house, and every time she laughed, the more excited he became. Little bugger.

'And now it's mummy's turn.' Amy's voice caught me unawares, but not as much as the feeling of her arms going around me did. Even I felt my body stiffen, but she just squeezed me close to her and kissed my cheek. 'Merry Christmas, Beth.'

I think I said something similar back, but I was trying to get a whiff of her hair, and before I knew it she had let me go. I hadn't really had an opportunity to get a grip on her, which, in hindsight, was a blessing. I knew if I'd held her properly, it would have been hell and all trouble for me to let go.

'Present time.' She opened her bag and pulled out two presents. 'One for you and one for the main man.' Dudley loves opening presents. He's good at it too - only eats part of the paper. It took him less than thirty seconds to reveal the brand spanking new red ball, which he gripped in his mouth and fled the room, probably to hide it in one of his beds. He ignored the bag of chews that had surrounded his new best friend.

'We'll have to wait until he comes back before I give you his present,' my hand was clutching the gift-wrapped box. 'Or else he'll sulk. He's saved up all his pocket money too.' I held out the gift I had bought for her, my hands shaking slightly. 'Here. You'll have to make do with mine for now.'

She opened it so carefully, peeling back the gold paper as if it would break. Eventually she had the naked box sitting on her lap and her fingers toyed around with the lid. I was praying that she liked it, as I had a growing sensation I had missed my mark and just bought her something I would like.

Slowly, she lifted the lid off and separated the tissue paper to reveal to the glistening object inside. Tentatively, she dipped her fingers inside and plucked the palm sized crystal figure from its depths. 'Oh Beth ...' She paused ... and so did my breathing ... 'its beautiful.'

The small crystal figure was a border terrier sitting proudly with a dark red stone in its mouth. 'It's Dudley!' I saw the tears spring to her eyes and I felt them pricking against my rapidly fluttering lids. 'He's beautiful.' The gentility of her movements depicted the reverence she held, and I knew she liked it. 'Even with the ball.' One lonely tear trickled its way from her left eye and paused before racing down her face.

'Glad you like it.' That's all I could say. She looked so beautiful sitting there so full of emotion. I'd hoped she would like it, but I had never envisioned she would be so touched by the gift.

We just sat there for a while and watched as the lights danced off the crystal, reflections catching in her eyes. I think that was the moment I knew I was in love with her.

The silence didn't affect us. It felt right. Everything felt right with her, and that's what made things so bloody confusing.

'What am I doing? Here's your gift.' She held out a flat rectangle shaped present and then sat rapidly back onto the sofa. As I was peeling the paper off, Dudley came trotting back in the room, jumping into the seat next to Amy and snuggling against her leg. His ball would be well and truly hidden, as he wouldn't rest until it was.

I looked back down at the parcel again and peeled the paper back. Amy was watching every move I made and I was hoping I would react in the way she wanted me too. I uncovered a wooden frame and a glint of glass, then impatience pounced upon me and I tore the paper back.

It was Dudley. I mean, a photograph of Dudley, looking all gorgeous and handsome and clean. He was sat bolt upright staring straight at the camera, looking straight into my eyes and hitting me straight in my heart. Nestled at his feet was his ball, all chewed and tattered. Then it became all blurry, as my eyes had filled with tears. I looked over the edge of the frame to see two pairs of eyes looking at me with expectation.

'I ... I ... he's ... how ...' The words just wouldn't come. They jammed and clambered at the back of my throat - wanting to escape, yet knowing if they did they may say more than I was willing to give.

Amy's smile blossomed, and Dudley sat up and panted like he was laughing. 'I called your mum and asked her if I could borrow him a couple of weeks ago.' She ruffled his hair. 'She was a little doubtful at first, until I told her what it was for.' I was wiping the tears away from my cheeks and harrumphing understanding. No wonder my mum didn't want me to get book vouchers ... she knew the trouble Amy had gone to for my present and knew I would've died of embarrassment when I received this gift. 'It was ok, wasn't it? To borrow him?'

I nodded. Then I leaned forward and grabbed her hand. I just had to touch her and let her know how happy I was, because words had deserted me, and all I could think about was telling her how much it meant to me ... how much she meant to me. But without actually telling her how much she meant to me, if you get my meaning. Her fingers curled around mine and squeezed.

I looked into her eyes and I saw something there. I didn't know what it was, but her face was getting closer to mine ... closer ... and oh so much closer.

'Bang! Bang! Bang!' No. It wasn't my heart speeding up and trying to make a break for it, it was the fucking doorknocker nearly being ripped off its little hinge. 'Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!' And alongside the doorknocker, reality came banging back into focus, and I took in the scene before me. Amy was actually on the floor, kneeling in front of me. Don't tell me I pulled her off the sofa? Shit!

Scuttling to my feet, I saw Amy sit back on her haunches and look enquiringly at me. She was probably wondering why she was on the floor too, and how I had dragged her there without her

knowing. She did look kind of startled. And I could feel the tell tale signs of embarrassment creeping up my face in the customary red flush. 'Bang! Bang! Bang!'

'Ok! I'm coming!' And I turned and nearly fled from the room.

I wish I hadn't bothered. Actually, no. I don't really know what I wanted at that precise moment. I knew I didn't want to make even more of a fool of myself than I already had, but then again I didn't want to stand in an open doorway with Sue. Bollocks.

'You look all flushed. Hope I'm not disturbing anything?' But her face said she hoped she was. 'I'm not stopping.' So why did she push past me and walk towards the front room then? In my book, that's a sign of someone wanting to park their arse on the sofa and sit for hours. So, I did what most of us would do. I shrugged and shut the door. I knew Sue would be pissed off when she saw Amy in there. And Dudley.

And ... Dud ... ley.

The sound of Dudley was enough to turn my blood to ice and make me race to the front room. Amy was trying to cajole him, trying to hold him back. Surprise was plastered onto her features, as she had never seen him react to anybody this way. Obviously, she didn't know it was Sue.

'Beth?'

'I've got him.' And as I passed Sue with him, he went to take a bite of her, but I pulled him further into me and left Sue and Amy alone whilst I put him in the sunroom. He looked totally devastated when I was closing the door, and I felt bad that he saw this as punishment for protecting me.

When I got back, Sue was in her charm-personified role, but Amy's face was closed. Sue must have introduced herself.

'We're just getting acquainted. Amy, right?' Amy grunted. 'Beth's told me about how well you two get on - such good friends, aren't you? That's what you said wasn't it, Beth?' She is such a shit stirrer. She was either trying to get it out of her, or me, if there was anything going on, or putting the blockers on it. Knowing her, she was doing both. 'What a lovely photograph! I'd love a copy of it.'

'Why?'

'Huh?'

'Why on earth would you want a copy of a photo of Dudley? It's not as if you even like each other.'

'Now, now, Beth. No getting all argumentative *again*, especially in front of your friend.' I looked at Amy, who was decidedly uncomfortable with the situation, and decided that for once Sue was right.

'What did you want, Sue?' From the corner of my eye, I could see Amy collecting her things. 'I've got company.' I hoped she would take the hint and bugger off - not Amy - Sue. But as usual, she had arrived wearing her rhino skin clothing and the hint I wanted her to leave bounced off it. Amy stood, pulling her bag over her shoulder. Crap.

'Just thought you might want a little company. I wasn't going to stay long.' A slight pause. 'But it seems as if your guest is going ...'

I could feel the fire in my gut racing and I wanted to tell her to fuck off, but that would have just made me look base and common in front of Amy.

'Beth ... I have to go. I'm leaving for Stratford in the morning.'

Panic filled me. Panic? No, not quite the kind of panic as you would expect if you were in a situation that was life threatening ... even though in a way that seemed quite apt, although not ... oh crap. I didn't want her to leave. I didn't want her to go. I wanted it to be ten minutes ago when she was at my feet and I was on the verge of making a fool of myself.

'You ... going away?' I didn't know she was going away.

'For New Year ... family tradition. Bring it in, in the town square.' Her voice lowered at the end as if she was drifting off from what she was saying.

Sue was patting the sofa and fluffing the cushions by this stage, and I had the urge to grab the nearest one and smother her with it. The base and common thing was becoming more and more appealing.

'I think you'd better go, Sue. I have a guest.'

'But ...'

'No buts. You'd better leave.' I had a sensation in the base of my back - I think it was my spine forming. 'Now.'

Her hand stopped mid fluff and she turned to face me. 'If I'm not wanted ...'

'You're not. And this is no time for dramatics.' Amy looked at me, her face saying she didn't mind leaving, but I was having none of it. There was only one unwanted person in that room and there was no way I was going to let her take over my life again. Sue looked livid, but I didn't give two hoots. 'Don't forget your bag.' I lifted it up and thrust it into her. 'And shut the door on your way out.'



'Still the cold, heartless bitch, Beth? Thought a bit of time on your own might have defrosted you a little.' She turned to look at Amy. 'Good luck, love. She's as cold in the sack too.' Then she was gone. Slam. Definitely gone, if the groaning of the door's hinges were any indication.

The room reverberated the bang, and it seemed to echo in vacuous pulses, throbbing off the walls and pinging off the furniture. Both Amy and I cringed at the impact and waited for the ricocheting to cease. I didn't want to look at Amy; I didn't want to see the realisation of who I was in her eyes. So, I turned and left the room to retrieve Duds from the sunroom. At least he was pleased to see me - well, if he had stopped for a minute instead of bolting past me in to the living room to finish what he had started. I wished I could have finished what Amy and I had started before the Wicked Witch of the West had turned up ... or dropped a house on Sue instead.

I waited a couple of minutes before I made a move to go back, thoroughly expecting to hear another slam as she left before having to make up an excuse. But there was no slam. Just the sound of cooing. Cooing?

Duds was giving Amy what I like to call a thorough doggy inspection by the time I got back. He was sitting on her knee, and I could tell by her face he had given it a good old-fashioned washing whilst I wasn't there to pull him off. He was giving her the 'beady eye' - the look where it honestly looks as if he is reading minds. Amy was stroking his back and cooing adoringly into his face. It was beautiful sight. A beautiful woman stroking my beautiful boy in a beautiful way. Her eyes drifted to mine and she smiled and I felt my heart pound out 'I love you I love you I love you' until the breath was realised from my mouth into the air.

'Sorry about that. Coffee?' Shit. The breath caught again as I waited for her to give me the knock back, but she just blessed me with one of her smiles and nodded. My internal organs were willing each other to relax, but my heart wouldn't listen. Little bugger.

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## Chapter Eight (The Bugging Up Stage)

She left not long after. I didn't mention the events leading up to the arrival of pointy-hatted witchy poo ... and skimmed over the events when aforementioned pointy-hatted witchy poo had tried to make me look like a dickhead. Again. We just had a coffee and picked up the conversation about her going to Stratford. I tried to be positive and tell her she would have a wonderful time with her family, but the words kept jamming unceremoniously in my throat and I kept on changing the subject. An observer would think one of two things. Firstly, I had a speech impediment. Or, secondly, I didn't give two shits.

But I gave two shits ... not too sure about the speech impediment though. Dudley, at least, loved all the attention both Amy and I were bestowing on him and kept on making grunting noises of contentment.

As she stood in the doorway, I was sure she was going to ask me something. She looked pensive and fiddled too much with the strap of her bag. I fiddled with the hem of my top. All in all there was a lot of fiddling going on - but no question.

'See you next week then.' She turned to leave, stopped, turned round and hugged me to her. I was shocked to say the least, and unfortunately - being a moron - didn't respond quickly enough. She was gone before I had chance to get my bearings. The growl of her car alerted me I had been standing like a knob head in the doorway for too long. Bugger. I had missed the chance to reciprocate a hug and maybe more, and Amy would be leaving for Stratford first thing in the morning, so there was no chance of me seeing her for nearly a week.

Yes. Once again I had buggered things up, so I did what any like-minded girl would do in a situation like that. I got pissed. Not angry pissed, but drunk pissed. Two bottles of wine pissed ... one red and one white - for balance of course. Obviously I didn't alternate the colour whilst drinking, to start with at any rate. And by the time I could have alternated I was well out of my tree and feeling decidedly sorry for myself. I think.

I remember putting CDs on and imitating Bridget Jones with Dudley's plastic bone singing (badly) Damien Rice's *The Blower's Daughter*. Unfortunately, I can also remember dancing around like a loony singing the Prodigy's *Voodoo People* - must have been thinking of Sue - not that there are many words in it, which was just as well. I finally passed out with James Blunt's *You're Beautiful*, and my last lucid thought was 'Yes ... you are' before blackness enveloped me.

Waking up with copious amounts of dribble sticking to my face and the side of the sofa was not good. The realisation that the Piss Head Fairy had been in and sandblasted my mouth was not a good one, either. Another illuminating feature was the pain in my arms and legs as I had slept half on, half off the settee, my arms above my head and my legs curled up underneath me. Dudley was looking at me from his comfortable place on the sofa, his head mere inches away from mine. It was as if he was trying to work me out ... as if he had a chance. Even I couldn't do that.

It took me ages to unfurl myself from my agonising position, my head deciding to get in on the action and pound with every movement - bastard. My trek to the bathroom was in imitation of the elderly, my hands covering my ears and my brain trying to focus on a prayer to stop the booming brass band, which had taken residence inside my skull. The refrain 'Never again' was gently whispered and at that moment I honestly believed it would be a cold day in hell before another smidgeon of alcohol would pass through my pulsating lips.

Showered and dressed, all accompanied by the dog that probably wanted a tinkle, and I felt more human. Not *all* human, but a little. Duds raced into the garden whilst I prepared coffee, and he didn't even sniff before he had a wee. Bless. I'm such a bad mother.

It wasn't until a good hour since my emergence from the land of comatose that I ventured back into the living room. Christ. It looked as if a bomb had struck. Bottles were strewn on the floor, a glass tipped over, the cushions were squashed near flat ... and the memory of me standing on the sofa screeching out some crappy song blinked into my head like a bad dream. Then a noise

sneaked into the mess and alerted me that all was not right. A muffled burring noise. A noise like ...like a ... fuck. Like a phone off its cradle.

Frantic searching ensued, pulling up cushions and kicking away the crap on the floor. Nothing. Well, nothing except for the whining noise coming from somewhere in the room. Whoever invented the cordless phone should be shot ... well, not shot per se, but told they needed to sort out the 'I'm lost' feature. Dudley was no help, either. He just stood next to the bin sniffing intensely. And if the wreckage strewn around me and the feeling in my gut were any indication, the bin would be the last place I would be venturing. That is always the way though isn't it? The last place you look is the place where it will be found. Obviously. Because you wouldn't carry on looking if you had found it would you. I fully expected it to lift up little imaginary arms and scream 'momma!' when I looked into the wicker basket and saw it lying helplessly on a mound of tissues and wrapping paper. Why tissues? Images of a pissed variety flashed into my head of me talking incoherently into the phone and crying like a two bit actress, stumbling over words and repeating myself to the point of absolute annoyance. Snot was escaping and I was snorting it like a coke addict. Quaint. Methinks not.

But whom was I calling? Calling and blubbing and snorting at? Dread cuddled me. I hadn't called Amy and sworn undying love, had I? There was only one way to find out. Shaky fingers hovered over the redial button until sheer curiosity got the better of me and I pressed it hard enough to nearly break it. The ringing sound pulsated into my head, the hangover still gripping me and conjuring images of a full drum kit in full swing. But that wasn't the worst of it. I found that out when I heard a very familiar voice pick up the receiver. Sue's voice, to be precise.

Shit, shite and khak. I had called Sue and told her I loved her. I could remember it as plain as day ... I told her I loved her and wanted to be with her. Ah fuck. I didn't answer the 'Who is it? I was too busy being mortified. Slamming the disconnect button with a very adamant thumb, I shot to my feet and staggered backwards, the phone fully ensconced in my hand. Then the little bleeder started ringing again. I knew it would be Sue calling me back, and there was no way I felt well enough to carry on my stupidity from the night before ... however good I was at being stupid.

It stopped. Then started again. Stopped. Then started. And I stared at the phone, willing the phone company to cut me off at that precise moment. I had to make a decision, and fast. So I did the only thing I could think of doing and threw it onto the settee to vibrate and cry like an abandoned baby. Stuff the metaphorical baby arms. There was no way momma was picking up this bundle of disaster.

I had to get out of my house and hide. Hide big time. Hide in a place where no one would ever find me ... and Duds. Hopefully Sue would have taken the hint by the time I re-emerged and realised I was not in love with her and I definitely did not want her back. That was a drunken woman doing a very good impression of being suicidal, and not me.

Quickly, I packed a bag - well stuffed items into a holdall to be more precise, collected stuff for my furry pal and was out of the door within fifteen minutes. The phone rang eight times in that short period. The more distance I put between it and me, the better.

Once inside the car, I was stumped. Where on earth could I go - with a pooch to boot? I couldn't go to a hotel - they didn't allow dogs. Couldn't go to my parents or Will's as Sue would go there ... I wracked my brains. Then wracked them some more. Then shook them. But they refused to cooperate. Bloody neurons ... never around when you need them. But I needed to get away ...

Earlham Park was deserted. I know, know it all. I knew I couldn't sleep in the park. My days sleeping under the stars were well and truly over, especially with all those squirrels around. But it gave me time to think. Who could I plant myself on? Someone who Sue would never think of calling? Someone she didn't like? That didn't narrow it down at all, because Sue didn't like anyone - especially if I liked them.

Then it came to me, like one of those lovely epiphany doo dahs ... Fi and Kate. She hated them. Probably because they were witty and clever and funny and *my* friends, not hers. And also because they had told her in no uncertain terms that she was a psycho.

The grin split my face and lifted some of the weight from my shoulders. Fi always made me feel so welcome, and I had ignored her for too long. Mainly because of being a limp, spineless git, but there was an element of not wanting to have to explain my break up and everything leading up to and after finding Sue with her pants down. I had disregarded my friends and their feelings in lieu of my own, and I did feel a bit of a shit about using them now. But I would make it up to them - stop hiding away and embrace my friendship duties.

Knocking on their door with a knackered dog and a holdall two days after Christmas, praying they hadn't gone away, enabled me to see how far I had come. Or not, as the case may be. When Fi answered her door her face said 'Fuck me!' - not literally, of course, but the good old way of showing amazement in the basest way possible. but she actually said, 'Beth! *Fuck me!* It's Beth!' Talk about her exhibiting her surprise on more than one level.

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As usual, they were lovely. And it didn't seem over eight months since I had seen them both last. I didn't even have to ask if it was ok if Duds and I forced ourselves upon them, Fi just offered with no expectation of explanation. It's amazing how we take our friends for granted, expecting them to always be there as buffers for our mistakes and letdowns.

Watching them both rally round, sorting out clean bedding and the like, I felt a mixture of emotion wrap around me and juggle for dominance. I felt safe, which was good. But I also felt like a bastard. I had allowed someone else to dictate whom I could or could not see ... allowed someone to tell me what I could and could not do. But the worst thing was I realised that it wasn't Sue's fault. It was mine. All mine. How I could have let her take control and allow me to hurt others in the process was not such a huge mystery after all. I had allowed it to happen because I had been weak and spineless and preferred the easy option rather than standing up for what I believed to be right.

It wasn't a case of Sue breaking my spirit ... my resistance. It was a case of me not believing that I could be right, the things I wanted to be worthy enough of my time and effort to keep them

alive. I had used and abused my friendships as much as I blamed Sue for using and abusing my relationship with her. And this acted like a punch in the gut. The intake of air I took was audible, enough to make Fi stop punching the pillows and look at me, her hazel eyes showing concern.

'What's up?' She dropped the pillow, stood for a moment to just access the scene, and then ambled over. 'Care to share?' I shook my head, knowing that if I tried to speak at that time, I would just blubber and make an even bigger fool of myself than I had for the last few years. 'Kate! Kate!'

Kate came in the room, breathless and smiling. 'What now, Hitler? She looked at us both, me sitting on the chair and Fi on the arm. 'What's the matter?' I shook my head again. 'Yes there is. Anything we can do?' Kneeling down in front of me, I felt the concern flowing from her, her blue eyes warm and inviting me to open up and take a chance.

The first tear sneaked past the defences I had erected and slipped effortlessly down my cheek. The second followed shortly after. Then the rest of them came tumbling out unchecked and unbidden, releasing my epiphany to the world and to myself - the second one of the day. Fi and Kate didn't say anything, just stayed with me, comforted me with touches and hushes. That made me cry harder, because it acted like another reminder of how badly I had treated them.

After what seemed like hours, but in fact was mere minutes, I stuttered out 'I ... I ... post ... ed ... your ... ca ... card.'

They looked at each other, confusion evident. 'We know, hon. Its on the mantle piece.' See? Friends. I spoke like an idiot ... mentioning bloody Christmas cards when I was in mid 'Wailing Woman' mode. But that's not what I meant. What I meant was, I had posted their card and not even bothered to take it round. Some friend I had turned out to be.

Eventually, I managed to tell them why I was blubbering like a baby. I told them how I was feeling, mainly about being a shit. They tried to make me feel better - tried to pin some of the blame on Sue, but I was having none of it. It was my fault. I had been the one who had forsaken my friends ... I was the one who had forsaken myself.

So, reader, remember this. Friends are friends till the end ... relationships come and go , but your friends will stick with you whatever - if they are true friends to start with. And, as Fi so charmingly put it, 'Friendship is like peeing your pants, everyone can see it, but only you can feel the true warmth.' How true ... although if you don't take care of it, it becomes cold, uncomfortable and smelly, and then people start avoiding you. Metaphorically speaking, I hadn't taken care of my pissy pants but now I was going to change these sodden drawers and make sure the clean pair were well taken care of. That does sound rather awkward doesn't it? Talk about extending a metaphor.

Enough said.

The rest of the evening was spent catching up on news and remembering times past. Fi was one of my oldest friends and I had met her at Uni. She originally came from Wales, but I always told

her I didn't hold that against her. The enigmatic Kate was a Pilate's teacher and that's where Fi had fallen head over heels for the auburn haired beauty almost six years ago. Their relationship was solid and the banter they had was easy and natural. I wanted that. I wanted to be in a relationship that was like theirs ... so giving, if you know what I mean.

Obviously, I refused a glass of wine with dinner; my stomach still hadn't forgiven me for my exploits the previous night. Just the thought of raising the glass to my lips was enough to make it kick out and roll around in its dramatic fashion.

Dudley loved having the attention, and spent the evening moving from one lap to another. He was lapping it up, rolling over onto his back and exposing his winky like the little attention seeker he was.

On the outside I seemed to be more settled; I seemed to have reached some kind of closure. But when I lay in bed, just me and Duds, I let the cleansing begin. Tears streamed down my face in an attempt to wash away the mistakes I had made. Some mistakes were too big to wash away with just one try, and I still had mistakes looming over me that I had to put right. Firstly, I had to make things right with Sue. I had to tell her that I didn't love her and didn't want her back. Easier said than done, but I had to do it, as it wasn't fair on her. Then, and only then, could I rectify the situation with Amy. I had to tell her how I felt - the lot ... the nitty gritty and beyond, tell her with no expectations of her falling in my arms and swearing undying love.

Then I thought of her, her brown eyes that glistened and were always full of expression; her laugh - what a laugh - so musical - so delicate - so uproariously contagious. The smile didn't last very long on my lips, because I also thought about the unrequited love aspect in our relationship. I loved her, I knew it as well as I knew I had to breathe to live, but I also knew she didn't think of me that way.

And that made me cry all over again.

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I called my parents the next morning so they wouldn't phone the police or put my picture on the side of a milk carton. I also pre-empted the visit or call from Sue, or at least I tried to. My Dad happily told me she had already called and didn't sound happy, especially when my mum so graciously told her to sling her hook once and for all. What could I say? My parents were never going to do whatever I asked them to, especially where Sue was concerned. So, I didn't say anything more on the subject, just told them I'd be in touch. They wanted to know where I was, but I wasn't having any of it ... my mum found it too hard not to let things 'slip', as she so delicately phrased it. All in all, my mother was not best pleased and accused me of becoming too secretive.

Fi and Kate were great, even when I told them about my drunken escapades on Boxing night, they just laughed, although Fi did call me, and I quote, 'a daft twat.' Bless. I was a daft twat, too. I mean, I had called my arch nemesis and told her I loved her. It's like Batman calling the Joker

and asking him round for a shag. Not done. Actually, come to think about it, Sue did have a look of the Joker, although she wore less make-up. Uncanny.

It wasn't until the third day that I spilled my guts about Amy. Not all of it ... just told them that we got on and stuff. It was the 'stuff' part Fi and Kate was interested in, but I wouldn't budge. I wanted to, God did I, but I didn't dare. Because, you see, if you say something aloud, it becomes real, doesn't it? And if it becomes real, there would be a chance I could fuck it up. So, I decided it was safer if I kept my mental meanderings inside my head - just to be on the safe side.

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Yes. It's still the bugging up stage, if you were wondering. As if you could have doubts about it. But that isn't the reason I have entitled this section the aforementioned name. Not by a long shot. Therefore, I need to move things along a tad. Can you feel me winding up the wheels of fate? The figurative clock? Otherwise I will just drone on and on about me me me me ... as if I hadn't already. Am I forgiven? You know, for focusing on the past and balancing precariously on 'what ifs'?

Let's get moving shall we? On your marks ... get set ...

And now we find me standing outside my house, Dudley snug on his lead and me rattling my key in the door. It is New Year's Day, and I had brought the New Year in with Fi, Kate and a crowd of friends down the local. It was fun, but there was definitely something missing ...

But not for long. I had no sooner released the lock from its haven than I heard a car pull up behind me. Yep. You guessed it. Amy.

Shit. God. I wanted to see her, had missed her so much, but this was too soon.

And then another car.

Sue.

Double shit and big fat hairy bollocks.

Thoughts of racing into the house and locking the door, barring the door with furniture and then escaping out the back way vied for dominance. This was not good. My initial reaction to Amy stemmed from feeling a little exposed ... my reaction to Sue was the knowledge that all was going to be revealed. Big time. In front of Amy - me swearing undying love to Sue - the lot.

Aw sausages.

Dudley was pulling on his lead, completely torn between the two women, and completely confused whether to wag his tail or bare his teeth. So he did both. I felt a little of the same. Well they do say you turn into your pets, or is it the other way around? Enough of that. Now where was I? Oh yes ... just about to die of embarrassment.

New Year's resolutions flew out of the window, as I shoved Dudley through the door. I had enough on my plate without him joining in on the dramatics. I had to break the news to Sue, in front of Amy, that I hadn't meant all those things I said to her on Boxing night ... that we were not meant to be together after all.

It was the way Sue stormed up my path that alerted me that not all was well. When she grabbed me by the scarf and dragged me close to her face, I thought 'Here we go. She's gonna fucking kiss me now ... in front of Amy.' However, when I felt the spit hit my face, and the volume of which the words came out, I took stock of the situation. Correct me if I'm wrong, but does this seem to be a loving reunion to you? Thought not. It didn't to me either. Especially when she threatened to punch my lights out.

Then she kind of disappeared. Rapidly. Like she had been yanked away by an unseeing hand. 'Get your greasy mother fucking wanking hands off her.' Huh? That wasn't me. Wasn't Sue either, come to think of it. 'Touch her again and I'll rip your head off. Got it?' Amy? Professor at the Uni, Amy? Speaking like me?

Amy was right up in Sue's face; her eyes flashing and joined by the devilish curl of her lip. 'Can't you get it into your thick skull? She wants nothing to do with you.'

'Oh o ... here it comes ... this is the part where Sue tells her what I had said.' The thought was stopped mid flow ... mainly by the reaction to Sue's response. No. She didn't thump Amy ... or crawl off with her tail slapping her stomach. She grabbed Amy's fingers and peeled them back like a ripe banana.

'Take ...' one finger loosened, '*your* ...' two, '*hands* ...' three ... my maths is getting better, '*off me*.' Sue flicked Amy's hand away, but it didn't stop them squaring up to each other like a couple of dogs at the park. Dudley would've loved it. 'Suppose it was your idea was it? Getting her to call me?'

'Beth has a mind of her own - not that *you* would know that.' Crap. There was going to be an all out bout of fisticuffs at this rate, and I was as much use as an ashtray on a motorbike.

'Funny that she decides to call me after she's been with you all night. Did you listen in? Did you like her telling me what she thought of me?' Cringe. 'Is that how you get your rocks off?'

Amy just glared at her, her face saying everything that words would struggle to define. I looked from one to the other, expecting to be dragged into the conversation at any given minute.

'As for you, you spineless ...' See? I should read people's horoscopes. '... piece of shit. You waited until I was gone before you could be arsed to tell me what you really thought of me.'

'But?' I was confused. Why would she act like this if I had told her I loved her? I thought she wanted to get back with me - and this reaction was rather over the top, even for her. So I told her. 'This reaction is rather over the top, even for you.'



'Over the top! Over the *fucking* top!' The whole street must have heard it - I could see curtains twitching, and Dudley started scratching at the door in a bid to get out. 'You call me in the middle of the night to tell me how much I had screwed up your life, and you think *this* is over the top?'

Huh? That's not what I remember of the phone call. My version was an imitation of Bette Davies on smack sans the drama lessons.

'You couldn't even do it when you were sober.' She lurched towards me at this stage, and Amy stepped in between us. Sue tried to struggle around her, and I could hear the scrabbling of feet, but she didn't get very far. 'And you call *again* the next day, like the coward that you are, and won't answer your phone.'

'I didn't ...' Sue didn't let me finish.

'Oh yes you did, Beth. I checked the caller's number and it was yours - I *think* I remember your number.'

'I'm not. I ...' Cut off again. Bloody women - they're serious candidates for goat's disease - forever butting in.

'You know what your problem is, Beth Chambers?' I didn't even bother trying to reply - she would only interrupt me anyway. 'You need to get over yourself. Take some bloody responsibility for your life.' She shoved Amy away from her at this point, and smoothed the front of her coat down. Then she made eye contact, cold grey eyes bored straight through me. The silence in the air was razor sharp, but not as sharp as her words. 'You play the victim well, Beth, and you hurt so many others along the way. I loved you, and you didn't think enough of me to say to my face that you, and I quote, "Would rather eat your own shit" than get back with me.'

It wouldn't have been so bad if Amy hadn't laughed, turned and give me the thumbs up. I could have got over the embarrassment of being a vulgar drunk, but now I had an approving audience. I mean, how do you follow that statement?

'I'm sorry, Sue. I ...'

'No.' Sue glared at Amy, who was trying to hide her mirth behind her hand. 'I'm sorry. Sorry I've wasted over four years waiting for you to realise people act differently ... we are not all the same.' She turned her wrath onto Amy. 'And *you*,' the words spat from her mouth like a knife thrower had delivered them, the look of scorn and hatred clear on her face, 'are welcome to her. Good luck.'

Then she was gone. No broomstick ... just her car screeching out of my road like the curse of hell was chasing her. The quietness surrounding us was painful. If I had seen tumbleweed rolling down the centre of the road, I wouldn't have batted an eyelid.

'I take it you called her then?'

Now, the thing that confused me was, if I had phoned Sue and said all those nasty things, who on earth had I poured my heart out to?

'Shall we go inside?'

Oh crap. Bugging up stage, complete, Captain. How on earth would I get myself out of this one?

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Funny thing was, Amy didn't act any differently. She made a fuss of the very overexcited Dudley, who was sitting behind the door so closely we had to push him out of the way. Then she plucked my holdall out of my hands and tossed it into the hallway.

'Make me a brew, Beth. I'm spitting feathers.' She grinned at me. 'Well, come on woman. I've been on the road all morning ... not even been home yet?'

Thoughts were whizzing around my head, too many things to think about. Was Sue right? Was I that far into myself all I thought about was how I was feeling? Did I play the victim? I knew I should have taken responsibility of how I allowed myself to feel and react, but did I use Sue as much as I believed she had used me? Was I a relationship fucker upper - too far up my own arse to actually make a relationship work? But I had tried, hadn't I?

See? Loads of bloody questions. And more if I could actually be bothered to tell you them all, but I doubt you would want to know what was spinning around in this reprobate's head.

And there was Amy. Even if she ever thought of me in that way, could I put her through the curse of Beth Chambers?

Get over yourself! Sue was right - you are a self-centred little fu ...

'Come on, girl. Brew. Now.'

I snapped out of my world of 'Poor me' and saw Amy standing there, looking at me quizzically. Funny thing was, Dudley was giving me the same look.

'Ignore Sue.' Amy came closer, taking my hands into her own and gently began to pull me inside the house. 'She's bitter and was out to hurt you.' Her face tipped downwards and she looked up at me, her eyes soft and tender. 'This is her style, remember? Make you feel unworthy and bad about who you are.' She pulled me into her, my head slipping silently onto her shoulder - clicking in place like it was always meant to be there. Her breath tickled my ear and made me shudder, the tingles racing down my spine to hit my toes and race back upwards again.

Slowly, she pulled back and looked into my eyes. She was so beautiful ... so so beautiful, and the sob collecting in my throat wanted to scream it out. 'By the way ...' I looked at her half expectant, of what, God only knows. 'Happy New Year.' And then she brushed her lips over my

cheek, my eyes fluttering with the touch. Then another kiss on my nose ... then on my eyelids. So gentle - so perfect, like she was the only one who could kiss me like that and get that reaction. I wanted to take her mouth and devour it. I wanted to kiss her - fall into her - climb down her throat and lie in her chest next to her heart forever in the knowledge that I would be safe.

But you know me by now, don't you? Spontaneity was not my bag, however hard my hormones fought to just do it. I wished I were wearing Nike trainers - as I believed they would help me get the gumption to forget about consequences ... well, that's what their adverts implied.

'I have to tell you something, Amy.' Was that my voice? Was I just about to spill my proverbial guts and tell the woman how I felt? She just continued to stand there and look beautiful and my stomach was thudding onto my diaphragm like a trampoline. 'I ... I ...' Here we go ... my spine was forming - the pain - the agony of mending bones ... 'I ... I ...' But mending years of feeling worthless needed more than plaster of Paris and a few gentle kisses. Much more. There was no way I was ready to be with someone else, that I knew as well as I knew the back of my overused clichéd hand. Amy waited for me to continue, so I swallowed my pride, my hesitancy, and my love and spluttered, 'I haven't got any milk.'

I watched as her eyebrows furrowed together, the statement hitting her like a baseball bat, then watched again as they slowly drifted apart and the grin chop her face in two. 'Well ...' and she released me to sag dejectedly, 'I suppose I'll have to take what comes, then.'

Just like me, I suppose. But this time, I had to do it for the right reasons. And if that meant losing Amy along the way, so be it.

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I sent Amy into the living room whilst I put the kettle on. I had no sooner entered the room than I heard Amy shouting for me to come. The panic in her voice turned my blood cold, and when I got there she was standing in the doorway, her face ashen. 'Beth ... Jeez ... I don't know how to tell you this.' What? Tell me what? I tried to push past her and get into the room, but she held me fast. I think you'd better call the police.'

'What's happened? Let me see?' With that I pushed past her and into the room. Fuck. It was a mess. *My* mess ... from my exploits on Boxing night.

'You've been burgled, Beth.' And she slipped her arms around my waist and pulled me into her. Honest to God, it did look as if I had been burgled. Cushions were everywhere, rubbish tipped over the floor, glasses and bottles strewn around. 'Bastards. Who could do this, eh?'

'Erm.'

'Can you see if anything's been taken? The TV is still there, and the stereo ...' She released my waist and began to walk into the room. 'Do you think they were looking for something?' Yeah ... the phone. 'Do you keep cash in the house?' I couldn't just stand there and let her believe I had been robbed, erm ... could I?

'Well ... erm.' Flaccid hands flapped in front of me as I tried to explain what had actually happened, and I saw her pick up the phone off the settee and begin to punch in numbers. 'Amy?'

She was intently listening to the speaker on the other end, and held up her hand to say 'Don't worry. I'll deal with this.' Her long fingers started to weave through her hair as she began to speak. 'I'd like to report a robbery, please.'

Shit! No! 'Shit! No!' See? Sometimes your thoughts can mirror your actions.

Amy thought I was meaning I had spotted something awful, and covered the mouthpiece to mouth 'It's ok ... we'll sort this.' I raced forward and grabbed her phone hand, pulling it down.

'It was me.' She looked at me as if I had lost my marbles, so I repeated it and added a little extra for clarity. 'It was me ... when I was pissed. Didn't have time to clear up.' Confusion raced fleetingly across her face, and then she threw her head back and laughed ... then laughed again, whilst I was dying of embarrassment.

'Sorry, officer. My mistake.' She listened to the speaker, nodding, but all the while she was grinning at me, who by this stage had started tidying up. 'Ok ... thanks again.' And then her full attention was back on me. 'Beth?' I turned from picking up the sofa cushions and looked at her, mumbling a 'what' in response. 'You've gone all red.'

'Exertion. All this bending over.'

'Well, lady. There's only one thing I want you to do now.' I wish. 'I want you ...' she started to walk over to me, and all the juices from my mouth disappeared, '...to ...' the cushion I had been holding slipped out of my grasp. I felt all my muscles tense and relax, '... make ...' I knew where the juices went! '... me a brew.' Then they disappeared again, allowing my heart to stop pounding against my ribcage like a trapped daddy long legs wearing hob-nailed boots. I could hear Dudley banging his dish against the floor alerting me it was time to be fed and watered. So I made him my excuse to flee the scene, giggling like a teenager after a packet of wine gums.

In the kitchen, Dudley just stared at me, his eyes demanding me to get my act together and take care of him ... He didn't have all day; he had sniffing to do ... check the perimeters to make sure his archenemy has pissed off. And for effect, he clanked his dish with his paw one more time and glared. Bless. He was happily munching away before I remembered why I had come into the room in the first place. Making a total arse out of yourself does that sometimes - makes you forget what you were doing.

As I clicked the kettle onto boil, I leaned against the counter. 'It wasn't my imagination, was it? She was flirting with me, wasn't she?' The thought made me go warm, or rather hot, all over. Maybe I hadn't buggered it up after all.

Her voice broke my reverie, and I turned to see her standing in the doorway loaded with bottles and glasses. 'And when you eventually make me a coffee, we can chat about your call on Boxing

night.' With that statement, she came and dumped the glasses on the side of the sink, placing the bottles next to the rest of my recycling - and went. Whilst I stood there, crapping myself.

Buggering up stage was still in action. Phase one hundred and twenty two now in place.

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I walked back into the room like a condemned man. I had forgotten my revelation about maybe her flirting with me, and concentrated on what was about to ensue. She was going to put me in my place - tell me, like Sue, to get over myself - she wasn't interested. Probably point out that I had to wait to get juiced up first, too.

'Bout time. A woman could die of thirst in this house.' She leaned over and grabbed the steaming mug from my hands, giving a dramatic 'ouch' at the temperature. The smile coating her face was so enchanting, that I forgot to be worried ... for a split second that is. 'You were really out of it Boxing night, weren't you?' You know that sinking feeling in your gut? The one that makes you want to puke everywhere? And also makes you go freezing cold yet hot? Well, that's nothing compared to how I was feeling. It was like I was standing on a stage, naked, with people jeering and laughing ... maybe throwing rotten fruit.

I tentatively sat on the couch opposite her, gripping onto my mug, the heat scalding my fingers. 'Yeah ... sorry about that.' What else to say? 'I had a little too much to drink; can't remember what I said exactly.' Nice, one Chambers. Now she is going to think you don't love her and were only saying it because you were pissed.

'I could barely understand what you were saying on the message either.' Huh? Message? 'I didn't know you'd called until the next morning ... must have been in the shower.' I didn't speak to her ... I'd rambled on like a Shakespearean spare part to a bloody answering machine! That would mean it was all on tape. Aw fuck. 'You just kept on apologising for Sue's interruption, and then threatening to call her ...' she laughed, 'which by the look of things went down a beautifully.' I just stared - gob open - staring. 'Then you said you had something to tell me, but the machine cut you off before you had the chance.' So, I must have told British Telecom I was in love with them. No wonder they didn't cut me off. 'And when I called you the next day, the line was busy ... then when I tried again, no one answered.'

It was Amy not Sue who had called. Crap. If only I had spoken to her, then the entire hide and seek fiasco would have been redundant. 'Left you a couple of messages, too. But considering you didn't turn up, I take it you either didn't fancy a trip to Stratford, or you weren't here.' She'd invited me to Stratford! And all because I was spineless, I had missed the chance to bring the New Year in with her. 'You didn't say you were going away. Anywhere nice?'

How could react to that? On one hand, I was relieved she hadn't heard me spew out how much I thought of her when I was pissed and incoherent ... but on the other ... she still didn't know how I felt about her. And then there was the chance to be with her, but because I'd been such a chicken, I had fled the roost without dealing with the consequences. Like usual. I had to stop this fleeing the scene without getting all the details. It wasn't doing either me or anyone else any

favours, just complicating matters. From now on my New Year's resolution was going to be 'The buck stops here.' I had to deal with the things life threw at me, whether I liked them or not. It's all part of the learning curve, and without facing my responsibilities, how on earth could I be prepared for the next time.

'So, what was it you wanted to tell me, then?'

Did I say the buck stops here?

'Ah ... it was nothing. Fancy another?' I stood, leaned over, and grabbed her half-full coffee. 'Maybe I have some coffee whitener in the cupboard. Two ticks.' Then I flapped into the kitchen, like the chicken I was.

Rome wasn't built in a day - cut me some slack. I was a novice at this responsibility malarkey, but I would, with time, get my act together. Promise.

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## Chapter Nine (The Can't be Arsed Thinking Up a Heading Stage)

That happened two months ago. Doesn't time fly when you miss out great big chunks of your life? Poetic license - well it would be if I were a poet. But I'm not. But it's my story, and you'll have to like it or lump it. Or you could do both - like it *and* lump it, your call. You are the reader after all, and I leave that decision entirely up to you.

Now, the month is February and it was the Thursday before Jane's wedding to Amy's brother, James. I had packed my bag and in I put ... I love that game. But this is not the time. I had packed my bag and in it I put ... tee hee hee ... knew I'd get you.

Ok. Ok. I was packed. Dudley was at my parents for the few days I would be away, bless his furry paws. And I was sitting on my suitcase waiting for Amy to show up. I was only forty-five minutes early. We had decided to go down to Stratford a little early, as the weather prospects were not looking good. To say Jane and James were going to have a white wedding would be an understatement. Snow was billowing its frosty way across the North Sea from Siberia, and we didn't want to get stuck on a road somewhere making ice pops.

As I sat there, fiddling with the strap on my handbag, the last two months came to mind. Amy and I had really bonded, and every time I saw her, I loved her more and more. It was weird, really. Everyday I thought I couldn't love her anymore, but then BAM ... it just got stronger. Nothing had happened between us, but I hoped and prayed every day that this would be the day I would tell her. I know I said I would start taking some responsibility for my life and my happiness, but I always found an excuse not to go through with it - just in case. I didn't want her to think she was a rebound fling, or a stab at making myself feel desired or desirable again. I wanted it to be right. I also wanted to feel in control enough to handle whatever that giant step would hold for me. I needed to know that this was not going to break me apart; I felt too fragile

for that. I know that's not the way you should look at love, but it was what I needed at the moment.

I also wanted to be strong enough if it all blew up in my face.

The sound of a car crunching to a halt outside my door alerted me that it was time to get my arse into gear. Pulling my coat more snugly round me, I picked up my case and struggled out of the door. She was waiting just outside, the smile on her face like a wave of sunshine in the cold temperatures of Norwich. 'Here. Give me that whilst you lock up.' And off she staggered, with my few days worth of clothes that would make any travelling woman proud. Well. You have to be ready for anything, don't you?

As I watched her struggling to lift the case into the boot of her car, I thought of how I had over prepared. No ... not my luggage ... my life since Sue, maybe even before if I'm honest. How I always avoided any kind of upset just in case I hurt someone, or myself in the process. But where did that leave me? And could I really prepare for life? Big thoughts, eh? I'd better not chat to the bride or groom or else they would probably call off their wedding - cheery little soul that I am.

'Come on, dreamer, before the snow starts.'

Keys firmly in my handbag, another check the door was shut and I was sitting beside her in the warmth of her car. 'You'd better take your coat off, as we are going to be on the road for at least four hours. That's if the weather holds.'

I slipped my coat off and secured my seat belt. Four hours wasn't nearly long enough to be alone with this woman.

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Just under four hours later saw us checking into a Travelodge just outside of Cambridge, a journey that should have taken us at the most an hour. However, we weren't fortunate enough to avoid the weather. The first snowflake plopped onto the windscreen of Amy's car as we joined the A11 in Norwich, about fifteen minutes into our journey.

Progressively, the flakes came thicker and faster, and the wipers had their work cut out trying to clear the windscreen. Every time Amy had to brake, our hearts were in our mouths, as the back end of the car wanted to go one way as we were going the other. Finally, Amy said enough was enough (I think it was the fact we couldn't see the outline of the road - or even the fact we had spent more time coming back down off the embankment than actually travelling on the A14), and said the next exit was going to be our exit. It wouldn't have been so bad, but there were too many wankers out there believing they were invincible, and I didn't want to add to the numbers plastered on the police signs along the side of the road. Road kill just isn't my bag. Thankfully, Amy felt the same way.

So. There we were, checking into a room, and feeling absolutely knackered to boot. It had only been four hours, and it was barely early evening, but staring at the vast whiteness, heart in your mouth, kind of drains you ... if you get my meaning.

Amy said she would pop to the service station to see if she could rustle us something to eat whilst I went to the room and ran a bath. I had taken some toiletries from my bag, and so had she, before going inside, so it was a case of just getting my cold arse into hot water.

Room 121. It looked like an oasis. Warm. Quiet. Cosy. Not the usual description of an oasis, but it was to me. I went straight into the bathroom and started to run the bath, dropping in some foam bath and swirling the water to life in the shape of huge, comforting bubbles. I was freezing, and the heat from the bathtub made me feel even sleepier than I had been at the reception area.

I clicked the latch so Amy could get back in, stripped and submerged myself in the still running water. It was in a word ... bliss. The ache from my joints was a pleasant reminder I was still alive, and the water caressed places I needed caressing. I turned the taps off and laid back, my eyes closing in absolute pleasure ... this was the life.

The door opened and closed, allowing a breath of cold air to shoot into the room. Amy was back, and by the sounds coming from the next room she had been successful in her hunter-gatherer role. I heard her click the kettle on and prepare to make us a hot drink, and that's all I remember until I felt a hand gently shaking me awake. 'Beth. Come on, love. Bed.' I opened my eyes to see Amy leaning over me, and I couldn't quite grasp why I felt wet. 'Lucky you didn't drown.' Then it came to me. I was naked, lying in the bath, with the woman of my dreams leaning over me.

Here's a tip for you. Free of charge, which is all the better. Never react like a floundering fish when there is someone fully clothed standing right above you. Reason? They get wet, the floor gets slippery, and then they fall on their arse. To continue this tip ... never shoot out of the bath to help aforementioned person without thinking things through. Reason again? The floor is wet ... you are wet and rushing, therefore the outcome is always the same. You fall flat on your arse too. But unlike the clothed person, you are flashing your lady bits to anyone who has a mind to catch a glimpse, and if you've ever seen someone naked fall ... it is not a pretty sight. Believe me ... not a pretty sight at all.

Flashbacks of the time in the park raced through me, remember? The time in the café? This time it was only me doing the exposing though, and I didn't have Dudley with me to enable the atmosphere to change into something light-hearted. I was above Amy, naked, her face mere inches away from mine, and I felt exposed. Not just literally exposed, but figuratively too. I honestly believed she could see how much I wanted her ... feel how much I wanted her, as the bath water was not the only thing wet about me at that moment.

I saw her swallow rapidly and move her lips as if to say something. The heat from her body was seeping into my own and I wanted more, but I didn't ... do you know what I mean? This wasn't right ... wasn't the way I wanted it to be, me making a half cocked (excuse the phrase) attempt at a pass at her. It was so trite ... so not me. So, I pulled back and lifted myself from on top of her, stretching to grab a towel and cover myself.



'Did I wake you?' From more than just sleep, that I can guarantee. I stood and wrapped the towel firmly around myself.

'Must have nodded off. Sorry about that.' I offered her my hand and she grabbed it, pulling herself to standing in one swift movement.

'I did call ... a couple of times actually.' Her face was flushed, and she looked uncomfortable. 'Knocked too. But it was too quiet in here, so I came in to see if you were ok.' I stepped round her and grabbed my toothbrush in a bid to make things seem normal again. 'I'll go and make the drinks now. And ...' She paused, and I knew she was in the doorway. 'You should wait to brush your teeth ... you haven't eaten yet.'

'I can always brush them again.' It was cold and cutting, and no sooner than it was out I was regretting it. I was looking at her through the reflection in the mirror, toothbrush static. Her expression initially showed surprise and then uncertainty - finally to be completed by resolution. She didn't answer ... just left the room to me and my humiliation. The minty taste of the toothpaste made me gag ... or maybe it was just my reaction to what had happened. I knew I shouldn't have snapped at her, it wasn't her fault I had made an ass out of myself again. Come to think of it, her predicament was not something you would chat about over dinner with friends ... 'Yes ... that reminds me of the time when I scared the shit out of Beth and ...' See?

Going back into the room, I saw her stirring the mugs, her head lowered as if she was concentrating on the task. But I knew her better than that. I knew I had hurt her, and not just by falling on her.

'Amy.' I waited for her to quickly glimpse over her shoulder in recognition before I continued. 'Sorry for snapping at you - just tired and ratty.' A hesitant smile edged round her lips. 'And embarrassed.' I grinned at her in the hope she would give me one back. I was not disappointed. 'Is that for me?' Edging closer to her and breaking her space, I leaned in and grabbed the steaming cup of hot chocolate. 'You know me so well, Ms Fletcher.' The smile she gave me could blind someone with sensitive eyes.

'Thought it would warm you up.' Her voice held a degree of contained excitement, 'And I also got you some chocolate, cos I know you're a bugger for the sweet stuff when you're due on your period.' Her face went scarlet - billiard ball red! 'I ... erm ...'

'You been keeping tabs on me, eh?' Unbelievably, she went a shade darker, her eyes flicking everywhere but at my face. But the laugh gurgling up inside me tore out and I laughed long and hard whilst she stood and glowed. 'Maybe that's why I'm so ratty then? Thanks for reminding me.'

'I'm just going to grab a bath. Won't be long.' And she was gone, leaving me alone to sip my drink and smile smugly to myself.

The bed was comfy, soft yet hard - a perfect combination. It wasn't long before I felt contentment glide over me with an ever-ready hand, and sleepiness sneak alongside. My eyelids felt heavy,

like they had been weighted down with stones and I wanted to snuggle under the covers of the bed. There were two things that prevented me from falling into the allure of rest. One ... I hadn't made up the couch, which seconded as a bed, and two ... my sleep shirt was sitting in the boot of my car. I had remembered toiletries, but forgotten about getting ready for bed. All I had was the towel wrapped around me and my clothes from I wore that day.

I promised myself I would just close my eyes for a few minutes and then I would slip my t-shirt back on. Promises ... promises ... promises. I couldn't tell you how long I had been asleep when I felt the bed slightly move next to me. All I had the strength to do was to scrabble under the covers and fall asleep again.

Dawn was breaking when I opened my bleary eyes one more time, although I could only see the shapes and shadows of the early light kiss the back wall of the hotel room, as I was firmly buried into something soft and warm. Amy. Propriety told me to move away ... take my face from the curve of her neck ... unfurl my hands from around her waist ... my leg from over hers ... move out of her grasp. But I didn't want to. Simple as that. I felt safe - so bloody safe and secure and protected. This felt so right - being in her arms felt so absolutely positively right and there was nowhere else I wanted to be.

Sighing in her sleep, she pulled me closer, her lips kissing the top of my head, her breath on my skin. The tightening in my gut accompanied the tightening of my hold on her. I needed her - God ... I needed her so much. Not just sexually, no. I needed to have all of her - all ... of ...her. Being in her arms made the world seem bearable - made my life seem bearable and gave it meaning. I had known I loved her - fallen in love with her, but I had been scared to do anything about it - scared to let her know how I felt. And from that instant I knew I couldn't hide it anymore; I had to tell her how I felt and accept the consequences.

Her hand slipped down my back until it rested at the curve; long tendrils of fire raced along my skin only to burrow deeper and deeper into the very heart of me. Amy started to swirl the tips of her fingers over my waiting flesh, each whirl creating another set of sparks, which slithered and danced across every ounce of my body. Then I realised the towel I had been wearing had opened and I was cleaving to her totally naked, and by the feel of her skin, so was she.

I should have stopped. Pulled away. Got up. Dressed. Anything but hold onto her and press myself further into her in guilty need - my guilty need to have her, even if it was for this moment. To know she was here with me, if only for an instant. To accept that maybe this wasn't forever, but to be contented with the here and now.

Culpable fingers stroked her collarbone, enchanted in the softness of her skin. They traced the line of the bone and dipped into the recess of her neck, my eyes fixated. Digits lingered in the nuance of her throat and delighted in dipping down ... dipping lower and trace along the centre of her chest.

When I followed their path with my eyes, I could see the curve and swell of her breast - enticing me - beguiling me - begging me to circle and caress the joy of her. And I would have too, if she hadn't shifted and pulled me closer, trapping my hand over her breast in the process. I couldn't

get my hand free, however hard I tried to pull it out - not that I tried very hard. Her nipple budded in the palm of my hand and I glorified in the sensation, not wanting it to end. I did feel a little pervy though. It wasn't as if she had said I could touch her, but then again, she hadn't said I couldn't either. Sound logic, I think. A balanced argument.

But the temptation was there and agonisingly difficult to ignore. My fingers were spread eagled over her breast, and I had the urge to bring them together and gently knead the pliant flesh. It was so difficult ... so bloody difficult not to do it. She would never know, would she? It wasn't as if I would be doing anything really bad, was it? Just making the most of a gift from the Gods - I mean, it was a gift given to me right into the palm of my hand, and I would be a fool not to accept it, wouldn't I?

No. I would be a fool if I did. It was bad ... and I felt ashamed of the fact I had momentarily been willing to take advantage of someone I professed to love whilst she didn't know anything about it. But it was so soft? So ready. So here ... in the palm of my hand begging me to touch it with more focus and dedication.

What the fuck was I doing? I was turning into some somnambulant fiddler - or ready to be. And what if she caught me red handed? Or *something* handed? How would I explain that one away? It wasn't worth the momentary pleasure - I would loose her friendship for certain.

It's ok to get all moralistic and on my high horse about what I had or hadn't nearly done, but the truth of the matter was I was going to fumble like a schoolgirl with someone who hadn't a clue what was happening to them. That is just not done. But the bugging part was that didn't stop the fact that my hand was still bloody trapped. What if she woke up now and caught me gripping her tit? Would she believe me when I said nothing was going on - you just rolled onto my hand? Would she hell as like. I wouldn't believe it either - especially if her face would be as crimson as mine would be with 'I'm guilty' written across my forehead.

But I was saved, as she mumbled something in her sleep and pushed backwards a little, freeing my hand in the process. The lack of contact left a gaping wound, and I craved for her to turn back again, but knew that would definitely be my undoing.

There was only one thing for it. I had to extract myself from her so it didn't happen again, as I was sure the next time I would have no control over my actions. As I moved, I felt the wetness between my legs escape, leaving a coolness to gather and dissipate. With my back to her, I grabbed the towel and attempted to wrap it around me once again, thinking it would have been easier to just get up and put something on. But to tell you the truth - I couldn't be arsed.

I thought I would never get to sleep again. Thought I would lie there for hours until it was a reasonable time to get up, and try to ignore the fact I had been in her arms for a little while, try to forget the feel of her skin, the smell of her hair - to softness of her breast. Try to ignore the feeling of total contentment I had when I was with her ... the fulfilment. Little did I know that within five minutes I would be once again asleep, dreaming of a time when I could do that forever.

When I next awoke, I felt someone spooning up the back of me, a long graceful arm draped over my stomach ... breath at the back of my head. I wanted to pull the arm around me and snuggle down for a little while longer, maybe just to try and keep the dream alive for a little bit more. But I knew better. However long I lay there, I would want to stay longer, and this way was only prolonging the inevitable. I gently took her fingers in my hand to move it off my stomach, when they curled around mine holding me in place.

'Good morning, Beth.' The voice was soft and sleepy, but the vibrations from it raced down my spine and kicked all the nerves awake. 'Sleep well?' She squeezed my fingers and I closed my eyes and relished the moment.

'Not bad. You?' I have to admit, I sounded squeaky.

I felt her stiffen, so I stiffened too thinking she was going to say something of my late night meanderings, but she turned it into a stretch and yawn, releasing my fingers in the process. 'Not bad.' I relaxed a little - well as relaxed as a person can be when they know the person behind them is naked. 'Had a funny dream though.' Her voice was becoming stronger, more awake ... and by what she had just said, I was waking up even more rapidly.

'Oh yeah. What about?' I didn't want to know. Why did I ask?

'You were in it ... you were holding onto me.' Shit. 'It was strange ... felt so real.'

'Probably because you slept deeply ... we all have funny dreams if we sleep deeply.' There was a pause ...

'I thought if you slept deeply, you didn't dream - or couldn't remember it as well.' As she spoke, I got out of bed, securing the towel around me again - bloody thing had gone walkies after I had fallen asleep.

Looking back to the bed, I was disappointed to see she had pulled the covers back over her, and all I could see were her shoulders. But being a lady I didn't say anything. She looked so beautiful lying there with her dark hair fanned over the pillow, one hand lifted and separating the strands even more, her eyes sparkling and alive, and her lips moving ... her lips moving? Crap ... she was talking to me and I had missed it.

'What?' She stopped fiddling with her hair and frowned at me. 'Sorry. I was thinking about breakfast.' Yeah right.

'I said, hungry Horace, that it felt so real - the dream.' I cocked my head to the side as if to tell her I already knew that bit. There was no way I could get out of this now, I was hooked into the fabrication of my own making - hoisted by my own petard, as my history teacher used to say. 'Oh yeah ... you were there, and you were drowning and I had to save you.' You already have. 'I jumped in and pulled you out of the water ... you had to hang onto my neck and grip the front of my top.' I'm sure I gulped audibly, but I couldn't be too sure. 'It was as if I could actually feel your hands on me.' Should I just curl up and die? Or should I wait to see if there was anything

else that could embarrass me further. 'And when I woke up, you were just turning over onto your side. I wanted to speak to you, but I knew you were asleep.' Thank God she had woken up after I had released her breast. That would have taken a lot of explaining.

I picked up the empty mugs and began to walk away to the bathroom, stopping near the door to turn my attention back on her. 'It was probably the incident in the bathroom last night, you know, brought back the memories of the day we first met.'

Brown eyes squinted in thought and then grew wide again, the smile breaking across it like a rush of life. 'I hadn't thought of that. You're right ... I was remembering about that day - the day in the river.' She looked comfortable with the explanation, and I scurried away to rinse the cups under the sink before making morning tea.

As I stood there, the water gushing over the crockery, I thought back to the day we had met at Earlham Park. She had saved me that day ... she had sparked the need to live back into my redundant veins, and for that I would be forever grateful. When she came into the water to save me, it wasn't the water I needed saving from. It was myself. Amy showed me there was another way, although I didn't know it at the time what the way was ... just planted the seed inside to make me try again.

My reflection in the bathroom mirror showed a healthier me. Hair a mess, sleepy eyed, but better - stronger - growing in confidence.

Yes, Amy. You did save me. But all I'm wondering now is, can you love me too? Only time would tell. And the way I was feeling, I doubted it would be much longer before I knew one way or another.

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After a quick breakfast, and a call to her brother, we were on the road again. Amy had told me, through mouthfuls of Rice Krispies, that she had called her folks the previous night and explained the situation.

The roads were not as bad as they had been the night before, although I still wouldn't have called them perfect. Once white fluff had been replaced with brown slush, and the commuter traffic was in full flow. At least we had a reprieve from the weather, but listening to the radio informed us it would be short lived. More snow was expected in the evening, so we had to get there as soon as possible.

Six hours later witnessed us pulling into the secluded driveway of James and Jane's bungalow in Seaford, which was just outside of Pinvin, about fifteen miles from Stratford. Her parents were there to greet us at the door, accompanied by her brother and his future wife. It was the first time I had met James and her dad, but by the looks of them, they were like peas in a pod. Frank, Amy's father, held out his hand in greeting and I swear to God, I have never seen hands as big in my life. They were like shovels, and we could probably use them to dig our way out later when the forecasted snow arrived.

'You must be Beth.' His grip was firm ... and my hand was swallowed up inside his making it look like he was shaking a stick. I stared at it, and then admonished myself for staring, then stared again only to give myself an imaginary kick up the backside and grin stupidly at him. 'What am I doing?' He laughed. 'Come here you.' And then I was treated to a bear hug, my ribcage screaming for him to get off, although I felt well and truly welcomed. Marion hovered in the background and performed exactly the same routine, although her hands were decidedly smaller. James and Jane didn't bother with the handshakes - they just lunged straight in with the hugging stage. All in all, I felt very much at home here.

Once inside, coats were discarded and we were led to the front room where an open fire blazed in the hearth. It was bliss. In less than five minutes outside, the heat I had grown accustomed to in the car had evaporated whilst being introduced to the family.

'I'll just get your bags,' James smiled at me and nodded to Amy to follow. I didn't mind being left alone with the rest of them, I mean, what could possibly go wrong?

'So. You stayed at a Travelodge did you?' Amy's dad came and sat beside me. Jane and Marion sat at the dining room table, sifting through last minute paperwork and grinning supportively. 'Must have been bad weather then?' I nodded. There was a slight pause, and I looked at him waiting for another question. I didn't have to wait long. 'Marion tells me you're a graphic designer. Pay much?'

'Frank! Leave the girl alone,' Marion's voice sounded shocked, but it also had an edge of mirth to it. 'Make yourself useful - make a cuppa or something.'

'I'm only being friendly,' and he turned back to me 'Aren't I love?' I smiled at him and nodded.

'See? You've embarrassed the girl.' I could hear Amy's voice somewhere in the hallway talking heatedly with her brother, about what, God only knows. Frank looked towards the door and shrugged his shoulders.

'Just like old times, eh? Them two would argue who shi ...'

'Frank!' Marion stopped him mid flow, but I knew how the sentence ended and sniggered. This was definitely home from home, as I remembered the times Will and I had argued over nothing.

James came through into the lounge, his face flushed, followed by an even more flushed Amy. No one asked what they had been talking about, just accepted that they always had to have a squabble of some description or another. Frank continued to talk to me, telling me things about his business and asking how he could promote his boat refurbishment company. I said I would help him get some ideas down after the wedding, which made him grin widely.

As I turned, I saw James indicate with his head to Jane that he needed to speak to her outside, accompanied by Amy furtively beckoning. What was going on? They looked like a mime troop.

'I'll just get things sorted for tea.' And then Jane was gone, followed by her future hubby and his sister.

More heated whisperings from the hallway, with a louder 'Well I thought you would have gotten your act together by now', which was paired with an extremely loud shush from James and Amy. Marion stopped her fiddling at the table and gathered her notebook and pencil, before coming to sit on the other side of me. I felt like a Fletcher sandwich, both of them grinning widely, making me slightly uncomfortable.

'Ignore them, love,' Marion said. 'You can help me sort out the last minute details.' It had gone quiet in the hallway now, and I knew they had taken their discussion to the kitchen. All I could do was accept the offer of being occupied whilst the drama was in full swing.

Ten minutes later, and I had neither been use nor ornament, they were all back in the room, tray of tea and biscuits carried unsteadily by Amy, who kept on glaring at James and Jane. The funny thing was, they didn't seem to mind. Actually, I think they were finding it all amusing. Tea poured, and firmly ensconced into my hand, I settled back and listened to the conversations they had, joining in now and again.

A couple of times, I caught Frank nodding and mouthing something at Amy, and her face flushing intently. I also spotted Jane and James nudging each other and giggling. Sometimes, however hard you try, you still feel on the outside of things. Not that I was concerned, just intrigued. Mainly because the usually confident Amy seemed to have regressed by fifteen years. I honestly expected her to storm off to her room on more than one occasion. She was a mixture of contentment and discomfort, and the last time I had felt that way around my parents was the day I had introduced them to Amy and they had assumed she was the new lady in my life.

Bollocks. That's what the arguing had been about. She had been putting them in their places. They had believed I was her girlfriend and she was putting them in the picture that there was no way on this God's earth would she ever want to be tagged with me.

It was agony to sit and smile ... absolute agony. I had arrived at a juncture in my life, realised I had to tell Amy how I felt, and just as I got there, I found out there was no point embarrassing myself. It wasn't the embarrassment I was worried about though. It was the realisation that she didn't want me other than as a friend.

See? Agony. The kind that scurried inside your chest and needles at your heart until it has a firm grip around the pumping mass - then rip. Tear. Shred. Only to scatter to living pulsing pieces around the rest of your body, making you feel nauseous and riddled with cancerous feelings that wouldn't dissipate - they just coagulated and reformed to repeat the process all over again.

I stood, a little too quickly, making the conversation stop mid flow. 'Sorry ... I ... I ... need ...' the words were jamming and reticent.

'Bathroom, love?' Marion stood up next to me and linked my arm. 'I'll show you.'

Once outside the room, she stopped and turned me to face her. 'You ok, Beth? The colour has completely drained from you.' I nodded, but I could tell by her face she didn't believe me. 'Is it something about Amy?' No answer. I couldn't. I wouldn't. I shouldn't ... but I needed to tell someone. Needed to crack the pressure valve that was containing all these emotions inside me before I exploded.

No.

'Just felt a little sick, because of the journey and stuff. Don't worry, Marion, I'll be fine.' Her eyes were squinting as if she was trying to read my mind, but to no avail. How on earth could someone read my mind, when I didn't know what was going on in there myself?

She didn't say anything else, just took my hand and led me in an almost childlike way to the door of the bathroom. As I was going in, she placed her hand on my shoulder, making me turn to face her. 'When you're ready, eh? I'm here when you're ready.'

A sad smile slipped onto my face and I nodded slowly, before closing the door.

Looking into the mirror I realised I did look pale - no wonder Marion had been worried. I leaned in closer and took a good long look at myself. I still looked healthier (although white), my hair was still a mess, but the main thing was I still looked better - stronger - and growing in confidence. It shouldn't matter that I thought she didn't love me - it didn't change the way I felt about her. Sad, but true. And I knew that although my love may not be reciprocated, one way or another, I would still tell her how I felt. Stuff the consequences.

The thought of relieving the burden of how I felt both terrified and excited me. And I swore to my reflection that after the wedding I would do it. Tell her how I felt - no strings ... and unlike the last time I said that, this time I really meant it.

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## Chapter Nine and a Half

No point going into another full chapter of my life, especially when I still haven't finished this one. Hope you don't mind.

Should I give you a blow-by-blow description of the wedding? The ceremony and the photo taking? How we were all freezing our bollocks off (both figuratively and literally)? How the snow cascaded and flurried and danced? And by the time we were all lined up like the duff end of a firing squad the snow ceased and everything just looked perfect?

Nah. It'd only bore the pants off you.

I could tell you how absolutely stunning Amy looked though, couldn't I? I don't know how I kept my hands off her when she emerged from the bedroom ... but then again, that would mean me



missing out the reason for the heated discussion from the previous evening, and we don't want that now, do we.

I think I will go back to the time I emerged from the bathroom. It would be unfair of me to skip all the juiciness of the situation, not when you've been ploughing all the way through all my mental meanderings. What's a few more paragraphs? Nothing between friends. We are friends now, aren't we? I've shown you all of my shortcomings and you're still here ... that's what friends do, isn't it? Ok. I'll take my story back a few notches ... just for you ... my new friend.

Nothing was said when I got back into the room, but I did notice that Frank and Marion had shifted to the other sofa and Amy was sitting on it instead. She looked worried when I came back through the door, and patted the couch in invitation. Everyone was talking about different things, as families tend to do. You know, when one person starts a conversation and another person begins another and then it all goes into confused chatter. Confusing, but very comforting.

'You ok?' She leaned towards me and I could smell her perfume. Her eyes were gentle, just glistening slightly. 'I was worried about you.' She picked up my hand and started rubbing the back of it. Electricity raced up my arms and ended at the tips of my nip ... 'Please tell me if you want to talk about anything.' Another stroke, this time with the tips of her fingers. 'I mean *anything*, ok?'

I just nodded, as the ability to speak was sitting mutely underneath my tongue, and I'm sure my tongue was swelling ... that and other parts of my anatomy.

'I've got something I need to tell you ... it's a bit embarrassing really.' I looked at her, waiting for her to continue. The chatter in the room stopped, and for the first time I could hear the clock on the mantelpiece. It sounded as if it was doing an impression of Big Ben. She gripped my hand, squeezed it and then released her hold. I could feel others getting up in the room and making their way to the door. Bugger. This must be bad. What did they think I was going to do? Have the screaming ab dabs or something?

I heard some excuses coming from behind me, and before long it was just her and me.

'Erm ... there's been some kind of misunderstanding.' Jesus. She already knows and she's trying to let me down gently. 'Jane and James, well they ... erm ...' she grimaced ... *grimaced!* 'They kind of got the wrong end of the stick.' I think I made it more difficult for her, because I didn't say anything. Just waited. 'They ... erm ... have put us in the same room.' I cocked my head to the side and gave her the look to continue, as I didn't understand. I understood all right - she didn't want to sleep with me - last night had been enough to put her off. 'Not that I don't want to - I mean - erm ... shit ... mind ...' Yeah right. 'I'm more than happy to sleep with you ... erm ... crap ...' her face was crimson by this stage. 'What I'm trying to say, and not very well is would you mind sleeping with me.' Blood red. She went BLOOD RED. 'No ... not like, well I ... see ... there's only three bedrooms, and ... bugger. I'm making a mess of this aren't I?'

I nodded, grinned and then held my hands up to her face pretending to get warm from the heat. She looked so adorable as she sat and glowed ... and then glowed some more.

'Jane assumed that ... I ... we ... erm ... were like ... together. And I told her we were friends, and that's all.' I should have been disappointed by what she had said, but there was something lying behind her eyes that I couldn't quite grasp - but it kind of gave me a boost of sorts. It wasn't what she said, more like what she didn't say. Probably, I'd read it all wrong, and it was just wishful thinking, but for the moment I wanted to go along with the idea of what that expression said to me. 'Her mother will be here in a little while, and they've given her the third room.'

'No worries ...' I paused and made sure I had eye contact before continuing. 'I think I could manage sharing a room with you again.' She grinned and blew out a breath. 'Just.'

So there it was. Drama over nothing - story of my life really. I love to make a mountain out of a molehill. It would be best if I didn't tell her that I loved her tonight as it might make her nervous as to my intentions when we were sharing the same bed. No one likes to get under the sheets with someone whom they know fancies them and they don't feel the same. Too awkward. But I would tell her. That resolution was still in place ... two months late, but there all the same.

We all had an early night, as we had to be up early the next day. Frank, Marion and James left not long after eight, wanting to be home and settled whilst they could still get there. Jane's mum, Vera, arrived about seven, and she was excited about her little girl tying the knot the next day. It's getting confusing. I'd better start another paragraph.

I spent most of the night just watching her sleep - as you do. She looked for all the world like an angel, lying there, so peaceful, so beautiful, so within my reach, yet so not. And this time I kept my hands to myself. Which was decidedly a bonus.

As I was saying, Amy looked a vision the next day when she walked out of the bedroom. She wore a sleeveless crimson dress, and her hair was gathered at the back, loose strands kissing and caressing her cheeks. For a split second I felt a pang of jealousy, then it was gone, and I was left being gobsmacked all over again. She looked so lady like - I had never seen her dressed up like this in all the time I had known her. Not that many people walk about in a bridesmaid's dress whilst walking a dog or going on the Big One. Amy actually reminded me of a character from a Victorian romance.

'I'm fucking freezing.'

Maybe not.

'Good job I've got a shawl, although I doubt it will be neither use nor ornament out there.'

It was a shame to see her cover those glorious shoulders up, but I understood that standing outside at minus four would be a little nippy in a sleeveless frock. Aw well ... at least I could stare all I wanted at the reception later.

Oh ... by the way, Jane looked nice too.

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The reception was heaving with people, and the heat in the room was bordering on stifling. After the speeches it was time to get the party started. Jane and James wouldn't be there for the whole evening, as they were off on honeymoon to Cuba and their flight left Heathrow in the early hours of the morning. It wasn't until late that I found out that Vera would be staying over at one of her relatives who lived closer to the hotel, a cousin, I think. There were so many relatives there, that I actually lost count of all the people I was introduced to ... and I'd be buggered if I could remember a quarter of their names.

As the evening went on, the atmosphere became more heightened. The kids had been taken home, as they had tired themselves out dancing and running round the dance floor like headless chickens high on sugar, and all it left were the adults. I had a few dances with a couple of cousins from Amy's side of the family, and Amy too. Nice blokes, looked a little like her too, but they weren't *her*.

It was just before ten that I spotted Amy talking to a woman who apparently had arrived late, as she was standing near the door and taking her coat off. I know. I should work for MI5. They were laughing and she kept on hugging each other - repeatedly hugging each other. Then they kissed. On the mouth. Not a long kiss, but a kiss on the lips just the same. I watched as Amy pulled back from the bint, holding her at arms length and looking her up and down, her face showing incredulity and happiness. Then they hugged each other again. I should have felt the usual disappointment and 'poor me', but all I felt was anger. I wanted to go over and smack the woman in the face, and maybe piss on Amy's shoes like a dog ... did I say that out loud? Maybe I'll scratch the last bit.

I'll start again. I wanted to go over and smack the woman in the face . Ok. Let's try again.

I wanted to go over and make my presence known, introduce myself, let Amy know I was still there ... maybe throw a spanner in the works. Bitter? Twisted? You bet. I didn't want anything coming between Amy and me tonight, as I wanted to tell her how I felt when we got back to the bungalow. I could do it tonight, as I knew we would have the place to ourselves and spare beds to sleep in if it all went pear shaped. And if it did go tits up, I could leave first thing in the morning. All I hoped was it didn't ruin our friendship ... that I did not want to lose.

But I didn't have to get up and go over, because within minutes Amy was standing in front of me with the woman latching on like a limpet. 'Beth? This is Rachel.' Then she thrust the woman closer to me.

I brought up the Chambers smile from deep within, stuck out my hand in greeting, and didn't visibly flinch when she gripped it hard enough to break my fingers. 'I've heard so much about you, Beth.' I've heard bugger all about you. 'Amy tells me you and her are good friends.' She turned to give Amy one of those looks, you know the ones, they go along the lines of 'Look how clever I am,' bordering on arrogance. The urge to wipe the smugness off her face was almost consuming me, and I had to clench my hands into fists underneath the table a few times until I felt the anger subside slightly. 'I just had to come and meet the woman who makes Amy go all girly ... isn't that right Amy?'

Amy's throat was pulsating, and I knew she was swallowing rapidly. 'You've just broken up with someone haven't you. Shame. No chance of you getting back together?'

'Rachel!'

'I was just wondering ... no offence meant, Beth.' Yeah. Right.

'None taken. No worries ... Sorry ... what was your name again?' Her face was a picture - absolute classic. It was worth biting my tongue and telling her to shove her 'concerned' questions right where the sun didn't shine.

'I'm thirsty.' Talk about blanking my question. Tee hee hee. 'Come on, Amy. Buy me a drink.'

Amy still looked startled, and Rachel tried to grab her hand and lead her away. 'In a minute, Rachel ... you go and queue and I'll be along in shortly.' Rachel looked disappointed, turned and glared at me and then walked off. She was attractive, I'll give her that, but what lurked underneath her skin was far from beautiful - says me who wanted to smack her one even before I was introduced.

'Ignore her, Beth.' Amy sat down in the chair opposite me. 'She's a little possessive.' I wanted to ask if she was seeing her, but Amy beat me to it. 'I used to go out with her a couple of years ago, but it didn't work out.' Best news I'd heard all day. 'She was extremely controlling, and had the tendency to be aggressive to anyone I was talking to.' I'm sure Amy heard me gulp because she gave me a funny look. 'She was a bit like how Sue used to be with you.'

Realisation dawned on me - thudded into my head actually. No wonder Amy had been so understanding about Sue and how I had dealt with it. She had been on the receiving end of it too.

She looked away, and I could tell she was thinking about something. When she looked back, she looked resolved. 'Beth?' Her voice was low, and I heard a little quaver just in that one word. 'I need to tell you something tonight ... need to explain something.' Thoughts shifted through my head ... did she want to tell me about Rachel? But by the look on her face, I knew it was something more than that. 'I have to tell you how I ...'

'Are you coming to get me a drink, or what?' Rachel had come back from the bar, and she didn't look a happy bunny. 'One of your cousins has just felt me up.'

I wanted to laugh out loud, dispelling the tension, and also to piss Rachel off. But I did neither ... I was a good girl, for a change. 'He's probably drunk.' I couldn't resist. She glared at me, and I heard Amy snort a laugh, but Rachel just gave me daggers. I wanted to add 'Or desperate' but that would be going a little too far. It was funny how I had taken an instant dislike to the woman, and I didn't even know her. But what I had seen of her made me glad that I would never become bosom buddies with her - maybe because she reminded me of Sue, and you know how I feel about that subject.

Amy gave me a look of apology, stood up to go with Rachel, stopped and leaned over to me. 'Don't forget.' Warm breath tickled the side of my face. 'Tonight.' Then she was gone, and I could just about make out her profile as she waited at the bar trying to get served. A couple of times she looked my way, and her eyes bored through mine - no smile ... nothing. I could tell she was deep in thought both times, about what I don't know. Thinking about what she was going to say to me later gave me the jitters, but I was more concerned about what I had resolved to say to her. Whatever happened, I would be telling her when we got back.

James and Jane left just after eleven amongst cheers and good wishes, and it wasn't long before Amy and I were in the taxi and making our way back home. The atmosphere was thick with expectation, but neither of us said a word. My stomach was churning and churning, but it couldn't out do the pounding in my chest. My heart was well aware it was going to be centre stage in a matter of minutes, and I think it was warming itself up.

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## Chapter Ten (the 'I'm not going to Tell You' Stage)

Once inside the house, I could feel my mettle sliding, the words were spinning around my head but did not make any sense. I didn't know where to begin ... didn't know how to broach the subject. I didn't want to just blurt it out, and all the preparation I had been doing mentally had fled the scene leaving me alone with a vacuous space where my brain used to be.

I had to collect myself before I told her. It had to be right. I had to do this right, as I knew I didn't want to cock things up ... didn't want to blurt and then regret. All in all, I wanted to have a decent chance of telling her how I felt.

Amy went straight into the living room, and I stopped in the doorway and just watched her clicking on the lamps. Her shoulders shimmered and gleamed in the soft light they gave off, and I could smell her perfume as strongly as if she was standing in front of me.

'Just nipping to the loo.' And I was gone. Door locked. My back against it - my breathing heavy and erratic. 'Calm down ... for God's sake ... *calm ... down.*' I knelt down, my knees nearing my face and attempted to regularise my breathing. 'Just tell her.' My heart was in overdrive. 'Just ... tell ... her.'

Then it came to me. It was Amy. Amy. Amy. Just tell her ... tell her.

Before I knew it, I was out of the door and standing in front of her. Surprise shrouded her face, and her lips pursed in question. Words were redundant. I couldn't tell her ... couldn't say the words I so desperately wanted to say.

So I kissed her. Cupped her face and pulled her to me and kissed her. Held that beautiful face in my hands and kissed her as if my life depended on it. Pulled her to me, and kissed her mouth - her sensuous mouth - the mouth I had coveted for so long.

No response. Her mouth stayed shut, but it didn't stop me. I continued to kiss her because if I stopped I knew that would be it. But then I felt her begin to respond, her lips parting, her tongue tracing the curve of my mouth. Her hands sneaked around my waist leaving a trail of fire in their wake. Pulling me into her, her thigh parted my legs and pressed against the throbbing pool of want collecting there for her alone. The gasp left my mouth and entered hers, and I trailed my fingers down her face, defining the contours of perfection.

Her lips left mine and she pulled back to look into my face. 'Beth.' One whispered word, but I placed my finger over her mouth not wanting to discuss what was happening between us. I just wanted to continue kissing her ... her to continue kissing me.

Wish granted. Her lips parted, luscious lips parted and my finger slipped inside to be gently suckled: the sensation rippling down my body in waves. Her firm thigh continued to press and rub, and I could feel the wetness seeping through my underwear. My fingers traced along her jawbone and round to where her hair was clipped back. With one click, her hair cascaded around her face and framed the perfection that was her.

Need overcame everything else as I lifted my mouth to claim hers once again. Lips of velvet ... soft, pliable velvet. Velvet that tasted of lipstick and promise. Tongues became more enquiring, coming out of their shells to dip and dance in the glory of the moment. Hands became clasping, searching instruments, which couldn't find purchase on one single thing that could quell the desire rippling and reverberating throughout me.

Once again, Amy pulled away, the cool air breathing on my face marking the absence of the heat of her mouth.

'Beth.' Almost a groan. 'Please ...' I went to kiss her again, but she moved her face, her eyes pleading for me to stop. Had I misread her reaction? Had I forced her to kiss me, giving her no option but to comply as I thrust myself upon her? But she hadn't pushed me away; she was still gripping onto me as if I would flee if she let me go - her thigh was fully entrenched between my legs ...

'Amy?' My voice crackled and split ... 'What's wrong?' I didn't want her to answer; I just wanted to carry on in ignorance and pretend that this was meant to be.

Brown eyes looked deeply into my own, searching, demanding, exacting a something from me, a something I didn't know. 'Please tell me ...' tell you what? I could feel the vibrations racing through her as she held onto me, pulsating waves as she pleaded without words ...

The light came ... bright blinding light ... the light that spells out you have been a fool ...

'I love you.' Three little words ... three syllables ... eight letters, but for some people they are the hardest words ... or syllables ... or letters to say.

Hands gripped my shoulders and I was pulled into a fierce hug, my face crushing against her breast. Amy released a sob from deep within; I felt it rip out her chest - rip out of her throat - tear out of her mouth and land in my hair.

'God ... Beth ... I ...' another sob ... 'I love you so much ... so much.' She cupped my face and brought it up level with her own. 'I've loved you forever.' Now, I could have let the phrasing remind me of Sue and her false promises, but this wasn't a false promise ... she said she *had* loved me forever - not that she was going to. And forever is negotiable, because forever with this woman would never be long enough.

Her forehead leaned against mine, and her eyes captured my gaze. 'I love you, Beth,' and then she kissed me so tenderly, I could have wept tears of happiness, but instead I kissed her back. Firmer. Dedicated. Oblivious to everything around me, apart from the glorious woman in my grasp. I could feel wetness running down my face and I wasn't sure if I was crying or it was Amy ... or both of us. Kisses and caresses became comforting, stroking, pacifying, the anticipation culminating and heightening to the point it was almost too much for us to bear.

I could feel my knees giving way, and wanted to pull her down to the ground with me, but I knew that wasn't what we both wanted - for our first time to be on the living room carpet.

'Amy ...' another kiss. 'Amy ... we ...' another mouth watering kiss. 'We need ...' She kissed me again, deep, sensuous and devouring until I nearly forgot what I was going to say. I was finding it increasingly difficult to formulate a sentence, and all I could conjure from the bank of words and phrases in my head was 'Bed.'

But that's all I needed. And I think I had said too much even then. The feelings that were throbbing through me needed no words, no explanation ... all they needed was her.

Amy slipped her leg from between my thighs and stepped back, the smile on her face inviting and accepting. My heart fluttered, or was that my stomach? Who cared? I was going into the bedroom with the woman I loved ... stuff the sideshow of organs.

Lifting her hand in invitation, she cocked her head to the side. Fuck. She was a vision ... and absolute vision of everything I had ever wanted and more besides. She lifted her eyebrow and her lips parted in a sensual smile ...

'I thought you'd never ask.'

Placing my hand in hers, I felt my future click into place. This is where I should be ... where I wanted to be ... where I needed to be to feel complete again.

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The bedroom was dark, but there was no need for lights, as the moon slipped though the crack in the curtains to silhouette her frame - but I didn't need a light to guide me to where she was. I could sense her.

Long fingers grazed across my cheeks and buried themselves in my hair, and gently she eased me forward and into her, her mouth tantalisingly close ... her breath sweet and warm. Lips, warm, moist, and tender brushed against mine and the sensation raced southwards to summon and dispel the raw emotion that felt had been buried there for eternity. I had never felt so alive - so alert - so totally entranced in anything or anyone before in my life.

Hunger roared within, and I wanted to savage her, take her and consume her ... own her and love her ... devour all of her in that instant. Everything was becoming harder to control, harder to rationalise, and I gripped her hips and dragged her to me, claiming her mouth as my reward for patience attempted.

Clothes were a barrier and I needed to feel all of her ... touch her skin, glide reverent fingers over soft pliable flesh ... dip between her legs and sample the delights of her. Kisses became more ardent, hands began to fumble and discover. A gasp left my lungs as her hand found my breast and covered it in possession, slightly kneading it ... as hips began to sway backwards and forwards ... backwards and forwards, chafing the spot that desired each the most. But it wasn't enough.

Slipping my hands up her back, I grasped the zipper to her dress and tugged it downwards, allowing the dress to billow and fan at the front. Slowly, I pushed it down so it puddled at her feet, leaving her standing in my arms in just her underwear. Her skin slipped underneath my fingers as I traced the curves of her waist on my way to her breasts. I broke off the kiss and stepped back, wanting to see my hands cup and weigh my prize for the first time. But the reality of doing such a thing is nothing like the imagined - it is so much more - so beguiling - so all-consumingly magical, and I was spell bound. Her bra suddenly popped and fell as Amy released the clasp.

Perfect. Absolutely positively perfect. Full rounded orbs finished off with dark, erect nipples. I know I had seen them before, touched them even, but not like this ... not like this ... God. This was an offering of something sacred ... something sacrosanct ... something I ached to cherish. And cherish them I would - cherish them always ...

I watched my fingers brush delicately over the swell of her breast, slowly fitting to memory the feel, the sensation, the exhilaration of touching her intimately and knowing deep within that this was so right. Nipples perked and primped, fighting to get underneath my touch. I didn't disappoint. Rolling my thumb and forefinger around the tip, a soft moan escaped her mouth and I felt the effect ripple all through me.

Lowering my head, I flicked my tongue over the nub and basked in the response, as it strained to enter my mouth. Which it did, as I suckled for the flesh of the woman I loved.

'I need to feel you, Beth.' Her voice was raspy, full of need, mirroring my longing - longing for the moment when we would melt together, skin on skin. I released her breast and attempted to unzip my dress from the back, when her hands stopped me. 'Here. Let me.' She turned me around, and I could feel the zipper give and release me into her care, the dress falling haphazardly to my feet. Next to leave was my bra - then my underwear. By the time I turned



back, she was naked and waiting. A trail of light shimmered across her face and chest from the window, her eyes dark and expectant.

Almost dreamlike, she moved towards me, footsteps muffled on carpeted floor. Pulling me to her, I closed my eyes and inhaled, luxuriating in her essence, her smell, and the aroma that was truly her. Mouths covered mouths ... tongues sought and searched ... hands covered and discovered, until we were lying side by side on the bed.

The only contact we had was our mouths and our fingers, fingers that excavated and revealed valleys and dips, curves and pleasures long hidden. It was so gentle, so tender, so fulfilling yet agonisingly frustrating to be so near and not have all of her. I needed all of her. Every square inch. Every molecule and particle that made up this vision lying next to me ... this woman who encapsulated my past, present and future. This woman who had saved me, made me realise just what life had to offer, made me stand back and take a good hard look at my life and give me the strength to try again ... but it was also so much more. I wasn't following blindly anymore - I was taking control.

Before I knew it, I was above her, looking down at her lying underneath me. Her hair fanned across the pillow, whilst errant locks gripped onto her cheeks. Gently I brushed them away to reveal a face open and honest ... trusting me to take care of her; allowing herself to give up control of everything. What a gift. What an amazing offering from one human to another. Trust. The knowledge that she completely trusted me was absolutely priceless.

Slowly, I lowered myself onto her, glorifying in the full body contact, her hands clutching my backside and pulling me closer. Her legs parted to allow me to slip in between and push myself into her. Eyelids fluttered and breaths expelled. So, I did it again ... and again ... and ... again, each time receiving the same response, each time the force of her returning the pressure increased, making me want to delve deeper inside. But I didn't want to rush it ... didn't want the need for a climax to dictate this moment.

I moved one leg over her thigh and slicked my juices up her leg, as she did the same to mine. Hot wet heat glazed and smeared onto waiting flesh, making the tempo increase easily, generating a pulsating need, a throbbing want, a desire to fulfil this ache, which seemed to increase with each journey along her skin. Kisses were ardent - possessed. Breathing was becoming a delectable chore, rapid, ragged, and heavy. Nothing was enough. However hard I pressed, the throbbing increased driving me mad with the need to satisfy and be satisfied.

Slipping one hand in between us, I parted the lips that guarded her entrance, the moisture clinging onto the tips of my fingers. Slick and wet and wanting me to dip inside ... begging me to take the plunge ... pleading with me to slip within and fill her. So I did. One finger eased inside effortlessly, as my hips stayed rhythmic and guided the way into the place where earth meets heaven. Inside her I found my Eden, my sanctuary. Another finger; another increase in the tempo. I could feel the tension ripple and burst into pockets of fire.

The raging inside my gut likened itself to the raging I felt throughout my whole being. Being with Amy was everything and more besides. I loved her. I loved her so much. And making love

to her, the woman who meant everything to me, was the most unbelievable experience I had ever had the fortune to experience. Kissing and stroking and claiming her, as she claimed and stroked and kissed me, was undeniably euphoric. To be inside her ... deep inside her ... thrusting and pumping and loving her ... feeling her walls contract and dilate around my fingers was tantamount to bliss.

Words spewed from my mouth and into hers, words of love, words of lust and want, words that spoke of forever. The same words came back like an echo, but this time in her voice. Her hands clasped more firmly to my ass and pulled me in, and I wanted to slip effortlessly inside and live out the rest of my life in absolute ecstasy.

Faster and faster, synchronicity abandoned as I gripped her thigh and pulled it around my waist, my fingers still buried and searching. I could feel my orgasm building, and I knew she was close ... so close. Juices spilled from me - spilled from her, coating my hand, my palm, my wrist. Breathing rasped and caught, and like a still from a movie ... snap ... the moment was captured with a flash of burning blinding light ...

Names mixed in the air in cries of our cumming, making the snapshot disappear and reality mingle with fantasy. Erratic thrusts pounded the vestiges of elation, and nails dug into skin cleaving to truth and contentment. I fell forward and buried my face in the curve of her neck, trying to acclimatise myself to this feeling of wonder and fulfilment. Heavy burgeoning breaths escaped and thumped on her skin, as hers concealed themselves in my hair.

Neither of us moved. Heat enveloped me, almost suffocating, but neither of us moved. Until Amy's arms wrapped themselves around me and pulled me close. Safe. Secure. But most of all ... in her arms.

Minutes passed and we lay there truly contented to just *be*. Minutes passed, but we didn't acknowledge the time. Minutes passed and I fell in love all over again.

'Beth?' I could feel the word pulsating through her chest as well as hear it. I grunted a response, too comfortable to move. 'I love you, you know.' My eyes flickered open, and I wanted to raise my head, but I couldn't ... I felt so at home lying on her chest, feeling her words. But no other words came. And before long I felt the fingertips of sleep pull down my eyelids.

What a perfectly wonderful way to fall asleep.

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Throughout the night, we woke to continue our explorations, committing to memory every nuance, taste, smell and sound. Although the passion raged, our lovemaking was tender and gentle. I think it was what we both needed ... no incensed coupling, it was more like a joining - a finding of each other. When the morning greeted us, we were lying in each other's arms and tracing patterns over skin. She held me against her, and I rested my head on her chest, her fingers running up and down the dip of my spine.

I can honestly say I have never felt so contented in my life. So relaxed ... at peace, if you will. I had spent the most part of my life worrying about life and consequences, denying myself the opportunity to sample the joys of being totally and utterly in love. A tinge of regret charged through me, dampening the moment for a split second. But there's no use regretting the past, that's just as bad as worrying about the future ... and presently I was in the arms of my future.

Then a memory about the previous night popped into my head. I shifted a little and felt Amy kiss the top of my head.

'Amy?' She semi grunted a response into my hair. 'Last night ...' I felt her tense, then release a breath, forcing her body to relax. 'You said you needed to tell me something ... needed to explain. What was it?'

'Doesn't matter ... old news.'

I shifted a little more so I was facing her. Brown eyes looked straight into mine and as if by sheer will, a twinkle sparked across them. Lips, red and slightly swollen, turned upwards into a secretive smile.

'Come on. Tell. You know you want to.'

'Nah ah.' An all out grin, and then ... nothing else. Curiosity gripped me, well, I had an idea what she had wanted to 'explain', but I wanted her to say it. I tried to coax with words and kisses, but the answer was still the same. 'Nah ah.' So I tried tickling, but that just made her squirm and laugh. I contemplated doing the sulking routine, you know, the one where you look really sad and hurt with the 'it doesn't matter ... I understand' line slipping from your lips like the ever faithful martyr. But to be honest, it didn't really matter. She was right ... it was old news.

Who am I trying to kid?

'Ok.'

Slowly, I pulled away, locking eyes with her, making sure she was paying attention as I brought out my sad face. Her expression changed from tormenting to concern in less than two seconds, and I knew I had her ...

'It doesn't matter ... I understand.' And then sat up, turned and shuffled to the edge of the bed, counted to five before saying 'Would you like a cuppa?' Perfect.

'Drama Queen.' Huh? And then she was on me, tickling my ribs and pinning me to the bed. 'Going to make you pay for that, lady.' More tickling, as I frantically struggled to free myself, but the strength had left me. Laughter broke out from both of us and we ended up a tangled heap ... a panting tangled heap. 'Ok, nosey parker, I'll tell you.' I felt smug. 'And there's no need to look so bloody smug.' Feigning innocence didn't wash with her. 'Go and make me that cuppa and then come back to bed,' she gently poked me in the chest. 'Then I'll explain, ok?'

I snatched a quick kiss, making her face open with surprise, before I scuttled from underneath the mound of arms and legs. I believe it was the fastest cup of tea I have ever made. Talk about motivated. She was still straightening the covers when I got back into the room.

Back in bed, cups firmly ensconced in our hands, she began to tell me everything I wanted to hear. About time too ... but then again, I had room to talk - 'Miss Procrastinator for the Millennium'.

'I think I should start at the very beginning.' I wanted to break out in a Julie Andrews impression 'that's a very good place to start', but I think it would have been bad timing. 'Right from the very first time I saw you standing in the river, I knew you were special.' I sat up and looked at her. How could she have thought that when I looked an absolute fright ... drawn, sobbing, and soaked to the skin, my mumblings making no sense whatsoever? Not to mention the fact she had to climb into the bloody river to get me out.

Amy cupped my face with her free hand. 'I did. So get over it.' My smile split my face almost in two. 'I'd been sitting in the café wondering why on earth I had moved to Norfolk, when in trots the most gorgeous little boy. He came straight over to me and gave me his ball.' Her fingers trickled along my face, the sensations rippling to other places. 'Eventually I figured out he wanted me to follow him, and the next thing I saw was you, standing up to near waist in water looking about frantically. I kind of guessed it was because of Dudley - the way he was going crazy told me as much.'

'Get to the point.'

'Oi ... it's my story, I'll tell it how I like, ok?' She leaned over and kissed my lips, my eyes fluttering closed. 'And I'll remind you to keep your gob shut, or else I won't tell you.' Opening my eyes, I saw she had placed her cup on the side and held her arms open so I could clamber inside. Which, obviously, I did, placing my cup next to hers first. 'I tried to get your attention, but you were having none of it. Then when you did, the reaction wasn't what I expected; it seemed so much more than relief. You seemed to crumble, and I just had to get to you.'

I remembered it well. Those eyes. The way she had come into the river and held me before helping me out of the water.

'But it was the tingling sensation I felt when I touched your hand that shocked me. It kind of triggered something deep inside, a reason to be there, if you know what I mean?' God. I knew the feeling well. I seemed to get shocks off her every time she touched me. 'All I knew was I had to see you again ... couldn't just let you go without talking to you, get to know you a little more. I didn't even know if you were gay. Come to think of it, I didn't care.'

It seemed as if she had read my mind. I had felt exactly the same way - I just wanted to get to know her, but I kept on denying the reasons why.

'I kept on going back to Earlham on the off chance I would see you again, but it seemed like I had either missed you or you decided that the park wouldn't be the best place to bring Dudley,

you know, after thinking he'd drowned.' Amy paused, kissed the top of my head, and gave me a gentle squeeze before continuing. 'Then we met again, and there was no way you were leaving without me at least giving you my phone number ... just in case.' I giggled. 'What's so funny?'

'I thought exactly the same thing.' And I giggled again. Being loved up definitely made me act like a teenager. 'Go on. What else?'

'Erm ... 'I saw her face screw up trying to remember where she'd got up to, so I reminded her with 'phone', her face breaking into a grin. 'Yeah ... you called me. I nearly wet myself with excitement. Didn't even know where Wells Next the Sea was when we made the arrangements ... had to look it up and how to get there.' I laughed and she turned slightly pink. 'And being under that coat with you ... Jesus. I felt so much, and I didn't even know you. It was nothing short of intimate.'

Inside I was glowing. She was describing all the things I had felt and it was wonderful to hear. 'But when I saw you shaking, I didn't know whether you were cold, or you could sense that I wanted to kiss you and you were scared.'

'A bit of both really. Not that I didn't want you to kiss me ...'

'You didn't feel ready though, did you?' I shook my head. 'Thought so. Even though I didn't know what had happened between you and Sue, I had a feeling that you were going through a tough time and didn't want to screw you up even more. Especially if you weren't gay. Now that would have taken some explaining.'

I turned to look up at her, and she was looking down at me, her face so open and honest. I had to just claim that mouth again ... just to make sure this all wasn't a dream. The kiss developed, and I had to tear myself away from her so she could continue primping my ego.

'Phew, woman. You kiss good.' And she went in for seconds, but I pushed her back indicating for her to continue. 'Ok ... ok ... later then?' I nodded rapidly making her laugh. 'Where was I again?'

'Jeez, Amy ... you were just about to tell me you fell in love with me over Sunday dinner. How on earth could you forget?'

'Nearly.' That stopped my laughing. 'The more I got to know you, the more I wanted to know you. And when you said you had just come out of a relationship with Sue, I felt elated and deflated at the same time.'

'Why?'

'Because I found out you were gay ... which was good. But you were also just getting out of an abusive relationship. Not so good. I didn't want you to come to me for the wrong reasons. I wanted you to be with me because you wanted to be with me.'

Simple. A child could have worked it out. But I hadn't. Shows how much I know, doesn't it. 'Why didn't you ever give me any indication you felt the same as me? Why just go along pretending you only wanted friendship?'

'Because that's all you ever gave me, Beth. You never showed that you wanted more, and there was no way I would force myself upon you. Not after you had gone through all that with Sue.'

Sitting up again, I moved back from her to look at her fully. She lay propped up on the pillows and her expression seemed almost solemn. 'But I did. I did give you signs I wanted more ... like in Blackpool ...'

'Ah ... Blackpool. Yes. At first you did, and then all you seemed to want to do was go home. I thought you'd had enough of me ... thought I'd done something to offend you.'

'It wasn't like that. I thought you and Jane ...'

'Were a couple. I know. And I played on that for a bit to see if I could get a response from you ... see if I could force you to take the plunge and say something, or show some kind of sign. But you didn't. You seemed happy enough for me to have a girlfriend ... and that hurt - like the final realisation you didn't think of me that way.'

I frowned, 'Didn't you think it odd that I wanted to go home early? Especially after you received the call?'

'Nope. You were fine in the restaurant ... although you did seem a little short with me on the way back to the hotel.'

What to say? What to do? It was true. I had ever given her any indication that she meant more to me than just a friend. But it wasn't just her I had tried to fool ... tried it with myself too ... tried to block it out ... get over it ... pretend it was some rebound thing most people went through. Deep inside my gut, I knew differently. I felt so bloody insecure back then ... my self-confidence shot to pieces ...

No. That wasn't true. I had tried to overcome the doubts and restraints I had put upon myself. The near kiss in the Paseje del Terror ... New Year's Eve ... the hugs ... the constantly wanting her to be with me ... but mainly the near kisses. No one could disguise that for something other than want. So I told her exactly that. She pulled a face as if she was thinking.

'True. It could have been you making a move, or even responding to my attraction for you.' She leaned slightly forward, 'which of course is exactly what I thought was happening.' Her breath brushed over my face, whilst I sat there trying to think of a come back, but she beat me to it. 'Each time we nearly kissed I thought it was all my fault. Especially Boxing night.' Then she squirmed and sat back. 'When I came round I had the intention of telling you how I felt and that I would wait until you were ready. Then Sue came round as a reminder of every thing and I bottled out.'

Trust Sue to put the boot in. Again.

'When I eventually got home, I really wanted to call you ... but it wouldn't have been right over the phone. I was gutted the next day when I realised I had missed your call, and wanted to invite you here to tell you on New Year's Eve.' Bollocks. Big fat hairy ones. 'But I couldn't get hold of you.' I know! Rub it in! 'Beth?' A slight pause. 'Can I ask you something?' I nodded, believing vulgar words were the only thing I could utter, therefore limiting me to body language. 'If I had ... you know ... had the bottle to ask you ... would you have wanted me?'

Now there's a question. I had wanted her ... God did I? But was I ready to start a new relationship then? In addition, was that what she was asking in the first place? I was so screwed up back then ... it wouldn't have been fair to drag her into my mess. All the dramatics with Sue had left me doubting my own state of mind, and my judgement ... not that I didn't believe that Amy was the person I wanted to be with. It was a case of not being able to trust the fact that anyone would want to be with me, like Groucho Marx said about not wanting to be a member of a club that would accept him as a member. Do you know what I mean?

Deliberating at this point was not a good idea, as when I'd snapped out of my reverie and focused on Amy again, I could see her eyes glistening. She thought I hadn't wanted her back then. Shit. Me and my mental meanderings.

'Good job I didn't then,' and she tried to laugh, but it came out as a semi sob.

'No, baby ... no. That's not it. God ...' I reached forward and wrapped my arms about her, pulling her close. 'That's not what I was thinking.' I kissed her hair and nuzzled my face into the curly brown locks. 'I was just thinking back to how I was then in comparison to now.' Not a good start, I know, but give me a chance. I was new to this. 'I was all over the place, emotionally that is.' Another sob that shook both her and me. 'Shush ... baby. I meant I *wanted* to be with you ... and still do ...' I could feel her shaking in my arms, and knew I was cocking things up big time. 'Amy?' Except for a couple of snuffling sounds, nothing else emerged from below my chin. 'Amy? Look at me.'

Slowly, she lifted her head, and I could see the traces of tears lingering on her face. 'Can I just say one thing?' She nodded. 'I fell in love with you long before that.'

The kiss she greeted me with indicated I had said the right thing, for once. This sweet talking stuff wasn't so hard after all. So I thought I would have another crack at the whip. 'I was attracted to you from the start, and it was so hard not to just blurt out and tell you. But I had to get my life into some kind of order ... it would have been a mistake to act upon my feelings for you. I felt fragile and broken back then ... I didn't want to screw things up. Understand?' Amy wiped her eyes and gave me a smile that could melt concrete. 'You meant too much to me for it all to go tits up.' I know. The phrasing could have been better, but the sentiment was the same. Moreover, I don't think she noticed the words, only the fact that I didn't want to lose her. I got this impression by the way her face lit up, and the way it melted right in front of my eyes.

Lying down flat, I pulled her to me needing to feel her close, needing to let her know that it was all about now, not then. We snuggled and kissed for a while before deciding that the rest of our coming together story should be discussed, or even get to the explanation stage. That was what had started this discussion off, after all ... the needing to know what she wanted to explain the night of the party. Or was this all part and parcel of the bigger picture?

Never mind. Food was now a priority ... and so was a shower. Not in that order, if you will. Had to keep my strength up and smell nice for my woman.

My woman.

All mine.

How perfectly fantastic is that?

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I smelled good. G-O-O-D. And so did she. But nothing smelled better than bacon, especially to two very hungry women. Being with Amy had awakened my appetite, on more than one level, and I demolished my breakfast come lunch with the grace and manners of a starving beast. I even nicked the last piece of toast, snatched it from right underneath her extended fingertips, which earned me a mock glare ... so I bit into it, chewed and then showed her the contents of my mouth.

'Charming. Do you treat all your women with such a delicate display?'

'Only the sexy ones.'

She blushed and picked up her coffee, nursing it between her hands. For some unknown reason, she appeared to be shy, and I knew she wanted to ask me something - could tell by the way she kept pursing and unpursing her lips. Then she stopped, took a drink, and stared at me. I leaned forward and poked her on the end of the nose.

'Do you always poke your women?'

'Only the sexy ones.' Then I paused ... 'And it depends what you mean by poke.' Honestly, I could have reheated lava on her face. It seemed weird that she would go red because I had said she was sexy ... although I can understand the poking bit ... We had spent the night discovering each other, but she was still shy about it.

'You've gone all red.' Time for payback. She used to always comment on how red I used to go when there was a double entendre to be had. Now it was my turn. Of course, she denied it, which made me worse. 'Why've you gone red?'



'I haven't ... it's not ... ah ... bugger.' Placing the cup on the table, she straightened her back and looked me squarely in the face. Her next comment surprised me. 'Do you think I'm sexy, Beth?' Her voice was honest and questioning, and bordered on the side of timid.

Was she blind? How could she question how absolutely gorgeous she was? I just sat, open mouthed, disbelief evident. 'Why on earth would you doubt how sexy you are? You are without a doubt, the sexiest woman I have ever met.' No answer. 'Amy? Is there something you want to tell me?' Still quiet from the other side of the table. I watched as she lifted her hand up to take her cup again, stop, and then go to her hair. The thing that grabbed my attention the most was that it was shaking.

'Hey.' I stretched and grabbed her fingers, pulling her hand towards me. 'What's up?' Amy shook her head, and I believed she was trying not to cry. Slowly, I got up from the table and made my way round to her side, not letting go of her hand for a minute. Kneeling next to her, I made sure she was looking straight at me by gently uttering words of comfort.

'Honey?' My voice attempted not to be intrusive, but I was still startled by the change in her. 'You can tell me anything, you know. Anything. It won't change how I feel about you.' Brown eyes filled with tears, but they remained unshed ... for how long God only knew.

Behind those unshed tears I could also see her battling with something, and I wanted to help her, not because she had always been there for me, but because I hated to think something was hurting her in any way.

Then it clicked, her face taking on the resolve of someone who was going to do something unpleasant, but knew they had to do it.

'Let's go into the living room. I'll tell you there.'

As I walked behind her, worry filtered through every nerve in my body. What if she was going to say she didn't want to be with me after all? Would I throw a fit, upsetting her more in the process? That couldn't be it, could it? Nah. It couldn't be. We felt so good together - so right. And why on earth would I be thinking that after all we had been through to get to this stage? More importantly, why was I thinking about my own selfish agenda when Amy was upset?

Amy sat on the sofa, but I decided to sit at her feet - felt fitting somehow. I think it was the dog owner instinct ... if you put yourself lower, then they feel like they have the advantage. Sounded good to me.

'It happened when I was with Rachel.' Fuck. Why hadn't I seen it coming? She mentioned that Rachel had been very much like Sue ... 'In some respects, she was very much like Sue, but then again not, if you know what I mean?' I nodded, not really sure what she meant, but wanting to give her a boost for some unknown reason. 'Sue made you feel useless, didn't she?' Another nod. 'Same as Rachel. But hers ... well ... she ...' She plucked at my fingers on the hand resting on her knee. 'Erm ... she concentrated on more personal things, like the way I looked. Her favourite line was that no one else would ever want me but her.'

'Fucking bitch. Sorry.'

'No need to apologise ... you're right. She was a bitch ... a very clever and manipulative one. I'm not saying she was like that from the start ... not by a long stretch of the imagination ... she was positively charming when we first met.' Aren't they all ... and my mind flashed to when I first met Sue ... charm personified. 'It was after a few months when I was beginning to think that it was all a mistake. I think she picked up the vibes and didn't want me to leave.'

'Funny way of showing it. Sorry, Amy ... I won't interrupt again.' She just smiled at me, and pulled the whole of my hand into hers, crushing it briefly before loosening her grip.

'It started with just the little things, like pointing out grey hairs. I used to laugh it off; after all, we all get older. I'm not vain, you know?' I kissed her fingers and then rested our hands back onto her lap. 'Then it became a little more targeted. "You're putting on weight ... look at the wrinkles around your eyes ... why don't you ever dress up anymore ... sometimes I'm ashamed to be seen out with you." I felt more and more like a mess. And I was beginning to feel as haggard as she made me out to be. I used to keep asking people things, you know, doubting myself, but they just said I was imagining it.'

I was beginning to see why she had asked me if I thought she was sexy.

'But it didn't end there. She ... well ... she started saying things in the bedroom when we were ... you know? And the things she said really began to get to me. Even said one time after she had done what she wanted to do with me, she felt sick. Said that no one else would ever want me.' She stopped, and her face closed up a little. Rachel was worse than Sue ... and I never thought I would say that about anybody else. Imagine saying that to someone. Imagine it. Imagine a time when you felt so exposed and vulnerable, to have that said to you ... that you made them feel sick and no one would ever want you. That woman wanted shooting. However, this was the time to think of how I could get her back; Amy needed to get it all off her chest, and then I could plot my revenge.

So I sat at her feet and waited ... I knew there was something else she wanted to say, but if she didn't want to say it, I wasn't going to force her to. I could never understand those therapists who believed that saying it empowers you. Sometimes it just plain hurts to dig it all up. But then again, that's the way some people deal with things. So I bit the bullet.

'Do you want to tell me? Sometimes it helps to get it all out.'

A deep sigh left her mouth slowly, seeping into the air and disappearing into the atmosphere. 'Saying them now won't help. The thing is I don't know if it was my ego that was hurting or my pride.'

'How about *you* were hurting? She was only saying those things to make you feel inadequate and therefore believe no one else would ever love you like her.' She shrugged her shoulders. 'Answer me this. Did you think no one else would ever want you?' Slowly, her head nodded her head.

'See? It worked. She had you where she wanted you, and the more she played on your sense of worth, the more chance she had of making sure you wouldn't leave her, or find someone else.'

Silence. The room vibrated silence. I knew she was thinking about what I'd said, but I doubt I would have been the first person to have said this to her.

'Do you know you're the first person I have told?' I gave her a look of disbelief, which changed into questioning. 'I felt like such an idiot putting up with her crap for so long? One day I just thought enough is enough - packed a bag and left. Stayed with James for a while, and then got the job offer from the Uni in Norwich.'

'What did she do? Did she try to get you back?'

'In her own way, I suppose. Kept on calling ... trying to get me to meet her saying we should talk things over like adults. But I didn't want to know ... it took a lot to leave, and for a long time I thought I'd made the wrong decision. Seeing her would have been too much then. It's only now that I can see her and not feel a thing.'

She stopped talking and leaned back onto the sofa. I let her just rest a while knowing how much this had taken out of her. It's not a good feeling displaying what you think to be as the lowest part of your life, especially when you feel like a fool. Been there and wore the t-shirt like a crucifix for too long myself.

After about five minutes, I went to ask her a question. 'We were together for nearly three years.' I closed my mouth, thought for a second and then went to ask her another. 'I finished it two years ago.' I had to grin at her, and she returned the gesture. 'And before you ask, you are my first since. I didn't feel ready until you.'

I stood up, taking her other hand in mine. But the thing was I was at a loss of what to say, so I stood there looking like I was about to do or say something. I was wracking my brain, but the little bugger had gone blank.

'Come and sit next to me.'

I hurriedly plonked myself down next to her, releasing her hands to capture her in a hug. 'That's just what I needed.' I smiled into her chest. Me too.

We sat like that for ages before she continued. 'So you see why I asked?' I nodded into her and mumbled a response. I surely did. It's amazing to think that this woman whom I believed to be so sure of herself, so in control had experienced the manipulations of someone else. I was beginning to believe that it could happen to anyone given the right, or wrong, circumstances.

'Amy? You can't blame yourself you know.' That sounded rich coming from my mouth ... the woman who had been beating herself up on a daily basis for God knows how long. 'I think Rachel, and Sue for that matter, must have felt threatened in some way, as if they had to prove something to themselves. The sad thing is they used us to do it. It takes all sorts to make the

world, and some people only feel content when they can make someone else feel worthless.' I was actually making sense. Can you believe it? 'You must remember, we are in control of our own happiness ... its up to us how we deal with the things life throws at us.'

I waited a minute to let what I had said sink in, to me also, before I finished by saying, 'And for the record, you are sex on legs.' The laugh she emitted was a release, I knew that, but it didn't stop me joining in with her. 'You know, I would never have guessed. You never seemed worried about me seeing your body,' I looked into her face, her face that was so open and full of trust. 'I mean ... we have been naked in front of each other so many times, and you seemed confident in yourself.'

She sighed, and I waited. Eventually, she answered. 'It was different ... there was no expectation ... no having to be aware of myself all of the time. You made me feel relaxed ... at peace with who and what I am.' Her fingers stroked my face. 'You never judged me or looked at me as if I was a piece of meat. Even that day in the café ... when we exposed ourselves to all and sundry. You were too busy dying of shame to do anything but panic. So I followed your lead ... laughed about it. It was from that moment that I knew it didn't really matter what other's thought about me.' A pause. 'And every day it gets a little easier and I become a little stronger. Do you know what I mean?' I nodded before kissing her gently on the lips.

We settled down on the sofa and cuddled, giving me the opportunity to digest all she had said. Thoughts raced through my head ... mainly how I had never suspected Amy had gone through this. I know I've already said it, but I was shocked. I don't think it was because I was so wrapped up in all I had been through with Sue, just that Amy was a damn sight better at hiding things than I was. Could I, if I went back to every moment I had spent with her, recognise the signs? I doubt it. Covering up was a skill that people in our situations were extremely good at. Silence was another thing we could add to our belt. Speaking the truth aloud was not something most people would do in our position ... I hadn't really told anybody what had happened. Sadly, I guess that's why people get away with treating others so badly. No one wants to admit being made to look a fool.

That's the reason I'm telling you now. Remember. You are not alone. You are not worthless ... and if anybody tries to make you think that, it is time for you to be heading for the door. Simple when it's said like that, isn't it? But, unfortunately, nothing's ever simple.

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## Chapter Eleven (Snow Day)

Later in the afternoon, we decided we needed to get air ... fresh air ... and lots of it. Snow peaked and dipped in the garden, and the country road running beside the house hadn't been disturbed since the last snowfall in the early hours of the morning. Every thing was stark white - unsullied - like a new palette, very much how I was feeling.

Layer upon layer of clothes were wrapped and tucked about us. Thick socks to accompany thick boots covered our feet; hats, gloves, and coats were donned, and then we were ready to brave the outdoors.

Outside it was warmer than we had imagined, as the snow acted like insulation to the cold of the earth, the white absorbing the sun's weak rays and intensifying its potency. It was refreshing to get outdoors, the air chilled the hairs inside my nostrils, and pockets of steam left our mouths when we spoke and breathed.

Linking arms seemed so natural, like we had done this thousands of times before, and I glorified in the feeling of just being with her. We chatted about life in general, and the weather, as the English tend to do, but it didn't matter what we discussed, it was just perfect. After a while, we just walked along in comfortable silence until Amy broke it by saying, 'Dudley would love this.'

I laughed, picturing my little fella racing through the snow collecting snowballs on his fur. 'At least we might have a chance of seeing his ball in all this white.' As I said it, I sank into a hole that was hidden underneath the snow, one leg in and one still on terra firmer. I thought Amy was going to piss herself with laughter, and the more she tried to help me get out, the further I sank. In the end, I just gave up and sat down, the wetness seeping through my jeans. 'Maybe not. He would lose the bugger in this ... it'd sink.'

'Like you, you mean?' I'm surprised she managed to get the words out though all the laughing she was doing. There was only one thing for it. Splat. Right in the face ... cold, wet snow. The surprise was fleeting, and she looked almost comic book as she wiped it off with her gloved hand. But the comic book image faded and I swear I saw a flash of evil skitter over her features. I knew I had to get away, and fast, but I was stuck one legged down the bloody hole.

There was only one thing for it. As she was slowly collecting a mound of snow, I scooped a handful and threw it at her, hoping it would give me the advantage to scramble and flee. It did ... by about three seconds. Before I knew it, I was being yanked back and a handful of snow was making its way inside my jumper. Fuck, it was cold. Obviously. I screamed and danced about trying to get the bastard to come out, and whilst I was performing my tribal dance, another fistful smacked me in the face. Then another and another ... then ... another. She was unrelenting in her barrage of snow, but I was too soaked to care by this stage.

In retrospect, it wasn't the smartest move. But I was defending myself. Right? I did what any smart minded woman would do in this situation. I launched myself at her, taking her down like a sack of potatoes, gloating in the 'oaf' sound she emitted as I knocked the wind from her sails.

She was underneath me, panting and grinning, and looking so bloody beautiful. I honestly believed I had the upper hand. Well, you would, wouldn't you? Especially when she said, 'Oh Beth ... you're just so strong,' a little stroke to my ego methinks. I should have known it wouldn't be so easy ... should have been prepared. But as I said ... in retrospect.

Bam. I was on my back, and she was grinning down at me. It was so quick; I don't think I even felt her move me. One minute I was on top, the next ...

She had me pinned down with her body, her knees holding my arms by my sides. That didn't bother me; it was the look of devilment filling her face that concerned me the most. I tried to wriggle free, but there was no way I could shift her. My hair was getting wetter and so was my backside. Not a good combination, by any stretch of the imagination.

'Oh how the tides turn.' Her voice almost sang the line, and to be perfectly honest, I was becoming a tad uneasy about the outcome, as my future didn't look sunny. I could see her gathering snow around my sides and was frantically trying to put two and two together. The only answer I had was 'Run', but that option had disappeared alongside 'Let's call it quits, shall we?' The only thing I could do was to accept my fate, relax and take it on the chin, but I should give it one last try ...

'Ok. You win. Get me. I deserve it.' I scrunched up my eyes and waited for the mountain of snow to present itself, but if my body was reading things right, her movements were slowing down. Instead of the snow, I felt her lips press against me, warming my freezing mouth. Slowly, they claimed me and I felt myself being sucked into the moment. Heat travelled all the way through me, creating tingling sensations in all the right places. I wanted to wrap my arms about her, but found they were still pinned underneath her knees, so I just concentrated on her mouth.

Amy pulled away from me, and after a couple of seconds my eyes fluttered open to look into hers. Slam. She had used that time to gather the snow in her hands and throw it into my face, rubbing it in for good measure. But she didn't count on the fact she wouldn't be as steady as she'd been before the onslaught, and I took the opportunity to tip her sideways and launch myself on her.

It was only after we were a complete soaked mess that we heard a car approaching, slowly, and we were a tangle of arms and legs when the blue four by four rolled alongside us.

'Hello there, girls. See you're getting along just fine.' Frank and Marion were leaning out of the window, the smile evident on their faces. 'We've been trying to get hold of you ... thought you might need some food bringing.' Marion whispered something to Frank and they both started laughing. Amy and I had disentangled ourselves by this stage and were trying to get ourselves into some kind of order, but we just looked a mess. Wet. Cold. Childish, and definitely embarrassed. 'Fancy a lift back?'

In the back of the car, Amy and I sat in silence like a pair of reprimanded schoolgirls. I did want to giggle, and I could tell so did she, but we weren't going to give the grinners in the front any more ammunition.

'So. You two getting along ok?' Marion had turned around in her seat to face us, the grin nearly splitting her face. 'You don't mind if we pop in for a cuppa ... it's freezing out there.' She looked us up and down. 'Which by the looks of you two, you already know. What on earth made you roll around in the snow?'

'I fell into a hole and Amy was helping me out.' I could tell neither Frank nor Marion believed me, but I didn't care. Amy sneaked her hand over to mine and clasped my gloved hand.

'That's what we thought, isn't it Marion?' And they both started laughing again.

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Back at the bungalow, I went straight into the bathroom and had a quick shower whilst everyone else sorted out something to eat and drink. A very good plan, if I say so myself. When I came out, Amy was waiting outside with an armful of dry clothes. 'Won't be long, baby.' She gave me a quick kiss before disappearing inside.

I could smell toasting teacakes drifting from the kitchen, and my feet just took me there. It's amazing how hungry you get after freezing your tits off and being ambushed.

Marion was in the process of sorting out plates and teacups, so I offered my services, like the well brought up girl I am. 'Frank's just getting the fire going. We'll all eat in there - warmer. And by the looks of you and my daughter today, I think you'll need warming up.'

'The shower did wonders, thanks.' It had too. I felt as if I was glowing, but on more than one level.

'Beth?' She waited until I was facing her before continuing. 'Can you answer me something?' Bugger. Was I going to like this question? Nevertheless, I nodded anyway. 'Has my big dumb daughter actually told you she loves you yet?' Excitement raced through me like my body hadn't known about Amy loving me and had only just found out. 'By the look on your face, I take it as a yes. About bloody time too. She wouldn't say, just grinned like a Cheshire cat every time we mentioned your name. Thought she had ... but thought I'd just check.'

Frank came into the room, his face expectant. 'Yes or no?'

'Yes. Finally.' He came over to me, and gave me a huge hug, crushing me to him.

'Welcome to the family love.' He turned to his wife and said, 'See? I told you she was the one.'

It sounded as if he thought Amy and I were going to get married, the way he was talking. A little premature, given the fact I only kissed her the previous night. I knew my face looked gormless, could tell by the slackness of my jaw and the tendency to dribble.

'Don't worry about him, love. He likes to jump the gun a little, don't you honey?' Marion ruffled his hair making him seem like an errant schoolboy, and by looking at him I could see where Amy got her facial expressions. 'What he meant to say is we are pleased for you both ... been waiting a long time for Amy to get her act together and find herself a nice girl.' She passed him a pile of plates and indicated he was to take them through to the living room. Then she snatched them back. 'Have you washed your hands?' He nodded and grinned, turning over his hands for her inspection. 'Take these through then, and don't forget to come back for the tray.'

By the time everything was ready, Amy was out of the shower and glowing with health and heat. Tea amounted to stacks of toasted teacakes, English muffins and crumpets, all swallowed down

with vast quantities of tea. Amazingly, no one mentioned anything about earlier events, as most of the conversation was about the wedding the previous day. James and Jane had called Amy's parents from Cuba to say they had arrived safe and the hotel was fantastic. They also wanted to rub it in about how hot it was too. It was agreed that all in all it had gone well. Even the weather had added that extra touch, making it all seem fairytale.

They only stayed a couple of hours before they said they had to making tracks. Frank asked Amy to help him sort the car out before he set off, leaving me alone with Marion for a few minutes.

'You two make a lovely couple, you know.' I smiled at her; thankful I had the parental approval. Marion's face turned thoughtful and I saw her deliberate over something before coming to a decision. 'She's been through a lot has Amy. Thinks I don't know, but I'm her mother after all - I'd have to be blind not to notice the change in her ... and the change back since you came into the picture.' She wrapped her arms around me, and pulled me into one of those mother hugs. 'Thank you, Beth. Take care of my little girl won't you?' Her eyes looked into mine earnestly, but then she laughed. 'What am I saying? Of course you will ... you love her as much as she loves you.'

'Yes I do, Marion. Yes I do.'

Then she hugged me again, before turning and going out to join her husband and daughter.

When I got to the open doorway, Frank and Marion were in the car and Amy was standing next to the car, talking to them through the window. She turned, looked, and then beckoned me to join her. Standing next to her, she slipped her arm around my waist and pulled me closer, planting a kiss on my cheek. Her parents looked how I felt. Contented, and also a little relieved.

After they had gone, Amy pulled me into a full body hug and whispered in my ear. 'You have made three people very happy today.'

'Make that four.' And I kissed her solidly on the mouth. The kiss deepened and I could feel a fire gurgling up in my belly that steadily began to seep both north and south. Hands started to explore on their own volition and I was losing all sense of reality. It wasn't until a very cold hand slipped underneath my jumper that I realised we were standing in sub zero conditions making out.

'Inside now, lady.' I grabbed her hand and nearly dragged her into the house.

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We were barely in the door before we were on each other. Hands turned almost violent in their attempt to disrobe and uncover the hidden treasures we had to find. I pushed her against the wall in the hallway and pinned her there, my leg between her thighs and my hands on her breasts. Kisses were ardent and unreserved. I wanted to eat her. Swallow her. Delve into the fabric of this beautiful woman who held my heart in her hands.



I pushed my thigh more thoroughly against her, hearing her moan, feeling her squirm to increase the contact. Our tops were discarded, but we still wore our jeans and shoes ... and I needed to have her naked ... needed to see her completely stripped. Her fingers gripped my hips and pulled me in, but it wasn't enough ... the pressure wasn't enough.

Frantically, I grabbed the button to her jeans, fumbling around the metal as she did the same to me, all the while moving towards our bedroom.

Once inside, jeans and shoes were gone and so were any inhibitions. There was no way this was going to be tender; we were too far gone for that. Hands gripped hair and mouths were unforgiving in their quest for satisfaction. But nothing quelled the need bubbling and boiling until it overflowed in kisses and clutches.

As we reached the bed, I guided Amy backwards, holding her hands with my hands, holding her lips with my lips. There was one thing I needed to do before we went any further. Put the lamp on. I needed to see her ... needed her to see how much I desired her ... how beautiful I thought she was ... how utterly delectable.

Click.

It wasn't a strong wattage, but it was enough to enable me to see the woman I loved, and let her see how much I loved her - all of her. Amy looked a little hesitant about the light being on, so I knelt down beside the bed and placed my hands on her knees. I looked up into her face, and tried to put all what I felt into my expression, her eyes changing indicating she was giving up control of her fear.

'I love you, Amy, ' I muttered as I kissed each knee in turn. 'I love you so much.' Another string of kisses that steadily moved up each thigh and then back down her legs. 'You ...' kiss '... are' kiss '... the most' kiss '... beautiful woman I have ever seen.' I stopped kissing and caught her gaze again. 'And I want to make love to all of you.'

Slowly, she began to open her legs, and I let her do all the moving. I didn't want to rush her, although I was dying to just take her all into my mouth and keep her safe. I trickled my fingers up the inside of her thighs ... up and down ... up and down ...up ... and up ... and past the core of her womanliness, leaving her gasping, making her hips jerk forward.

I honestly don't know how I controlled myself. I wanted her so fucking badly and I could see a glimmer of wetness pooling at her centre. I needed to taste her ... needed to lavish my tongue in and around her, swallowing her nectar as if it was the elixir of life. But I didn't. All thoughts of the primitive coupling were gone and all I wanted to do was love her ... love her any way she wanted me to, as long as she let me love her forever.

Her hands lifted, and she brushed her fingers through my hair, twirling the strands and inspecting them then letting them fall unabashed back onto my shoulders. All the while, I was stroking her thighs, skipping over her growing want and exalting at the reaction my ministrations were inducing. Finally she gripped her hands into my locks and pulled my head downwards ...

downwards ... towards my goal. But I pulled back, preferring to concentrate my mouth on the tops of her thighs, knowing she was ready for me to sample the delights that were truly her.

A soft lick. A flick. A stroke. The sounds she was emitting were making me so wet, so needy. A suckle and twist of the lips. Her hands tightened in my hair and I could feel her trying to push me into her. Once again, I moved back slightly to whisper, 'You are so beautiful, Amy ... so absolutely beautiful.' And then I opened my mouth and took her clit between my lips to suck and roll the tip of my tongue around it.

The cry she let out made the juices swamping my core rush out and slither down my thighs. God. I wanted her so much ... so much ... I ached with need for her. Ached with longing to possess her fully ... take her solely into my being ... house her in my yearning ... anything as long as she never left me.

Using the flat of my tongue, I started at her opening and slipped it slowly from base to tip, luxuriating in the thrust of her hips as she tried to rush me. When I reached the top, I made my descent again, this time taking longer.

'Please ... Beth ... please.' Her voice was breaking. 'Take me ... I need you inside.' Who am I to refuse?

Using my thumbs, I parted her lips and exposed her essence. It was perfect. Pink and swollen, glistening like raindrops on rose petals, and budding open like a youthful flower. The tip of my tongue was ready and waiting to enter, salivating at the prospect. I had to calm myself a little before I did so, as there would be no stopping me once I sampled the delights of her.

She leaned backwards opening herself further, and I could feel her feet on my back, her calves pulling me closer. Circling around her entrance was agonisingly wonderful, and I revelled in the sensation of her juices coating my tongue. A little push ... a little more ... and I slipped effortlessly inside, feeling her walls clutch and grab my tongue.

All the way in ... hold ... and then back out ... In. Hold. Out. In ... a flick ... out. And on and on and on ... the tempo increasing, following the rhythm dictated by her hips. I loved the sensation of my tongue caressing her from the inside out ... loved the sensation of being inside this woman ... loved ... her.

Her hands were pushing and pulling my head, increasing the impact of each thrust. I was on my knees by this stage, my back arched in my nurturing of her up and coming orgasm. I could feel it building ... taste its imminent arrival ... taste the wonder that was her.

The scream left her lungs as I was buried deep inside, the jolt of it vibrating through her body like an electric charge ... and I nearly came with her, but my own release would have to wait. I could feel the aftershocks pulsating through her walls and I waited before pulling my tongue from inside her. A gentle kiss ... a nuzzle ... her hands were guiding me up and towards her face, where I claimed her mouth, allowing her to share her most intimate secret.

Her hands were on my back, and fingers dug into pliant flesh eking out jolts and expectation, until they reached my ass ... pulling me in to sample the wetness pouring from her. Blinding flashes skimmed across my eyes as I allowed myself to become swallowed up in the moment. Grinding and pushing ... thrusting and pounding into her ... breaths ragged ... kisses unrestrained.

I felt her right hand drift across my hip and snake between our bodies, searching out the pulsating place that craved her touch. Contact. Slippery and wanting ... contact of her fingers and my longing. Each time I pushed, her fingers glided down and then back up to the tip of my pleasure ... the tip that quivered and pulsed as if she had my heart pumping in the palm of her hand. I opened my legs wider, needing her to bury herself inside me, unlocking the vacuous yearning she evoked in me, wanting her to enter me deeply and stay.

One lone digit danced and circled, taunting me with anticipation, and I tried to capture it but it danced away. I slipped my leg over her thigh and pushed the other against her leg to open us wider and followed her lead. My hand cupped her mound, delighting in the heat and wetness that greeted me. My middle finger edged towards its goal ... slipping between her folds and positioning itself outside her centre, provoking a response ... daring her not to fill me.

But she did, as I filled her ... fingers captured to the knuckle and moving in and out amidst moans and whimpers, thrusts and heaving bodies. I was in heaven ... heaven ... heaven. She was inside me as I was buried inside her and I was in paradise. Her thigh lifted and pushed against her hand making her finger delve deeper. A grunt escaped my mouth unreserved ... and she did it again and again and ... God ... the sensations were mind blowing. I couldn't think of anything but her, her finger, her thigh ... the ... God ... She inserted a second finger inside and I nearly came ... nearly tipped over and over into the realms of make believe and white flashing lights. But I wanted us to cum together - join again in our ecstasy. It was agony - exquisite agony. The vibrations ricocheted through me and pulsed into her, making the experience all the more intense.

Through my haze I could sense she was on the edge ... sense she was about to join me, so I pulled out my finger, her hips searching down the sheet trying to gain contact again. My thumb rubbed her nub and satiated her until I could delve two fingers deep.

Over she went ... as did I. Over into the land of cries of wonderment and bliss. Over into the sphere of forgotten worries and inhibitions. Over and over and over ... Fingers frantic - hips frenzied - breathing coarse and unashamed. Mouths tried to calm and ease; lips attempted to quiet and pacify, but they were useless.

Another explosion detonated, and we both came again, squirming and slick with sweat.

After a few moments, she pulled her fingers from inside me. Lifting shaking hands to my face, she cupped my cheeks. 'I ... love ... you.' The words were broken up into breathy snippets, her eyes glazed and satisfied, reflecting my own.

'I love you, Amy.' I kissed her softly. 'You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen.' A lazy, contented smile crept on her face and she kissed me back - longer, but still tenderly.

The kiss slowed and eventually stopped, having completed its mission of soothing the aftershocks of our joining. I moved from on top of her, and slipped down to her side. Her arms came around me and pulled me close, and we lay in absolute contentment our eyelids fluttering closed.

The last thought I had was one of utter completion. I was in the arms of the most wonderful woman in the world and she loved me ... loved *me*. I never wanted this to end ... never wanted anything to ever come between us. I knew that if she were not in my life, there would be no point in living. Dramatic? You bet. I had found my reason, and there was no way I was ever going to let her go ... call it dramatics or whatever you like. But I had found perfection, and I intended on keeping her.

Always.

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The next day saw us up early, as we had to get back to Norwich. Amy had a lecture first thing Tuesday morning, and I had to go and collect my little man from my parents. I had called them a couple of times to see how he was, and then too of course, and he was having a whale of a time. My dad said he had been playing in the snow all day yesterday - lost his ball in a snowdrift too. I laughed at the thought of him, but also at the memory of yesterday when I had said the same thing to Amy and ended up down a hole.

Although we had risen early, we couldn't leave until early afternoon because it took the local council that long to get their arse into gear and clear and grit the roads. There had been no more snow since the previous day, and it was starting to melt. Amy was worried that it would turn into icy patches if we left it too late, as the forecast had guaranteed temperatures of minus five by the evening. So, the sooner we hit the road, the better.

On the way back, we called to say goodbye to Amy's parents who lived in Bidford on Avon. Their house was gorgeous to say the least; a huge house situated near the side of the river; boats were dry moored and covered in tarpaulin to keep off the winter frost. Frank showed me round his workshop and we talked over a few ideas for promoting his business, whilst Amy had a chat with her mum in the warm. Yes. In the warm, when I was outside freezing my butt off. I didn't mind though. Frank was easy to talk to, and every idea I sent his way was met with admiration and thanks. My head was decidedly getting bigger, but it made a welcome change to feel good about anything I did.

Once inside the house, it was a quick cuppa before getting back on the road, and it was nearly two o'clock before we were winging our merry little way down the A46. The roads were clear, as far as congestion was concerned. The majority of snow became a distant memory as we entered Cambridgeshire, and at certain points, we were hard pushed to see if there had been any of the white stuff at all.

As usual, Brandon was a nightmare. The little village just outside of Thetford always came to a near standstill around rush hour, so we decided to have a toilet break for half an hour or so and wait for the traffic to thin out.

I know. Too technical. Going on about the journey instead of telling you about the conversation within the car. I thought you might like a refreshing change - give you some insight to what happened. Ok ... I'll move it along. Anyway ... toilet break. It must have been all the tea I had been drinking, but by the time I got there, I was bursting to go ... had been for the last twenty miles.

By the time I emerged from the loo, Amy was seated next to the window, hand resting on her chin. The smile she greeted me was radiant and appeared to act as if we hadn't seen each other in years and not the five minutes since we got out of the car. In a way it reminded me of Dudley ... he was always like that. It didn't matter if I had just stepped out of the room; he greeted me like a long lost friend every time I came back in. Funny allusion, I know, but to me it was perfect.

It was five thirty, and rush hour would be still hectic for another hour or so, so we decided to have a snack to pass the time, as it would save us from sorting out food when we got back. That made me think. What would happen when we got back? Would she stay over? Come in for a while? Arrange to see me again? A smidgeon of panic surfaced and disappeared ... then came back to the surface again. Why didn't I just ask her instead of worrying about it? I wanted to casually ask what her plans were, but ... ah ... I don't know.

'What are you doing later? Any plans?' Trust Amy to get in before me.

'Just got to collect Duds and then I'm free.' And this is the part where I got a spine. 'Fancy coming back to mine for a bit?' A bit of what, I didn't specify, but I was hoping for a bit of what we had experienced last night. Obviously. But mainly I just wanted to be with her ... spend time with her ... even if it was watching paint dry, I would love every second.

She grinned, nodded and said 'I'd love to,' making me go all girly inside. Like usual. At this rate, I would be painting my nails pink and wearing stilettos, and in my case, this would not be a good thing.

After we finished our meal, Amy sat back fully in her chair and looked absolutely stuffed. She had eaten her meal and then finished mine off, pleading the cold made her hungry; even though I said we had actually been sat in a lovely warm car for the last three and a half hours ... and the other forty-five minutes in a café.

'It's just the thought of being cold then, picky.'

God. This woman made me feel so bloody good inside. Even when she was calling me picky, I felt special. Weird ... but that's how love gets you, isn't it. What a fantastic experience - and I'm getting on my own nerves now.

There is a reason why I have stopped the tale and written about snacks, drinks and toilet breaks. Trust me. Would I take you on a wild goose chase? Don't answer that. The reason I stopped here and told you stuff that would bore the arse of a train spotter is because something was revealed in conversation ... over dessert actually. Interested?

I don't even recall how the conversation started ... it was like it started in the middle and mentally I had to work backwards in order to get to the present; it seemed relevant to my future somehow. It was about something Amy had said on the night of the wedding, the needing to explain something, the 'I have to tell you how I ...' bit, more specifically.

Here's the bit where I remember it from. She said something along the lines of James and Jane ... the wedding ... and then she mentioned Rachel. That certainly got my full attention. Then she thanked me. For what? For loving her?

'I was so worried about telling you ... explaining what had happened to me with Rachel.' Explaining? Is that like in the needing to explain? 'I had to tell you ... I couldn't keep it stored up anymore, had to get it off my chest if I ever thought there would be a chance with you and me.' It was. 'I had to let you know about me warts and all.'

How arrogant. No her, me. I had believed she had wanted to tell me how she liked me and how she had wanted to tell me how much she fancied me - even loved me. I know at the time I said I didn't know, but I'd been hoping it all the same. What I couldn't understand is why she started telling me the things I wanted to hear. You know, the first meeting and stuff.

'When I first started to tell you, I wanted it to be in some kind of perspective.' I should go in for mind reading. 'I couldn't just launch into the whole Rachel fiasco ... wanted you to know that I was different now to how I was then.'

'Why?' Amy looked at me questioningly. 'Why did you feel you had to put things in perspective? Don't you think I would've known you were different?' She screwed up her face in consternation before answering.

'Just felt it was the right thing to do. Didn't want to take any chances with you, that's all.'

I stretched my arm over the table and grabbed her hand. 'I want to say one thing and then we will forget about all this.' I felt her fingers digging into my hand. 'I love you, Amy Fletcher, warts, and all.' Honestly. I thought she was going to lean over and kiss me right there in front of truck drivers and the rest of the population of the café - not that I would have minded. Her body lurched forward and then slammed back into her chair, her hand still gripping mine.

She didn't have to say she loved me ... I could see it written all over her face. But she did anyway, and my heart clanked against my ribcage, as it tried to jump into her.

That was that. Cleared up and mess free ... a clean palette, shall we say. From this moment, it was her and me ... me and her, and we had our future to build together. It's amazing what five months can do. This time last year, I thought my future was bleak and without purpose; thought I

was a worthless piece of shit that would never amount to anything. But look at me now? Or should I say, look at us?

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The sign for Norwich said five miles to the city centre, and by this stage all I wanted to do was get back and have a shower ... after playing with my little man for a while. I had missed him, and I knew I would have probably missed him more than he missed me.

The traffic had eased considerably, and the roads were free of snow, so I knew it would be less than twenty minutes before we would be pulling up outside my parents' front door, so I thought I would text my mum to tell her I was on my way.

After I was putting my phone back into my pocket, I saw Amy looking at me from the corner of her eye. 'Just texted mum.' Old habits die hard, I guess. I thought she was wondering whom I'd been texting just as Sue used to do.

'It's good that she knows how to use it. My parents haven't a clue.'

I laughed. 'She hasn't a clue. When she hears the beep, she'll be looking all over the house trying to find out where it came from. I've sent her loads of messages and she hasn't read any of them.' Amy started laughing, calling me a tight bugger. 'Hey! I've got to get my kicks some how, haven't I?'

It was all in slow motion, really. It was her face I noticed before anything else. The curve of her mouth slowly descending ... her teeth gritting together ... her hand coming over to me as if I was pressing the picture frame skip button on a VCR - slow and jagged. Moving my head to look at what she could see seemed to take forever. Blue. A blue moving mass. A blue swerving moving mass, heading for the side of our car.

The velocity of two moving vehicles colliding created a deafening roar of metal on metal, brakes on tarmac. We were all going sideways, Amy's arm was pushing me back into my seat, but I was sliding sideways with the pull of the impact and she was following me.

Splintering and crushing ... my side of the car was cracking through the barriers at the side of the road, and I could see the concrete pillars guarding the embankment approaching slowly, but there was nothing I could do to stop it ... nothing I could say that would stop the inevitable crunch and bounce the car would experience when ...

Thud. It sounded almost like crinkling, except the screeching of the metal ruined the musical effect. My arm had rose in its own volition and cradled the side of my head, cushioning the blow against the side window, but the pain shot through my head before the gravitational pull dragged me away to lurch unrestrained back towards the driver's seat ... and then back to slam against the window again.

Then I started to fade to black, the last thought banging through my head was I couldn't feel Amy's arm anymore.

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## Chapter Twelve

In and out of consciousness: it was so difficult to wake up. The pain burring through my head accompanied the aching in my shoulders, arm, and back. I tried to move my legs, but they were jammed underneath something, and I could feel panic surging up through my body.

Turning my head, even slowly, caused a bolt of agony to tear through my skull, making me cry out, but I had to see if Amy was ok. The pain in my head and body was nothing to the pain I felt when I saw her slumped, lifeless; her head lolling sideways like a broken rag doll. Blood was seeping down her face, thick red lines of it. It was also coming from her mouth and dripping mercilessly from her chin to land on her leg.

Time stood still. Initially, no reaction came from me. I just stared at her ... couldn't comprehend why she wasn't looking at me and laughing ... couldn't reason why she had her eyes closed and redness was marring her beautiful face. Wisps of her hair were sticking to the side window, and I could see the spider web breakage trickling out from the core where her head was covering.

It started in my gut ... the cry, I mean ... started deep inside and travelled agonisingly through my intestines and up through my mouth. I didn't even recognise the cry leaving as belonging to me. It seemed primitive and bestial, culminating and hollow in its anguish. My hand reached out to touch her face, tentatively, as if it didn't want to hurt her ... fingers toying with making contact. Rationality was not an emotion I was capable of having, as panic overrode everything ... until grief took centre stage.

I knew that the blood was a bad sign ... knew that I had to get it back inside her somehow ... knew she needed blood to live, just as I needed her. Hands cupped her face and tried to gather the warm, wet fluid ... tried to push it back inside ... tried to make it better, but all it was doing was smearing and looking worse. I didn't know where it was coming from ... didn't know where I should put it ...

Tears were racing down my face; sobs were unrestrained and constant. I was losing her ... I was losing her ... I knew she was leaving me here ... leaving me here without her. I tried to get my legs free, but I couldn't move them, the pain was trying to stop me, but physical pain was nothing compared to losing this woman beside me.

I leaned over her and tried to get her to open her eyes ... pulled her eyelids back ... shouted at her to wake up ... wake up ... *wake ... up.*

Nothing. Her eyeballs were partly rolled back, but I could see her pupils - just. They buried themselves in the brownness of her eyes, hiding in their minuteness.



*'Please ... Amy ... Please ... wake up.'* I started to shake her ... but her head flopped around as if it was precariously balanced. I cupped her face, tried to bring it to me, stopped and just held it there. I could feel the warmth seeping from her. I couldn't get close enough to listen if she was breathing, so I tried to feel for her pulse ... on her neck ... on her wrist ... but I couldn't feel the thudding feeling I so desperately wanted to feel.

*'Don't... leave ... me ... please ... don't leave me ... I... love ... you ... love you ... don't go ... don't go ... wake up ... please ... don't leave me now.'* Nothing was making sense anymore. Nothing mattered anymore. She was dead. Dead. I had found her at last and she was dead ... gone ... leaving me here to rot without her. What was the point of living if she was gone? None. No point whatsoever. I was stroking her face, stroking the blood away, stroking the thing that mattered in my sad little life. I just wanted to curl up on her chest and die right alongside her.

Resting my head on her body was the first comforting thing I had done since I had woken in the middle of a nightmare, and I resigned myself to go with her wherever she would lead me. I pushed my arm around her waist and pulled her closer to me. I couldn't quite manage to place my head on her chest, as I couldn't move my legs, but it would be enough. It had to be.

As I closed my eyes and waited for the blackness to take me, I had to tell her one last time. 'I love you, Amy.'

And then I blacked out.

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Voices alerted me. Lights flashing stung and blinded me. Cool air seeped through the driver's door as it opened to admit the evening's chill. I was gripping onto Amy's shirt, and I felt her body shift towards the gap, taking me with her. Pain soared through my body, except my legs - they were numb. Physically and emotionally, I was a wreck. Spiritually I was broken. Mentally I wished I were dead.

The voice from the doorway tried to sooth ... tried to cajole me into letting her go, but I wouldn't ... I held on tighter. She was mine, and I wasn't letting anyone else touch her but me. She was my girl ... *my* little girl ... *my* everything, and I didn't want them mauling her. Why couldn't they just leave us alone? Leave us here together?

'Come on, love.' The voice was male, but I wouldn't look at his face. My focus was on the small St Christopher sticking to Amy's throat ... the patron saint of travellers ... 'Let's get you both out.' It was so shiny ... like it was illuminated. 'You have to let go ... come on, sweetheart ...' I unfurled my fingers from her shirt and lifted my hand up to gently lift the gold pendant. I was transfixed. The coolness of the metal seemed alien in my hand. Memories of seeing glimpses of it when I first knew her scuttled in my head ... memories of the time we had shared blaring out of the shining disc.

Hands held my shoulders, but I didn't care, I had this in my hand ... this in my hand ... until it slipped away, as they pulled her away from me leaving me with nothing.

I tried to lunge forward and grab at her, my fingers sliding off her jeans. But I couldn't reach ... couldn't get to her ... she was going ... leaving me here all alone. I was screaming something, but I don't know if it made any sense. The words were tumbling and fighting to get to her ... desperate to be heard ... desperate to bring her back.

'Hey ... come on ... shush ... you're going to be all right.' I didn't want to be all right; I wanted to be with her. 'We'll get you out of there in no time.' I slumped onto the seat, completely drained, tears streaming shamelessly down my face. Futility took hold and I could feel the sobs waiting in line to be released. 'We're going to have to cut the side of the car away to get you out ... but you'll be ok. Do you hurt anywhere?' I didn't answer. 'Can you feel your legs?' I wanted to be left alone ... wanted to tell him to fuck off and leave me alone, but I said nothing. What was the point?

The back door opened and I felt the movement as someone climbed in. Arms appeared over the seat to touch the back of my neck, circling round to the front, the faceless person examining and trying to calm me with soft words.

My attention was solely on the outside of the vehicle, listening to the disjointed words of whom I believed to be the paramedics. Words like 'Driver dead on impact.' Four words. Four words that took away the last vestiges of hope clinging to me.

I don't know how long it took the fire crew to cut me loose ... didn't care. I shut down as soon as I heard she was dead ... crawled back inside myself and watched me die from the inside out. I could hear the saw cutting through the metal, smell the fumes, hear the shouting of the people working and the voices of the ambulance man and woman who were treating me in stages. But none of it sunk in. It all just bounced off me ... bounced off the transparent shield erected to deflect their kind words. I didn't want their kind words ... didn't want anything anymore.

The metal came away like foil paper, peeling back like a huge metal banana to release my legs ... not that I could feel anything, just watched them do it through half closed eyes. Strong hands buried themselves under my armpits and before I had chance to acknowledge what was happening I was outside on a stretcher.

Looking up to the faces of the people who had saved me, I saw concern and compassion, both of which I didn't want.

'You were very lucky.' It was the woman paramedic. She was attempting to look into my eyes with a small torch, but I kept on trying to close them. Firm fingers pulled back each lid in turn, and I could see her smiling at me. 'It could have been a lot worse.' What? Like what? I had lost the woman I love and she was saying it could have been a lot worse? How? 'You were both very lucky?' Why? Because she died on impact? That she didn't have to wake up to being alone? 'Your friend has gone on ahead ... she'll be fine. The other driver wasn't so lucky though.'

My eyes opened and I looked at her, believing I had misheard what she had said. There was a strange sensation gurgling deep inside me. Was it hope? Or was it sickness because I thought she

had got it wrong. Amy was dead ... I had heard them discussing her, 'Driver dead on impact'. But ... I hadn't heard which driver.

She was turning away by the time the words had sunk in, but I grabbed her arm and pulled her back. 'Please ...' the word cracked from my mouth. 'Which driver died?' Each word pulled from my throat like it was attached to barbed wire.

'The Ford Mondeo driver. The police believe she'd been drinking.'

I should have felt some kind of remorse ... some sorrow at the news someone had died, but I couldn't. Somewhere out there, Amy was alive, and I had to get to her ... had to see her with my own eyes - make sure it was true.

A feeling of lightness took over me ... supreme lightness of being. Fresh tears melted from my eyes, but this time for a completely different reason. My girl was alive and so was I. I needed to look into those brown eyes again and tell her until my tongue stiffened how much I loved her.

The last lucid thought I had before I passed out was 'I'm coming.' However, this time it wasn't a plea to die ... it was a promise to live. And now I had my reason.

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The journey in the ambulance took forever. When I woke, again, I kept on asking could I see Amy, but they just told me I had to calm down and I would see her as soon as we were both taken care of. Pain in my shoulders, back and legs ... well, more specifically my leg side, had come back now it knew I gave a shit. I was now sporting a neck brace just in case I had a spinal injury, and I didn't want to look at my legs - even before they cut my jeans off.

A painkiller was administered on the way to the hospital, I think more to shut me up than anything else. The change in my outlook was what could best be described as manic ... Before, when I thought I had lost her I was so low, but now ... Bloody hell. No. I wasn't laughing and screaming with joy - that's not manic. I was hyped up ... almost aggressive in my hunger to know what was going on. I think the crew heaved a huge sigh of relief when the doors to the ambulance eventually burst open.

Once inside, I began again. The corridor echoed her name as they raced along the white vastness to get me to the Accident and Emergency room. Not like ER, I can tell you. The doctors looked knackered, and the nurses looked like they hadn't been home for days. The cries and whimpers coming from behind closed curtains surrounding me shut me up for a few minutes, as I listened to see if I could hear her.

'Please ... Dr ... nurse ... do you know anything about Amy Fletcher?' Their responses were curt and professional. A simple 'No' and they carried on examining me. I wasn't being reasonable, I know. They were just doing their job, one patient at a time ... or were they hiding something. 'Car crash. Norwich Road.' I saw the flicker of a glance from one to the other. 'Tell me ... is she ok?'

'Come on ... let's get you sorted and then we'll check, ok?' The young Chinese nurse smiled, trying to cajole me into working with them for a while. She lifted a needle and aimed it at my left leg. I tried to lift it out of the way, but the pain shot from my knee and cradled itself into my gut forcing me to cry out with pain.

'I don't think it's broken ... but x-ray will pick anything up.'

Panic surged again. X-ray would take ages and I needed to know what had happened to her ... needed to see her and check. For all I knew she could be in surgery ... could even be dead by now. 'I'm ok ... *please* ... find out ... I need to know if she's ok. *Please*.' I lifted my top half off the table and covered my leg with my hand, stopping the nurse in her tracks. 'I'll let you do anything to me if you do. I'll be good.'

She looked at the doctor for a signal, and he glanced at me then nodded at her. 'Be quick.' Turning back, he smiled, 'Can't have my patients worrying themselves to death. Bad for the reputation.' The nurse laughed at his joke, and then asked me for a name and other details, which I gave, repeating her name over and over again. I did not want any mistakes.

After she had gone, I felt more contented, and lay back onto the pillows to wait for news. The doctor continued his examination, asking me to push his hands with my hands, and then try to push him away using my feet. My right leg ached a little but I managed to do it. Lefty had other ideas. As he placed his hand on the heel of my foot, the pain tore upwards. He grimaced ... either because of what he thought I was experiencing, or the f word that slipped unchecked from my mouth.

'I think you've just dislocated your kneecap. Nothing major ...' That was easy for him to say - he should try being on the receiving end, 'but we'll go with an x-ray to be on the safe side.' I was beginning to shut off. I just wanted it all to be over so I could find Amy. 'Is there anyone you would like us to contact?' Yes. Amy. How many more times?

The nurse took what seemed like forever. I mean - it wasn't as if she had to go miles. I could still see her standing at the desk talking to the woman seated there. She kept on looking over to me as she was talking, and soon was accompanied by the woman - both of them looking ... the receptionist shaking her head, her lips still moving.

Breathing was becoming more difficult, as panic was settling in again. The way they were acting made me think that something was terribly wrong. As I sat up, ready to spring off the bed and drag myself over to them, the nurse started to make her way back.

'A woman was admitted nearly two hours ago, and our records show she was named Amy Fletcher.' Was? 'We found ID in her pocket ... a driving license.' Was? 'She came around enough to alert us that she was worried about another passenger - you, as it happens.'

'Is she ... is she ...' I couldn't finish the sentence.

'She is in the ICU at the moment undergoing observation. We think it may be concussion ... she took a nasty blow to the head. Only time will tell, I'm afraid.' The nurse looked uncomfortable, but not as uncomfortable as I was feeling. This was not good. Not good at all. 'Is there anyone we can contact? Next of kin ...'

That's when I blanked. Next of kin? They only wanted to know that if someone was at death's door. Did they think ...

'It's just procedure. We like to inform the families in the case of accidents - especially car accidents.' Do they fuck? They thought she was going to die. 'We still have to notify your next of kin.' I was beginning to shake - from top to toe - toe to top - inside out and outside in. The ache in my chest was culminating and vying with reason for prominence. I knew reason was going to lose ... knew that I was going to lose more than that.

This was not the time ... not the time ... not *her* time. I thought I had lost her once, and look where that had gotten me ... gotten her. I had to respond ... take responsibility and act like an adult. Show spine ... show control and maturity. Show myself I could actually deal with all this. There would be time to break down after all this was over.

Swallowing rapidly, and trying to moisten my mouth at the same time, I gave them all the information they needed - my parents' numbers, and Amy's too. After it was all done, I felt drained, yet full of strength. It seemed as if I had gained the ability to achieve just about anything ... I knew I had to face this - get through it somehow.

The only word I can use to sum up how I was feeling is vibrating. I was vibrating with life and empowerment. It seemed I had summoned up, from somewhere deep inside, the capacity to deal with what was happening - God only knows how, but they do say he moves in mysterious ways.

When they'd finished cleaning me up, informed me of my parents' impending arrival, I was passed onto the porter, George, who had arrived to take me to x-ray. It took me three corridors to convince him he should stop at the ICU - I had gone through so many different ploys to get him to comply, but it seemed all I needed to do was ask him nicely.

Arriving outside the big double doors in a wheelchair was not a good idea. If I'd been able to walk, I would have waltzed straight in and found her ... but it's not that easy when you can't move and your leg is sticking out in front of you.

'Leave it to me, love.' George disappeared inside the ward leaving me sitting outside like an escapee. Minutes later, he re-emerged looking very pleased with himself. 'We have five minutes. The matron is on a coffee break ... and if she catches us, we'll have matching wheelchairs.'

The room was deathly quiet. Most of the patients were asleep, and the ones that weren't were lying on their side watching us with interest. We arrived at a little side room at the end of the corridor, the door partly open and soft lights sneaking outside.

Seeing her there looking so helpless made my heart break all over again. She was flat on her back and attached to a myriad of monitors ... beeping the rhythm of her heart. George pushed my chair alongside the top half of her bed and clicked on the brake. 'I'll be back in two minutes.' He was gone before I had the chance to thank him.

She looked as if she were asleep. Peaceful, if you will. I could see the steady movement of her chest, and also hear the beep ... beep ... beep of her heartbeat.

Taking her hand in mine felt surreally wonderful. Her fingers were slightly clammy, but there was definitely life there. I could feel the strength of her pumping through her veins. Looking at her there, you would never equate her to the woman I had been gripping onto in the wreckage of her car. The blood was gone ... the pastiness was replaced by blotches of pink ... her lips looked full and red. All I could see there was a poppy of a bruise on her temple ... the petals surrounding the stitches of the centre. The rest of her was covered so I couldn't see if she had any other injuries, but the nurse had said it was the concussion they were worried about.

I knew I was running out of time, knew George would be back to collect me soon. Then I saw it ... glistening, the soft overhead light touching it and sparking off tendrils of light like a halo. Saint Christopher in all his glory. It was like a sign ... a prophecy that everything would be ok ... he was reminding me he would take care of this traveller ... keep her safe until I could take care of her myself. It's amazing that I hadn't thought of that when we had been back in the car.

Footsteps were approaching, and I gripped onto her hand before saying 'I love you, Amy Fletcher.' And do you know what? She gripped my hand right back. Her eyes didn't open - there was no other sign of consciousness, but I felt good for the first time since the crash.

When George poked his head around the door, I was ready to go. I knew she would be all right ... knew it as well as I knew the back of my clichéd hand. Again.

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The x-ray was painless. It was the clicking the kneecap back in place that hurt like a bitch. I never, ever want to go through that again. Ever. I also had three cracked ribs, a sprained wrist and concussion. The majority of my left side was black, green, blue ... purple; luckily, my right side had only scratches and a couple of bruises. All in all, I was extremely fortunate, as they would insist on reminding me.

After I had been bandaged and cleaned up more thoroughly, I was given a mixture of medication to help with the pain ... mainly anti inflammatory for my knee. Because of the concussion, I was informed I would have to spend the night in hospital - for observation, as if I would have been going anywhere else. Amy was here, and that's where I intended on staying for the unforeseeable future.

I was given a room off the ward, as they would have to keep waking me up every hour to check my pupils and blood pressure, and they said it was better if I was away from everyone else, as not to disturb them.

When I was settled, a nurse came in to tell me I had visitors ... my parents and Will to be exact. They had been waiting to see me for nearly an hour. As soon as they walked in, I knew they had all been crying. My dad was trying to be the strong one, but was failing miserably. Before I had chance to ask, he told me Dudley was safe and sound and staying at Will's girlfriend's tonight. He also told me, after a dig in the ribs from my mum, that Amy's parents were on their way - reception had told them to pass the message on.

'Did they say how she was doing?'

'Not much. She's woken a couple of times,' Thank God, 'and her breathing is a little erratic.' My face must have said it all, because he quickly continued. 'They said that is common in car accident victims ... stress, I think they said. Reliving the scene.' My mum was hovering behind my dad, a carrier bag clutched in her hands, her knuckles white. Will was pretending he knew what he was reading on the chart at the end of my bed ... only my dad was looking at me.

I must have been getting paranoid. Well, you would, wouldn't you? Experiencing something so traumatic like believing the woman you loved had died ... then was alive ... thinking she was dead again ... and on and on it goes, would make anyone slightly suspicious.

'Is she awake now?'

'The last we heard was she was sitting up and they were trying to get her to take some fluids, but her mouth is sore.' I looked at them questioningly. 'She bit her tongue, they think on impact.' That explains all the blood on her chin. 'And chipped her front tooth. They think it was when she was gritting her teeth together - her bottom set pushed out a little too hard.'

Considering they were a little hesitant about divulging details, they sure as hell knew a lot.

'What else did the doctors tell you?'

'They didn't tell us anything ... the porter - George, I think he said his name was, told us to tell you. He couldn't come in because the nurses were here.' Bless him. What a lovely person. He had found out everything he could so I wouldn't worry. I didn't know how I could ever thank him enough.

It must have been the relief, because before I knew it I had my head in my hands and I was crying. My mum was next to me in a split second, wrapping those comforting arms around me in the only way a mother could.

They all waited for me to finish, my mum adding words of comfort and love, before they told me how devastated they had been when the police knocked on their door. Luckily, Will had been there waiting to see me after my trip, and it was his girlfriend who had answered.

'It's the thing every parent dreads ... well anyone really ... seeing two coppers on your doorstep at that time in the evening.' My mum settled herself next to me on my bed. 'I knew. Just knew it was about you. Had a funny feeling that all was not well. Will had just stopped laughing at me

for not spotting the message from you, and realised that it was sent over three hours ago, when they knocked.'

The message reminded me of the seconds before the crash when I saw Amy's face change from laughter to terror. A lump surfaced in my throat and I valiantly swallowed it down. That's when I thought of it. My phone. My fucking phone had been in my pocket all the time. Why didn't I get it out and call the police? I could have gotten Amy to hospital so much quicker ... But no ... I'd lost the plot ... went to pieces ... become a quivering psychotic mess and thought about how I was feeling, rather than how I could stop things getting worse. Story of my fucking life. It had been in my right hand pocket ... I could have reached it ... why didn't I just pull the bloody thing out and press 999?

'The police said they were on the scene in minutes ... The car behind you stopped and called 999.' But it wasn't the same as me doing something was it? And another ...

I stopped mid thought.

I mentally admonished myself. There was no use in crying over spilt milk ... no point doing my 'what ifs' and focusing on my shortcomings. I would have to learn that everything does not boil down to me ... things that go wrong are not always my fault. I think that was one of my major problems ... believing if I would have acted differently, said things differently ... responded differently, then everything would have turned out for the better.

The crux of the matter boiled down to this. I was in no fit state to think rationally when I woke up. I had concussion. I was hysterical. No many people would have thought to phone the police, especially when they believed there was no need.

Drama curbed and over. Amy was sitting up. Speaking. That's all that mattered ... she was alive, and so was I.

'I've brought you some jims jams.' Mothers. You've got to love them haven't you?

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I was getting pissed off. Every bloody hour ... lights in the eyes ... blood pressure. At this rate, they would kill me with their attentions and lack of sleep. My mum, dad and Will left the room every time the nurse came in, and slipped back in after they had gone. I told them there was no point in their staying, but they wouldn't go.

It was nearing three thirty in the morning when I saw a huge hand slip around the door of my room, followed by worried brown eyes. It was Frank ... shortly followed by Marion. They both looked a mess, a complete juxtaposition to how I had last seen them.

'Mind if we come in?'



After the introductions, and the stunted body language of parents who were worrying about their kids, Marion and Frank eventually got to the side of my bed.

'How you feeling, love?'

'Like I've been in a car crash.' I meant it to be a joke, a bad one at that ... 'Sorry ... I ...'

'No worries ... I understand.' Marion sat on my bed and took my hands in her own. After seeing me wince, she released the left one with a mumbled 'Sorry, sweetheart.' Her face said everything her words didn't.

'Have you seen her?'

She nodded and released a sigh. 'She looks a mess. The right side of her face is turning black where she hit her head ... her back hurts ... she's got cracked ribs ... stitches ... three broken toes and a sprained ankle.'

'But is she all right?' You know what I mean.

'Apart from all that, and her lisp, fine. She asked us to come and see you to make sure you were ok, although she's had everyone working in the ward running around trying to find out if you were all right ... she said she trusted us to tell her the truth.'

I didn't know where to begin, so I just said 'Lisp?'

'She bit her tongue and it's swollen ... that alongside the chip in her front tooth. Whatever you do, don't mention it. She seems more worried about how she sounds than all her other injuries put together.'

That was a good sign, wasn't it? Talking ... even though it hurt.

'So, lady. How are you? I have a report to fill in.'

Twenty minutes later I was alone in my room, as Marion and Frank had gone back to 'testify', as Frank put it, and my family had said they would meet them in the cafeteria to get to know each other better. Therefore, it was just me and my thoughts ... me coming to terms with what could have happened and what had actually did.

There were too many thoughts ... too bloody many, and my head was hurting. I could feel my eyes drifting closed as the events of the night finally took their toll.

'Just checking your blood pressure.'

Bollocks.

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Six thirty. Time for a mission with the help of my brother, a wheelchair, and a keen set of ears. I had convinced him that it would help my recovery if I could go and see Amy ... just for a few minutes. There was no way the nurses were going to let me rest until I cracked, so I thought it would be better to keep myself occupied ... keep myself alert on account of the concussion. Well, that's what I told Will anyway.

Brothers are weird. You spend your life growing up with them believing they were the spawn of Satan, but when you needed them they were always there. Many a time I had to pull him off lads who had called me a dyke ... carpet muncher ... rug muffler ... clam smacker ... crack snacker ... lady garden licker (oops - that was one of my own) ... and if they were not so inventive ... lesbian. He had sported more black eyes and fat lips than an all in wrestler. Bless. However, ask him to help dry the dishes and I was on my own. Ask him to cover for me whilst I sneaked out to meet Karen Draycott ... nope.

The worst one was the irritating noise when he was eating dinner. I knew it was just to get a reaction out of me - which then shortly followed, as I punched him between the eyes. Then up to my room for penance for hitting my little brother, who couldn't help having sinus problems. Yeah right.

But he was here now ... pushing me along and looking over his shoulder like an undercover agent. 'What if we get caught?' I looked back at him giving him the look that said 'Idiot.' 'But what if we're discovered?'

'We'll get locked up.' For a split second he believed me ... I'm sure of it, and then he 'accidentally on purpose' bumped my left leg into the doorframe. Obviously, I'm too much of a lady to tell you what I called him ... it started with a 'w' and ended with an 'r', and it wasn't waster.

It's quite hard looking inconspicuous as you are ducking into doorways and your leg is still sticking out, but we managed to get there undetected. Eventually.

As you can see, I had perked up a bit. Still a little bit hyperactive, but I knew I would calm down after I had seen Amy with my very own eyes ... made sure - personally - that she was on the mend, even if she was asleep when I got there.

Frank was waiting just inside the doorway to the ICU, as Will had arranged with him to meet us there. He hadn't told Amy we were coming, as I wanted it to be a surprise ... and it was. It was the look of incredulity on her face as I rolled into the room. She was sitting up, her legs over the side of the bed, her right foot bandaged and looking stiff. But the best thing was she was halfway through getting into a pair of her very own jim-jams courtesy of her mother, and they looked like her father's.

Her bruised face slackened and her eyes grew wide with shock, but it lasted less than a few seconds. The grin grew huge exposing a chipped front tooth, which made her look absolutely adorable, almost like a little girl just getting into bed.

'Bethhh.' The lisp came out stronger than even I had anticipated, and she stopped, licked her teeth and tried again. 'How are you feeling?' A hand raised itself and covered her mouth. 'Howsthe head?' She tried to get up, but her mother pushed her back down onto the bed again. 'Come closer, let me sthee you.'

Will had disappeared by this stage. As soon as he had come into the room and seen Amy pulling her arms into bright green paisley patterned pjs, he was gone. Therefore, it was up to me and my good hand to wheel me inside further. I tried to aim straight, but wheeling a wheelchair as a novice with only one hand was not an easy feat, as the table ... the side of the bed ... a bit of paintwork on the wall, will tell you. Marion got up in the end and pushed me closer to the bed.

'I'll leave you two alone for a moment.' Then she was gone, leaving me there to look into Amy's eyes ... look at her battered and bruised face ... look at the pain and suffering she was going through ... but best of all, look at all the love I saw pouring out.

No words. There were no words to convey what I was going through, and by the lack of dialogue, I think she felt the same way. I lifted my hands to hers and our fingers interlocked - stuff the pain in my wrist ... it would be more painful if I didn't touch her. Energy sparked from me to her and her to me ... the feeling of complete connection was there in spades. Amazing what can happen in twelve hours ... I thought I'd lost her ... thought she'd been taken away from me twelve hours ago, and look at us now.

We didn't even ask each other how we were feeling, just held on, glad to feel the life racing through our veins, knowing that it could have been so easily a very different story - we could have been like the woman from the other car, or worse still, I could have lived. Everything came through the way we looked at each other ... the questions ... the answers ... the feeling of completeness ...

I tried to lean up and kiss her, but I couldn't reach. She tried to lean down, but her back hurt too much, and with all the grunting and moaning we were doing, I think the people outside believed we were up to no good. 'I really want to kissth you. Know you are real.'

Tentatively, I swung my leg from its cradle and placed it on the floor. Next, I gingerly placed my right leg on the ground, tested it, and slowly rose from my seat to flop onto the bed next to her. Seconds later, we were in each other's arms, holding each other as tightly as were dared, lips touching lips gently as I didn't want to hurt her mouth.

To have her here ... here in my arms ... breathing ... I couldn't put it into words if you paid me ... not for all the tea in China. I had my woman back, and there was no way I would ever let her go. Never. I was here for the long haul ... in sickness and in health.

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## Chapter Thirteen (Homecoming)

You don't know how tempted I was to call this the 'Like it or Limp it Stage'. So bloody corny ... but I like corny ... corny is cheesy with less protein.

Anyway.

The doctor discharged me late afternoon, as he was pleased with my progress, but I wouldn't go home from the hospital. My mum tried all ways to convince me it would be better if I got home, showered, had a rest, and came back. But would you?

Didn't think so.

Amy had to stay in for another day ... minimum. Although her eyes were dilating as they should, there was still some concern over the cracking sounds inside her skull. Dr Deaton (who's signature looked like Dr Death - honestly) said it could be the movement of the brain as it realigned itself inside the head, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Safety it was then.

She was moved from the ICU and onto the ward I was vacating. Just as I came out of my little side room, she was wheeling down the hallway. Her face gave the impression she had completed ten rounds in the ring, but I could see she looked better than she had last night. George was pushing her and they were chatting away as if they had known each other forever.

'Hello there, sunshine.' George's cheery voice boomed down the corridor. 'See this? Only been back ten minutes and here I am ... pushing your other half.' I beamed at him and hobbled over using the stick they had given me to make sure I didn't put too much weight on my knee. 'You can't leave using that ... I'll whip you down in this wheelchair as soon as she's finished using it.' I frowned and pouted, 'NHS Policy ... You walk in and get wheeled out.' His laugh rumbled out and bounced off the walls.

I didn't kiss her, as I thought it would shock the older man. Just leaned over and caught her gaze before saying 'Good afternoon, honey.'

'Nice.' George harrumphed. 'Poor girl is in a right mess and you can't even be bothered to kiss her.' Both Amy and I laughed aloud, and I leaned in a little closer.

'Can't disappoint now, can I?' before tenderly brushing my lips over hers.

'Hiya sweetie ...' she stopped and licked her lips, '... sweetheart.' And she kissed me again. 'I've been talking with that lisp for so long now; I think it's become a habit.' I placed my hand under her chin and motioned for her to open her mouth. She hesitated for a fraction of a second before opening as widely as she could. Her right tooth had a chip from the bottom, but her tongue looked normal ... well apart from the huge bite mark at the front.

'Let's get you settled then.'

Unfortunately, she didn't get the private room. She was taken into the main ward, and plonked in the bed next to a woman reading *'That's Life'* magazine. I honestly believe Amy was the youngest in there by thirty years ... she looked positively foetal. I also knew that if I left her alone to fend for herself, she would be babied by the rest of them. How could I leave her? You see the predicament I was in. It wasn't because I wanted to spend every minute of every day with her - that would have been selfish ...

The world runs on good intentions. I wanted to stay there with her - gaze at her ... tell her I loved her every thirty seconds ... get on her tits (metaphorically - she was recovering after all) ... but to tell you the truth, I was knackered. I hadn't slept properly and I had gone through hell in the last twenty-four hours. It was enough to take anyone down and I was no exception. I think I would have persevered if I hadn't seen Amy keep nodding off. We were both wiped out, and as much as I wanted to be there, I knew it would be for the best if I went back later.

So, kisses and hugs were exchanged, and I could feel the *'People's Friend'* and *'Chat'* magazines being put down like falling dominoes around me. Promising to come back later, and under the care and attention of a grinning George, I was gone, leaving her amongst the sharks.

She's survived a car crash; everything else should be child's play.

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They kept her in for five days. Five days! I had spent as much time as I could at the hospital, but I had another person to worry about.

Dudley.

Talk about nearly pissing on my feet when he saw me. Will brought him round Tuesday evening, and he raced straight through the house and dived on top of me, his bony little feet jabbing in my already sore ribs.

I needn't have bothered struggling in the shower, as he gave me a thorough wash ... his tongue acted as if it was attached to his tail ... the mewling noises he made accompanied his excitement. The homecoming would have been perfect if Amy could have been there too. Duds didn't leave my side all night, even when I shifted my leg to get it more comfortable, his head shot up as if to say 'Where are you going?' and didn't settle again until he was definite I wasn't going anywhere without him.

Taking him for walks was a job in itself. I had to use a stick for at least two weeks, which wasn't too bad, as Dudley was excellent with or without a lead. The problem arose when I needed to drive anywhere. The doctors said I would be ok to drive after a couple of days rest, but I didn't feel I had the confidence ... you know how it is. I know the best thing to do is to get back in there ... climb back in the saddle, but at the moment I was fine not driving.

Will saved the day once again. Funny that isn't it? I go through nearly all my tale without mentioning him much, and then I never shut up ... Will this ... Will that ... Will was Weird

...But I honestly don't know what I would have done without him. He picked me up in the morning, before he went to work, and took both Duds and me to the park ... walked round with us ... brought me home ... went to work ... you can see how this is going? Do I need to go into more detail? Do you want me to get a move on?

Thought so.

One more thing before I go back to the hospital setting. I have to clarify something before I carry on. Dudley is just as important to me now I had Amy, as when I was on my own. I would hate you to think I was neglecting him. He would still sleep on my bed ... still kill my slippers and still be my number one little boy. And I would still love to wake up and tickle his winkle inadvertently ...

But I can't deny the five days without Amy seemed to leave me in limbo. All I did, it seemed, was wait until I could go and visit her again. Don't get me wrong, I loved being there with Dudley, but it just felt that a huge part of me was missing. Time before her, when I was single and happy to be on my own, seemed pointless now.

Truth be told ... cards on the table, this was the thing I had feared most. The absolute dependence on another person ... the feeling that I couldn't survive without her ... couldn't breathe ... function ... think straight. That she was the centre of my universe in which my life revolved ... the focus of every waking thought and emotion. No. I was not obsessed. For once in my life, I had allowed the shields to drop and love to come into my world. And the feeling was exhilaratingly terrifying.

I spent most of my time in a daydream, catching myself blanking out and missing conversations. My dad thought it was after shocks from the accident, but there was no pulling the wool over my mum's eyes. Knowing smiles and loads of knee slapping ... which went down like a lead balloon, until she decided my thighs would be less painful.

There was no question of making the decision to let love in. No sitting and wondering if I could turn it down. It was all out of my hands. I had spent too many years being afraid of being hurt, allowing no one to get close enough to know me ... close enough to hurt me. But you know what? Life's just too fucking short. Carpe diem ... grab that proverbial bull by the horns and go for the gold ... whilst mixing my literary phrases with a bit of Latin thrown in. So 'Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all.' Sorry. It's not Shakespeare as I promised ... Tennyson. But the sentiment is definitely the same ... Love. Be loved. Accept love in all her glory and in whatever guise and shape she falls into your lap. Treat her as a gift ... a reason for life ... the hope that humankind can do more than hate and start wars.

Whom am I trying to convince? You or me? I've accepted my fate, so ...

Let's get back to the hospital ... I know you're dying to know. Here goes.

Every time I visited, she looked better and better. The bruising had started to dull, and peter at the edges making it not so prominent. Headaches were becoming less frequent, and her back pain

was easing because she was forced to rest. On the fourth day, a dentist made a cast of her mouth so he could begin work on replacing the chip from her tooth. I had grown accustomed to the uneven smile and the way she would whistle through the gap between her top and bottom teeth, especially when she wasn't expecting it.

I was right about the women on the ward with her. Even though we expected them to be shocked at our relationship, they didn't bat an eyelid after the first time. Dora (*People's Friend* and sometimes *Take a Break*) was an absolute star. She adopted Amy from the moment she finished her tea break crossword, and kept giving her the soft centred chocolates from the stash in her locker. Gwen (*That's Life* and *Hello*) was in the next bed to her, and gave Amy the story of her life on more than one occasion.

But it was Sylvie who was the absolute star. Married for fifty-four years to Harold, a retired builder from Dereham. Four kids - ten grandchildren - twenty-two great grand children ... jeez - I sound like a game show host. 'Syl-vi-a ... Come on down!' The thing is, I can't tell you what she did differently from all the others, but she was just so lovely. Stories from her younger days were full of fun and laughter, creating the picture of the golden era our parents love to tell us about, but we never listened. Shame really, because we could learn so much.

The memory that sticks with me more vividly was when Amy, Sylvie, and I were in the lounge area drinking in some sunlight through the huge plate glass windows. We were chatting about soap operas. Characters were always jumping in between the sheets with every Tom, Dick, or Harriet, with no sense of morality or commitment. Then she said it. I thought I had misheard her at first ... or hoped I had.

'I was in love with a woman once.'

You can imagine my reaction. And Amy's. I mean ... what do you say apart from, 'Really?'

Sylvie didn't bat an eyelid, said it as if it was an everyday thing. 'It was before Harold, even though he knows about it.' I was praying she didn't go into detail. 'I was twenty - it was 1948, and I had just moved to London to work in a typing pool. I spotted her on my very first day and I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world.' She leaned back into the armchair and closed her eyes, as if she was reliving the memory.

Usually I felt extremely uneasy when I am faced with older people talking about sex ... love ... anything that happens behind the bedroom door - I know ... I'm being unreasonable ... ageist, to be exact. However, watching her expression flit over the memories - wow. It was mesmerising. Her wrinkled face didn't seem as old anymore ... it seemed to shed the worry and the life learned lessons, if only for an instant.

'Jeannette.' Huh? Her voice broke through my thoughts and brought me back to reality with a thump. 'Her name was Jeannette and she didn't know I existed.' She sighed and smiled sadly. 'I didn't know that women could love each other in that way ... been a country girl all my life ... farmer's daughter. Put it down to being lonely ... being in the city and not really knowing anyone else.' It seemed so quiet when she paused, so exposing, and not just for her. 'All I knew is that

when she was near me I couldn't breathe ... couldn't think straight. My stomach would tie up in knots and I would start to sweat.'

I knew the feeling well and looked at Amy, who was intently looking at Sylvie. 'I wonder if you feel that when you are near me?' The question stayed in my head, but it didn't stop the urge of wanting it to be born into the air and watch Amy's reaction. 'Will you love me forever?' The thought flitted in, pushing the last one out. Sue's words of loving me forever came back and shot a bolt of fear and vulnerability through me.

'It was nearly a month before she spoke to me. Came right up behind me and whispered hello in my ear. All the blood drained from my face, even though I only heard her voice. The strength it took me to turn round and look at her close up ... bloody hell. And to actually say hello back. Had no spit in my mouth.' A soft laugh escaped her and she gripped her knees and shuddered. 'Thought all my Christmases and birthdays had come at once. Especially when she asked if I fancied going to the flicks ...'

Sylvie continued her tale, telling us of her first evening out with Jeannette and how she felt being with her. I was finding it easier to overcome my initial shock - you know ... her being in love with a woman. Very conservative and narrow minded, I know. I expected people to accept my sexuality, but I was just as bad as they were. It didn't matter how old, what sex, race, or religion you were ... normal is as normal does. Love is love, whether it's sexual or platonic, and the sooner people, including myself, start focusing on their own lives and not meddling with others, the sooner the world would begin to sort itself out. Hatred and ignorance are *not* qualities, *not* something to pass on to the next generation. Embracing differences and things we don't understand are the means *to* understanding and change.

Fortunately, we live in a world that is changing ... not very quickly, but changing nevertheless. I'm not saying all the changes are in the right direction either. Bigotry and prejudice were still alive and kicking. And even within the classifications we label ourselves with, there are still people who disagree with other people's life choices. The lesbian who classifies herself with the way she acts, dresses and talks can come into ridicule from the lesbians who believe a woman should look like a woman. Why? To define the term of lesbian? A woman loving another woman?

I know I'm going off the point here, know I should just be reporting Sylvie's story, but I need to say it. Need to understand it myself. Need to comprehend why people need to judge and put others to type. Myself included. I had automatically assumed Sylvie was a woman who had loved her husband and had no life before him - and had no life other than his. Know that she wasn't just an old lady full of stories, but devoid of passion and longing. Love doesn't stop because of age ... creed ... or sexuality. Doesn't stop because others don't think of you that way.

Sylvie had been in love with another woman ... married a man ... but loved a woman. What I needed to know now was why? Why had she given up on happiness? Because the way she spoke about Jeannette, I knew she had been the love of her life.

'What happened?' Sylvie looked at Amy, the one who had asked the question.



'I want to blame society, but it was all down to me. I pushed her away.' Amy and I shot each other confused looks. 'I couldn't handle it ... the deceit ... the hiding how I felt for her. I used to start fights over nothing ... used to take it out on her why we couldn't tell the world we were in love.' Sadness washed over her, and a single tear escaped and zig zagged through the wrinkles on her face. 'She left me - married someone she had grown up with. Left London and went back to Dorset. Last I heard she had a couple of kids and was training to be a teacher.'

The once vibrant woman left and all that remained was emptiness. 'I went to pieces. Came back to Norfolk and married the first man who asked me.' Sylvie sat up straighter in her chair, trying to appear more in control. 'I told him everything. Didn't want him to live in the dark about my past ... I owed him that much.'

'But did you love him?' The question shot out of my mouth before I had chance to check it.

'Eventually.' Another sigh. 'But not in the same way. She was my first, and I think there's part of me that loves her still. Harold's been a good husband and father. I couldn't wish for anyone better.' Except Jeannette. 'So, girls ... I hope you've taken a leaf from this old bird's book.' We just looked at her; I think we were gob smacked. 'Don't let anything get in your way ... not even each other. Respect. That's the key. That alongside with trust. Without those two, you have nothing.'

How true. Trust and respect. Love cannot stand without those foundations, or else you will eat each other alive with jealousy and cruelty. No love can withstand that, and if you haven't got those two, have you really got love at all? Jesus. I'm beginning to sound like that woman from Sex in the City.

Later that day I met Harold. Anyone with half a brain could see he loved his wife with everything he had, and that confused me even more. By Sylvie's own admission, she had loved someone else ... but looking at Harold ... Could there be hope after love? Not the all-consuming fire of first love, but love all the same? If Sylvie had stayed with Jeannette, what would have happened to Harold? Would he have met someone else and loved her just as much? What about soul mates ... meeting 'the one'? Was that just a pipe dream?

A hand landed on my shoulder and pulled me round. Brown glistening eyes were there to answer my question. Soul mates? Definitely.

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Amy came home Saturday afternoon, and I was there to meet her, Dudley staying with my parents for a while. Marion and Frank had picked her up from the hospital and I was getting her house aired and sorted for her return. It was amazing to think it had only been a week ago we had actually shown each other how we felt. Apart from the near fatal car crash, it had been the best week of my life.

I didn't stay long. Just got her settled and left her to her parents. I didn't want to suffocate her with my presence, as I knew she would have a lot to do once at home. I left her with the

understanding she was to call me anytime. And that meant ANYTIME - even if it was three in the morning.

It was so much easier now I was back to driving ... so much better than relying on lifts or limping around. My knee was recovering, the swelling was gradually going down, and my wrist was on the mend. God bless anti inflammatories and painkillers.

Instead of going straight round to my parents, I had the urge to pop back home for a little while. Don't ask me why - just felt I had to. I hadn't been in the house five minutes when the doorbell sounded.

Sue was standing in the doorway with a bunch of flowers gripped tightly in her hand, her face ashen. 'Just heard about the accident and thought I'd pop round and see if you were all right.' The thought of slamming the door in her face flashed fleetingly across my mind, but I just pulled the door back wider and limped off down the hallway towards the kitchen.

The front door closed, and I could sense she was following. 'Where'd you keep your vases?'

'Under the sink, like always.' I stopped and thought about how I was behaving. 'Thank you for the flowers by the way. They look beautiful.' She was bending down and rummaging through all the crap I kept under there, but halted in her tracks, lifting her gaze to mine. The smile that broke free was radiant and made her look freer somehow.

'My pleasure. Couldn't come round and not give the patient something bright and shiny to look at ... they were out of grapes though - fancied some too.' And for the first time in so bloody long, we both laughed - together - with no malice behind it.

I felt myself beginning to relax, beginning to be human around her. Everything I had been through over the last few months, especially last week, had taught me so much. Many things are reflective in life ... people reflect and respond to how you treat them. It's also relative ... everyone has a different take on events. My memories of what had happened between Sue and I must be so different to her thoughts on our relationship. Maybe this was the final step ... the thing we strive to do ... finalise things ... find closure. It was my last step at gleaning some control over my life and the way I reacted to it.

'We need to talk don't we?' Sue was just pulling the vase free from all the camouflage in the cupboard, but stopped and stared at the glass container. Slowly, she turned to face me, her eyes full of sadness and hurt. The nod of her head was slow and deliberate.

'Let's talk then. It's been too long.'

Settled in the front room surrounded by thickening air, I was finding the situation almost surreal. Sue and I were actually having a conversation. A civilised one at that. I had started it off, telling her how I had felt in the last cycle of our relationship. I didn't hold anything back ... told her everything. It didn't have the impact I thought it would. On me, I mean. Somehow I thought I would feel some kind of elation ... some liberation, but no. Telling someone she had made your

life lifeless was not the be all and end all of my coming to terms with what had taken place. There was an element of release there, but I already knew by this stage that Sue was not the person solely to blame. That rested, to a degree, at my feet. But I was getting there - getting a grip on my shortcomings ... understanding that I had to take control of who I was and who I wanted to be.

She sat in silence and heard me out, her face expressionless. At times, it felt as if I was talking to the air, but I knew she was listening ... knew she was taking it all in. Finally, I admitted to her how I knew I hadn't given her what she needed. The reason? Because I didn't want to. Simple as that. Relationships needed to have both parties wanting to make it work, and my lethargy had shown me I hadn't. To some people this would have sounded cruel, almost vengeful, but I was trying to explain to her that it wasn't all her fault. However much it hurt, I was no longer going to play the coward.

After I had finished, the silence surrounded us. I expected her to become angry, attack me with a spiteful remark, but she just looked broken.

'I know.' She released a sigh and leaned back onto the sofa. 'I could sense it. Even before I moved in ... Could feel you slipping away from me. That's why I wanted to move in so much.'

'Why?' I couldn't understand the logic, the reasoning behind it. If she *knew* ...

'I thought that as soon as we moved in together it would sort itself out. I loved you, Beth. Still do.' Shaking hands lifted and wiped her eyes; I could see the tears glistening on the tips of her fingers. I went to interrupt, but she held a hand up, the light dancing over the wet digits. 'I know you don't feel the same, don't worry. I wasn't saying it to make you feel bad. Just thought I'd let you know.' I closed my mouth and sat back, illuminating the literal and metaphorical distance between us.

'The way I treated you ... God. Sometimes I still can't believe I did the things I did.' Her voice quavered slightly, but she swallowed and started again. 'It wasn't long after I moved in that I knew things were not going to get any better. But I couldn't just walk away ... admit defeat. I wanted it too much - wanted *you* too much to just leave.'

At that point, she started to cry. Initially I felt numb, but then I picked up the box of tissues and offered her one. It was not like the usual crying Sue did ... the crying I had thought she did to manipulate and control me. It was deep rooted and thick, as if she had bottled it away for years. The realisation of what I had done was beginning to shape and shimmer inside my head. I always thought she had everything sorted - had everything tightly under her control. But like the way I had lived, Sue's was also an act. She had to be and perform a certain way in order to get me to take notice, but all I had done was shy away from any form of responsibility.

I'm not saying it was all my fault - not saying that to live this kind of life, or lie, was the way to go. Do you understand? It all boils down to this. No one should have to go through what I went through, whether they believe they deserve it or not. Because no one deserves it ... no one. A relationship takes two to work, but it only takes one to break it. What I was trying to come to

terms with now was who did the breaking. Me? Sue? Or was it our inability to voice how we felt the culprit? However, the crux of it all was the fact I hadn't loved her in the same way as she loved me.

Sue's voice sounded again. 'I was so scared of losing you, and the more you slipped away, the more frightened I became.' The tissue was clutched in her hands, crumpled, reflecting how she felt. 'I know I wore you down - even to the way you washed up. I thought that if I could make you feel as if you couldn't survive without me then you would stay. The more I pushed, the more you pulled away, and then I would try to reign you in again. I knew I was trying to control you, maybe because I couldn't control myself.'

Images of Sylvie flashed into my head - especially the part where she had said 'I pushed her away.' Had Jeannette felt the same as me? Sue was like Sylvie: the anger and hurt they both felt negatively projected in order to feel some semblance of control. What about Rachel? Another victim? Or was it a case of desperately wanting what you can't have?

She explained why she didn't like me seeing my friends too. Didn't like the fact they received all my attention, initially, but then it developed into so much more. Insecurity was the main cause, so she said. It was the belief that my friends would see past the façade of our relationship and tell me to leave her that made her stop me seeing them.

'But that was one of the problems, Sue. You never gave me the opportunity to think for myself - make my own decisions. You thought I could be influenced by what others said, maybe because I was so influenced by you. When I made the decision to call our relationship a day, it was my choice - no one else's.' She gave a slow nod - acceptance of what I had voiced. 'You didn't trust me enough to think for myself and didn't respect me enough to allow me the freedom to make my own mistakes.'

I waited for it to sink in before saying, 'Without trust and respect, love can't survive. And neither of us showed each other either.' I told you we could learn so much from our elders, and about love too.

I left her at this point, and went in to the kitchen to make coffee ... I think we both needed it. Whilst the kettle was boiling, I took time out to think of all we had said. Quite a lot had been covered in the time she had been here, and I was beginning to get things straight in my head. Both of us were to blame, that much was obvious.

But what about the relationships out there where love had been a factor. Both of the parties had been in love and one had started to control the other ... little things that eventually morphed into bigger things, even violence? Why do people stay in abusive relationships? Do they actually admit to themselves that this is wrong, or believe it is what they deserve? I remember a woman I used to work with whose husband used to beat ten bells out of her on a regular basis. The amount of times we all told her to get the hell out landed on deaf ears. She told us the only reason he did it was because he loved her too much. Too much! She had had an affair and he had found out about it ... made sure she was accountable for everything she did ... where she went ... whom she spoke to. But it was never enough. The last part of what I have told you, we surmised ... she

never told us - only about the affair. However, she used to panic if she was late, or if her husband called and she was out of the office.

One day, Daniel, a workmate, was sitting on her desk telling her that if she had an affair then obviously she wasn't happy to start with. It was time to leave the bastard. It was the first time he had ever sat on her desk ... the first time he had ever voiced an opinion about anyone else's life, and unfortunately, for him, it was the worst time to do it. Her husband came through the door, didn't even ask what was going on, just attacked him; beat him to a pulp in front of us all.

Daniel was nineteen. Nineteen and like a rake. The husband was thirty-four and built like a brick wall. It took three men to get him off Daniel, and even as they were dragging him away, he was laying the boot in. He got six months custodial sentence; Daniel got six broken ribs, a cracked jaw, a black eye and lost his front teeth. I realised that day that I couldn't stay with Sue any longer. No. She had never hit me, and I doubt she ever would, but abuse does not only come at the end of a fist.

That night I met the woman who would take my place in Sue's bed. Two weeks later, I walked into our bedroom and gave myself the excuse to leave. Even in the end, it had taken more than watching some poor bloke get the shit kicked out of him to make me stand up and walk away. Life deals us some very wild cards at times, and it was only now I had realised I could shuffle the deck myself.

Back in the front room, Sue started again. 'I never hurt Dudley, you know? I swear. Never laid a finger on him.' I squinted at her, thoughts racing again. Thoughts of Dudley cowering ... thoughts of how he hated her so much. 'Come on, Beth. He wouldn't even let me stroke him without growling. You think he would let me get close enough?' Come to think of it, that much was true. Duds had never backed down from Sue - always wanted to bite her, even when I was there. So why did he duck when I lifted my hand up? Jump when I slapped the paper on the side of the chair? He had stopped doing it not long after Sue had left, so what had been the reason he'd done it in the first place?

'That fucking paperboy!' It made sense. Came like a bolt from the blue. I had cancelled Sue's paper about a week after she had gone, and not long after that Dudley had been fine. 'That little bastard!' I was on the phone in seconds calling the newsagents and reporting the incident. The owner told me the paperboy who used to deliver in my area had been sacked four months ago for tormenting the dogs on his round. There had been loads of complaints about him ... and in the end, the owner had followed him delivering papers and caught him kicking a black Labrador who lived two streets away. Kicking it. *Kicking a dog!* Can you believe it? What sick little fucker would hurt someone who couldn't speak up for themselves?

A loaded question ... and one, unfortunately, with many answers, all of them names. The husband who beat the crap out of his wife, for one.

Then I thought of me punching Sue in the face. Hearing her nose crunch. I looked at it and noticed the slight curve at the bridge. She noticed me looking. 'I deserved that, Beth. Not for hitting Dudley, but for all the shit I put you through.'

'No. No one deserves that. There are other ways to sort things out without resorting to a full blown fight in the street.'

She thought about it, and then nodded. 'But it's in the past now. Everything's in the past.' Sue lifted her cup and took a long pull on the drink. 'One more thing before I leave you in peace.' I gave her a questioning look. 'I'm sorry I couldn't let it go ... sorry I tried to hurt you in any way I could. Like taking your furniture - threatening to go for custody for Dudley. In my screwed up mind, I thought whilst you were hating me, at least you were feeling something, and at that point I took what I could.'

In a flash she was standing, the cup back on the table. 'Thanks for listening, Beth. Don't worry ... I'll leave you alone from now on.' I just sat there. 'Amy seems like a keeper. How did she ... 'Promise me ... *no* ... promise *yourself* ... you will take good care of each other.'

Before I had chance to say anything, she was gone. It was so fast, like she had to leave as quickly as she could. There was more I wanted to say; more I wanted to explain, but I think we had both said enough. It was time to close that chapter of my life and move on ... move forward.

Something on the coffee table caught my eye: an envelope with my name on the front. Tentatively I lifted it, and peeled open the paper. Inside was a CD, a homemade one. On the front was written, 'Maybe this will help you understand.'

I put the CD in the player and increased the volume. The soulful acoustics drifted out, and I instantly recognised Radiohead's *Creep*. The words were mournful and full of longing, but they were also full of sadness. The beginning spoke of the singer's idyllic view of the person he loved ... skin that made him cry ... floating like a feather in a beautiful world. I sat, mesmerised by the lyrics, understanding fully for the first time what Sue must have gone through.

The verse that stood out the most was agonisingly wanting, and I could feel the tears trickling down my face, the realisation of what it was like to be in love and not feeling worthy, the only emotion I could feel.

*I don't care if it hurts I want to have control I want a perfect body I want a perfect soul I want you to notice when I'm not around You're so fucking special I wish I was special*

Sue had been so bloody unhappy, and all the time I was with her I thought she had everything sorted ... was sure of whom she was. That was the second time I had made such a huge mistake - I had thought the same about Amy when I had first met her. Shows how much I know.

To become aware of how someone else is feeling, and to know it is because of your actions, is not a nice feeling to have. Sue had left. Gone. But she had given me her reasons for her behaviour in the only way she could. To think she believed herself to be a weirdo ... a creep, to know all she wanted was me to love her ... believing the only way she could do it was to be as special as she thought I was, increased the pain in my chest and released the tears to tumble and cleanse. I'm not special - no more than anybody else. Even now she felt inadequate, or why else would she give me the CD?

As I said, life and its events are relative. All we need to do is to step outside ourselves occasionally and look at the bigger picture. We might surprise ourselves. It may be 'we' are like me, or even we are the Sue's of this world - it all depends on who is watching. But what we must recognise is that whether you feel the victim or the offender, you might in fact be a little of both.

And for the record ... we are all special - we all deserve to be treated as such and loved fully and completely. If we're not, then ...

Sermon over.

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## Chapter Fourteen

Four months have gone by since that day. Time flies when all you have to do is press the return key on the computer. Thought you'd like that. Or maybe not ...

See? I've done it again. Pressed return. Ok. I'll stop pissing about.

Back to Amy, I think. Everything always comes back to her. She was my focus - my all. I told her about Sue and what conclusions I had finally drawn, enabling me to draw a line underneath the whole debacle that used to be my life. I was still haunted by Sue's message, and deep down I knew that I had to find a way to help her overcome this feeling of failure and insignificance. But that would come with time, as at the moment, everything between us was still too raw.

The conversation between Sue and me would have to have an impact on Amy's broken relationship with Rachel. I knew it made her think about it, and I expected her to mull it over and marinate on the actions, or inactions, of her life with her ex. Initially, she didn't say a word, but when she did it was as if the floodgates had opened, allowing her to recognise the similarities between her experience and mine. There were major differences, obviously, but the outcome was the same. We are who we are ... and no one has the right to make us uncomfortable in our own skin, just as we don't have the right to do that to someone else.

When she was feeling better, and her toes had healed enough for her to get about on her own, she arranged to meet Rachel in Cambridge ... neutral ground, so to speak. Clearing the air with her ex had become a focus that she couldn't deny any longer. Like me, she needed it as a symbolic closure as well as a need to know what had actually gone on to make the relationship pan out the way it had.

Waiting for her return seemed interminable. The day dragged and dragged, and I had to stop myself phoning her to see if she was ok. But I also knew she had to do this on her own ... had to take control once and for all and realise she could get past this. The main thing she regretted was the fact she had just upped and left. There had been no showdown like Sue and I had; no dramatic punch-ups, just told her she had to go ... finished it ... cut off all contact for a while whilst she licked her wounds before moving to Norfolk. Burying herself in her work hadn't helped either; just made her feel more distanced from society. She had left all her friends and

family behind, tried to cocoon herself from the world and its shortcomings. But humans are social beings and thrive on interaction - well, on the whole we do.

I remember one of the first things she said to me, well, it was when we went to the beach actually. 'I'm good at fun.' Was that for my benefit or hers? Remember the 'Fun. Something totally distracting. Do things you would never usually do'? It all made sense now. I thought Amy had saved me ... but in a way, I think we saved each other that day. When I say saved, you know what I mean. Gave each other a purpose, a focus ... a chance to start again. The love we shared was not built on self-pity - far from it. The love we have is born from the wonder of love itself. We were there for each other when we needed it, but it just became so much more.

She came round to see me as soon as she returned to Norwich. Dudley got in there first, like usual ... ball gripped in his mouth and trying to lick her at the same time. Finally, he moved his hairy little arse out of the way so I could get my turn.

Kissing her felt wonderful ... totally encapsulating. When she was with me, it seemed as if nothing else mattered - that I could take on the world. It grew stronger, the kiss I mean, and steadily I could feel the want surging up inside almost making me lose my sense of reason. But it wasn't the time or the place.

Stopping the kiss slowly, I leaned back from her face and looked into her eyes, our arms firmly wrapped around each other. 'How did it go?'

Amy shrugged her shoulders and sighed. 'Pretty much as I expected. Let's get comfy and I'll tell you.'

There was nothing in the world more comfortable than laying on the sofa in her arms ... unless it was in bed ... or standing ... or anywhere, as long as I was in her arms. I stroked her forearm gently, my fingertips playing with the fine hairs. My head was snug on her chest and I felt so contented just to hear the sound of her breathing - feel the movement as her lungs filled then dispelled the air into the atmosphere.

'Rachel was still the same. Unfortunately. I told her how I had felt - how she had made me feel when we were together, and she asked me why I had even bothered to turn up today.' Bitch. 'I told her I just wanted to get things off my chest ... let her know that she had hurt me ... and I think in a way to forgive her before I could begin to forgive myself.'

I looked round at her, wanting to interrupt and tell her she had nothing to be sorry about - nothing to be forgiven for. But her expression told me now was not the time to interrupt - I had to let her come to terms with things her way.

'She started all sweetness and light, but her attitude changed when she realised I wasn't there to get back with her. I tried to explain what I felt like ... how she had made me feel worthless, and she laughed in my face - told me to grow up. Her exact words were "Life is not all sweetness and Mills and Boon novels. Get over yourself."' I'm so glad I hadn't been there - I doubt I would have kept my hands off her. 'But you know what, honey?'



'What?'

'It didn't affect me. I didn't rise, or sink, to her bait. When she realised that she became aggressive - brought your name into it.'

'What did she say?'

'It doesn't matter. She doesn't matter. I understood completely for the first time in a long time, that it didn't matter what she thought. That part of my life is dead and buried - gone for good. So I actually did take her advice.'

'You did what?' I couldn't believe that she would listen to a selfish arrogant twat like her.

'Yep.' The smile she gave me warmed my face. 'I got over myself ... told her she wasn't worth my time and to stay away from us. Then I left. But, before I got to the door she shouted "And for the record - you were shit between the sheets. Like I was shagging a rag doll." I stopped, turned and made sure everyone was either looking at her or me before I said, "That's no way to speak to your sister, is it?" The look on her face was priceless. I could hear people gagging as I left - stifling her with the bill too.'

I sat up sharply, the grin spreading on my face. 'You never said that?' I was incredulous.

'Sure did. I knew I had to say something that would stop her in her tracks ... and one thing I knew she hated was to be made to look a fool. There was no comeback for that, because if she had denied it, it would've brought even more attention to her. She knew I wasn't going to take her shit anymore.'

'How?'

'Might have been when I told the waiter to make sure he hid all the knives ... or even the glass of wine I poured over her head.'

'When did you do that?'

'Just before I left the table. Come to think of it, that maybe why she shouted out what she did.'

I threw my head back and laughed, and it wasn't long before she joined me. It felt good. So bloody good to laugh at something that could have so easily ruined our lives.

When we eventually calmed down so we were only hiccupping laughs, Amy caught my hands and held me fast.

'Beth. I love you so much. So bloody much. You are the love of my life.'

It's amazing how one minute you can be laughing and the next sobbing into the t-shirt of the woman who you loved more than breathing. Shushing noises whistled through my hair, as strong hands stroked my back and I knew I had come home.

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Later that night Amy showed me just how much she loved me ... showed me over and over again, as I showed her with every touch and caress ... every tantalising taste of her. Kisses were fervent and unreserved; hands possessed and captured; thighs rubbed as breasts melted into breasts, encompassing all we felt into a climax of unity.

Words of love and forever slipped easily from expectant mouths, willing each kiss and touch to last for eternity - knowing that however long we loved each other, it would never ever be long enough.

The most wonderful part was the way Amy gave herself totally to me, as I gave myself totally up to her. There was no her and me, only us. For the first time since we had become a couple I felt there were no barriers ... nothing to hinder our lovemaking. We were free to be who we were ... free to be ourselves, expecting nothing but expecting the world at the same time.

As Amy was above me, between my legs and looking down at me, I felt so in control - weird, I know. But I did. There was not uncertainty in our actions - every single touch was perfectly performed - every word uttered came from somewhere deep inside. And as her fingers slipped inside I had the sensation I was filling her. I can't explain it. Can't describe the feeling. It honestly felt as if we had swapped bodies, but our minds were our own.

And that's the whole point isn't it? Having the freedom to make up your own mind.

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Resolution Stage - or generally known as The End

Ok. You were expecting this in the last chapter heading. But I wanted to give you something to look forward to. I know I said it was four months later, but then I went on to ramble about something else, but I thought you would have gotten used to that by now.

Right. Yep. I understand. I'll go back to the 'four months later' bit - keep your hair on.

But that means now. Four months later is now. Today, in fact.

Amy and my relationship has grown from strength to strength. Every day I wake up and find I love her more than I did yesterday, but definitely not as much as I'll love her tomorrow. Mushy, I know, but true.

After all the incidents we had shared ... some of them when we weren't even together, if you know what I mean, made us realise what we had. We valued our love ... respected each other ...

trusted implicitly ... and readily told each other how we were feeling. Not just the lovey dovey stuff, but how we were feeling - all of it.

If Amy did something to piss me off or hurt me, she knew about it - and she did the same back, told me when I stepped out of line. It wasn't a relationship built from pipe dreams or straight from the pages of a trashy romance story. This was real life ... and in real life, people get on your nerves or as my mum would say 'Get on your tits.' But that sounded like a good idea in my book, as long as it was Amy getting on them.

Being in love was the easy part; making it work took effort, but not in a bad way. We can all become complacent, believing everything is going wonderfully, but ask yourself this. Have you told the person in your life you love them today? Have you showed them? Ruffled their hair ...stroked their arm ... their back? Made them a cuppa without being asked? What about compliments? 'That top suits you' or 'You have washed up beautifully' .

Another thing to remember is to never take them for granted - in any respect. I'm not preaching, just sharing what I have learned. To thank someone for making a wonderful meal ... for posting your mail ... for taking the time to be together although you know they are snowed under at work - all of them relevant for letting the other one know you appreciate them. And that's part of the love package alongside respect and trust.

Amy and I still have so much to experience ... so much to discover together - alongside of Dudley of course. The car crash saw to it that we would always treasure each and every single moment we shared, as none of us know when it would be our last. The poor woman in the Ford Mondeo never had chance to say goodbye to her husband and two children; the third glass of wine she had round her work colleague's house turned out to be the reason why. Life is for living, learning and loving, and when you find that special person, you will want to do all three with them.

Got to go now, as we are going to Fi and Kate's for dinner - Dudley has got sausages - he loves sausages, nearly as much as he loves all of the attention he gets when we are all together. Although, he now sleeps spread eagled on the sofa when Amy comes to stay ... but I never close the door. Bless him. Must be like all kids; can't deal with his parents making out.

Anyway, a few thoughts before I go. I can hear you groaning ... I won't be long, I promise. I'm running out of tired old clichés to go on for much longer.

Life can throw you a curve ball ... sometimes one after the other. It hurts like hell - I know, but never give up trying. Never give up on life. Live it, don't exist. Don't settle for second best and put up with things for the sake of it or believe you deserve it.

Don't sit around waiting for the once in a lifetime love - you could wait forever. Go out and look. Remember Harold and Sylvie? How they had both found the loves of their lives, which turned out to be different people? A teapot has many different lids, they may not fit perfectly, but they all serve a purpose. They can stop you being scalded or making a mess of things, even though on the outside they don't look quite right. What I'm trying to say, badly, is that if you have loved

someone and it didn't work the way you wanted - don't give up. Never think 'Once bitten, twice shy' because what doesn't kill us only makes us stronger. Learn from it. Take heed from it, but don't avoid it. To do that would only hurt one person. You. And *you* have so much to give.

We have the ability to mould our lives ... shape it into something we want. If we pass up this opportunity, we become more fearful of ourselves and focus on what we can't do rather than on our strengths.

You only live once ... so make the loving *once* matter.

And *once* and for all ... be you. You're worth it. We all are.

The End

Well. There you have it. Another one of my rambles for you to think about, or not ... grin. I hope you enjoyed it, and if you did, let me know ... if you didn't - erm ... sorry?

<mailto:fingersmith@hotmail.co.uk>

Also, if you did like it and want to actually hold one of my books in your hands ... maybe light a bbq with it; you can find details in the link below.

<http://www.pdpublishing.com/heartsflowersendpage.htm>

Thank you for sharing your time ... See? I'm not taking you for granted. Be good - if not be careful.