



DARKEST SECRETS BEYOND THE KEYHOLE

By

ROSALYN

RICHARDSON

PREFACE

This book is based on a true story but is also fictional.

The characters have fictional names to protect their identities. You as the reader may decide who is and who isn't.

This story displays a host of emotions: bitterness and hate, sexual ecstasy at great height followed by tragedy and torment.

The scene starts with, me Natalie Smethurst.

My childhood had been tempestuous from the start.

I sought relief on leaving home, finding what I assumed was love. The man I did marry would have to have my parent's complete approval, almost like an arranged marriage.

I did meet someone whom they did readily approve of but love and happiness was not meant to be. My husband was violent, both sexually, emotionally, and mentally abusive.

My parents are horrified when I leaves my husband and meet Greg Whitely who works on the same Business Park that I then began to work at.

Greg totally captivates me, makes me feel special and shows me love and sexual ecstasy that I had never experienced or ever dreamed of.

Fatefully though, I am warned by two brothers who also own a Company on the Business Park, that Greg Whitely is a sexual magnet to women and couldn't be faithful to just one if he tried. Greg's love for women in his life is like a habit or even an addiction that can't be broken.

I adamantly refuse to listen or believe this and ignore any nagging doubts that do eventually start to appear. Thereafter despite all odds I marry Greg.

One afternoon, I proved drastically wrong, when I arrive unexpectedly back to Greg's office and find him engrossed in the

process of passionate sex with loud groans of orgasmic pleasure from another woman, or Olena as I later find out.

As soon as possible I move many miles away to Hampshire where one of her neighbours are a doctor and his wife who is a nurse.

It is then that tragedy, death threats and displays of deep hatred are levelled against me causing me to flee for my life

It is then that I realise that it is only me that holds the key that can unlock my future for my future happiness, will I do so?

Chapter One

As Greg drove through the pretty little village of Broughton, I noticed a small shop and post office with a few surrounding cottages.

Greg drove his Cayman Porche up the lane and through the open gates towards the magnificent building they, or at least I was going to survey. He slowly glided across the sweeping gravel to the car park at the front of the building. I then stood and looked in awe as my eyes gazed at the vista before me.

The Georgian Mansion, which had apparently been vacant for some time, had been recently converted into six luxury flats. The grounds exuded beautifully kept colourful gardens, and the mansion itself, were apparently owned by the Earl of Hampton.

The scenery was breath taking. All around, as far as the eye could see, were green velvet pastures and rolling countryside. The view of the downs. The tall spire of the nearby Winchester Cathedral could be seen in the distance of the picturesque surroundings that engulfed "Marten Manor".

Greg and I had recently divorced. We stood together on the pebbled drive beyond the electric gates. We waited for Brian Worsley, the local representative from Coe Midgely and Bates, estate agents in Winchester. Greg Whitely had driven down from his offices in Ryedale, North Yorkshire to Broughton with me to look at one of the

apartments, namely the show apartment, if, which I decided to take, would be as part of our divorce settlement.

Greg had left his Ukrainian partner up in Yorkshire for the day, but that is a story that will soon unfold!

Mr Worsley soon arrived. He parked his Mercedes Benz near to the impressive wildlife pond which was situated beside an impressive water fountain.

Mr Worsley greeted us both and we were invited in to accompany him to the Manor House.

The front door was of heavy oak wood. The marble floor in the entrance sparkled and glistened with the sun shining through the narrow stain glassed window.

As we walked through the entrance, you could see in the middle of the reception area was a large sweeping staircase with a period wooden handrail. The stairs were decked with a pale green Axminster, or similar quality, thick pile carpet.

“Well,” Mr Worsley began, “I’ll just give you a summary of the Manor. The top three apartments are occupied and downstairs, one of the apartments is occupied but this first one here, as I know you are already aware, is the “show house apartment as it were” is now ready for sale”.

Mr Worsley directed his left hand towards the front door of the apartment.

“As you might expect, with this being the show home, it is decorated and does contain some fixtures and fittings and is at a discount price with it being the last one to be on the market at present”.

Mr Worsley unlocked the door and opened it, saying,

“I’ll leave you to look round at your leisure. I’ll be in my car. I’ve a few calls to make. Enjoy your perusal and I will see shortly”

He beamed at us both before he turned and walked away. His small frame and immaculately dressed person in a crisp grey suit, white

shirt, and ruby red tie, finished off with expensive leather brogues, certainly were a good representation of the estate agents.

Greg and I hardly spoke to each as I toured round the apartment, mind you, he hadn't really spoken to me all the way down, so I put my earphones in and listened to the latest novel on my iPad.

It was very tastefully decorated. A large en-suite bedroom and then directly opposite it, a much smaller bedroom with a small bathroom next to it. "Obviously not made for families" I deduced.

The lounge was perfect. My eyes were immediately drawn to the wood burner set in an exquisite marble hearth.

I turned to Greg and my eyes lit up excitedly

"Look, exactly what I've wanted for ages – a real fire!"

Greg was sat on the armchair which formed part of the two-piece suite. It was a pale grey, or as I had noticed from the description, "Medusa Silver" and a two-seater settee with matching cushions.

I took my high heels off before stepping across the period wooden flooring and made my way to the rear of the living room.

I could see the French doors looking out to the back of the apartment, beyond which was wooden decking and an open garden which then overlooked the Mansion grounds. There were rows and rows of fir trees and mature woodland around the parameters of the estate. Beyond that a row of Leylandii trees could be seen.

By habit, I gave a slight giggle to myself as I recalled that every time Greg and I, in the past had seen those trees, they had always grown in straight lines next to each other and had been planted in long rows. Greg would get me to count how many there were in any one line, sometimes as many or few as 24. Greg would then say with a grin that he could name each tree after each woman he had slept with, and he could! I thought it was a bit of a wind up or a wheeze on Greg's part, only it wasn't.

I laughed at the time thinking it was a bit of a game. It reminded me of the "Four Weddings and a Funeral" when Andie McDowell was

naming each man, she had ever had sex with and what it was like, how she rated each one. I do believe that her list was over twenty, but at the end of the day that was just a film, this joke was the same, wasn't it? I later found out that it wasn't a joke at all!

I let out a huge sigh and made my brain focus on the present, not the past.

A large, beautifully maintained rockery was situated at one side. Everywhere was pure unadulterated beauty, "unlike Olena" I thought sarcastically to myself.

I then made my way upstairs to inspect the rest of the apartment.

The master bedroom was at the back of the apartment. It had an ensuite shower room and built-in wooden wardrobes. The sash windows complimented the room and gave ample sight of the beauty of the surroundings.

To the front of the property was the bathroom with a stand-alone bath and copper accessories with a shower head. Next to the bathroom was a smaller bedroom which also overlooked the front of the building.

Greg sat entirely engrossed, focusing on his laptop. I felt my blood begin to rise at first as a thought passed through my mind, "He's probably emailing "blondie" or as he now had promoted Olena to the title of "Super Tart". He was probably watching her latest pose. I had now seen everything that day, apart from everything else, the height of ecstasy as she climaxed her loud orgasm with his appendage in her mouth. I now tried to always make sarcastic remarks to counteract my grief and resentment, "Well, her gobs big enough!"

Before we parted on that fateful day in his office, I had quite by accident stumbled across a calendar that was on Greg's hard drive. He had been photographing Olena for each month of the year with different poses. One month had Olena with a plastic warning sign between her legs that read, "Warning Toxic Levels", her tiny breasts thrust forward and her hands behind her head over her short spikey

blonde hair, and slowly and enticing sexually licking her lips heavily laden with red lipstick. Then he photographed her posing with a picture of me and a sign underneath from the workshop that read, "Needs restoring so half price".

At one time it would have cut me to the core, but even I could see the funny side now and my bitterness and anger were now rapidly waning. I had confronted Greg about it, not just the actual photos of this blonde tart but the familiar surroundings where she seemed to be posing.

The one where she was posing with the fire extinguisher, behind her looked like our glass fronted cabinet with our office crockery in that we used for when our visitors came to the office and refreshments were made for them.

Then there was the heavy-duty large banker's desk where she was laid out on completely naked, and had her wrists and ankles tied together, wasn't that ours up at work?

Greg must have quickly thought up an anecdote or I must have been stupidly naïve when he said that it was just a bit of fun and that he had superimposed the photos that he had downloaded from the internet lyingly telling me that he didn't know who she was. Greg said it was only like calendars those garages, and workshops used to have hung up for all men to see.

I wasn't totally convinced but I didn't want to believe anything other than what he told me.

I remember saying when I was looking at the one with her face down on the table:

"She could do with washing her feet, their black and she can't be a spring chicken, can you see those varicose veins running down both her legs!"

A few days later curiosity had got the better of me and I tried to look again to see if the calendar was still on there, but Greg had changed the password. That should have rung alarm bells, but I didn't want to face it, after all Greg at that time was just the same old person.

I hadn't seen "Olena" at this time and hard as it was, I desperately put it to the back of my mind and trusted Greg. After all men had to have their dreams and excitement – didn't they!!

I gave an exasperated sigh as Greg suddenly looked up expressionless.

"It's you that's going to live in it, not me, I'm just the "Bank of Greg".

I chose to ignore that comment and moved on to view the kitchen. I felt that childlike rush of excitement as my eyes cast on the large kitchen range, which had also been on my wish list, surrounded by plenty of stone worktops.

There was a decent sized American style fridge with an outside temperature gauge and a drinks dispenser. Next to the sink unit was a washer dryer accompanied by a dishwasher next to it.

I stepped back into the lounge and Gregg was still glued to his computer.

"I'll have it" I declared confidently.

Mr Worsley at that point came back, still sporting his beaming smile, and I immediately gave him my decision. All the official paperwork was arranged to be completed.

Mr Worsley turned happily to me and reassuringly said,

"You won't regret it, you'll soon settle, and you have some fine neighbours". Little did Mr Worsley know what or how my fate would steer me through some of the most challenging tapestry of my new life here in Hampshire.

Firstly though, I will go back to my childhood and how I eventually ended up moving miles away from North to South, in this new apartment and what terrible challenges I was still to face.

Chapter 2

My life began in Kingston Upon Thames in Surrey.

My parents were Ron, and Martha Smethurst. I was originally going to be named Nicholas if I had been a boy but for obvious reasons if you pronounce the name as it sounds “Knickerless” so it was decided against. Then I was going to be called Nicola if I was a girl, but my parents decided that it might be shortened to “Nic”. However, based on their reasoning, it didn’t add up as my name is “Natalie”, but people have then and now called me “Nat”.

I was always reminded that I was an accident, and that my mother had been taken by surprise that she would have to go through bringing a child up again, (she did tell me many years later, out of the blue one day, that she had tried to miscarry me and the methods she had used). I then (as everything always was my fault, regardless) was reminded many years later by one of my parents’ friends, that Halloween was a deadly day to even think of being born.

A cruel remark was thrown at my mother that “She should have held her legs together for another 24 hours rather than give birth on that day” When this was related to me as an adult, I actually felt sorry for my mother, notwithstanding the fact that it was the surgeon decided the date of my birth as I was a Caesarean due to the impending risk of losing mother and baby.

You will see later how this was in painful contrast to events that I would have to eventually face.

My parents successfully ran a garage for many years and my elder brother, Stu, worked with my father for two years after leaving school. My mother worked from home running the accounts and office side of the business. Looking back many years later, I think that was another means of his control so that my mother didn’t have contact with the outside world, mainly men.

She was a stunning blonde with long hair and a curvaceous figure and the most beautiful blue eyes you could imagine, very similar to Marilyn Monroe and could have been a model if she had been allowed or had the inclination. She had an attractive personality that men adored, and she was like a magnet to the opposite sex. The

endearing feature about her though was, she was innocent with it and her beauty was also in her naivety.

My father was an extremely controlling, jealous character and liked to keep her within his grasp.

There was a large age gap between my brother and me, in fact fourteen years, and so I was still very young when he left home.

Stu had been introduced to a girl named Mel by an old school friend. Mel had, at the time, been staying with her aunt near us in Kingston before starting college up in Keighley, West Yorkshire. Stu had started a whirlwind romance with Mel and, in fact, when she was due to return home, my brother declared to our parents, that he was moving to Yorkshire to live with Mel and her parents.

Our parents were heartbroken, but Stu was adamant. I think, apart from his deep love for Mel he also wanted his freedom from the grip of their control, which I later understood myself.

Sure enough, my parents tried to gain back their control, especially when Stu and Mel announced their engagement and wedding for the following year. This became apparent when my father suddenly decided to sell our house and his business, and after just one weekend's visit to Mel's family, found a house two miles from Keighley in a place called Southfield and near to Stu and Mel.

Many years before my birth, my parents had become dedicated worshippers to a religion.

My upbringing was quite suffocating, not just due to their religion but their grasp on me was certainly heightened after Stu had moved out.

I used to love going to stop at Stu and Mel's house. They were so welcoming and were always inviting me, especially in the school holidays, but it was the going back home I dreaded. I think Stu invited me because he knew it would give me a break from our parents.

I remember one year, when I was about 10 years of age, I did run away to Stu's and begged him to let me live there. My brother understood, but my parents arrived and marched me home and I was locked in the house for a week. I needed to take desperate action, but my young age was against me, and Stu could no longer save me as a short time later he tragically died of a heart attack at a very young age.

I lay awake many nights planning my escape however futile. I was just a teenager and certainly not financially secure by any means. I didn't have any close relatives to run to, especially now that I didn't have Stu. I just knew I needed to break free as soon as the opportunity arose, which it eventually did, but as the saying goes, "Out of the frying pan and into the fire".

Chapter 3

I was now 18 years old and had just completed a secretarial course at the local college and started my first job as an office junior at a nearby Accountants.

I did meet Matt while at college. He was training to be an English teacher.

We spent many lunch times together, sometimes in the dining area of the college and sometimes we would get the "student" deal at the café next door – a cup of soup and a sandwich.

We really did hit it off together and were never short of things to talk about.

Eventually, just before the end of my course, which was only 12 months in total, we had been out for our lunch and Matt told me his sister, Jade was getting married, and the wedding reception was being held at the social club. He asked if I would like to go with him. I said that I really would like the idea, but he already knew a little bit about my restrictive home life and understood when I said I would have to clear it with my parents about it.

I remember arriving home, a sinking feeling in my stomach, already knowing what their reply would be and yet a feeling of longing and yearning to lead a normal life and be part of the community as it were instead of being controlled by religion and my father mainly.

There was also the agony too of picking the right moment.

As will become more apparent later, my father was a force to be reckoned with, especially during his temper tantrums, and my mother would always back him up, even if she felt or knew he was wrong, frightened to have her own opinion.

When he came in from work was never a good time as all he wanted was my mother's attention as he went through what his day had been like, regardless of hers and nobody interrupted this. After tea, and for the rest of the evening until they retired to bed was always dominated by the television and always the programmes he liked to watch, without considering anyone else. So, picking a time wasn't easy but I didn't have time on my side as Matt needed to know sooner rather than later.

I nervously seized my opportunity on the Saturday afternoon, when the television was on low as it was football, and my father had no interest in sport whatsoever. Both he and my mother seemed in a reasonable mood. They had both eaten their lunch recently and so that was a good thing as my father had a ferocious appetite and food had to be on tap as it were.

I broached the subject gently.

I had never spoken about Matt before, but I briefly explained that I had met him through college (omitting the lunch time meet ups), and that sometimes we were on the same study times together. Then I bravely went ahead with Matt's invitation to the anniversary party.

It was like a black cloud that had suddenly descended over our house, ready to burst.

"Well, you must know him pretty well, more than you're letting on if this Matt or whatever you call him, is suddenly inviting you to a family party!" My father hissed.

“I only know him from college. I’m bound to meet others at college, male and female” I said trying to be brave.

“Don’t be impertinent” said my mother, to which my father nodded in agreement.

“It’s a wedding reception where there will be a lot of people present and it’s a type of gathering that I would be allowed to go to within the Organization, the ceremony itself is at the Registry Office and not a church” I defended.

My father told me that it would be totally out of the question. I would be mixing with “heathens and bad associations” He was probably right when he said that it wouldn’t end there and would probably lead to Matt asking me out on a regular basis, which was forbidden. My father also added that due to me now being 18 years old, he had to let me choose, but he wasn’t going to make it easy. Yes, I could go to this party and pursue this relationship, or still have a home, it was my choice.

If I did as was expected of me by them and their beliefs that I had been raised to respect, I would still have a roof over my head, if I didn’t, that was me out of their lives altogether. So, I had to choose between Matt and a roof over my head at home.

My parent’s religion demanded that all single people wanting to get married, must marry a fellow believer, so as not to be misled but stay firm in the faith, and so Matt obviously didn’t come into this category.

The following Monday, when we were back at college, I explained the outcome regarding my parents. Matt was flabbergasted.

Matt really was one in a million. He offered to come and meet them and speak to them to reassure them that he was genuine and only had my best interests at heart.

I told him how much I appreciated his offer, but because of being steeped in their religious ways, it was pointless, and as heart wrenching as it was, I would have to conform as I hadn’t any income and hadn’t anywhere else to live.

Matt, bless him, immediately said that he would have a word with his older sister, Amelia, and that he was sure she would let me stay with her, rather than live under the same roof as a tyrant and his accomplice. Matt confessed that he had been confiding in Amelia about me and that she was extremely sympathetic and so he already knew that she would take me in.

I said I was extremely grateful but felt that I needed to be independent and that meant being self-sufficient with a job and my own income. I knew Matt understood. It was a tough decision to make, and one day I would look back and question – “what if” all those years ago.

The end of year came far too soon, and Matt and I went out to a pub near the college and had our final drink together. It was like the last supper! Neither of us said much, but hugged each other tightly, not wanting to let go.

I wished him well for the future and secretly hoped that I would “accidentally” bump into him now and again in the town.

That night, my heart felt like lead and inside I felt inconsolable.

My father picked up on my obvious low mood and depressive state.

I had to bite my tongue as they say as my mother and father put on a fake sympathetic air.

As I walked into the living room after tea, my father, already spread out in the armchair with the television on full blast, extended his arm, and beckoned me to come and sit beside him.

I mustered all the strength I could to do so but inside my feelings of bitterness and anger towards him were welling inside.

“Natalie, I know you’ve made a real tough decision about your “friend”, but you’ll see it is for the best”. He tried to sound convincing.

I was too hurt to speak, so I just looked blankly at the floor.

“You know the saying, there’s always plenty more fish in the sea?”

That was not a quote I wanted to hear or deemed appropriate in my case.

Father sounded triumphant as well with the knowledge that he had won and his power was still very much in force, most importantly, that he wouldn't have to lose face with his daughter becoming involved with an "unbeliever".

As you will see, yes, there were other fish in the sea, but it was me who ended up with a shark!

Chapter 4

My opportunity arose to meet Mr Right was when my parents and I attended a religious convention. In fact, as there were only three conventions a year, these became a breeding ground for youngsters and other single people on the look out to find someone to marry, suitable or not, the only criteria was the person just had to be in that religion.

I was approached by this man with deep brown hair, tall and slim. I was queuing for a cup of tea and a sandwich in the on-site cafeteria He introduced himself as Andrew Horsforth. After only meeting again on two other occasions, Andrew asked me to marry him, and I jumped at the opportunity!

Although we dated under supervision as requested by the Organisation, I felt I hardly knew him. Even so, I still went ahead and married him. After all, my parents and their religious family had accepted Andrew, and it would mean a new life for me, or I hoped so.

Andrew was already living in his own house in the small town called Cray in Lancashire, quite a few miles away from my parents I might add.

Andrew worked for a nearby farmer. I also managed to get a position in an employment office five miles away.

I really enjoyed it, working with the public, even though it could be quite challenging at times. There was a vast number of staff and so I only really came to know a few members that were on the same team as myself.

I realised on our wedding night that we weren't suited and that this marriage was going to be a test of endurance. Andrew was physically and sexually violent and expected things of me that totally shocked and hurt me. However, as will be reiterated later, marriage was for life and that was drummed into me continually.

I relished my time at work, away from Andrew. I found out all too quickly that nothing would appease Andrew when he was in one of his moods which happened to be most of the time.

After one bad session, I arose the next morning to see a real shiner of a black eye on the right side of my face. There were plenty of stares as I made my way into work.

My Team Leader, Stacey, immediately called me into her office before we opened.

I'd never really found her very sympathetic to anyone except for Maisy who also just happened to be her best friend!

Therefore, I was dumbstruck when she seemed to show some feeling.

"Natalie", she began and then paused thoughtfully.

"Please don't think I go around with my eyes conveniently shut. I've noted bruises on your arms, and one on your neck which you tried to disguise with makeup and a scarf, and now this" she pointed to my eye.

"You can't go on like this. I can't let you lose out on the front line like that. The public, especially the vulnerable ones that we see each day, are going to think this is acceptable, and that's the last thing we want to do. It's not good for the clients and it's not good for you!

I will give you until the end of the week to decide what you are going to do. I don't have to be an expert to guess who is responsible for

this, but I have a pretty good guess. Your husband doesn't seem a particularly pleasant person, I've watched him on the odd occasion when he has come in here. Natalie, despite what impression you may have of me, I do care believe it or not".

I was overwhelmed and felt a sudden burning at the back of my eyes and throat feeling a wave of emotion blowing over me, but really appreciated her frank approach to the situation.

She finished by saying,

"Thank goodness there aren't any children involved, that really would complicate matters!"

Little did Stacey know that about nine weeks earlier, I found out that I was pregnant. This had evoked another row.

Andrew and I had been at the top of the stairs which were quite steep and without carpet yet when he really did do the unthinkable.

Looking back, it wasn't the best place to break it to him, and especially as I hadn't told him earlier when I first knew. I just kept putting it off but knowing that he would very soon have to know.

He freaked out and fuelled by his usual nightly eight cans of lager, lunged at me with such force, that I fell down the stairs.

That night the pain was unbearable. Eventually, after going through the motions as it were and obvious signs, I couldn't help but know that I had miscarried the baby.

Otherwise physically I must have had strong bones as despite the many falls because of his violence, I never had any resulting fractures as far as I could tell.

I didn't go to the hospital to get checked over, I just couldn't face it and didn't feel I had the emotional strength to keep the truth from anyone. Shoving this whole horrible event mentally and emotionally under the carpet was what would have been expected of me by Andrew and my parents and all the others in the congregation.

I suppose in some ways it was easier to do so, as only Andrew knew about my pregnancy. I didn't even tell Andrew about the miscarriage,

and he would have been too thick and insular to even know what was happening.

I rang in to speak to Stacey and decided that I really needed to explain the situation as I had also made a final decision to leave Andrew and get as far away from him as possible.

I took a deep breath before the rivers of truth began to fall and I told her about being pregnant, then Andrew's explosive reaction and the subsequent fall and the miscarriage as a result. I also confessed that the Doctor, who didn't know the full story had advised me to take time off work to rest.

Stacey's reaction was so sympathetic that I felt tears pricking my eyes as she spoke.

She said that the time off work wasn't a problem at all, and certainly was for the best.

." And Natalie, what are you going to do, you can't go on like this, being used as a human punch bag?" Stacey asked firmly, as if jolting me into a reality check.

"I'm leaving him this week. I will bring my essentials to work, and I have already packed a bag, my friend Jayne has invited me to stop with her and her family for a few days" I replied.

Jayne and I had been friends from school and unbeknown to my parents we continued to stay good friends even after school. Jayne was now married and lived not all that far away so we managed to meet up regularly and catch up on each other's news.

Stacey was really pleased at my decision and said comfortingly that if I needed any help to just let her know.

On that eventful day I made sure that Andrew was at work, and then quickly put my bag in the car.

When I arrived at work, I had a private talk to Stacey. She advised me to get another appointment with the Doctor an urgent one and get a sick note so Andrew couldn't come looking for me at work, and she would discreetly advise the other Team managers what to tell their

staff to say if he rang in as he certainly would. I thanked her for her help and concern and said I would keep in touch.

I said my farewell to Anita before I left who was on the same team as me and we had become very good work colleagues. She seemed to take my departure quite hard. She was around the same age as me and a single mother of two. I though had become a bit of an agony aunt to her. At times I found it quite exasperating but had a lot of empathy for her.

I then made my way over to Jayne's in Hawksworth, over the border in North Yorkshire.

Jayne knew by now that going to my parents' house just wasn't an option.

When I had tried to talk to my parents about Andrew's treatment of me, I always got the same answer, "marriage is for life and that meant no matter what!"

Jayne was lovely and so was her husband, Peter.

Jayne and Peter had an eight-month-old baby called Callum. He was beautiful. Despite my sad experience, I was quite close to Callum too.

The following morning, I made my last visit to the surgery.

I advised my doctor that Stacey had said that it would be a good idea for me to be off work for a short period, and that I would be staying with my friend for a few days. He asked me if I was still moving as I had mentioned last time and I said I was, but Mr Horsforth didn't know. The Doctor gave a gentle smile, and wished me all the best, and just finally said, "I'm glad you are putting yourself first for once Natalie"

After a couple of days at Jayne's, I asked her if she would come with me to the local council offices, and she agreed.

I explained to the council clerk that I was now homeless and needed accommodation.

It wasn't long before I saw a property to let on the internet at a place called Skelbrook. This was a private rental and after ringing the

telephone number as advertised, the landlord arranged a suitable mutual time to look round the tiny one bedroomed flat.

Later that day when Jayne had managed to arrange with Peter to look after Callum, we met Mr Brent the landlord.

It was in a block of three nestled within a small cul-de- sac of bungalows.

This one was the top one. It was very basic, almost like a bedsit, but it had all the amenities I needed. Jayne gave her much welcome approval and so I agreed with Mr Brent that I would like to go ahead and rent it.

Jayne said I could have a single bed out of her spare room and the linen, and she had an armchair I could have. The rest, I was going to buy at my leisure.

I wrote my resignation letter to Stacey saying that it wasn't safe for me to return to work there and that it wasn't going to be that practical either. She soon replied and sent a signed card from different ones in the office and a box of chocolates and a bottle of my favourite Chardonnay.

I wrote to my parents without forwarding my address. I couldn't face their anger and I couldn't trust them not to tell Andrew where I was. Just as expected, my mother rang me on my mobile and I could hear father in the background saying I was a disgrace to them and to the "faith". I had the insult of being told that Andrew was a good man and was an elder in the Congregation and it was him that had been wronged. I ended her call abruptly, took a deep breath and thought, "Well Natalie, here's to the new start in your life" and toasted myself with a glass of that white wine.

I made an appointment the following day to see a Solicitor and set divorce proceedings in place.

After explaining my plight and what I had to live through, the Solicitor agreed that I would have no problem obtaining the divorce,

and kindly ensured to me that my address would remain unknown to Andrew for my safety.

My Solicitor informed me that Andrew of course objected to the unreasonable behaviour and didn't admit any of it, but I did have my medical records and Jayne did a statement for me.

Not soon enough, I was set free, and now officially changed my name back to Smethurst.

My new neighbours were mostly elderly, but those who I did get chance to meet were adorable and looked upon me as a daughter to take care of.

I was often presented with a cooked meal and given pots of jam and chutney that they had made extra portions of. They took turns in putting my bins out if I wasn't about or had forgotten. In return I would pop in over the weekends and have a cup of tea with them and a biscuit or cake. Many of them were just lonely and wanted a chat.

Although my life had now sorted itself out and I was now safe and independent, everything began to feel humdrum and without routine that I longed for. I longed for a challenge, and soon the chance arose with a bang!

Chapter 5

I arrived home one teatime. I had been to Jayne's for the day. I kicked off my shoes as I came through the door and went into the tiny kitchen and opened the fridge and poured myself a glass of white wine. I picked up the local weekly times which had been posted through my door.

I settled on the tiny balcony at the back of the flat which had a single chair and small table.

It was a warm summer evening. I could smell the aroma of the different teas cooking as it wafted up towards me. I mused as my

nostrils breathed in the different mixtures, and tried to guess for a second, what each of the dishes were.

I felt really relaxed. The noise of the evening traffic began to slowly die down. I picked up the newspaper from the picnic table.

Briefly I flipped over the pages, which I only browsed over.

Suddenly, something caught my eye. It was an advert for an office on the newly built business Ryedale Park. It was situated on the outskirts of Ryedale which was a beautiful and picturesque village in North Yorkshire. I'd only briefly been in that area once when Jayne had invited me to come with her to deliver a parcel to an Accountants there for Peter. I remember how breath taking it was. Ryedale was like the gateway to the dales.

I thought to myself, this must be a positive sign as it were. Here I was, thinking about setting up my own secretarial business and then I see this advert for an office at Ryedale Business Park.

At lunchtime the following day, I contacted a Mr Myers and expressed an interest in the advert for the vacant office. The following day was Saturday and so we arranged to meet on site at 10 am.

As usual, places look better anyway when the sun is out, but here at Ryedale, it made it look spectacular. I guessed there were roughly ten units on site. Around the communal carpark were well maintained lawns.

Mr Myers arrived in his Range Rover. We exchanged names and shook hands, and as we made our way to the empty office, he chatted a bit, telling me about the neighbouring businesses.

I already knew through Jayne about the Accountants and that it was run by two brothers, but Mr Myers went on to tell me that there was a curtain making business, a sweet making factory, a carpet fitter, tool makers, and the largest I could see, had a prominent sign on it above the door, Furniture Restorers.

I was intrigued. Mr Myers explained that Whitley's restored all kinds of furniture, antiques also and were even well known abroad. He added that Mr Whitely was very often out of the country seeing his long list of different clients.

The small office round the back was functional. It did have a desk and a chair already in it. There was a wash basin and cupboard and a work top where I could have a kettle to make hot drinks. Mr Myers explained that there was a communal area if needed, with toilets and a larger kitchen with a microwave and small fridge.

This was a massive step to take and financial commitment to take on, but it felt too good to miss, and I made an agreement with Mr Myers to go in first thing on the Monday and sign the lease and pay the deposit.

As soon as I went back to my car, I rang Jayne and told her

I think Jayne first thought I had suffered from a mental blockage, but loyal and dependable as she always was, would support me.

For once, Monday morning couldn't come soon enough. Although my office supplies were extremely limited, I could make a start on advertising, and I knew of a supplier not far away who could design some flyers for me. I would also contact the local newspapers and arrange an advert for my services.

I had arranged to meet up with Mr Myers again that morning and complete the necessary paperwork.

As I drove into the car park, I saw and heard a buzz of activity. As I was about to get out of my car, someone pulled up beside me.

Almost in precision, Mr Myers parked up on the other side. That was when I first saw the Porche Caymen.

As I got out of the car, Mr Myers spoke to the gentleman in the said car whose name I was not yet aware.

I heard Mr Myers comment on the good old fashioned conversation starter of the British weather.

Mr Myers asked the gentleman how he had coped in Dubai with the heat there.

I then had a feeling that this must be Mr Whitely who Mr Myers had mentioned on the previous Saturday.

As I approached them, Mr Whitely extended his hand to shake mine. He introduced himself and I politely responded.

For a moment I was cemented to the spot as my eyes and brain took in the stature and appearance of this man by my side.

He was around 6 foot tall. His hair was greying, which made him look very distinguished. A neatly trimmed moustache and chocolate brown eyes. I always had a fetish for men with brown eyes, and to see these perfect eyes looking down on me, had already stopped me in my tracks.

His slim figure was donned in a crisp grey suit and a shining white shirt with a sky-blue tie. His feet were dressed in expensive leather brogues, which looked as though they came from the Bally Score range that I had heard about which were usually over £600 a pair. He was really dressed to impress his clients.

As our hands touched, they were like velvet, and his fingers were like a pianist's, long and slim and manicured. What a comparison to Andrew's fingers which had been like thick pork sausages and seemed to always smell of the farm, probably because he refused to wear work gloves and never seemed to wash them properly.

I scalded myself in my thoughts as I was sure that there was an electric shock as our hands touched each other and that teasing smile as Greg Whitely introduced himself to me and made my legs tremor.

Mr Myers ushered me into the communal kitchen and laid out the relevant paperwork and agreement on the table.

Mr Whitely suddenly appeared in the process and offered to make Mr Myers and I a drink. We both politely declined, as we both had limited time.

Mr Myers asked me a few final questions about the start date of the lease and what I was going to call my company. He also explained that I would need to give them a month's notice if I decided to leave. It was agreed that the lease would start on July 1st. I had decided to call my company "Ryedale Secretarial Services".

I had a feeling that Mr Whitely had been listening to our conversation as he suddenly came back into the kitchen and commented,

"That's a first, and we could do with a secretarial business up here. Just let me know if you need anything. I'll be happy to help. I look forward to getting to know you"

I temporarily let my mind wander, as I mused, "Was Mr Whitely by any chance, loitering with intent and being nosey?" I certainly would hope so.

With that he smiled and was gone.

Mr Myers gave a wry but knowing smile. I was, in time to find out that Mr Whitely had certainly built up a reputation and made his mark in many places.

Chapter 6

Jayne and Peter were brilliant.

They came up before the end of the week with little Callum. They contributed many accessories to my new office, even a new kettle, a tea and coffee making machine along with cups and cutlery and a two-seater settee for visitors.

I had arranged with a telephone company to connect my extension to the existing landline and was all set up for July 1st.

I spent the rest of the week also getting business cards printed and a moderate sign to put on my new office door.

I thought I would “kill two birds with one stone” as it were and pick up my orders from Gavin the printers and visit my parents en route. That was no mean fete and more one of duty than pleasure.

As I parked outside my parent’s house, I gave a huge sigh in apprehension and mentally braced myself for their expected derogative remarks about my new business plans. I had totally gone against their planned future for me and being a businesswoman was certainly not one of them!

Mother and Father were pleased to see me and at first made me quite welcome with tea and homemade cake. However, it did not take them long at all to suddenly bombard me with gossip regarding the members of their religious community, and especially the ones I knew from before. I desperately tried to look mildly engaged with their conversation, but the strain was too great.

Suddenly, the tone and subject changed and was pointing at me. My mother began to tell me in a simpering way, that there were so many who were missing me and asking when they would see me again. May I just add, these so called “friends” were only friends when you were attending, but once you stopped, you were passed in the street without even an acknowledgement?

At an appropriate and opportune gap in my mother’s spiel, I began to tell them my news.

“Anyway”, I started, “I thought you might like to know that I have handed my notice in at the employment agency, and I am in the process of setting up my own business, a secretarial one. My office is on a Business Park. Gavin from the printers is helping me with the advertising” I finished with an excited tone.

A painful silence ensued. Even though it was only really what I had expected of them, a tiny part of me still had a particle of hope that my parents would take some pride in me like most parents would in their offspring’s achievements. No way, this was devout Ron and Martha Smethurst, pillars of the church.

Then the bullet of anger was fired at me by my father as he said vehemently in reply:

“Have you totally lost it? It’s all pie in the sky with you. You embarrassed us by leaving Andrew – you know marriage is for life, and then you go on some hair brained scheme of setting up your own business”

With that, my father did his usual exit performance and slammed the door on his way out.

My mother’s response was far from motherly. She shot a cold glare at me,

“Now look what you’ve done. You just can’t resist upsetting your father, can you?” she asked rhetorically.

Then her face softened a little, and her expression to her famous ‘doe’ eyed look.

“Come back home Nat. We miss you so much” Then came the sympathy trail, “life’s been so difficult, what with losing your brother and then losing you to the ‘world’ out there with all the bad association that’s taken you away from us”

“Mother”, I began firmly, “I loved my brother too and think of him a lot of the time but yes life can be cruel, but life also goes on and we have to learn to cope along the way. What is that expression that you used to always quote to me in my younger years when things didn’t go right? ‘It’s all part of life’s rich tapestry’.

I carried on despite her scowl, “Well I’ve had enough of that tapestry. I’m a grown up now and I’m allowed to make my own mistakes and learn from them. I’m sorry I can’t be what you want me to be, but you need to accept I’ve made my own choice”.

Her expression became angry as she said,

“Well don’t come crying to us and remember, we won’t be funding any of this nonsense of yours!”

“Mother, I don’t need your money. I came today to visit my parents, but you are even more like strangers than you were. I’ll keep in

touch, and I do still care about you both". I gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek and made my way out of the door, not lowering myself to seek out my father to wish him farewell. Walking back to my car and hence walking on to my exciting new life and career.

Chapter 7

I picked up my business cards and a sign for my office door from Gavin.

I went to Ryedale over the weekend and began putting the finishing touches to the office. I half expected to see Greg Whitley's Porche in the car park considering he said he worked 24/7, but it wasn't.

I momentarily became carried away with my thoughts, such as, wondering if he had a partner and a family and what sort of house he lived in and whether it was a mansion, I mused to myself.

The weekend seemed to drag, and I became very restless. Jayne and Peter had gone away for the weekend to Jayne's mum in Suffolk, and even my elderly lady friends seemed busy. They were probably helping run the local church fete.

I took myself off to the cinema. I had picked the best of an unexciting list of films and came out halfway before I fell asleep.

I went to an electrical wholesaler not far away and splashed out on a new laptop along with printer, all ready for the launch.

At last Monday July 1st came.

Excitedly, I made my way to my new office. I'd had an announcement and advertisement in three of the local papers and details of my grand new opening. I was aware that starting from scratch was going to be a slow process but nevertheless I had a good feeling about it.

I arrived at Ryedale, and for some strange reason my heart sank as I pulled into the office car park and didn't catch sight of the Porche or Greg Whitely. I mentally scolded myself. I was fantasizing about a

man I had only met once and with no rhyme or reason to have any feelings for.

As I passed a few of my neighbouring workers, I introduced myself and made sure each of them had possession of one of my business cards.

Joe, one of the directors of the accountants, encouragingly commented that he and his brother, Tim, may well need some of my skills. Their clients were mostly farmers from up the Dales and needed their accounts typing up. Joe also offered to tout for business for me.

The following morning Tim knocked on my office door with a couple of files.

“Please could you set up a couple of new files and print them for me when you’ve done?”

“I’d be delighted to” I responded smiling.

“Are you managing to settle in a bit now and getting to know the motley crew on the business park?” Tim said laughing.

“Yes” I said hesitantly, and then I decided to bite the bullet,

“I’ve managed to speak to most people here. I only met Mr Whitely briefly when I came in to sign my contract the other week, but I haven’t seen him since” Trying to sound light-hearted.

“Oh, you mean Greg. He’s a free spirit is our Greg, in more than one sense. He can run his business from his computer and mobile. He can be anywhere in or out the country. You watch it, Greg will be getting you to take more than his notes down before you know it” Tim said with a cheeky grin and naïve as I was, I realised this remark had a suggestive ring to it. I felt the colour in my face embarrassingly redden, and as a blush emerged, I quickly turned to avert Tim noticing.

As Tim closed my office door, my mind wandered in thought, “Greg, eh? I will have to get to know this intriguing man but when and how?”

Chapter 8

I had been in my office now for two weeks and work was steadily, albeit slowly, beginning to build up my new customer list. Gavin's advert had certainly helped.

I beavered away at my desk until lunchtime when the desire to sit outside in the office grounds at the back of the kitchen, got the better of me. Just adjacent to the kitchen back door was a low wooden platform with two picnic tables on and four easy garden chairs.

Opening the small fridge, I picked up my salad box that I had made earlier and a bottle of sparkling water.

As I ate my dinner, I gazed across the view of the Dales and the farmers hard at work, grabbing every opportunity to complete their haymaking in the glorious sunshine, with the fields turning from rich green to straw coloured in relatively quick succession.

The atmosphere, my lunch now digesting, and the warmth made me feel completely relaxed and I must have temporarily dozed off.

When I came round, there was Greg Whitely sat opposite me. His long legs were outstretched, and his hands clasped together behind him supporting his head which was slightly tilted back on the chair. He had his sunglasses on, and he looked positively sexy with his cheeky smile. I jumped.

"Sorry to have disturbed you Miss Smethurst, but I couldn't resist the opportunity to sit next to you. I didn't mean to startle you though".

"That's ok Mr Whitely" I replied, at the same time desperately anticipating what he was going to say next.

"Please call me Greg – and your first name is?" He asked prompting me.

"Natalie" I replied.

"What a lovely name" he complimented.

“Thank you” I said but thinking this was probably his usual answer to a female.

“Well, it’s good to stop the world and get off as it were and enjoy a few minutes in this glorious sunshine even more so with an attractive young woman for company” Greg said teasingly.

I willed my face not to blush as usual and concentrated on my next sentence. I made sure not to respond to this “easy off the tongue” compliment and just carried on in my usual manner.

“Joe and Tim said you were particularly busy and must be away”

“Oh, did they, eh? I bet that’s not the only thing they said” he replied amused.

Greg obviously knew their digs that they made about him. Greg quickly reverted the conversation.

“Yes, I’ve been in China this time” he continued.

Greg went on to tell me a little about his furniture restoration business and how his business had grown to such an extent that his company wasn’t just number one in this country but was widely extending to other countries.

“He has no idea of how I have yearned to get to speak to him and to know more about him and the disappointment I had endured each day when his limousine wasn’t in the car park” I thought to myself. However, my reply was controlled despite my inner thoughts,

“That’s a place I’ve never been”.

To my surprise his confident reply was,

“Well, we will have to remedy that”. He laughed as he saw my jaw visibly drop at his remark.

Greg went into his inside pocket and pulled out a business card,

“Here” he said, “My mobile number is on the back, you can call me anytime. If I could have your business card in return?”

Part of me felt affronted at his forwardness but the real part of me savoured that delicious suggestion. I handed him my card. Greg gave

me that enigmatic smile and excused himself saying that he needed to wade through his post. Then he was gone, and I felt lost suddenly.

Making my way back to my office, I felt rather dazed and then I heard my office telephone ringing. "Ryedale Secretarial, can I help you?" I answered as professionally as I could.

Then the familiar voice said,

"Please let me take you to out to lunch tomorrow – somewhere special, not far from here"

I answered Greg flustering at first and then I replied, trying to sound as professional as possible,

"I'll just check my appointments for tomorrow" As I did so I randomly flicked the pages of my A4 diary as though I was struggling to find time although the pages were blank. I'm sure I heard Greg chuckle as if he knew what I was doing.

"Yes, that will be fine for tomorrow" I said still trying to keep up my professional air.

"Brilliant, shall we meet in the office car park at 12 pm then?" Greg suggested.

"Yes, will do" I uttered, my head spinning and reeling.

As I arrived back home, food certainly wasn't on my mind, so I just sufficed with two slices of toast and a cup of tea.

I proceeded to take almost every outfit of clothing out of my wardrobe.

Eventually I decided on a lemon-coloured halter neck dress with a crisp white bolero jacket, accompanied by three-inch-high white sandals. "Um, summery but smart" I nodded to myself.

I spent my evening relaxing in my expensive Chamomile bath therapy salts and my Cedar wood aromatherapy candles burning around the bathroom. The bath was so relaxing, and my thoughts began to drift and imagine what my lunch with Greg Whitely would be like.

Eventually, I emerged from the water and put on my fluffy white dressing gown. I then began my ritual of moisturising and then a top up of my spray tan and painting of my finger and toenails.

Finally, I poured myself a glass of mulled wine, and as the warm herbal liquid hit my throat, my whole body tingled. Then to bed for a good night's sleep to be refreshed for my new but longed for experience. Who knows what tomorrow would bring!

Chapter 9

The next morning, I arose, and the sensation of butterflies began to rise in my stomach.

I applied the final touches to my thick rich dark hair, applying my straighteners until my hair hung sleekly around my shoulders. Checking the mirror, I made sure my makeup was as flawless as possible and enhanced my green eyes.

Greg's car was already there when I arrived on the car park. I parked my tiny black Citroen next to it. My car seemed so minute in comparison.

Armed, one hand with my briefcase containing that morning's work in one hand and in the other hand, my white clutch bag for when it was time to go out to lunch.

As I passed the main entrance, Tim was on the doorstep having his morning coffee and soaking up another glorious summer's day.

As he caught sight of me, he smiled cheekily, and wolf whistled. Before I had chance to say anything, he quickly remarked,

"I see Greg's already luring you into his net then. I'll give him his due, he doesn't hang about"

I gave a coy smile,

"Don't you think you're jumping to conclusions?"

Tim replied, "I don't need to" he chuckled as he went back inside.

I must admit, I was a bit ruffled by Tim's throw away comments but hurried along to my office.

Work just wasn't on my mind and I accomplished very little that morning. I just made a couple of calls and read and answered some emails. I started chuntering away to myself. Of course, I was ecstatic to be going out for lunch with Greg, but the other half of me was cross that I had let my guard down and let Greg already enter my life almost like a bulldozer. I didn't know the first thing about him, yet, on the other hand, I so desperately wanted to be overwhelmed by him.

My extension rang and interrupted my thoughts, and I quickly glanced up at the office clock which showed it was 11.55 pm.

"Ryedale Secretarial, can I help you?" – Although half knowing who it would be.

"You certainly can. I'm outside in the car park, waiting to see Miss Smethurst" Greg's deep voice made my heart skip.

I gave a silent gasp as I came round the corner. There stood Greg, leaning against his car. He was casually dressed, compared with the grey suit business clad attire I was used to seeing him in. He had black chinos, a white short sleeved sports t shirt. He had his sunglasses on. He smiled gently as I approached.

"By the way, please call me Natalie" I said a bit harshly.

"But of course, Natalie" Greg replied with a hint of amusement.

He extended his hand, as if to shake mine. As I extended my hand, he gently kissed the back of it. The feel of his lips on my skin made feelings arouse in me that I found extraordinary.

Greg opened the passenger door of the Porche, and I sank into the cream leather upholstery which was like a feather bed. The aroma of the leather was rich as it hit my nostrils.

Greg climbed in the driver's seat. I started to babble away as I always did when I was nervous. I commented that I felt over dressed and didn't realise I should have dressed more casually.

Greg glanced with a knowing expression and said,
“Overdressed, well we can always change that”.

As usual, I felt that blushing sensation coming over me.

Greg chuckled.

“I’m teasing you. You look fantastic. There aren’t any dress codes, and you look perfect it I may say so”.

Greg drove a short distance to a very elegant but cosy looking place called the “Trout Beck Arms”.

I hadn’t even heard of it, but Greg must be a frequent visitor as the receptionist greeted him,

“Hello Mr Whitley Sir, how are you today?”

A friendly waitress showed us to a table, who also knew him by his name.

I didn’t recall much about the actual lunch.

Greg ordered a bottle of Champagne, and we chatted away to each other once the conversation started to flow, and I felt as though I had known Greg ages, feeling very comfortable in his company.

We talked about all sorts of subjects, including work. Greg told me a few anecdotes of his experiences in different countries which including his witty sense of humour, and slightly touched on his very normal upbringing, unlike mine.

We didn’t discuss anything heavy or deep and there weren’t any questions about either of our pasts. That I realised was probably to establish that comfortable awareness in each other’s presence, and just drew me further towards my rapidly growing affection of him.

The time just seem to fly, and it was all too soon, time to get back to our offices.

As Greg pulled up beside my little car he asked,

“Are you busy this afternoon?”

To which I replied,

“I’m just going to gather up my paperwork and I’ve one or two people to see on the way back home”, (I hadn’t really but it sounded business like).

“I’ve a director to see from a shipping company this afternoon. I’ll catch up with you later”

Greg leaned across and gave me a soft kiss on the cheek which played havoc with my bodily reactions and feelings.

I couldn’t describe these feelings as they were totally unique. Why, when Greg had kissed my hand, the sitting so close to him in the car, and his kiss just now, these feelings of arousal.

My heart was still thumping, my breasts were throbbing, feeling pert and my lower parts felt as though my blood was in a rush to get to them suddenly.

As I walked back to the office, I felt almost breathless. However, two main thoughts battled around in my mind.

I had a dreadful habit of analysing people’s comments at times and their meanings, I think it is termed these days as “overthinking”, but I think this was also due to my horrific marriage to Andrew, constantly reading between the lines and trying to guess whether his words were meant in a negative way or not, as they usually were.

I started to dissect Greg’s last sentence. Did “catch up with you later” mean, “see you later” or just a throw away remark that people often seemed to say as a common expression, or did see you later mean as in anon, in a day or two?

Well, it turned out to be the latter in my case.

My heart sank as I saw Greg’s car wasn’t there when I arrived the next morning at work. Fortunately, I was busy that day. Business seemed to be taking a hold already much to my delight and the telephone kept ringing.

About 5.30 pm, just as I was getting ready to finish for the day, the telephone rang. “Typical” I thought. I was half tempted not to

answer it as I could do, it could always go on to the answer service, but nevertheless I did stop and answer it and I was so glad that I did.

Those velvet tones of Greg's voice were at the other end, and the sound made my body surge with excitement and longing for his touch.

"Will you join me for dinner tonight, Natalie?" he asked softly.

"Yes, I'd love to" I replied, secretly becoming overwhelmed by these feelings that I couldn't explain.

"Right, I'll meet you outside in a few minutes" he said taking command.

"Oh, I can't go like this, I'll need to go home and change and meet you back here" I protested.

"You always look divine to me" he said charismatically, "just come as you are".

In a state of panic, I quickly went to the small sink in the office and with the mirror above it, refreshed my makeup after a quick wash of my face.

As I came around the corner, Greg was waiting looking sexier than ever. He smiled and opened the car door for me.

"Shall we go to the same place?" he asked.

"Sounds good to me" I agreed.

Well, this turned out to be a very different occasion.

Greg began to open to me about his past.

He had been married twice before.

He was only 21 years old when he first married. His wife ran a village grocery store, and he was originally renting a business like his present one. He then lived in Derbyshire in a little village called Hambleton although he was originally born in Huddersfield.

He had met Katie in a pub one Saturday evening. She was with a group of friends and happened to go to the bar at the same time as him to order some more drinks, they started chatting and that was it,

he said they were almost made for each other. Greg didn't hide the fact that he and Katie, within days they were having sex whenever they could and wherever they could.

I tried not to look too gob smacked, with my upbringing this was a new world to me. On the other hand, I admired Greg's openness and stupidly (on later experience) thought how honest he was.

Shortly after his marriage to Katie, he lost his parents who still lived in Huddersfield, within a few years of each other.

Katie's parents were still very much alive. They were demanding and didn't give him and Katie much privacy, always being round at their house daily. He became restless and missed Yorkshire feeling guilty that he hadn't spent more time with his parents. He felt the need to break away and start anew somewhere else, but with Katie too.

Greg continued.

One evening he had been on the telephone a long time to an old friend, Jason, who lived up here in North Yorkshire with his wife Suzanne. Jason and Suzanne had met Greg and Katie on holiday in France when they were staying at the same hotel, and Greg had kept in touch ever since.

Greg went on to say that as he and Jason had chatted, Jason happened to mention the new business park In Ryedale and it's opening day. Jason had suggested,

"Why don't you come and stay with us for that weekend, have a lovely couple of days in the Dales and a look round the new estate while you are here?"

Greg had said that that sounded perfect. He said that he would have a word with Katie and see if she could get that weekend off too.

He did have concerns about how to approach Katie about the suggestion of the weekend but knew she could do with a break too and thought that she would enjoy the chance of meeting up with Jason and Suzanne again.

Apparently, Greg had booked a table at Katie's favourite restaurant the following evening.

During the evening, he gently took her hand as she sipped her wine. He proceeded to talk about his conversation with Jason.

Greg had said that it would be good for them both to have a breakup in the Dales for the weekend and see Jason and Suzanne and then loosely added that he wouldn't mind going to the opening day of the new Ryedale Business Park, just out of interest.

Greg said he saw the thunder in Katie's expression, and she recoiled, immediately removing her hand from his as she spoke,

"Jason and Suzanne are your friends – not mine!" She continued, "And, don't think I am coming to look round some business park. I know why you're going – you're still fantasising about moving up to the Dales, well count me out!"

With that Greg said, Katie rose to her feet, threw her serviette in his face, poured the rest of her glass of wine over his head and stormed out of the restaurant.

"I gasped in empathy" and shock putting my hand to my mouth as Greg related this. She immediately went up to the desk in reception and asked the receptionist to call for a taxi.

Greg said that when she arrived home, he hoped that Katie would have calmed down.

She was sat in the recliner chair, a glass of wine on the small table beside her and listening to soft music in the background.

He approached her, sitting down beside her. He tactfully made no reference to her earlier behaviour.

"I only wanted to look around Katie, nothing else, no strings attached" he began.

"Look" Katie had replied, "You've been on and on about moving up to the Dales – I know what your game is, and I've told you, I am not moving. I've my mum, dad and sister here and besides I've built up my business here".

“I know” said Greg understandingly. “That doesn’t mean to say you couldn’t set up another business up there. You will have the money from the house to invest in it”

“Absolutely not! Yes, you go ahead and sell the house and that money will be for our divorce settlement and nothing else” Katie yelled acrimoniously.

Coming back to the present, Greg added, “And there you have it. That was the end of Katie and I”

“So, you must have still gone ahead and gone to the opening day of Ryedale as you are there now?” I reasoned.

“Yes, and I’m so glad I did. I should have made that decision and moved a long time ago” he replied.

Greg then continued.

“I then married Sara”

Greg had met Sara on a regular night out with his friend Jim who was a butcher in the village.

Jim already briefly knew her as one of his customers and when Sara walked in the pub with one of her friends, Jim introduced them to each other.

Jim had invited them both to a barbecue at his house the following weekend which they had both accepted. Greg had already guessed that there was a bit of matchmaking going on.

It turned out to be a whirlwind romance followed by a wedding weeks later attended by eight guests. However, shortly afterwards Greg and Sara knew, their marriage was doomed almost from the start.

Sara was an Art teacher at Cross Dale College when Greg had met her, but her interest in him waned within a few weeks.

Although it wasn’t the wisest of things to do at the time, Sara had given in her notice at work before securing any other employment. Greg said that he had never criticised her for that and encouraged her to find her niche in her career. He didn’t show any disapproval

when she decided to go back to university and retrain, still as a teacher but of music this time. Greg had agreed to fund this new change in her career.

Sara seemed to be totally engrossed in her studies and did seem to be excelling in her different grades along the line. Greg said he had noticed that Sara didn't seem interested in or was too busy to spend time together. Although he knew deep down, staring him in the face that they were getting poles apart, he just kept on as normal, working all hours.

Greg knew Sara must be doing well and tried to take an interest in what she was doing. She always seemed very passionate and excited when she did share any of her day-to-day life with him.

There had been two occasions when Sara had told him that she needed to go down to London and stay at King's Cross as part of a convention for her degree. This was feasible as he had seen the forms etc., to do with these training events, and he was the one that paid for her courses and accommodation.

However, Greg came home one evening to find all her belongings gone, even the Audi sports car he had bought her but was really his, was gone.

There was a note on the dining room table with her set of house keys to say that she was sorry, but she had met someone else called Adrian and wanted to be with him. Sara had met him at university and so they had a lot in common and that was another ending.

"Although our relationship was short and sweet, I did love her and was devastated that my life had been like a runaway train, speeding down a track with the destination that I didn't really want but was powerless to stop it" Greg concluded.

I sighed heavily and said sympathetically, "I'm so sorry".

"Well, that's enough about me. I suppose we better be making tracks"

I laughed at the time thinking it was a bit of a game. It reminded me of the “Four Weddings and a Funeral” when Andie McDowell was naming each man, she had ever had sex with and what it was like, how she rated each one. I do believe that her list was over twenty, but at the end of the day that was just a film, this joke was the same, wasn't it? I later found out that it wasn't a joke at all!

Back to my evening with Greg. My heart sank like a brick inside. Although this evening had been anything but light-hearted, I was so glad to get to know Greg a bit more. He'd certainly let his guard down and that meant he must have trusted me to tell me about his past relationships, which meant a lot to me”.

Much later, as you will find out, I looked back and wondered if the experiences he had endured, the emotional stabbing from Sara and his trauma with Katie had made him out to turn almost into a misogynist, but a very charming one at that.

The night was only just beginning though.

As Greg drove back to the offices, he was much more light-hearted.

He always had an amusing tale to tell, especially about people he had grown up with or had known during this time, and he had me in stitches as the expression goes.

Greg drove into the car park.

As he turned off the engine, he looked at me and caught me with surprise when he asked,

“Would you like to take on some work for me Natalie? I've a customer base that needs updating for the next 12 months and it would really help if you could fit me in to help me with this.”

I smirked and thought to myself,

“I would certainly fit him in and not just because of his customer list and where in my body I'd like to fit him in!”

“Well, the night is still young, would you like to come and see my office and factory while we are here and get some idea of what my factory manufactures?” He suggested.

“Yes, that makes sense” I replied.

Inside the large factory were different types of machinery, the smell of varnish, machine polishers and various shapes and sizes of furniture all in different stages of production and processing.

We then approached his office just down the outer corridor.

It was quite a cosy office, though smaller than I had imagined.

In one corner was a large desk, best quality wood with a racing green leather surface, and a captain’s chair opposite of the same style.

Across the other side of the room was an expensive looking Chesterfield settee. On the desk was Greg’s computer and printer, his landline and a green banker’s lamp on the corner. A large metal filing cabinet stood in the other corner,

Greg moved across to the cabinet and began to explain about his vast list of customers and varying orders and suppliers and the process from these orders, beginning to end. There was another section for quotes, invoices – all types of files under the administration umbrella. A lot of what Greg said went over my head as some things seemed very complex. However, coming back to me, he did explain the role he would like me to take on, and I did feel confident that it would be within my capability.

Greg then turned to me and asked if I would like a coffee. I agreed and sat down on the chesterfield while he opened the other cupboard door and pulled out a percolator and two China cups that also matched the rest of the décor as it were, they were a delicate white with a racing green rim with a band of gold just above it and the saucers were the same.

I loved the smell of true ground coffee as the aroma hit my nostrils.

I smiled as Greg brought our cups over to the small coffee table next to me.

Without a word and just a gentle smile, Greg looked straight into my eyes. I could sense straight away as I returned his look into his velvet

brown eyes what was coming next, and I knew that he could sense my body sensually longing for him to be inside me.

He softly touched the tip of my chin and brought my lips up to meet his. All that longing began to race over my body as our embrace began to heat up and our bodies ferociously entwined whilst our tongues touched each other in a passionate kiss.

Again, with our eyes fixed on each other.

Greg finally spoke very softly and as a true gentleman, he asked, "Natalie, will you allow me to make love to you?"

Speechless, but enchanted and already panting inside, and a longing for him to enter me, I nodded and gave a shy smile. Somehow everything felt right.

Greg's kisses were tender as he gently began to caress my body and kissed my breasts softly which, in response began to tingle and stiffen with the elation I felt. My body began to sink into the large pile sheepskin rug that I was now laying on. As I sank into it, my body arched and began to get into the rhythm of Greg's gently entering my body and his kissing of every part he could reach as he did so. His tongue gently moved from my breasts down the centre of my body past my belly button. Suddenly he stopped. My body ached for him to carry on, but he paused.

"Natalie, he asked gently, would you be offended if I shaved your pussy into a heart shape?"

I suddenly felt like a little girl not understanding what he meant but my longing for him wanted to carry on. Inside I cursed my naivety. Greg sensing my anxiety proceeded to explain.

"You've got a beautiful pussy; I mean genital hair as you might call it. However, a lot of women these days have it shaved off or shaped into different things. You have dark hair and plenty of it I might add, would you like me to do so, I will totally respect you if you don't"

I lay stunned for a few seconds trying to take all this in and resenting missing the outside world and its day-to-day antics for so long.

“No that’s fine, what did you have in mind?” I asked Greg rather formally.

“Well,” he replied cheekily, “Do you know of the heart shaped wood, engrossed in the trees on the way to Cumbria?”

“I’ve heard of it but never actually seen it”

“Well, I go past heart wood on quite a few occasions when I go to see my clients in Cumbria. I always see it when I pass. As legend has it, a man planted the wood after his wife had died near to that point, so it is supposed to be very romantic” Greg explained.

“Right, I paused, well what has that got to do with me?”

Greg smiled, “That will be a sign of our romance and one that we will remember”.

I feel sickened now when I think about it but I suppose I couldn’t blame Greg really as I was caught up in all the height of what I thought was romance and let him go ahead thinking I was special and learning something new that others didn’t know!

I look back now and wonder how many other women he conned into the same story but on the other hand the other “tarts” wouldn’t be bothered if they got their money!

I sat motionless to begin with as he did a wet shave on my pubic hair until he was satisfied it was the right shape. I enjoyed his gentle touch and the rhythm of this made me feel more excited than ever. (Little did I know at the time this was common practice to him and whichever tart he picked up).

Our kisses soon became more forceful, and he began to thrust inside me. It was pure ecstasy. I lay feeling deliciously helpless as I let my bodily responses take hold and I felt my body go into rhythmic spasms and the blood flowing downwards to my lower body. I didn’t want this thrilling feeling to end. Now, and only now I realised what was happening before, and that my bodily responses and longing, had been for Greg to make love to me. Something I had never experienced with Andrew or ever dreamed of.

After we had gone to the highest of sexual pleasure and climax, Greg kissed my breasts gently and then looked into my eyes and gave me a warm smile.

Neither of us spoke but we laid, completely naked on our sides in a strong embrace.

It was Greg who broke the post climatic silence, looked at me tenderly and then whispered that he never wanted it to stop. We never did get round to drinking our coffees!

When we walked outside holding hands, he again embraced me, and we engaged in a long and passionate kiss before I finally got into my car.

Greg said that he would see me the next day.

As I drove home, my mind felt like spaghetti junction, my thoughts were driving off in all different directions. I hardly knew this man, and yet within the space of a few hours, I had let him inside me, and yes it was DELICIOUS!

With Andrew, sex really had been, “wham bam – but no thank you mam”. Andrew was cruel and animalistic with no respect or feelings or thought for me. I just accepted that this is what it must be like and could never understand what pleasure people found in it. With Greg I had for the first time, been orgasmic, and I craved for more.

Suddenly, my thoughts turned towards my parents and what they would think if they knew what had just happened, they would die of shame. “There you go again”, I chastised myself, still being controlled by them, even if it is only just in thoughts, after all these years.

The rest is history as they say – or was it?

Chapter 10

Greg and I were soon recognised as “an item” as they say.

I had now started working with him and he was officially now one of my business customers. In fact, Greg suggested that I gave up my office and move my part of the business in with him, and not only would it be financially beneficial but also, we could spend a lot more time with each other. I could also “man the fort” when he was out or on the odd occasion now, if he was working away.

Our love making was ecstatic, and nobody said anything, but they must have noticed how often the office blinds were down as we made love on that sheepskin rug.

The sheer pleasure of his touch, the electric like feeling that buzzed up and down my body as he kissed and caressed my nipples, and the touch of those lovely, gentle hands as he stroked my clitoris. His tongue, fuelled with passion, licked it to absolute perfection and I orgasmed again and again, howling with enjoyment and fulfilment. He never failed to excite me, and Greg became addictive, and I craved this wonderful experience and this man who I longed to be with forever!

About three weeks later, Greg asked me to join him for dinner after work. He was going to be at a client’s factory in Durham.

I left Ryedale a little earlier than usual and went home to shower and change.

I carefully moisturised my body and topped up my tan. I put on my g string panties which sat perfectly on my shapely thighs and barely covering my heart shaped genitals. I wanted to appear as sensuous as possible for Greg and expected our evening to be sealed with our vibrant sexual expressions for each other.

However, the evening unfurled, my expectations were very different to the outcome I had been expecting.

Chapter 11

Greg was relaxing, with his seat reclined in his Porche. His driver's door was wide open, and he was soaking in the early evening sun. He lay there totally relaxed and I suspected he was asleep. The sounds of Elgar's Enigma Variations played from his CD player.

He must have sensed I was there as his eyes opened as I approached and straightened himself up.

He grinned and said "I've something special in mind, hop in"

My mind became excited with anticipation and my stomach began to feel as though it was doing somersaults.

Greg and I chatted away about each other's events of the day.

Greg then pulled up outside a rather suave looking restaurant in Netterby.

It was now late summer, and the sunset was glorious. It was about 8pm. The fiery red glowing of the sun as it settled behind the hills with bright green carpets of grass and the distant sounds of tractors in the fields as the farmers worked tirelessly taking every opportunity to gather the hay in for later in the year. The atmosphere was exquisite. There was still a pleasant warmth in the air, and from the direction of the restaurant, the aroma of different herbs and spices filled the air.

The restaurant was packed – "always a good sign" I thought to myself.

As we approached the reception, a tall dark handsome waiter approached us who spoke very good English with an Italian tone to his accent.

"Ah Mr Whitely" he began, "Mademoiselle", he uttered as he nodded and took my hand. "Please follow me".

He led us to a table near the conservatory windows which looked out on to a courtyard with a very impressive fountain with lilies floating on the surface. In the distance, the remains of an ancient abbey could be seen.

The conversation between us flowed easily and as had become the norm, I felt safe and warm in Greg's company.

When we left, I glanced up at the night sky and could see that the blanket of night was now almost knitted together with threads of stars embedded on it. The sweet smell of the flocks filled the air.

As we made our way back to the car, Greg suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned to me and pulled me into a strong embrace and then said, looking straight into my eyes,

“Natalie, please let me show you where I live before I take you back to Ryedale. I'm sure you will like it. I would like you to get to know me better and vice versa, and to trust me”.

I was rather overwhelmed but felt delighted at the idea and of course agreed.

We didn't say a lot to each other on the journey to Greg's house, but the silence wasn't uncomfortable, and I enjoyed soaking the beauty of the scenery and overlooking the various lights as they shone from the array of hill farms in the area. Greg had soft gentle music playing in the background.

My attention was drawn back to the road as Greg slowly drove up a long drive and came to a stop. He came and opened the car door at my side for me. I stepped out on to the cobbled area which was lit by one single streetlamp. Greg's house was the last one of four terraced cottages, set in the adjoining hillside.

As he ushered me inside, I was immediately impressed by the cosiness of the living room. There was a large open fire – something I had always wanted myself. There were two armchairs and a matching settee and recliner.

I commented on the fact that the lamps were already switched on before we had even entered the door even though he had been out all day. Greg then surprised me that he always set them to come on at a certain time, obviously according to the time of year. He also astounded me by saying that the bath was set to run at a set time,

and, according to his schedule, set it for the evening before he left each morning.

I could tell the house was still a bit “bachelorised”, but it was spotless, very few ornaments etc., but still cosy.

Greg caught hold of my hand and led me through to the kitchen with its range cooker. Everywhere was very modern and expensive, very precise, and tidy.

In the centre of the kitchen stood a farmhouse dining table on the stone floor with elaborate pine chairs around it. An expensive looking porcelain fruit bowl sat in the centre of the table, brimming over with a beautiful array of colours of different fruits.

Greg smiled as if he sensed my thoughts as I soaked in the pleasure of the environment.

“Let me pour you a glass of wine” he said still smiling.

“Come, let’s relax in the lounge” Greg suggested.

I felt at home already and certainly didn’t want this evening to end, but even so I said, “I’ll just have this one and then I better go if you don’t mind dropping me back to the office. I’ve had a superb evening Greg” I said sincerely.

With that Greg came up close to me and knelt by me with those gorgeous brown eyes that now had taken on a pleading look, as I sat relaxing on the settee.

“Please stay with me tonight, Natalie. I have fallen helplessly in love with you”

I gasped, “How can you have? I do feel that we already seem to know each other well, but I’m scared that everything is going at such a rapid pace that something is going to suddenly bring us back to earth with a bang and spoil something so special. I don’t want to sound negative, I’ve never had the privilege to experience, feelings, yes love, like this and I’m just phased by it to be honest”

Greg gently put his index finger to my mouth to let him speak.

“Of course, I can understand your fears and anxiety after what you have been through, but I trust my instincts and I fell in love with you the very first day I met you in the car park that day. Please let me be a part of your life – a massive part”. He kissed my hand, then my arm, then my ear, then my lips and we came locked in a delicious kissing session.

I couldn't resist.

“Let me show upstairs” Greg said encouragingly.

We climbed the stairs hand in hand and my body began to throb again, aching for his touch and everything else that went with it.

We entered the first dark oak bedroom door which as traditional, had a latch fitting. His king-sized bed base and headboard was of solid oak which were engraved. I recognised the sheets as Egyptian cotton, very good quality I might add. The gorgeous aroma of conditioner exhumed the air and soft spring green cushions were spread along the pillows. Just off from the main bedroom, was another oak door which led to a toilet, basin, and a wet room. A shower and a bath were in the adjoining room.

“Come to bed with me” Greg suddenly said in a soft gentle voice, followed cheekily by, “or we could always start in the wet room and see where we go from there”.

“Sounds good to me, I don't need any encouragement” I replied confidently and licking my lips sensuously to his delight.

A brief thought flitted through my mind, “Where has this come from – this is a new Natalie who I don't recognise, but I like her!”

We slowly and delicately peeled each other's clothes off, experiencing the savour of the moment.

As we stood opposite each other in the wet room area, completely naked, Greg reached out for the shower gel and emptied some into the palm of his hand. He gently caressed my breasts with it, and slowly worked his way down my body. I was becoming completely lathered, both inside and out, he protruded his tongue and softly

licked my clitoris and entered as far as his tongue could reach. The thrill of the sensation made me cry out in ecstasy and my orgasms just kept coming and coming relentlessly to my great pleasure.

I then lathered him with my hands, caressed his erection and anywhere else.

Our eyes locked to each other, and that longing joined us together. It wasn't just the ecstasy that was so wonderful, but that great feeling of trust and belonging between us that I had never experienced at any time in my previous life and relationship. I knew that Greg wouldn't hurt me, and it was delicious to be helpless to my feelings and desires and totally at his mercy to fulfil these.

As we both climaxed in unison, mine several orgasms we held each other, holding on to that wonderful moment.

Greg tilted my chin upwards and kissed me tenderly. He then whispered, "Would you like another glass of wine?"

I giggled, I expected him to say something serious – about us, not about a glass of wine.

Then I thought seriously. "I'd love to but I better not, I've to drive back home yet remember?"

Greg gently pulled me closer and with those deep brown eyes looked at me and said, "Please stop with me tonight and then we can go down to work together in the morning"

I couldn't resist that. It all felt so right, here with someone I wanted to be with all the time. Greg had an addictive influence on me, and one I had never experienced or even dreamed of before.

We had our glass of wine together, and soon laid curled up together in each other's arms and slept peacefully.

When I awoke to the sounds of the birds singing happily away and the cows mooing to each other and the sheep baaing as if answering each other through the open window. The sun was already emanating its warmth across the meadows.

It sounded as though Greg was downstairs in the kitchen.

I showered and dressed and climbed down the thickly piled carpet with my hand on the deep oak banister. Greg came across towards me and put his hands on my shoulders and kissed my forehead and then a long lingering kiss on my lips.

Greg then beckoned me towards the kitchen. The table was set for breakfast, with a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice and the percolator already full of coffee.

“You said you liked poached eggs?” Greg said checking with me. I nodded and smiled. Within a flash there were two poached eggs on toast before me. The smell of real farmhouse bacon and the gorgeous aroma of the coffee were delightful.

“Well, I am being spoiled, waited on hand and foot” I said with a chuckle.

“You’re more than worth it” Greg responded with a stroke down my right cheek.

We set off in Greg’s Porche towards work.

When we arrived at work, the muffled sound of the tyres rolling over the pebble stones, I glanced towards the entrance to the offices, and caught sight of Tim and Joe having their usual morning coffee before they started work.

I saw them nudge each other, as in that saying, “Nudge, nudge, wink, wink” fashion.

“Morning Greg, morning Natalie. You look as though you had a good night last night” commented Tim cheekily.

I just grinned and looked at Greg and said I would see him later about his client lists. I then made my way towards my office.

I had just walked through my office door when my phone rang. I somehow already sensed it was Greg and I was right.

“Ignore those two, their like two schoolboys” Greg assured me.

“I don’t bother these days; they are only having a bit of fun and I’m learning quickly!” I replied.

“Good, well when you have a minute, could you pop round and see me?” Greg said in a quite matter of fact expression.

“Oh, might that be for an encore?” I asked cheekily but light heartedly.

“I think we could safely mix business with pleasure” Greg remarked.

Later that day when we had both stopped panting and recovered from our erotic episode, starting on the office desk, finally ending up laid out unclothed on the famous sheepskin rug. Greg gently looked at me in earnest as he asked, “Will you move in with me?”

I was taken aback in shock by this sudden life changing question. After a few moments silence, I replied,

“Greg, you have certainly swept me off my feet, but that is a huge commitment for both of us, and so soon”

“I realise that” he said understandingly, “but even so, the time feels right”

“I need to come up for air my darling and I need to think. We both have had bleak experiences with our previous relationships, and I don’t want anything to spoil this beautiful and special relationship that we have. It’s early days and could be considered fragile” I answered with all the courage I could muster, not because of Greg, but because of myself.

“Ok, I’ll back off as regards that, but say you will still consider it?” Greg said a little deflated.

“I will, I promise” and gently kissed him on the cheek.

“I can’t believe I have just said that” I thought to myself, half amused and half in disbelief. I really was changing and becoming stronger as a person. I was thinking of me for a change and what was best for me instead of having to live my life through others and at the mercy of pleasing others as I had done all my life.

A few days passed. Greg and I spoke regularly and made a point of saying goodnight to each other on the phone each night. I daily had

texts on my mobile, more than once a day to say “I love you xx” from Greg.

One morning I came into work to find a massive bouquet of red roses at my door with a note asking me to call Greg urgently.

I sat down at my desk, and my hand hovered over the phone.

“Urgently” that didn’t sound good. I braced myself and rang Greg. As he answered I asked,

“Are you ok? What’s the emergency?” I asked concerned. I heard Greg chuckle.

“No there isn’t one, I just wondered if you would come to the Rome with me next weekend?”

I was irritated by this assertion and made him know that. “I don’t think that is an appropriate way to ask someone a question like that. You had me in a state of panic. I should say no for that very reason” I replied in a mock annoyed voice.

“Is this our first row?” Greg said teasingly. Then before I had answered, he responded, “You’re right, in retrospect it wasn’t an appropriate way to get to ask you I’m sorry”

“That’s a first” I thought “A man saying sorry, especially to me!” It did feel good though.

I then responded, “I must admit, it does sound pretty tempting”

“Right Rome it is” Greg replied, and then added, “I’ve taken the liberty, I know, of booking a table for dinner tonight at the usual spot for 7.30pm. Is that ok” Greg asked humbly.

“Yes, I’d like that” I agreed, concealing my excitement at our conversation and what lay ahead for the immediate future.

On the Thursday, before we were due to fly to Rome on the very next day, Greg asked me if I would stay at his house, which made sense, so I agreed. This time I followed him home in my little car to leave on his drive. I didn’t want idle gossip coming from Tim and Joe if I left it on the car park at work for the next three days.

I became caught in the traffic out of the busy town of Ryedale and being a bad time of day when the world and his wife were going home from work, so I lost Greg in the process. However, when I arrived the big oak front door was ajar, so I politely knocked. When there was no reply, I gingerly let myself in, I would have felt better if Greg had been there ready to invite me in or at least be within earshot.

As I walked straight into the lounge from the front door, I couldn't help but notice a tan coloured fur coat draped over the settee and next to it a black beret. I gasped but tried not to jump to conclusions. These were woman's clothing. My mind and thoughts began to run away with me – was there something that he wasn't telling me? Had he meant to move them out the way before I arrived and hadn't had chance to? After all I had been delayed.

My stomach gave a sinking feeling as I kept staring at the coat and hat and I felt my emotions going into alarm.

I stood frozen to the spot for a few seconds. My head turned upwards towards the staircase; I couldn't hear any sounds from upstairs. All was still and unnervingly quiet.

Suddenly I heard Greg's voice coming from the garden and guffaws of laughter.

I shut the front door behind me which must have alerted Greg and he came back into the house still amused by the look of it with the conversation he had just been having which was presumably with a neighbour. At first, I felt a childish surge of irritation.

Greg's smile suddenly disappeared, and he came over and took my arm and said in a concerned voice,

“Are you ok Natalie, you look rather pale?”

“Yes, Yes, I'm fine” I replied falteringly.

“I'm sorry I didn't hear you come in. I've just been teasing Rob next door. His mother-in-law is coming to stay for the weekend, so I've been winding him up with the famous jokes” Greg explained.

“Oh right” I replied still distracted and with a weak watery smile.

Greg followed my gaze as I glanced across at the fur coat and beret and giving him the cue to satisfy my curiosity as to their presence.

Greg chuckled and explained, “You’ve seen my surprise – ‘voila’ he said. “These are for you” he continued. “A warm fur coat for walking round in Rome and a beret to finish for the Italian look”

“I don’t know what to say” I said taken aback.

“How did you know what size to get?” I queried, still in shock.

“Well, I couldn’t have had my hands all over that gorgeous sexy body of yours and not had a good idea of your measurements” he said cheekily.

“Do you mind!!?” I pretended to protest.

Greg picked up the coat and brought it towards me to try on. It was perfect.

“You know what my mother would say?” I asked grinning. I paused and then quoted my mother’s well known saying: “Fur coat, no knickers!”

“I must say I like the no knickers bit,” Laughed Greg.

Greg asked, “Why don’t you go and have a soak in the bath. I’ve prepared it all for you, in the meantime I will prepare one of my famous stir fries in front of the fire”

“That sounds perfect”. I kissed Greg on the cheek as I passed him on my way to the bathroom.

When I entered the bathroom, the atmosphere was awesome.

Greg had placed tea candles around the bath and in various nooks and crannies. By the taps stood a bottle of Rosewater bath oil.

Greg never ceased to amaze me. He came up with surprises all the time and he certainly knew how to treat a woman, and to pamper her.

I pinned my hair up before I began to undress and took my new pink short silk nightshirt out of my case and draped it over the bathroom

chair next to the luxury lavender-coloured towels which smelt heavenly.

I sank down into the bath and my body snuggled down into its waters with my head resting on the padded head rest and closed my eyes, wistfully blowing away from my mind the cares of the day.

However, my thoughts were interrupted slightly.

I began to process some very mixed thoughts, which at first, I found quite disturbing.

Firstly, it bothered me how I had reacted when I first caught sight of the fur coat and beret earlier that day.

Why had a sense of panic, or insecurity and distrust sweep over me? I had immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion that Greg was hiding something.

Why did I suddenly seem so insecure?

I quickly chided myself and told myself that I was going to have a perfect weekend, our first weekend away.

Moments later there was a light tap on the bathroom door.

Slowly, Greg made his way across to me with a glass of white wine which he placed on the shelf next to me.

He bent down and kissed me gently on the lips. As he passionately pressed down firmly this time, he made me groan with pleasure as his hand under the bubbles and water and he felt for my vagina and started caressing it and rotating his hand exciting me and sending me into sexual spasms and tingling all over my body.

Greg suddenly stopped and teasingly said:

“That’s just a taste for later. Right, I’ll get tea on the go”

He then made his way back downstairs.

As I dried myself off, I put on my sexy nightshirt and Greg’s bathrobe.

I descended the wooden staircase and saw that the television was on low and a small lamp on just above it. There was a warm glow from

the logs on the fire and the beautiful appetising smell of the stir fry wafted around the room.

As I approached the settee to sit down, Greg came across and tenderly kissed me and handed me another glass of wine.

I wished I could capture and frame this very moment.

Life was good.

However, there were more surprises to come, some would be wonderful and very welcome, and others would be quite devastating and with dread.

Chapter 12

Our flight to Rome wasn't until 6pm the next day from Manchester airport, so we took the opportunity to spend a good part of the day looking round the historic city of Chester and had a late lunch in a first-class restaurant overlooking the Dee River.

Once on our flight to Rome, we snuggled into each other's arms, and I felt safe and secure.

When we arrived, we were shown to our room which really was top class. There was a massive bouquet of flowers which Greg had ordered.

Also, there was a banquet of fresh fruit in a basket with a wide selection on display, compliments of the hotel.

We both sat down on the four-poster bed and for a few minutes laid out on the top of, we were exhausted and must have both drifted off to sleep.

When we eventually awoke in each other's arms, we showered and dressed and came down to the dining room to partake in a scrumptious continental breakfast, this consisted of a selection of ham and cold meats, croissants, cheese, and crumpets. The morning coffee was delicious.

Greg and I then prepared to go sightseeing. I put on my new fur coat and beret. We went to the Colosseum and other famous buildings which were magnificent.

After our evening meal, Greg said that it would be good to visit the Spanish Steps, in fact I thought he was quite persistent about the suggestion.

The view was admittedly breath taking. It was now dark, but the lighting made the surroundings sparkle brightly. Greg led me over to the large fountain at the foot of the steps and took some photographs.

Then we began to climb the 135 stairs of the staircase to the top. Neither of us said much as we took in the awesome surroundings.

Once at the top, Greg turned to me, delved into his inner coat pocket, and pulled out a small velvet looking box. He opened it to reveal a stunningly beautiful garnet ring surrounded by white diamonds and a gold band.

“Natalie” Greg said looking up at me from his bended knee, “Will you marry me?”

Without even thinking about it, I replied, “I will”

I knew that was what I really wanted, even after our whirlwind romance. Everything felt so right.

“I love you and I’ll love you forever” Greg told me and kissing me intermittently as he did so.

Those words rang painfully in my ears as I later looked round that flat and caught my breath how someone so seemingly trustworthy and earnestly at the time had captured my heart to the utmost degree and then shoved me like a rock off a cliff, tumbling down the side to its final resting place.

Our weekend passed only too quickly but I had certainly come back with more than I had bargained for!

I returned home on the Sunday evening after picking my car up from Greg’s house.

I always did any serious thinking in the bath when possible. It was quiet, relaxing and to an extent, shut off from the outside world and its distractions.

As I laid there and my mind flicked over like pages in a book, thinking over the last few days and our time away. Suddenly, my mind filled with dread – I felt I had to do the decent thing and inform my parents of my engagement to Greg. I knew already that they wouldn't approve, but I was a different person now and didn't have to cower to them for their approval. Those days were well and truly long gone.

I decided that I would give them the opportunity to attend their daughter's wedding and give their blessing, but deep down I knew this wasn't going to be.

I tried not to think of the ramifications knowing that I would have to draw on all my strength to combat the testing times ahead. Even then I could not predict of how testing they would be and from what direction they would come.

Chapter 13

Only days after our weekend away and Greg's proposal, he again broached the suggestion that we should live together as after all, I would soon be his wife.

I readily agreed. The following weekend I came home to pack up the last of my belongings.

My lovely neighbours, the older ladies, came out with going away presents. They did seem quite sad to see me go, even though my presence there had recently been rare.

I wasn't sad to leave. I couldn't wait to be with Greg in my new life to come and settling in that lovely cosy cottage. Life seemed perfect for once.

My next big change to embrace that Greg and I had mutually agreed on and that was to now give up my small office and move everything

and my business into his office. I was still going to keep my customers but would also continue to help Greg at the same time.

The following evening, Greg had suggested that we eat out and go to our favourite restaurant. I was all for it, but I asked Greg if he would mind my parents joining us. I wanted to take the bull by the horns and “tell” them, not “ask” about our forthcoming marriage I felt it would need to be on neutral grounds and this seemed the perfect opportunity to do so and the sooner the better to get it over and done with.

I had already told Greg from the start about my extremely restrictive upbringing, but I felt the need to forewarn him of two verbal bombs that they would throw at me so that he could be prepared.

I rang my mother and invited her and my father to a meal out at The Overdale Hotel which had often been one of my father’s favourite eating places on special occasions. I rang my parents and told my mother that there was someone who I’d like them to meet, sort of preparing them in advance.

I told her that the table was booked for 7.30pm on the Saturday evening. I knew my father would probably be there well before us as he was always fanatical about time keeping.

True to form, I could see my father’s Audi A4 parked in the car park as Greg, and I arrived in with his Porche.

“Brace yourself” I whispered in his ear before we got out of the car.

“Come on” he chortled, “I’ll hold your hand” he mockingly reassured me.

But deep down inside I knew what my parents were like.

“Here goes” I said nervously.

We linked hands and walked over to the table that they were already sat at.

I smiled as I spoke to them both.

“Hello mum, dad, this is Greg– my fiancé, Gregg this is Ron and Martha”

Immediately my father's face took on its usual pouting expression when he was annoyed, and his eyes turned a dark grey as they always did when he was angry, and they certainly were now. Neither my mother nor father pro-offered their hands in polite response to my introduction of Greg.

My mother proceeded to glower at me, ignoring Gregg, and then looked across at my father for guidance as to what to say or do next.

My father briefly collected himself as Gregg and I sat down, then craftily and deliberately jumping in at the deep end, started to quiz Greg.

"And which congregation are you from then Greg?"

"I don't belong to a congregation Mr Smethurst" Greg answered politely.

My father just sat and said nothing but continue to look straight at Greg as if waiting for an explanation.

My father continued in his cold steely manner,

"So, are you having a study with the intention of attending our meetings?"

Embarrassment and anger started to immediately flow through my veins. I knew my father was determined to be offensive.

Greg continued patiently, "I don't have a religion Mr Smethurst or at least I don't practice one and have never really thought about it. My parents didn't really follow one. We always went to the Christmas service and at Easter and my mother always helped out at the local church jumble sale"

My father let out a loud snort in disapproval and under his breath muttered to my mother:

"Why did I expect anything else!"

It was like lighting the blue touch paper, but we were unable to retire.

I quickly stepped in and pressed ahead with our news, that Greg and I were engaged, and our wedding date was December 21st. I also told them where the reception was going to be, and they were more than welcome.

My father then let rip.

“That is impossible. You are not free to remarry, you are still married to Andrew. You might think you are legally divorced, but not in the eyes of God. You know that marriage is for life, not matter what. A bad marriage is better than no marriage at all.”

“That’s right” my mother chirped like a parrot.

I gripped Greg’s hand who was being exemplary in his demeanour, and I replied, “I’m sorry father, but in that case, you should know that Greg and I have been living together for some weeks now and whether you acknowledge legal divorce or not, our wedding is going ahead. I just wanted you to meet Greg and be open about our wedding plans and not go behind your back.”

“You’ve gone too far this time” he hissed. “Well get this. Your mother and I are finished with you, and we won’t disgrace or lower ourselves to attend this joke of a wedding. You are the disgrace. Come on Martha, we are going”.

I was almost sure my father was going to turn the table over as he had done in times past in his fury and tantrums. My mother neither looked Greg or myself in the eye but scuttled off following my father.

I looked at Greg, tears flowing down my face. He pulled me closer to him and we engaged in a hug as if it was our last and in silence.

I eventually pulled away and said, “I tried to warn you about them” I began apologetically.

Greg replied, “It’s you I am marrying, not them” and kissed me tenderly and reassuringly.

To bring a smile to my face Greg said with a straight face:

“Well, at least that saves us money, only two meals to pay for tonight and they hadn’t even ordered anything!”

I let out a giggle and dug him in the ribs and let out a sigh of relief.

Chapter 14

Our wedding approached.

Jayne had offered to make the wedding cake and she was also going to be my maid of honour.

Greg's friend Tom was going to be his best man.

It was only going to be a small wedding and would be at Ryedale Registry Office. We just had a meal with our close friends who attended.

With our close friends round us and happy for us, it took my mind off my parents, who if they were "normal" would be there joining us in our celebrations.

We just had a week's honeymoon in Madrid, and it was glorious.

For a start the weather was superb, and the immediate warmth hit us as we arrived.

Our hotel was in a quiet area, but it was central to all the local attractions. Everywhere was spotless and there were a vast number of coffee shops and gift shops and a hive of activity.

Between eating our meals, when we weren't making passionate love, several times a day, we did get to see some of the wonderful tourists' attractions. Then on the final evening, we went to watch the Flamenco Show at Corral de la Morelia. Greg was especially, mesmerized by the passionate performance of Madrid's most dazzling dancers and their spectacular show that unravelled before our very eyes.

All too soon it was time to return home.

Greg and I returned to the hum drum of daily life, working most of the time.

The next few months were blissful. We did have our disagreements and heated moments, but they were few and far between.

Greg and I tried to keep that sparkle in our intimate lives and continued our bursts of lovemaking at work on the office table with the blinds drawn of course. Many a time we would set off for a night out in one of Greg's work vans and after a meal, particularly on the lighter nights, we would drive up on the hills, take out our deckchairs, Greg with his supply of beers and me with my white wine and watch the sun go down.

If we were in a secluded place up in the hills such as a place called Yockenthwaite, we would make love in the soft grass in the fading sun. In winter times it could be anywhere suitable. The spontaneous was in the excitement and enjoyment of it. Life seemed almost perfect. Our businesses were doing well, and when we did have time off, we packed in plenty of leisure time together, whether it was just a day out together and dinner out, or a weekend away.

Greg, being as he was, combined his work with pleasure and this did mean that I often had the opportunity to go with him to his overseas clients. I met many of his business clients in the Middle East and Ireland.

We also had Jane, Peter, and Callum to stay occasionally and vice versa. Callum was a delight to see and growing up so fast and now ready for nursery. Greg was very good with Callum and played with him and his little train set that he seemed to like best of his toys.

Greg and I had talked about the possibility of children, but Greg was perfectly honest with me and said that it was not something he had ever committed himself to considering. Greg knew about me losing my baby and the circumstances. We decided that we were both still young enough to leave our options open and had agreed for either of us to openly discuss at any time to go ahead and try for a family.

Could life ever change?

I had a wonderful attentive husband who was always full of surprises and pleasantly unpredictable. We had a lovely and cosy home together, and what seemed like a very firm and close relationship

together. It was something I never even dared to imagine possible after my destructive marriage with Andrew. We knew each other so well, we would often be sat quietly, absorbed in something totally separate from each other, then one or the other of us would speak, and almost like telepathy, we had both been dwelling on the same subject.

I explicitly trusted Greg, and I knew he felt the same about me.

Only the future could reveal the change that this was not to last.

Chapter 15

Life did begin to change dramatically, firstly with my parents.

They had deemed not to communicate with me since that evening when Greg and I had met up with them to announce our engagement.

I did leave telephone messages now and again, and from time to time would send a card and a postcard when I was away. This would not be reciprocated or answered but I felt that I was not going to sink to their level or give up.

One morning, about 5.30 am, Greg and I were woken up by my mobile phone ringing. It was my mother. Despite her quite composed voice, I knew that something dramatic must have happened for her to suddenly be calling me after all this time and at that time in the morning.

“Natalie, I thought you should know that your father passed away about half an hour ago, here at home. The paramedics are still here, and we are just waiting for the duty Doctor to come and confirm everything”

As I said, her voice was composed but for once there was compassion within her tone.

“Oh mum, I’m sorry” my words just automatically tumbled out.

“I’ll come over straight away – is that ok with you?”

Mother surprised me when she replied, "Yes, I would like that Natalie"

I quickly explained to Greg, and he insisted on driving me over to my mother's and said that he would drop me off and pick me up whenever I was ready. He thoughtfully didn't want me driving in the circumstances.

When I arrived and walked through the door, I naturally opened my arms to my mother and hoped that she would respond, and she did. That hug was indescribable, and those years of hostility between us seemed to melt away and now became insignificant.

I silently now followed her into the living room.

It didn't bother me that there were two of her religious companions there. Now wasn't the time to add to the upsetting circumstances for my mother.

My mother explained that my father hadn't seemed well for about a week. He had been off his food and just wanted to sleep all the time. It was even too much for him to go to the toilet. Although he was never an energetic person, this was rather strange even for him.

When he didn't seem to get any better after a couple of days, she called the Doctor out. She said the Doctor hadn't seemed too concerned, and since it was wintertime, he concluded that it must be the flu and wrote a prescription for him. The sad thing was my mother didn't drive and had to arrange for the chemist to deliver it. Father had been on his tablets for about 24 hours, previously.

Father had woken up at about 3 am earlier that morning and said to my mother that he felt like a cup of tea. So, she arose out of bed, about to go down to the kitchen. My father had apparently looked a bit better, and he attempted to get out of bed. Despite my mother's advice to stay where he was while she went to make his cup of tea, he assured her that he felt strong enough to make his own way to the bathroom.

She said that she had told him to just take it very steadily and that she would be back as quick as she could. She had put a chair on the

landing, advising him to sit on it if he felt weak and needed a rest, even though the bathroom was only yards across from their bedroom.

Apparently, as my mother had just reached the kitchen, she heard an almighty thud come from upstairs. Upon rushing back up she found him knelt by the chair, and the top of his body laid across the seat, on the landing. It was though, if it was the last thing he did, he was going to muster all his strength to prove he could get to the bathroom again. My mother told him to stay exactly where he was, and that she would ring for an ambulance. She said that just before she went back downstairs to the phone, she bent down to kiss him, and he kissed her and then he passed away.

My mother immediately called for an ambulance, and the two paramedics, after a full examination, suggested that it was a massive heart attack. The Doctor who followed shortly afterwards confirmed this.

My mother was trying to be a real stalwart, but I could tell she was breaking inside, and my father having been such formidable person, was now lost.

One of her friends did offer to stay with her and I was genuinely grateful for her help.

The following few days passed in a blur. I helped my mother out with the funeral arrangements as much as I could without shutting out her friends.

I hardly saw anything of Greg over the next week and he was understanding, as were my clients that I needed time off from work in the circumstances.

Although the first part of the service was at their religious hall, I did attend with my mother, and she even conceded that Greg could attend with us, and he respectfully did so. However, nobody spoke to either of us and we made our apologies to mother that we would not be able to attend the get together afterwards, and she understood.

Life then began to really change.

Greg and I became like ships passing in the night. We did see each other at work, but only briefly at times. My mother had become more and more dependent on me. Her “friends” had started to dwindle in the visits to her and I, after all, was now her only family left.

Because Mum had now become unable to move about very well and the stairs were now impossible for her, I appealed to the Local Authority for their help. They did manage to get hold of a special bed for her downstairs, and for carers to come in twice a day.

I did go through a traumatic time myself for a while. When I was at my mother's and needed the bathroom, I found it almost impossible to walk across the landing knowing that my father had died on that very spot. It wasn't that I was afraid of death or that I thought he was present still as it were, it was just all the history I think and then the thought that he had ended up just there.

I spent many nights there and thankfully, when I needed a break, a crisis team came in for a week and stayed with her for a week round the clock, but obviously this could only be few and far between as resources

Greg and I had now been married 3 years. I had noticed some warning signs and niggling concerns with our relationship but chose to put them to the back of my mind. I just put it down to the pressurising time we had both been going through, particularly with my mother being ill and needing me so much.

Eventually, I had a good talk to my mother and to the carers and we all mutually agreed that my mother would be best to go into residential care. My mother seemed very keen at the idea. Not only would she have the constant care but company as well. This was very quickly arranged, and she was thankfully placed in a care home not far from me.

I made sure that I visited her as regularly as I could which was every other day, and for once in my life, we did become closer, and even more like friends.

However, at the same time Greg and I started to slowly grow apart. Within two months, my mother peacefully passed away. Although of course I did grieve, I felt we had had that bonding time together to have the relationship we had never been allowed to have, and she was now no longer in pain.

But Greg and I didn't seem to get back on track.

Our sex life – I say sex because it no longer seemed like love making, had now dwindled considerably.

I could understand it during the time my mother had been alive as I was tired most of the time or not even at home but stopping nights at her house, and Greg must have felt neglected.

I noticed Greg seemed to be away a lot more and seemed to always have a reason or excuse I could now call it, to not take me abroad with him. Greg used to say that he needed me to man the office now that we were busier than ever. This was very true, in fact, I had cut my own clients down to just one or two now as I was mainly taking on Greg's work as much as I could.

I did notice that his flight bookings were mostly for the Ukraine, rather than his general list of customers overseas.

When I tried to ask him out of interest about this, he didn't really respond, but just said that his business was still expanding and spreading to new areas which I should expect and understand.

I was soon to find out painfully, these so called "business trips" weren't about work at all.

Chapter 16

There was a setting in a famous film that I had watched a few years ago, Sliding Doors where a man is always going away on business, or is meeting up with a business partner after work. The woman, who has a temporary part time job in a café one day notices a couple sat together and the man presents his wife, with a massive bouquet of flowers.

Rather than be blown away by this generous gift she says, looking at him with piercing eyes, “Never trust a man, be it your husband or partner, if he brings you flowers, he’s more than likely having an affair”. Then she throws them at him and storms out. The husband, rather than looking indignant at her accusation, looks decidedly sheepish to say the least, as it proves to be true.

You can imagine where my mind was immediately steering on this one, when Greg had started to arrive from the airport with a beautiful array of flowers each time, but I told myself not to be ridiculous, that was only in a film. However, it did prey on my mind, especially as Greg began to be a person I no longer seemed to know.

His whole persona had changed. He became quite distant in both mind and body. We very rarely went out together for dinner or anywhere for a break from work. Our evenings were often spent either watching television with Greg only half watching as he was always on his computer, or when he was relaxing it was often listening to his classical music, spread out on the settee with his eyes closed.

I did suggest that we have a talk as I was really worried about him, about us. I asked him if he wasn’t feeling well, which seemed to irritate him immensely.

“I’m just resting – is that a crime?” he snapped one evening.

“Of course, not” I replied trying not to ignite matters into a row.

“Oh, I’m going down to work if you’re going to start getting on to me” he said curtly and picked up his coat and brief case and headed for the door.

I wasn’t sure what time he’d be back, but it must have been in the early hours of the morning as when I got up in the night, he was flat out asleep on the settee. I didn’t disturb him but went back to bed and listened to my radio with my earphones and eventually drifted off to sleep.

The following morning, I woke up to the smell of bacon cooking. As I came down the stairs, it was as though a transformation had taken place and life was almost back to normal.

Greg was busy cooking breakfast and the aroma of coffee wafted through the living room. That was a first hint. Greg very rarely drank coffee so I could safely assume that he had made it for me. Even this was progress, for all those little things he used to do, seemed a thing of the past. I could even hear him whistling to himself.

He turned as I came into the kitchen and smiled as he put my plate of scrambled eggs on to the table and the coffee pot.

“You seem a lot brighter this morning” I remarked but trying not to sound intrusive and send him back the other way again.

As he sat down opposite me, he replied,

“Yes, I’m fine, I’ve just been really overtired, and work has been piling up recently”

“I’d have worked longer hours to take some of the weight of you, I’m not shy of hard work” I said, still trying to keep the mood light as the atmosphere felt very tenuous still.

I felt Greg was almost brushing aside what I had just said and not acknowledged it. However, he did seem a lot brighter and that was something to be grateful for, maybe at last we could get back on track after a very rocky period.

He suddenly broke my train of thought when he said, “Natalie, I would like you to have a bit of a break, it’s always me going off but that’s to do with work. I think it would be nice for you to do something for yourself for a change. There’s a special offer I’ve seen. You have always wanted to go to the highlands and see the Isle of Skye”

“You’ve been doing your homework” I said jokingly.

“I just thought you could do with some “me” time for a change” Greg responded. Then he continued,

“We’ve both been under a lot of pressure these last few months, well more so for you with your mum being ill and everything. I also think you should come to work just in a morning and then spend some time and money on yourself for a change. I don’t mind what it is, a spa etc., just pamper yourself, and I will give you the money”

I was totally taken aback. It wasn’t that Greg hadn’t always been generous but he must have been having a good think about these ideas, but I did take a slight affront as it would have been nice for me to have had some input on it all.

“When do you want me to go part time, I thought you were snowed under last week?” I asked rather confused.

“I’m talking about now. I’ve pretty well caught up with everything” he said reassuringly.

“It has been hectic but I’m on top of things now” he assured me. (I didn’t realise how true that sentence literally was!)

“Well, ok” I responded, “I’ll give it a go” I smiled and kissed him on the cheek and went and finished getting ready for work.

Greg, as good as his word, when drawing our weekly wages from the firm, would also give me a handsome amount for my personal spending during my time off in an afternoon.

At first it seemed like good fun, shopping and traveling on the train to Leeds and Manchester, even sometimes as far as York, I did go to the spa a few times and spent time updating my wardrobe.

Eventually though, the novelty wore off. I had joined a lady’s gym, but it was usually 2 or 3 times a week in an evening, and I enjoyed going there at that time of day as I made a circle of friends who came in after work. The afternoons though were becoming a drag. There wasn’t that much housework to do with just being the two of us and it was only a small cottage.

I had thought about signing up for a college course which I could attend in an afternoon, but to be honest, the evening classes again, took preference.

Eventually I mentioned this to Greg and said perhaps I could restart my client list again and pursue my own business once more. He wasn't having it though and said that it wouldn't really fit in with his expanding business.

I began to feel and become conscious that he was almost trying to phase me out especially in an afternoon. Perhaps he was just being considerate old Greg. He had always been very thoughtful or was he?!

One afternoon when I had set off back home after my morning's work, I felt restless. It was a dreary time of year, and the light was fading earlier each week. I walked into the living room which seemed very uninviting and cold. Everywhere was so quiet and still.

As I was lighting the fire, I suddenly had an idea. I would do some baking! Unexciting as it might seem, Greg loved my baking, and it was something I hadn't bothered to do for a while. Up until now I was usually too busy.

I set about making his favourite ginger biscuits and some scones and put a casserole in the oven for dinner that night which I was sure he would like that to come home to on such a cold, dark and dreary day at work.

Time still seemed to drag even after all that. I suddenly decided to surprise him and drive back down to Ryedale with my samples of baking. We could have a coffee together at the office. It might have sounded a bit basic but anything to break this monotony and I was sure he would like a distraction (little did I know he already had that).

I rang him first to make sure he was about before I set off. There was no reply from the landline and his mobile went onto answerphone.

Nevertheless, I decided to still set off. Greg was supposed to be local today, so I was sure he would be about somewhere.

I made my way down to Ryedale, completely unaware of the consequences of my surprise arrival and the shock that would hit me in the face as a result.

Chapter 16

As I drove slowly on to the pebbles of the drive at Ryedale, I could see all the blinds were closed in the office which did seem a bit strange.

As I walked through the reception door, I was enveloped in the warmth from inside the building, in stark contrast to the wintry atmosphere outside.

The first person I encountered was Tim. He was carrying two mugs of coffee. One for him and his brother.

The stride in his step began to falter when he saw me.

It briefly came to mind as I looked back over the last few weeks, I had noticed Tim hadn't been as cheeky and friendly as he usually was, today he was acting strange. When I greeted him, he replied as if out of politeness, but his eyes were downcast and did not meet mine. I decided to kindly confront him and show my concern.

"Are you alright Tim only you don't seem to have been yourself for the last few weeks?" I asked, then I continued before he had time to answer, "have I annoyed you in some way?"

There was a delayed silence.

I continued.

"I haven't had a chance to have a catch up lately, what with Greg wanting me to take things easier and work part time".

I certainly wasn't prepared for the reply that followed.

"I'm fine, really, Natalie" Tim replied but almost nervously and then continued.

"Look Natalie" Tim started then paused. "I feel there's something I need to tell you, and it's quite urgent. I need to tell you now" Tim replied, now daring on his part, to look me in the eye.

"What an earth's wrong Tim?" I asked alarmed.

"It's Greg" He hurriedly replied.

“What? Has he been in an accident? Is he hurt? OMG, I knew I shouldn’t have gone home this afternoon. He’s been so distant these last few months. Is, he seriously ill and can’t face telling me?”

A torrent of questions burst out as my imagination was doing summersaults.

“No, nothing like that” replied Tim obviously looking for the right words to break it to me.

“Then what?” trying to restrain raising my voice but feeling decidedly frustrated.

“It’s none of my business, but now you are here in the moment as it were, I need to forewarn you that he has somebody in his office with him as we speak, another woman. She’s been here several times now once you have left for the afternoon” Tim blurted out.

A few seconds past which seemed like minutes and the moment felt it was frozen in a frame like an act in a play as I tried to get my brain to process the information.

“Tim, I get the sense from the way you are telling me that this is nothing to do with business, she’s not an Accountant or someone visiting from another Company?” I asked fumbling for the right words and looking at Tim desperately pleading for some sort of reassurance from him although I knew deep down that this was futile.

“No, Natalie I’m afraid not. We don’t know who she is, but we can tell it’s not for professional reasons, put it that way” he replied.

I stood rooted to the spot and then Tim spoke again but unhelpfully.

“I did try to prepare you Natalie”, and with that he quickly slipped into his office and rapidly shut the door

I gave a deep breath, and despite everything Tim had said, I still tried to think positively, hoping that Tim had jumped to conclusions.

I edged towards the office door and down the three carpeted steps, still trying to convince myself that it wasn’t necessarily anything to be suspicious about. Then suddenly, my thoughts and memory

kicked in – the blinds, they were closed, and the memories came flooding back to when Greg and I had our passionate sessions of love making on the sheepskin rug, this suggested more than a business meeting or a chat and a coffee!

My stomach felt filled with lead, and the deep anxiety made my lips dry. I felt lightheaded. An intense nauseous feeling began to wash over me. It really was the “fight or flight response” that is commonly talked about. “Shall I fight and face whatever “secrets are going beyond that black keyhole” or should I run away unable to face the truth and bury my head in the sand like an Ostrich?

I chose the first option.

My hand was now hovering over the brass doorknob and shaking almost uncontrollably.

I could hear Greg’s familiar groans of pleasure and his gasps of enjoyment and satisfaction. I could also hear “her” voice, I’m sure it was a Russian accent. I could hear her shout,

“Udoudetrorit Menya” (I later found out that it is translated to mean Satisfy Me!). I crouched down and craned my neck to look through the dark keyhole. I could see Greg at this point had the woman splayed over his large office desk firstly on her front wielded by a riding crop which he applied to her back side on many occasions to her apparent delight.

The scantily dressed woman was then rolled over to her front.

This was followed by rapid and heavy panting, which I could only imagine was her supposedly climaxing after her torrent session with my husband.

I slowly turned the door handle and braced myself to enter the office, but as quietly as I could. My whole body was shaking and my lips quivering almost uncontrollably.

The keyhole had prepared me for what was to be finally revealed.

Greg had his trousers and underpants down and his penis was in full view, but now for obvious reasons was no longer erect. He then

leaned back over her and was kissing her with force, which seemed to delight her.

His earlobes had a definite trace of red, almost like nail polish, at the tips of them, and assumed this must be from her lipstick which was scarlet red whilst sucking them.

My gaze then turned to the woman underneath him. A naked blonde, with very short spikey blonde hair. Her nipples were erect and pert on her small breasts like jammy dodgers. Her slim body was well toned, what I could see of it.

Her legs were bolt upright in the air, positioned as if in stirrups.

Her nails were a deep scarlet that matched the lipstick.

My strength and calmness suddenly took over, and I broke the somewhat "heated" atmosphere with a measured voice.

I destroyed the intenseness of the moment when I said with all the sarcasm I could muster,

"I see that it's more than a bacon sandwich that you indulge in at lunchtimes"

Greg rose calmly to his feet and redressed himself without a word. His eyes looked cold and there wasn't a flicker of embarrassment or shame in his demeanour.

I could feel resentment and a host of anger fired emotions passing through my brain as I again spoke,

"I'm surprised you like such cheap meat" scowling as I said it.

With an icy glare he replied, "Well I could hardly call you fillet of steak or lobster thermidor now, could I?"

The "blonde thing" then began to irritatingly giggle to herself while meeting my eyes, and then her lips settled into a pout.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my spare office key, and the spare keys to Greg's Porsche which I always carried in my bag for emergencies.

I threw them with force, to which they passed in the air Greg, not caring if they hit him in the face or not, landing on the chesterfield behind him, as they did so I said curtly, “I won’t be needing these anymore” and turned and stormed out.

My legs were like jelly and my hands shaking.

I went down to the kitchen and tried to gather my thoughts.

Before setting off back I sat briefly in my car trying to compose myself.

I shouldn’t have really driven in that state of mind, but I did arrive eventually at the cottage and immediately rang my best and most dependable friend, Jane.

I could hardly contain my tears and my voice trembled uncontrollably as I related my nightmare event.

Another chapter of my life had just dramatically closed, but a new one was to begin.

Chapter 17

Jayne had suggested I go and stop with her, and I was extremely tempted but decided I would stop the night at the cottage and then decide what and where I was going to go the following morning. I was quite sure that Greg would at least have the decency not to appear, and I reasoned that he would probably stay with “blondie” who more than likely was booked into a hotel somewhere locally. I didn’t really care.

However, I did care, and once in bed, the bed that Greg and I had shared so many happy moments, I began to sob uncontrollably. What a mess my life was again!

I kept checking my phone from time to time during my fitful sleep. There weren’t any missed calls or text from Greg.

The following day, I bought the local newspaper and scrolled on my tablet while having my “elevenses” in the supermarket.

It may not have been ideal, but I noticed a caravan site that was open all year round and there were caravans to let on a weekly basis. On the site there was a communal pub and restaurant available., so there was the opportunity for an occasional distraction from the daily cares and woes, and the socialising would be very welcome. There were also lodges on the site in which people lived on a regular basis.

It was only ten miles away and was a lot more economical and readily available than a house to rent. I felt the need to keep local until I had sorted my financial situation out with Greg and knew in my heart of hearts that this was now the point of no return with Greg.

A divorce was on the cards. I knew that after this outright and blatant betrayal, there was no other option. I also knew that even if there was the remote possibility, which was highly unlikely, that I would never be able to trust him again.

I needed to move on, and although I was financially secure at present, I knew I had the chance to repair myself, or at least let time and circumstances, to heal emotionally.

This, however, was not without further traumas.

Chapter 18

The following day I rang the owner of the caravan site and arranged a mutually convenient time to view the caravan.

The one Mr Johnson showed me was small and basic, but adequate for my needs, and so I accepted the terms and conditions and agreed to pay the deposit for the rent and move in on the Saturday. I had very little possessions to move, mainly my own items and clothing, so this would not be a big move physically.

I still hadn't heard from Greg by the Friday night but decided to be courteous on my part and emailed him, notifying him of my vacating his cottage and that I would leave the keys through the letterbox on

my way out. It was all very formal and professionally worded as if to a landlord, but at least could not be misread.

I received a formal reply acknowledging receipt of my email and that that would be acceptable, but there was no other correspondence whatsoever.

On the Saturday I moved myself into the caravan without a hiccup and decided to treat myself to a meal and a drink in the bar afterwards.

It was quite busy; I suppose with it being a weekend. I didn't feel too subconscious being on my own for there were others, mainly much older people who were alone, but seemed "happy in their own skin" as it were, and I felt admiration for them.

As I sat in the bar after my meal, I plucked up the courage to email Greg again and without showing bitterness and anger, expressed my wishes for a divorce as soon as possible as I could not move on without one and I felt it was in both our best interests.

It was a mixture of relief but sadness when I quite quickly received a reply. Greg had agreed that it might be for the best.

I replied, telling him where I was living and agreed to set the wheels in motion on the Monday.

My mind was a complete maze, and I was stuck in the middle of it. The next few days passed in a type of limbo and to an extent on automatic pilot.

Jayne bless her, rang me every evening at the same time, keeping her eye on me albeit from afar, and I did accept her offer to go across and stop for the following weekend.

Jayne was brilliant. She was non-judgemental and kept positive for the future.

Callum was growing rapidly and now walking well and talking and now into the "why this, why that" which I found amusing and enjoyed my time with him as well.

Sure, to his word, when I arrived back to the site, there was mail for me to pick up and among these was a very official looking letter from Mr Anthony with my decree nisi. I read through it carefully and slowly and observed that Greg had quite openly admitted his affair and adultery with Ms Olena Evanovich.

I made an appointment to see Mr Anthony, my Solicitor and signed the relevant documents.

Greg did email me and out of court settlement was agreed between us.

Greg did agree to arrange to meet up with me a few weeks later at the caravan site restaurant to discuss a few matters in a civil matter.

A lot of the bitterness and anger had now subsided, and I was ready to tell him of my new plans. We agreed to meet in the onsite bar one Friday evening...

I must admit, I was extremely apprehensive and not quite in control of my emotions and worried how I would react to my first sight of Greg since that awful incident, the other side of the office keyhole.

When Greg arrived in the bar, he was in casual clothing as expected, and despite what had happened, I did still agree with myself that he was still attractive.

I was grateful that Greg was polite, even though I felt like one of his customers than his soon to be ex-wife whom we had shared so much together.

He bought me a drink and came over to a quiet part of the saloon.

I spoke first.

"I don't want any trouble or hurtful words between us. What we had between us was beautiful while it lasted, but please just answer two obvious questions if you feel able to"

"Go ahead" replied Greg calmly.

"Firstly, please tell me where you first met her, and how long has this relationship being going on?"

Greg replied quite openly, and I must admit with sincerity so that I felt I could believe him.

“I met her about six months ago when I was working at the St Petersburg State University.”

“How come I wasn’t aware of that quote you sent for your work there, I certainly don’t remember it” I queried.

“To be fair” Greg went on to explain, “You weren’t at work most of the time, and I don’t blame you for that at all, your mum was your priority”.

I felt a surge of pain arise in my throat as that part of my life fluttered by in my mind but managed to calm myself and remain composed.

Greg continued honestly.

“The University had seen my website and despite me being in the UK, thought my supply of furniture was a good price and gave me a generous contract. It was on my second visit there to give them a quote to furnish their labs and teaching rooms that I met Olena. She was a teacher in English”

My mind tried to process this information rapidly.

“So” I began slowly” “You say she ‘was’ a teacher in English, how does she just happen to be on “tap” at Ryedale so regularly in an afternoon when I’ve conveniently gone home?”

I began to feel my blood pressure begin to rise.

The air was silent temporarily.

“You know the other buildings at the top of this lane? There are new buildings with flats: he replied.

“Yes” I said slowly.

“Well, Olena has recently moved in to one of those” Greg replied.

“So” I started automatically, “You have been, under my nose, carrying on an affair with this Olena woman, that is a real insult!”

“We will never get back to what we were, so I am glad that we are proceeding with this divorce but one thing that has come out of this, I know when and where and even why I suppose” I retorted.

Greg replied quite humanly, “In no way did I mean this to happen Natalie. We were both going through a bad time and living separate lives really. She was there at the “wrong” time”

“My heart bleeds” I said mockingly.

Greg replied without biting at my comment.

“What are you going to do? Have you any plans for the future yet?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business anymore” I shot back.

Greg remained calm and said,

“I just want you to have enough money to pursue whatever you decide to and to know I am behind you”

“Excuse me, this sounds a bit post conscience talk” I replied starting to get wound up again.

I hated to admit that Greg was being very reasonable with me, I’d give him that.

“Natalie, I don’t want this to end in bitterness even though, yes, I do carry most of the responsibility of it, but we both need to move forward”.

“Yes, I realise that. I don’t really know what I want, I’m still a bit in limbo. All I am certain of is that I need a complete change, many miles away from here and the opportunity to set up a totally different business” I replied calmly.

The evening ended quite civilly, and Greg said that he had drawn up plans for the financial settlement once the decree absolute was in place. We shook hands and Greg said he would be in touch shortly.

The next few weeks weren’t easy at all.

I started going back to the lady’s gym and did make one or two acquaintances, and that’s all they were. There were about five of us that would meet up quite often and have coffee after a session at

the gym at the café opposite. We all kept the conversation light-hearted and there were never any intimate problems discussed. Sometimes it could be a bit boring, but it was company and because I didn't really have anything that positive to discuss, I usually ended up the group listener, but I didn't mind.

I had thought about going to night school, but when looking at the prospectus, nothing jumped out at me enough to make any enquiries about a course. Maybe that was just me and the mood that surrounded me at the time.

I gave myself a good talking to and my first positive step was to go to the hairdressers. I always felt better when I had my hair done and it had got straggly and out of shape lately.

I had decided to have my colour changed slightly to a rich deeper brown, and a touch shorter than on my shoulders.

While waiting for my colour to set, the hairdresser brought me a random set of magazines to read.

At first, I just aimlessly flipped through the top two but then, my eyes became more interested in a brightly covered magazine called House and Country. It was wording across the middle that caught my eye. It said that there were new affordable properties now available in Hampshire. I remembered seeing a programme a few years ago about Hampshire and all its attractions and it seemed to be a very popular place to live.

Turning to the relevant page, I saw a page devoted to the advertising of the newly converted mansion called Marten Manor and its apartments. The rest is history as it were, as that is where the beginning of this book started.

Within two weeks, the decree absolute had been granted and I received a large settlement from Greg.

I had already told Greg about my desire to go and see the show apartment and asked him if he would take me, providing he could spare a day away from "blondie" I still valued his opinion and he agreed.

For once I felt there was a new and exciting future ahead of me, and a completely new start was what I needed and not being swallowed up in my sorrows.

Little did I foresee that this life changing event would also prove to be life threatening at the same time?

Chapter 19

I immediately gave notice on the rent on the caravan and began packing up my small number of belongings, ready for my move to Hampshire.

Jayne and Peter had volunteered to help and rented a small van to use for my move down for the bulkier items, for instance, Greg had kept a Welsh dresser that he had restored and new that I liked, along with my favourite armchair and two-seater settee that I had recently bought and needed collection.

Greg's life too had changed. He had sold part of his business and was renting his house out but most of his time was living with Olena. He had also appointed a new Director for the Company, so the world was his oyster and much of it was travelling with Olena and that did prove profitable as he did drum up business at the same time.

After Jayne and Peter had emptied the van, I met my first new neighbour, Mary. She was about 80 years old and was married to George and they lived downstairs in the apartment next to mine.

Mary came out with a large flask of tea and some newly made scones. After introducing herself, she said she thought we may be glad of some refreshments.

I, in turn introduced myself and thanked her for her kindness.

I soon began to settle, and Mary and George were very good to me, and I often was invited round for elevenses and a meal quite regularly. I think Mary was very motherly.

Mary soon explained who my other neighbours were. In flat two upstairs was Mike. He was a single man in his fifties who worked out on the oil rigs, so was often away for long periods of time.

Alison was in flat three and she was engaged to Connor. She was a Civil Servant and Connor was a builder.

In flat four was a woman in her forties called Jo who had recently lost her husband and was very involved in charity work at the local hospice.

Then, finally, in flat five were Dr and Mrs Crowther.

Apparently, Ian Crowther and his wife, Clare, worked at the same Health Centre where Clare was a nurse.

I finished by saying to Mary and George that I looked forward to meeting my other neighbours and hoped they were as pleasant as them.

The next day I drove into Easterly, which was the nearest town to Broughton. I did some shopping and had a good look round.

On the local Recruitment Agency was a large advertisement which was inviting interested parties to join an evening Counselling course at the College in Easterly. That sounded about right for me. I felt I had plenty of life experience and I had proved many times that I could be a good listener and non-judgemental, so I eagerly went through the door and signed up for it and paid for the twelve months. It was to be an intense course that was two nights a week, and that seemed ideal.

It was an enjoyable start to the course. It was a must that you had to interact with the whole group at some point as part of the learning skills. If you were a wallflower, it would be impossible to proceed. This must have helped me become friends with a young woman of a similar age called Grace.

Grace had been a carer for many years but wanted a change of career while she was still young enough.

It wasn't long before I met Alison, my neighbour upstairs. It was one evening when she was on her way back from work and I was on my way to the college. She seemed very pleasant, and I soon began to make good friends with her and Callum.

One evening I went up to their flat with a parcel that I had taken in for them and Alison invited me in for a drink and from that initial visit, we became regular visitors to each other. I also looked after their goldfish whenever they went away. Recently, although it was still a few weeks off, Alison and Callum had invited me for Christmas dinner with them and her parents, which I gladly accepted.

I didn't see much of Jo, the lady from upstairs. Our paths didn't seem to cross, and she did seem to be more of a person who wanted to keep herself to herself, and she was very busy with her work campaigning for the charity for which she raised a admirable sum.

I eventually was able to meet Dr and Mrs Crowther. In fact, it wasn't at home that I met them but in the shopping centre at Easterly.

Ian Crowther extended his hand to shake mine and introduced himself and Clare to me. Clare did shake my hand but seemed a rather "retiring" person as they call it. I could only conclude that she was more outgoing at work as a nurse.

I introduced myself and said it was good to meet them, and we parted company.

As I was registered with a different medical practice to where they were, I hadn't had chance to meet them through their work.

I continued to progress at night school, and Grace and I would often go for a coffee or sometimes to the pub just across from the college for a drink.

Christmas came very soon. I was pleased to be invited to spend time with Alison and Connor and to meet Dan and Sue, Alison's parents who had come up from Surrey and were stopping over for a couple of days.

As we all sat relaxing in Alison's living room, Alison, and Sue, not as in a gossiping manner, began to fill me in about my neighbours. Not a lot was said about Jo, but that didn't surprise me, she was a bit of enigma really.

I already knew Mary and George well. Apparently, Mike was back in England from the oil rigs, but was visiting his parents in Glasgow for Christmas.

That just left Ian and Clare.

I remarked that I had only briefly met them once or twice in the last few weeks. I did mention that Clare had seemed very reserved but commented that I was the same at one time.

I had already told Alison and Connor how I came to be living here in Broughton, and so they knew me quite well now.

Alison revealed very sympathetically that Clare longed for a child and she and Ian had tried a few attempts at IVF, which did at first seem promising and she had become pregnant more than once but had not managed to carry the baby full term. Clare also had the added worry of the female clock ticking away which was like sand slipping through a timer, and that this hadn't helped her confidence. Ian had managed to get her a job at the same Health Centre, and this apparently had helped her keep more focused, but she was a shadow of her former self. Ian had managed to get her work there so that he could keep an eye on Clare as she seemed so fragile.

I laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" Clare asked suddenly surprised at my reaction,

"Well, considering we've just been saying that she's very reserved etc., you seem to know a lot about Clare all of a sudden" I said teasingly.

In defence, Alison went on to explain, "It's only because her cousin works at the same Jobcentre as me, and when she realised, I was a

neighbour of Clare's she told me about the situation" Alison pulled a guilty face, "I know, we shouldn't gossip!"

"So, it is gossip then" I replied chuckling as I did so.

Alison threw a fluffy toy at me in jest and said, "It's not malicious"

Alison, Sue, and I had a laugh, and then I became serious as I added,

"No, you're right, and sometimes it's good to be informed about such situations, so that a person can understand someone like Clare who has been a bit of a mystery to me, I must admit".

I really had enjoyed meeting Dan and Sue.

They were delightful. Dan's sense of humour was infectious, and Sue was a very bubbly person. When it was time to take my leave and get to bed, I remember coming down that marble staircase deep in thought. I wistfully and with a tinge of sadness, thought about my deceased parents and wished they had been "normal" like Alison's were.

Then my thoughts suddenly turned to Clare. I could relate to losing babies and the trauma of it.

What I was painfully to discover was how mentally fragile she was, and that I would be the brunt of things to come.

Chapter 20

I did keep in touch with Greg, not regularly, but occasionally. He was still somebody who I could turn to advice when I really needed it and by and large he was ok with that, but he did put the proviso on it that it must only be at certain times, which interpreted, meant when Olena wasn't around.

He suffered grief if he was caught in correspondence with me, and I couldn't help but smirk when he added how serious a threat to his manhood would be if this was the case.

The year flew by and with it came the joy and satisfaction of passing my course and knowing I was now a fully qualified counsellor. The same was true for Grace.

Grace was going to set up her own business, and I knew I had to seriously start looking for work.

I did risk ringing Greg and telling him about my recent success. I wanted him to know that I could be successful and that I had moved on without him but also wanted to tell him almost like a friend.

Greg answered his phone, and I knew immediately that it wasn't an opportune moment as he replied,

"Very good Mrs Fairbrother. I'm really pleased you managed to pass my accounts for processing"

In the background I could hear Olena shouting, "More". Then the phone went dead.

I gave a small giggle. Was that the only English word she had learnt? Greg did seem under her thumb, and not just her thumb at that!

I grimaced at the thought and then smiled, at least Greg looked as though he had received the gist of my call and in his response, did seem pleased even though having to handle his companion at the other end in the process.

I had also rang Alison at work and told her, and she was delighted for me too.

I realised how pleased she was for me when I arrived back home.

Mary greeted me at the entrance and Alison was there with her.

"Come on" said Mary, "We've made a celebration tea for you"

Mary and Alison took hold of each of my hands and led me through to the beautiful grounds at the back where there stood a long pasting table which was now converted into a picnic table which was laden with an array of different foods for a buffet.

I was completely overwhelmed.

It was lovely to be with everyone at once, and even Mike had managed to be there.

I thanked everyone for their lovely surprises and all the effort that had gone into it for me. I even managed to get to speak to Jo at last.

As we started to talk, Jo was telling me why she volunteered down at the hospice and all the other activities involved in it. Jo went on to explain why it was so important to her. Her beloved husband, Lee, had, at a very young age of thirty-two had passed away from bowel cancer. Jo had nursed him at home until he died.

I said I was glad to get to speak to her and ended our conversation with an invitation to meet up and have a coffee somewhere, to which Jo seemed to like the idea and said she would let me know when she was free.

Mike had apparently, arrived back that morning for a brief break.

He was not much taller than me, and he was quite portly which did seem to make him look older than he was. His hair was greying as was his beard. He was pleasant enough. He was a bachelor, which I reasoned with his work and being away for such long periods was a bit of a hamper to meeting anyone. He seemed a kindly enough person, but I must admit, after our initial pleasantries, I did have to stifle a few yawns as his favourite subject was politics and not something I really had heavy debates on, but to him it was almost a hobby.

As our tea party came to an end, I couldn't help but notice that Clare was still being her reserved self and on guard. It felt that she was being there more out of politeness than joining in with the rest of us. I had learnt a lot on this counselling course, and it had given me a lot of insight into all sorts of areas, including, mental health and psychology etc.,

Ian did briefly come across and shook my hand and said, "Well done", but Clare just seemed to give a watery sort of smile.

Despite feeling desperately lonely at times, and longing to find work with my new qualifications, we all seemed to get on as neighbours together, and looked out for one another.

Grace was finding business a bit slow and hard to get off the ground at first so we agreed to book a holiday in Devon for a week, and I couldn't wait.

I had to admit that Greg had been very generous on one of my more recent brief conversations with me and had sent me some money to keep afloat. It was probably a guilt trip here and there, but I wasn't complaining.

Grace picked me up and we set off in the warm sunshine for a glorious week of being pampered and having all our meals prepared.

However, I did have a surprise in store on my return that would shape and completely upturn my foreseeable future, but also endanger me at the same time.

Chapter 21

On my return as I walked into the door that led into the large reception hall of the apartments, I could hear laughter and gaiety coming from the rear grounds.

I quickly opened my front door and just dumped my bags down on the bed and hurried to nosily see what was going on in the gardens.

All the neighbours were there except Mike who was now back at work.

It looked like a celebration of some sort.

I arrived in the gardens and said a cheery hello to everybody.

As usual on these occasions, Mary, probably doing most of the organising, had prepared a large picnic.

Alison came rushing over to see me and said, Hi Natalie, did you get my email about the party today? We arranged it so that we knew you would be back to join us"

“Oh, I’m sorry Alison, I haven’t read my emails these last few days. I was determined to have a complete break and not be tempted to go on my laptop” I replied apologetically.

Before Alison could continue, Mary came over towards us, beaming. Mary immediately said, “I’ve a lot of knitting to do and I’m going to be extremely busy” she told me excitedly.

I didn’t twig straight away as I knew she helped Jo out quite a bit and often knitted little things for Jo to sell on her stall that she sometimes hired.

Without saying anything, Mary caught my arm and led me across to see the large banner that had been put up. It read, “CONGRATULAIONS” with a picture of pink and blue storks in flight. “Ah?” I responded thickly.

Well, I thought to myself, I somehow didn’t think it would be Alison that was pregnant, she and Connor had plenty of plans set in place before their wedding which they had started to arrange, and I was quite sure that children weren’t on the agenda just yet.

It wouldn’t be Jo, unless it was Immaculate Conception, so it could only be Clare!

I thought I better just whisper and check with Mary first before I put my foot in it, and she assured me that I was right.

“How wonderful” I said to Mary, “They’ve been through so much”

I gave a quick glance over to where Ian and Clare were stood.

Clare was beaming, even though it was still a shy smile.

Mary nudged me and nodded towards Clare, encouraging me to go over.

I made my way over to them both and said my congratulations to them.

“I’m so pleased for you” I said.

“Yes, thank you, we are ecstatic” replied Ian on behalf of them both.

I knew Clare would obviously feel the same. She was such a complex creature, and so hard to get to know. She was a deep well. Clare did surprise me when she spoke to me.

“I’m just over 3 months and I’m due on the 20th of March”

“That’s lovely, a spring baby, what a lovely time. I’m really pleased for you both” I replied.

After that small, but meaningful communication, I began to mingle between the others that were there which included some from the surgery I was told.

I really felt for Clare but knew that she would have the best of care, especially having her husband as a GP. I really hoped and prayed that for once things would go right for them, and that it would soon be March and to see Clare holding that longed for baby in her arms who would be smothered with love. I was quite sure that that would make her a new person and bring her out of herself, and it certainly would be a life changer.

However, life can be so cruel at times, and dark days lay ahead.

Chapter 22

The next two months were spent between working on temporary counselling jobs, meeting up with Grace, the occasional weekend away at Jayne’s and a meal here and there with Alison and Connor.

I very occasionally saw Ian and Clare. Mind you, their hours between them could be very long and at times very different to mine. I would often see them setting off to work together, early in the morning and would occasionally get chance to say good morning to them.

It did go through my mind that Clare had begun to have an olive type of tinge to her face, and had begun to look rather drained and tired, but just assumed that this would soon change and the “blooming” period that people often talk about, would soon follow.

I had just finished a temporary contract at the high school in town. It was now late October, and the light was now falling around 6pm.

That evening I had pulled into the grounds of Marten Mere and became immediately aware of an ambulance flashing blue lights in front of the main door. My first thoughts were of Mary and that George or herself must be ill, given their age.

Just before I walked into the entrance, two ambulance men came out with Clare in a wheelchair. She was crying uncontrollably, and Ian was hastening his step behind them.

I stood back out of the way.

As I made my way into the foyer, Mary approached me, her face drained of colour, and began to explain.

Ian had brought Clare home early as that morning she had begun to have contractions at work.

He knew he had to get her home to bed and to rest and to see how things went from there, and the specialist who had been looking after Clare had been out and advised the same at this stage.

Obviously, this had now progressed to an emergency admission to hospital.

My heart ached for Clare.

Although my miscarriage had been early in my pregnancy and was for a totally different reason, it was still very much a bereavement and loss. Clare had been through so much to have a baby, and now everything was hanging in the balance.

I didn't see much of Alison and Connor around that time.

I did see Jo on her way to work, and she seemed well.

It was usually Mary I saw with my coming and goings from my apartment and it was usually evenings she would hear me arrive home and update me on how Clare was.

I didn't see much of Ian either, but I suppose he was on a bit of a treadmill with going between work and then to visit Clare.

My last temporary post had now come to an end, and I had been invited down to Jayne's for a few days which was very welcome.

As I was crossing the car park, I saw Ian pull up. He smiled, but his eyes, and the look on his face told a story of thorough exhaustion.

“How’s Clare?” was my immediate reaction and concern.

“She seems to be going the right way” Ian then sighed with relief.

“Fingers crossed, she may be home tomorrow, but on strict bed rest” he added.

“Well, that’s something”, I said trying to sound encouraging.

I told Ian that I was going to see my friend for a few days, and to please tell Clare that I was thinking of her. I said if I could be of any help when I came back, just to let me know.

Ian said he would pass my message on to Clare and thanked me for my concern.

“I will keep that in mind. Have a safe journey” he said kindly before I drove off.

Time does fly when you are enjoying yourself and all too soon it was time to say goodbye to Jayne and her family and make my way home.

On my last evening there, Jayne had arranged a small dinner party. There were people there who I had already met but now had the opportunity to get to know them better.

When I arrived back home, Mary, bless her, had made some buns, and presented them to me and took her chance to update me about Clare.

“Clare’s back home” Mary told me. “We’ve been taking turns, mainly Alison and I, going in and making light meals for her and doing a bit of housework as she’s on strict bedrest. The district nurse pops in and sees her regularly too”

When I saw Ian the next day, he told me that Clare’s mother, Pam was coming up for a week or so on the following Monday, but he was trying to keep a rota going until then. So, I reminded him that I would be happy to help too, and this he seemed to gratefully accept, and as

a result, I went in to look after Clare from 5-7pm most evenings until Ian got back in from work.

On my visits, Clare still seemed quite reserved, but did eventually start to communicate a bit more.

One evening, I had the privilege of being invited from Clare's bedside to take a tour of the nursery that was all prepared and ready for the big day. I told Clare that it looked perfect! Clare really seemed to warm to my praises. I noted from the colour scheme of cream, that they had opted out to know the sex of the baby, and I must say, I would have done the same.

On one of her chatty days, Clare was telling me that she started her student training at the main Queen Elizabeth Hospital near Birmingham, and that she lived in New Exley with her mother and that her mother still lived there in the same house.

Her father, Fred had been on the hospital trust board and was a well-known microbiologist.

Her mother, Celia had been a deputy manager at the local council offices.

Clare went on to say their lives were thrown into complete grief and despair when Clare's father had been on a course in Inverness, and their concerns had heightened when he didn't make his daily call one evening. Apparently, he always used to ring just before his evening meal as he would always have a walk before eating to clear his head and especially being sat in an office all day, it gave him an appetite for his meal. Come rain, sun, or snow, he would go out regardless.

Apparently, the weather hadn't been very kind that week and her father had not been that well in health, and very overtired. Her mother had managed to ring one of her father's colleagues who was on the same course and at the same hotel. An alert was put out and her father was soon found on the pavement not far away. Once the emergency services had been called and he was rushed to the hospital, it was confirmed that he had had a massive stroke and sadly he quickly passed away.

Clare's mother had a breakdown shortly afterwards and as a result resigned from the council.

Clare had taken extended leave to care for her but found it a struggle when she did go back to work, caring for her mother and working as well.

Clare's mum accepted help from the hospital and agreed to have regular check-ups with the psychologist and had many sessions with a bereavement counsellor. Clare always tried to manage her work so that her mother had her support when attending these various appointments.

On one such occasion, she had her first encounter with Ian.

Clare had been waiting for her mother to come out of one of these visits and wanted to ask one of the other doctor's there, who had on occasion seen her mother on an appointment, a query she had about her mother's medication. Ian had happened to be in the room at the same time.

Clare had noticed what a pleasant person he seemed to be.

One day, he came up to Clare in the waiting room and sat beside her and said,

"Aren't you Clare Brighton and you work at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital?"

"Yes, that's me" she had replied, although rather taken aback.

"I'm Dr Crowther. I was so sorry to hear about your father, he was a brilliant man"

Clare said she had begun to get used to these comments about her father, but they were very welcome.

"The rest is history" laughed Clare, I gather meaning that she and Ian had progressed in their relationship from then and went on to marry.

She had explained to her sister, who didn't live that far away from their mother, that she and Ian wanted to move further up country after their wedding and that Ian had seen an advert for the vacancy up here in Hampshire. It was a lot better paid, and Ian would now

have a chance to be a partner in his own practice. Ian received notification before the wedding that he had the position and so everything started fitting into place.

Clare's sister had said that she would help their mum out more, but Clare wasn't totally convinced, especially with her previous record.

Clare looked at me and said with sad eyes, I really thought she was going to end up in a home.

Apparently, as if by miracle, her mum started going out more with a group of old friends that she was now back in touch with regularly and that is where she met someone else.

"She's a different person and back working again" said Clare, her eyes lighting back up at this wonderful transformation.

Clare and I heard the key in the front door, and Ian came in smiling.

"You two look as though you've been having a good chinwag" Ian said pleased.

Clare smiled, a true and warm smile and looked at me and then at Ian and said, "Yes we have" I felt a warm feeling of a sudden as I felt that a huge wall was finally coming down after persistent delicate "chiselling" away.

It felt amazing that someone who had hardly said one word to me in all the time I had lived downstairs and now practically told me her life story, and the trust that she must suddenly decide to place in me was amazing. That had really made my day and I hoped that Clare felt better for it.

I told Clare that I had really enjoyed her company and to take care, saying that I would see her the following evening.

The next afternoon soon came and I was back again with Clare. I had taken her in some homemade ginger cake and proceeded to make us both a cup of tea before I went and sat in the easy chair by the bed.

"Well Natalie – what about you? I've borne my soul to you, and I know so little about you" Clare suddenly said.

I was a bit taken aback, but she did have a fair comment.

I had never really liked talking about myself, I preferred to listen. Being through my counselling training, you never talked about yourself, even if you had the temptation to, but this was different, and the transformation in Clare made me feel I could talk.

I started slowly, "I've never thought of my life as being that interesting"

"I do have some affiliation with you though Clare, in that, I was pregnant a few years ago, but I miscarried my baby very early in my pregnancy and I can only imagine the mixture of emotions that you must have been through the other week when the prospects look so bleak for you and your baby."

I paused momentarily. "I never got to the stage where I could feel my baby move, so it was very different in some ways with me"

Clare looked shocked, but her expression was one of sympathy, and she went on to ask what happened.

I didn't want to go into details. I didn't feel or want to talk about Andrew and the past, so I just said that it was as a result of a nasty fall down the stairs leaving out the fact that I had been pushed first.

I did mention that I was just under 10 weeks pregnant and that nobody could have done anything to save the baby as the miscarriage had followed very quickly afterwards.

"I'm so sorry" Clare whispered, placing her hand up to her mouth in shock and emotion.

I was very guarded about my relationship with Greg, and besides, my feelings at times were still very raw when I dwelt on them, and I certainly wasn't going to now.

I just said that we had grown apart, and we eventually wanted different things and had become different people and that is why I had decided to have a complete change and move many miles away to start anew.

I did, however, tell her about my recent ventures and about the short-term contracts that I had completed in my counselling profession and where.

Clare did seem genuinely interested. She went onto ask the obvious I suppose. Did I have a boyfriend or partner in the wings as it were? I said not at this time. I was quite happy to be single for the time being without the complications of a partner in my life. I did say that Greg and I remained friends, and that when he was coming down this way, he said he would come and visit and take me out to lunch, but this as yet had not happened so far.

When Ian came back home, I had a bit of banter with them and then politely made my leave.

Although I hadn't given much away about myself, I was pleased that Clare did seem to be trusting me more and I hoped that we could become friends, like I was with Alison, and maybe I could be on hand occasionally to help her out with baby Crowther when he or she arrived.

Chapter 23

Clare's mum Pam was now staying for a few days and so that relieved us from our neighbourly rota.

Greg had rung me to inform me that he was coming down to a furniture sale in Winchester and was going to be stopping at a hotel in Easterly. I had asked Greg if he would mind if Alison and Connor joined us for dinner at the Red Lion, in Easterly which was known for its good food and welcoming atmosphere. Neil agreed. It was a therapeutic evening out. Combining Greg and Connor's sense of humours made Alison's and my ribs ache with laughter, and we loved it.

The three of us did have to excuse Greg's mobile phone ringing and his texts coming through on a regular basis. On one occasion we witnessed a barrage of angry words in Russian. Alison raised her eyebrows at me, and we had to stifle our giggles. "No wonder Greg

has to come over to his factory at regular intervals” I thought to myself.

In the following days, which turned into weeks, I didn't see much of Clare and Ian. All I knew was from Mary that Clare had felt well enough to go back to work but was just carrying out light duties and Pam had now gone back home.

I did briefly see Ian one evening on his way back into the foyer, and I was on my way back out to meet Grace. We were going to see what was on at the cinema and then go for a quiet drink.

Ian approached me and asked if I would like the opportunity to take on a few hours each week in my counselling capacity. Apparently, one of the surgery's main counsellors was soon to retire. I jumped at the opportunity.

Ian explained that I would still have to go through the interview process with the Trust board, but he would give me a good referral, thus giving me a good start. Ian said he would let me know the following day when the interview was arranged for.

It was two days later that I came back from shopping to see an unstamped envelope that had been posted through the door and opened the official looking document. Straight away I saw the surgery heading, my interview was to be the following day at 10.30am.

I was pleased that during my shopping trip I had thought ahead and bought myself a cream blouse to go with my formal looking grey suit. I was also pleased that the hairdressers that I went to had agreed to fit me in at short notice the following morning at 9am for a wash and blow dry.

I came back home, pleased with my hair, and started to get myself ready for the interview. I set off for the surgery in good time, in fact I was too early but hoped that this would be noticed and in my favour.

As I sat in the waiting area, Ian popped his head round the door and wished me luck.

My stomach felt like butterflies.

It was quite daunting as “Natalie Smethurst” was called into the Trust’s Board room.

There sat three very serious looking professional people opposite me with a large and long table between us. They each introduced themselves in turn. There were two men and one woman with pens poised over their writing pads waiting to make notes on my every answer to the questions they were going to present me with.

Each one had a different set of questions which I tried to answer as best I could.

When I was asked finally if I had any questions, my mind just went a blank which I worried would go against me.

The good thing that I felt would go in my favour was, having been in quite a few temporary positions and in various organisations, that did give me a strength in my level of experience.

As the interview came to an end, I politely rose and shook hands with each of them and thanked them for inviting me.

On my way out of the door, it felt as though my legs would buckle under me as they felt like jelly. It hadn’t been unpleasant, but I knew I could only be prepared to a certain extent.

Before I had left the room, the chairman had said that one of them would be in touch with me by the end of the following week.

Over the next week, I packed in as much activity I could. I made sure I went and had a good exercise down at the gym each day. I spring cleaned the flat, even though it was now well into autumn. I planted out some daffodil bulbs for the following year. In between I met up with Grace more than once.

It was now Thursday morning and Mary knocked on the door and asked if I would like to go and have a cup of tea and cake with them, which I gladly accepted.

I did notice that Mary had said during the conversation, that she thought that Clare had started to look pale and tired again, and at

almost 6 months, it did seem strange, but neither of us wanted to dwell on that.

The following morning, I woke up a lot later than usual and had been in a heavy slumber.

It was around 9.30am and although it was now well into December, the sun was streaming through the French windows and good to wake up to.

I sleepily arose and decided to have my breakfast on the settee and watch the morning news.

Just then, I heard the flap of the letterbox open.

Anxiously, I moved towards it and sure enough there was a letter, face down with the surgery's stamp on the crisp white envelope.

My stomach churned as I slowly bent down to open it.

My heart missed a beat as I read through the contents of the letter. In fact, I read through it 2 or 3 times before I could believe that I had been successful in my application to the surgery.

The letter was signed by Mr L Simmonds, head of the Trust, and it was stated that I was to start on the Monday.

Excitedly I rang Jayne first and then Grace. I even text Greg. I didn't email him as Olena's English was improving rapidly and she would recognise my name. Greg did respond to my text and said that he was pleased for me, probably immediately deleting the messages for his own sake and peace.

When I was showered and dressed, I decided to go up and see if Alison was there and share the good news with her. I noticed her car was still in the driveway.

As I made my way out of the front door of my apartment, I became aware of Ian and Clare slowly making their way down the stairs, so I stopped and waited.

"Well done, Natalie" Ian suddenly said, and in response, Clare gave me a slight smile and nodded.

Clare did look ill and extremely tired.

Ian had a small vanity case of Clare's in his hand, and with it a much larger bag, presumably with clothes inside.

Ian noticed me look at the bag, and said, "I've had a word with the specialist, and he has advised that Clare now be admitted to hospital for long term bed rest"

"You take good care" I said to Clare and stroked her shoulder lightly. "I'll pop in and see you when you feel up to visitors"

That was the last time I saw Clare pregnant as tragedy was to follow and dark clouds were on the horizon and not just for her but me as well.

Chapter 24

I kept busy over the Christmas period. Jayne and Peter accepted my offer to come up to me for Christmas for once and I had my first stay in the box room, which didn't seem too bad at all.

It was lovely to see Callum who by now was in full voice and I had the pleasure of watching him open his presents from Santa at 6 am in the morning!

When Jayne and I snatched a few minutes of "girly" time, I told her about Clare, and Jayne being Jayne and a very protective friend, told me to watch my back as Clare seemed a very unstable and unpredictable character, and looking back I wish I had taken more heed of her warnings.

When I went back to work after the Christmas break, I made my new year's resolution to get into a good routine and stick to it, and not to neglect my fair of socialising in between.

I saw quite a bit of Ian, and although my thoughts were naturally with him and Clare and their unenviable situation, it just didn't seem right just to turn up and see Clare at the hospital, especially as I had not been invited during conversation. I had sent flowers and a card in the meantime.

To be honest, with the days still being short of daylight, I didn't see a lot of Mary and George.

In the lighter evenings, especially in summertime, I would see Mary and George as I arrived home, sitting on one of the benches at the front with a mug of tea in their hands soaking up the evening sunshine, but not this time of year! It was now early January, and I am sure we all hoped for a good start to the New Year.

It was around three days into the New Year when I arrived home from work to find a scene that made my blood run cold.

On the landing above were bunches of flowers rowed up outside Ian and Clare's front door and cards and a little teddy bear with a heart in its hands. I didn't have to be a genius to work out that something disastrous had happened at the Crowther's and I could only conclude that it must be to do with Clare and their unborn baby. There had been nothing said at work, but I did notice that all Ian's appointments had been cancelled until further notice and he was nowhere to be seen at the surgery, but in no way had I suspected the worst, which looked as though it was now hitting me in the face.

I was on my way up to see Alison. Not to be nosey but I didn't want to put my foot in it and knew something bad had happened. Was it Clare that something drastic had happened to, and not the baby? I really needed to know and would rather hear it from my close neighbours and friends than some feedback at work.

As I shut my door and made my way across to the staircase, I saw Ian on his way down, and he stopped midway when he saw me and called over to me asking if he could have a word with me.

"Of course," I replied and made my way over towards him.

I put my hand on the large dark oak handrail as I stepped on to the first stair and began to ascend the stairs to where Ian was still standing.

I noticed Ian looked drained with tiredness and his eyes were sunken, his demeanour seemed deflated, and a look of desperation seemed to wave over him.

Ian started in a gentle but controlled voice.

He told me the dreadful news that Clare had been on continual bedrest but the specialist and other Doctors, couldn't seem to regulate her blood pressure. The medical team had already decided that Clare should be induced early as was safe to do so, especially with her medical history of miscarriages and that time was crucial, but that cut off time had not been reached yet.

Then came the worst point possible before that agreed date had been reached, the baby had stopped moving, and it had become painfully apparent that the baby had died and was now stillborn. Clare was just over 29 weeks, and had to undergo a gruelling birth to bring their much-loved baby girl into a world she would never see or grow up in. Tests were being carried out, Ian told me to see why this had happened, but were not conclusive yet, and it was a mutual decision that Clare recuperate physically at home, but this would not heal the emotional scars.

I eventually spoke,

"Words fail me" I flustered. "I can only try to imagine how you both must be feeling and to have to go through an indescribable ordeal that you have, is just horrendous".

Ian said with a slight smile, but with conviction,

"That is why you make such a good and natural counsellor! So many people, although meaning well say thoughtlessly, "I know what it must be like, I know how you must be feeling etc.", when they don't know a damn thing about it."

Ian suddenly continued,

"Then, on the other hand, people get the idea that because you are a doctor, that you don't suffer your fair share of tragedy, almost as if Doctors are immune. It's almost as if a doctor's life is like a textbook"
Ian then gave a huge sigh.

"I am sorry", Ian said apologetically. "I went off the deep end there and bombarded you with my vent of anger".

“Not at all” I replied sympathetically. “You are both grieving, and you are both going to feel a complete cocktail of emotions and feelings and one of those is most certainly going to be anger”.

My hand was still resting on the Bannister. I did suffer on occasions dizziness, especially after one of my migraines, which fortunately I rarely had these days. Nevertheless, today had been a real recipe for one those to start, and I needed to steady myself on that large staircase, and particularly stood on the spot for some few minutes. The significance of this is what was to happen next and would, although seemingly quite insignificant to me, changed my next few months into a hell that I became trapped in.

Ian started to talk again.

“We have named our daughter, Tamara”

“What a pretty name” I responded.

“Clare and I will be having a formal service, to say goodbye to our baby, and you will be welcome as the other neighbours obviously will be, if you feel you would like to” Ian continued.

“Yes, of course I will come and if there is anything whatsoever that I can do to help, just let me know, I’m always here” I reassured Ian.

My hand was still clinging onto to the bannister for support, my head had started to throb, and my legs began to feel wobbly. It was at that moment that Ian’s hand covered mine and his other hand patted my shoulder almost affectionately. That seemed harmless enough and given the circumstances I would never have possibly read anything into it.

“Maybe”, said Ian, “In a few days you could perhaps let her talk to you. She needs some female company and you seemed to have built up a rapport with Clare over the past few weeks.”

I smiled but was non-committal. I felt quite uncomfortable about the situation, especially as I was sure this wasn’t ethical, especially by the BACP standards, and I wasn’t trained in bereavement counselling. However, I’d cross that bridge when and if I came to it.

As Ian lifted his hand off mine and turned to go down the rest of the stairs, there was a loud slam of their door. It was with such force it made me jump and it could have only been Clare that had done so.

Unbeknown to Ian and I, Clare had been taking in the situation on the stairs and our conversation.

Ian himself then confirmed it, when he added,

“I’m sorry, that must be Clare. I’ve kept you talking, and I’d promised Clare that I would quickly go down to the car and get the rest of her belongings out, saying I would be two minutes”

Then he briefly added,

“I’m not back at the surgery until Clare’s mother comes back which won’t be for two days yet, so I’ll see you then”. With that he hurried down to the car, and I changed my mind about going to see Alison that evening. I descended the stairs now gripping the bannister in desperation and sadness for them both.

Those few innocent moments and perfectly above board, on my behalf at least and exchange of conversation with expressions of condolence, were to pay the price. This occasion would turn my life into a living hell, would be the cause of a death, and eventually endanger my life.

Chapter 25

When I briefly saw Ian at work, I naturally asked how Clare was, and if I could take her some flowers that afternoon. Ian assured me that would be fine and assured me that he thought she would be glad of my company.

I went into a florist’s and bought a bouquet of mixed roses. This seemed appropriate for these would have a more personal touch and would be wrapped to an individual request.

When I arrived home, I went straight up to Clare’s.

I knocked softly on the door as I didn't want to wake her if she was asleep and resting.

Eventually Clare came to the door. She did look ill. Her complexion was grey and wan and the delicate skin underneath her eyes looked puffy with the many millions of tears that she must have shed. I noted that she did look quite dishevelled. Her nightwear looked as though it hadn't been changed for a few days and there what looked like tea stains down the front.

Her usual immaculately and tidy blonde hair, looked greasy and stuck to her head. The way Clare just stood looking through me, I knew this wasn't the right time to say much and so just uttered softly that I just wanted to know that I was thinking of her as we all were.

Without expression Clare snatched the flowers from my hand and the door was then promptly shut in my face.

It was a bit of a shock, but then understandable in the circumstances I suppose, and people reacted so differently in the face of grief. I must say, I was quite surprised that her mother seemed to have gone back home so early.

I wasn't at all prepared for her reaction towards me, nor was I prepared for the shock the next morning.

The following day, I wasn't due into work until 10.30am, and so I just took my time getting ready, pottering about the apartment.

As I came out of the flat and was turning the key in the lock, I saw Molly, the district nurse from the practice. She came down the stairs with a broad smile. Then came the shock, as I became aware of what Molly had, draped over one arm – it was the very same bouquet that I had bought for Clare.

Molly looked at the flowers and then at me.

"Aren't they lovely, exceptionally so?" Molly asked rhetorically. I've just told Clare that she didn't have to get me anything, but she wanted to, and Ian very kindly went and bought them last night apparently".

The wind was really knocked out of my sails, and the rise of emotion which hit the back of my throat and made me want to shed a tear, I managed to keep under control and out of politeness, made myself reply and say, "Yes they are truly lovely Molly".

I stood at the side of my car door and tried to compose myself before driving to the surgery. At that point, I was just confused.

"Why had Clare so suddenly and cruelly turned against me? "I asked myself. It was almost as if she was blaming me for the loss of her baby, or at least needed to take it out on someone and that looked as if it was going to be me.

As I arrived at work, I decided not to say anything to Ian, he had enough on and had a log of back work to catch up on. It was a blessing in a way, to work through my clients for the day, and to realise that there are much worse things going on in people's lives than a rejected bunch of flowers and helped me at least try to get the morning's event in to prospective.

I didn't see Ian at all that day and gathered he had left as early as possible and one of the other Doctors in the practice was going to cover Ian's evening surgery.

As I arrived back home, I was aware of waves of shouting and screaming from their flat. This really was a first as normally they were both such quiet and seemingly composed people, Clare especially.

In fact, all of us in the house were very quiet. Occasionally Alison and Connor would have friends' round and you could hear some laughter and music, but it was never unbearable, in fact it was quite pleasant to break the routines of the weekends at times.

As I began to cook my evening meal, I heard something that sounded like crockery or glass being smashed against the walls upstairs and the shattering of the item as it hit the floor. Clare's voice was still screaming like a banshee. For someone who had come across as so quiet and reserved, she certainly had a good pair of lungs!

I found this drastic and emotional change of atmosphere and behaviour extremely distressing and so as usual, I rang Jayne at our usual evening time when Callum was in bed. I hadn't told her about the recent events of the week, but was now filling in her in, and she did comment that she could hear noise in the distance down the phone.

I knew Jayne would be particularly understanding having had a child herself, and being able to some degree, put herself in Clare's situation if that had happened with Callum.

Over the next few weeks there were quiet evenings but also tempestuous ones. On one evening I decided to go to bed early while there was a lull in the storm. Just before I had managed to drift off to sleep, I heard Clare scream,

"Go on. Go to her, you obviously want to!"

Then silence fell, and I fell asleep, not knowing that the "her" in Clare's outburst was me, and totally unbeknown that this, I later came to know had started from her witnessing Ian putting his hand over mine on the bannister that night and patting my shoulder.

I hadn't realised that Clare had totally come to a misconstrued conclusion, from my point of view anyway. Neither did I know that Clare's unstable mind would result in her revenge and the strength of it like a bullet aimed against me.

Chapter 26

On the Saturday I was in Easterly shopping centre getting my shopping for the weekend. It wasn't often I saw Mary out and about for she usually had her shopping delivered with George now being housebound. We decided on the spur of the moment to go for a cup of tea in the Lavender tea rooms.

Our subject, quite naturally I suppose, soon turned to Clare, and the turbulent atmosphere that had been emanating from Ian and Clare's apartment which also affected Mary and George's peace.

It was Mary who informed me that the funeral of baby Tamara was on the 9th of January at the Crematorium in Easterly and that Dr Crowther, as Mary always respectfully referred to Ian as, had said that all were welcome to join him and Clare in saying goodbye.

Apparently, after the service, there was going to be a small gathering at one of the small rooms at the Town Hall where refreshments were available.

I thanked Mary for telling me and said that I would make sure I had that day off in my diary. I then gave Mary a lift home.

Friday morning arrived and although I wanted out of compassion and respect to attend the service, I did not feel comfortable with going to the get together afterwards.

As it was, my hunch was confirmed by Clare's reaction to me as I arrived at the service.

I politely tried to keep out of Clare's way and only speak if she was ready to.

It had been a bright but biting cold day with an east wind which heralded the possibility of snow.

I didn't really take in much of the service but did cry when I saw that tiny white coffin being brought in by the bearers and placed on such a large stand. It was covered with flowers and teddy bears and the name Tamara made from flowers along the side.

Although there was only a small group from the practice and some family there, the group of mourners were kept to a minimum. I decided that I wouldn't bring flowers, especially after my experience, but I did make a generous contribution to the neo natal charity research.

Ian and Clare stood along with the Vicar outside the crematorium and spoke to the different attenders as they came out.

Alison and I were next. The vicar spoke to me and shook my hand as he did everyone else's, and I voiced my appreciation of his very sensitive and powerful service.

Ian didn't shake my hand but thanked me for coming. Clare on the other hand had a lot to say to Alison and even hugged her but totally ignored me when it was my turn. That really hurt but I wasn't going to let it show. Inside though I kept asking myself "why?" when we had become so close only a few weeks ago.

I had, as usual, kept Jayne well informed of the situation, and she had suggested that I set off to her house straight after the service.

I hadn't told Alison beforehand, but just said that I was needed over at Jayne's, and would she make my apologies to Ian and Clare, but already knowing inside, this would please Clare immensely for some reason.

I had a lovely relaxing time at Jayne's and enjoyed the luxury of relaxing, not just in my own skin but just being with real friends and not on edge. In fact, I was rather perturbed when it was time to go back. I secretly didn't feel like going back at all despite my lovely apartment that at one time had meant so much to me and doing a job I really loved.

I managed to arrive at Jayne's while it was still daylight.

Chapter 27

I arrived back home at around 1pm. As I walked into the foyer, the glorious aroma of roast lamb, emanated from Mary's apartment.

I opened my front door, and after putting my case on the bed, bent down to retrieve my post from the floor.

I picked up a small pile of letters and then decided with a cup of tea in hand to go and sit on the settee and open my letters.

My thoughts turned very briefly at first, to the unusual but unpleasant smell that surrounded the atmosphere. I briefly put down my post and went into the kitchen again. I couldn't identify it and wondered if it might be from the drains. I decided to go through my post then have an investigation and maybe all that was needed was a thorough bleach through everywhere

As I sat perusing my post, out the corner of my eye I became aware of a grey object, scurrying across my cream lounge carpet.

My natural reaction was to scream.

I then saw it again and it scuttled out of sight under my Welsh dresser. I screamed again.

I then became aware of an eerie shriek of laughter, just like something out of Jane Eyre.

I stood on the settee and fumbled for my mobile, which was fortunately in my pocket.

I immediately rang Ernie who lived on site, in the keeper's lodge with his wife, Elsie. He was the handyman for the estate.

I hysterically told Ernie my predicament and he promised to be round within the next 30 minutes or so.

I stood almost riveted to the spot and shaking.

There was a knock at the door, and I shouted, "Come in" in a high-pitched voice.

It was Alison.

"I heard the screams" she said, "I worked out it was coming from here"

On the brink of tears, I explained to Alison what had happened when I had arrived back home.

"Have you any apples?" she suddenly asked to my surprise.

"Apples?" I questioned, feeling a bit irritated as though she was having a joke.

"Yes" she replied, I think sensing my irritation as though she was mocking me. "Don't forget, my sister knows about science, and they do lots of experiments at school. If it is a mouse or even a rat, trust me, they like apples. We need to tempt this fellow with something he likes" Alison replied confidently and taking charge.

"A rat?" I responded with a hysterical voice.

“Have you, or haven’t you got an apple?” she asked firmly.

“No, I haven’t” I said, my voice raised.

“What about bread?” Alison next asked.

“I’ve some granary bread, but it’s probably going a bit stale now with me being away” I replied.

“Oh, they don’t mind that, they’re not fussy. Now then, I’ll take the seeds out first and coax our little friend out” Alison continued as though she was conducting a nature programme, and as for the “little friend” bit, he or she was certainly not mine!

As Alison chopped away preparing the bread and taking the granary seeds out, I questioned, “I thought they liked cheese?”

“No” said Alison. “That is actually a bit of a fallacy. They prefer carbohydrates” she said, momentarily amazing me with her knowledge of such vermin.

After she had prepared the slice of bread, squeezing out all the grains and seeds, she made her way towards the Welsh dresser and went down on her knees with one hand outstretched invitingly to my little “squatter”.

Eventually the mouse came out which enabled Alison to gently pick him or her up.

“You look like a professional” I said cringingly.

“How can you touch that thing?” I asked Alison screwing my face up.

Alison chuckled at my face. “I did my work experience at a vet’s practice where you had to be prepared for everything and to handle any animal”

Just at that moment, Ernie knocked at the door and came in.

“At least you’ve made my job easier Alison,” said Ernie.

Ernie put the ghastly creature into a cage which he had brought with him in preparation for the departure. He took it and put it in his works van, saying that he would release it, but a good way from here!

I thanked Ernie and told him how grateful I was for his help.

Both Alison and Ernie remarked on the smell that was obviously now known to be down to the mouse. Ernie did remark, which I don't know whether was for the good or not, that the mouse must have been trapped there for a couple of days to make that sort of smell. I did remark that when I had left on the Friday, there wasn't any evidence of one and it was only Sunday afternoon. It did seem strange that this visitor had decided to come while I was away.

Before Ernie and Alison departed, the daylight had rapidly begun to fade and I reached out to turn on my lamp over the television, but as I moved the switch near the bulb, nothing happened.

I apologised, "Sorry, I won't be a minute, I've a spare one in the kitchen drawer" which I quickly went to fetch.

I changed the bulb and tried again. Still nothing.

Ernie said that he would look.

He went over to the lamp and then looked across at Alison first and then me. With raised eyebrows.

He switched the lamp off at the socket before pulling the plug out. Ernie then held the lamp lead up and which revealed what was plain to see, there were teeth marks right through it. Your visitor has done, what is quite common, and chewed through this cable. There might, however, be other cables that are unsafe that we don't yet know about.

I shook my head in disbelief.

"I don't understand" I started. "Our apartments are brand new, who would imagine mice being a problem I don't think Mary or George have mentioned anything like that and they are on the ground floor too" I protested.

"Not necessarily so," said Ernie. "We aren't far from the fields remember".

Alison, trying to make light of the situation gave a slight giggle and said,

“Looks like he may have invited himself in through the letterbox and not the back. The mouse must have thought it was a cat flap!”

Alison then backed off as she noticed my face awash with panic and then swiftly added,

“I’m only joking, Mice are known for their craftiness, they can get in anywhere that you couldn’t imagine”.

A sickening thought crossed my mind, I had never heard of a mouse climbing through a letter box!

However, that thought haunted me. How could that mouse have just conveniently decided to come in at the front instead of the fields at the back, which was nigh on impossible, and just decided to come through the front door – it just wasn’t feasible.

Ernie interrupted my silent panic.

“Look Natalie, it’s not really safe for you to stop here tonight, it is my duty to check all the electrics are safe, which they obviously aren’t. I need to come in tomorrow and check all the cables etc., in the daylight. I’ll also get the pest control chap to come and have a check to see if it was just that one or if there any others lurking about. I’ll also get your carpet cleaned and suitable for you to move back in within a couple of days if that is ok with you?”

I glanced at Alison, and heavy hearted said, “I feel as though it’s my fault and that I haven’t been keeping the place clean”.

“Well don’t” said Alison administering her authority.

“Come on” she instructed. Pack a few things in your bag and stop with us until your place is sorted”

The relief I felt when she made that offer, was so welcome, and one I couldn’t resist, especially for my sanity. I was beginning to feel I was being targeted by someone who had a hatred for me,

Was it Clare? Had she got some personal vendetta against me and if so, how was I going to prove it?

It was a great relief to be at Alison's. Being upstairs I didn't have to listen to Clare's outbursts and hear that eerie laugh which she like to break out in to from time to time.

I didn't stay up late and had a soak and relax in the bath.

It might have been blowing a January gale outside, but it was cosy and warm here for tonight at least.

I sank into the lovely crisp white sheets.

I was about to doze off when Alison's comments came flooding back into my thoughts, regarding the mouse inviting itself through the letter box like a cat flap.....

I felt a surge of panic.

That mouse been planted in there. Why did the mouse suddenly decide to appear when I was away that weekend?

There was only one person it could be and that was Clare. She seemed to hate my guts for some unknown reason.

I went into work the next day and managed to function professionally in my counsellor mode.

Looking at my diary, I noticed that I needed to make an appointment with my supervisor. As Counsellors, we needed regular supervision ourselves and to discuss any concerns or queries about our clients and to make sure we always delivered the best.

While at the surgery, I rang Zoe, my supervisor and made an appointment to see her. I had managed to keep my appointments with her strictly based on my clients, but Zoe, as all trained supervisors, read beyond the person sat in front of them and I knew Zoe could tell, there was more going on than I was revealing and that needed addressing.

I must give Zoe her due in the fact she never pried or forced me to reveal my real worries and I am quite sure, she could feel at ease that my clients were not of concern or beyond my capabilities.

On my latest visit to Zoe, I did mention, but more from a concerned neighbourly point of view that we were all wanting to do our best for Ian and Clare but without making matters worse.

Zoe had heard about the tragedy and was very understanding how difficult it was to say the right thing when people, like Clare were in a dark place and could easily take offence at the smallest thing.

Zoe did try to reassure me that Clare's outbursts that I overheard were part of her natural anger, "Why me?" coming out and that it was all part of the grieving process. I didn't let on that I had become the target of that question.

The following morning, I woke early. It was still dark and gloomy, and I quietly made my way down to my car without disturbing Alison and Connor.

There had been a hard frost overnight and had taken its toll on my windscreen and windows.

I started to scrape the ice off with my scraper and tried to turn the engine over to get the blowers going to heat the back and front windows but found that the battery was flat. I turned the ignition over three times, but still no joy. This seemed to be unusual these days with modern cars and I felt surprised if the problem was due to a flat battery.

My mind vaguely drifted back to when, as a young child, I helped my mother and brother push his "banger" a push start on many a morning in the winter.

However, no such luck or assistance for me. With this drive being level plus a lack of human force, there was no way I could perform a push start. I was just about to ring the RAC who I fortunately belonged to, when Ian came out of the main door.

"Hi Natalie, looks as though you are struggling, can I help"

"I think it may be the battery. My late brother would have started it in no time" I replied.

“Well, I’m on call out duty today and I’ve just had an early call. Jump in and I’ll drop you down at work and you can ring the RAC from there if needs be”. Ian responded helpfully.

I turned towards Ian’s car, and out the corner of my eye saw the curtain move back and forth from their flat, as though we were being watched.

The conversation between Ian and I was mostly around Clare which I suppose, was natural in the circumstances. I tried to sound sympathetic despite my hunches about Clare. I had no proof though but my suspicions were strong ones.

As I had arrived early and before and clients were due, I decided to ring Jayne. She came to the same conclusion as me. I assured her though, that although it was a bit nerve racking, I could handle it and I wasn’t going to let it get to me.

Jayne was such a good friend and knew she really did genuinely care about me. She made it plain that she thought that Clare was out to scare me.

Jayne kept urging me to move back, but I told her that I decided to stick it out for the time being as I enjoyed my job, I loved my apartment, the other neighbours were brilliant I had a small circle of really good friends down here. I felt sure that eventually, given time that Clare would settle down emotionally and mentally, and after all having a GP for a husband must have its benefits in situations like these and have access to top notch treatment if needed.

Jayne gave a little laugh, and said “Yes, I suppose you’re right. But all the same, be careful”.

Little did I know that Clare’s mental state was going to deteriorate even more and how I would continue to be the vicious brunt of it?

Chapter 28

As I walked into my office to prepare for the day ahead, I had a return call from the RAC who informed me that it was just one of the

starter leads that had come loose. Nothing serious but that my car was up and running fine now. The mechanic offered to bring the car down on the truck to work so that I was alright for getting home.

I was grateful and so relieved that it was nothing too serious or expensive for that matter.

As I waited for them to arrive, I couldn't help but think that this was too much of a coincidence that this had happened, and that surely, someone would have had to have been under the bonnet for the lead to come loose? Surely it wouldn't happen on its own. I tried to chide myself for going to the sublime to the ridiculous.

When the mechanic turned up with my keys, I asked him if this was something that happened often.

The mechanic said it was rare, but there are always occasions when something will happen that you don't expect.

I thanked him and returned to the office with my keys. My thoughts suddenly turned towards Clare, was she a bit of a mechanic on the quiet? All this was just getting to be too much of a pattern, and one I didn't like it.

Just before I saw my first client, I decided to take a chance and ring Greg.

We may be divorced, but I had always admired his stability and level headedness in a crisis, and I felt that this was turning into one.

I wasn't going to mention about the car, I was more upset about the mouse and how it came to find itself into my apartment very conveniently.

It was now around 11.30am where Greg was. He did answer his phone, but he was quite curt in his manner.

I tried to tell him my plight, but he just shortly replied, "Get a cat". Just before the phone went dead, I could hear muffled Russian communications towards him.

Greg did later text me not long afterwards and did apologise but advised me that Olena had demanded their sexual escapades to be at certain times of the day as she was trying for a child.

That would have upset me at one time, but not now, and I even found it quite amusing that Greg was having to abide by her ritual and be controlled by a woman for a change!

I only stayed at Alison's a further night as Ernie hadn't found any further damage and neither had the rent a kill man, so it looked like a one off. Ernie had managed to persuade the accounts estate office to have the carpet professionally cleaned.

While on my break at lunchtime, I sat in the surgery kitchen and had a good scan through the local paper under the pets for sale column, and the local pet shop's advertisements.

I noticed there was an advert for a two-year-old female tabby, free to a good home and for genuine reasons. It said that the cat belonged to an elderly lady who was going into a home. I noticed the address was only two streets away from where I was. I rang her number and Ivy, as she was called, said that I was welcome to call round on my way home from work.

After work, I went straight round to Ivy's house. I explained briefly to Ivy that I was having trouble with mice coming off the fields (well, I thought that was the best way to put it), and I really need a good mouse catcher. Ivy assured me that Rosie was very good at that, and giving her young age, would be ideal.

On entering her house, I could see that she was extremely fond of Rosie, but she did seem to take to me, nonetheless.

Ivy was kindly giving me all of Rosie's belongings and that included some food as well.

After our short conversation, I thought it best for Ivy to put Rosie in her basket. I felt a lump come up into my throat as I saw Ivy give Rosie a hug and kissed the top of her head.

I assured Ivy that she would be well cared for.

As a child we had only had a dog as a pet, so I knew little about cats and their behaviours and needs apart from the obvious.

I had spent the previous evening, after Greg's suggestion, researching on my laptop for vital information.

I had also heard, that, particularly with animals such as cats, that you should let them come to you when they feel comfortable, and not when you decide.

When I arrived home with Rosie, I opened the cat box when I had gently placed it on the lounge floor, so that Rosie could come out when she felt ready.

I then went into the kitchen to start making my tea but also put her down some food and water and chatted away to her as I thought this might help.

I arranged to have the next day off work as Ernie had offered to bring someone from a professional firm to look at fitting a cat flap through the French windows at the back. At least it was safe from the road around the back and there were lots of areas and places that a cat would like to explore.

Alison popped into to meet Rosie and thought she was adorable.

We sat down in the lounge and had a coffee and a chat together.

Alison immediately wanted to broach the subject of my wellbeing which she said was of her concern now.

I decided to get one or two things off my chest.

I told her about Clare's sudden change towards me, about the flowers, my suspicions about the mouse arriving suspiciously, the car incident, all the arguments and smashing of objects etc.,

Alison listened patiently and then smiled gently and agreed,

"Yes, I admit, Clare is definitely strange these days, not that I have seen much of her, but don't automatically think that Clare is against you" she said trying to reassure me. "Her anger will be against Ian, which is often the case" Alison sounded to be convincingly reassuring.

“I don’t know” I sighed. “It’s just a hunch, but I can’t prove anything”. Just then, as if on cue, Rosie came up and began to rub her head up and down my leg and jumped on to my lap, curling herself into a ball and making herself comfortable.

“Well, someone certainly likes you without a doubt” Alison added teasingly.

“Animals, particularly cats and dogs, love us unconditionally, and we all need that” continued Alison.

Alison gave me a hug and said she would let herself out as Rosie was comfortable, but before she went out the door added, “You know where I am, if and when you need me” and then let herself out.

For once, I felt quite relaxed and felt so happy with my new member of the family.

I curled up in bed that night, and Rosie decided to sleep at the end of the bed on her favourite cat blanket.

Ernie came the next day and made sure that the cat flap was fitted to standard.

Rosie was already used to one at Ivy’s and so that was a bonus.

I arranged my appointments so that I could work with the rest of my team and then have a few days off.

I decided that, although I was a novice, I would turn my attention to my little patch of garden through the French doors on to the small patio at the back. My daffodils that I had planted earlier and seemed a bit of a flop, but I had always been quite successful at growing pansies all the year round.

Late winter was now giving way to Spring, and I had noticed that there were a lot of pansies for sale, so on my next shopping trip, the next day I went down to Easterly Garden centre and bought some compost and four trays of multi coloured pansies.

Much to Rosie’s delight and her greetings of my return, we went out together in the early evening sunset and began planting them out. As

I did all the hard work, Rosie curled up contentedly after her meal on the patio, soaking in the warmth on the slabs.

After my efforts of filling the two large tubs, I decided to enjoy the rest of the daylight.

I poured myself a glass of white Chardonnay and sat next to Rosie, admiring my handiwork, and chatting away to her.

As the sun began to set, I feasted on the glorious view before me and felt relaxed for once. This wasn't to last though.

I became aware that I was being watched from the flat above.

I arose from my garden chair, and as I did so, the window from Clare and Ian's flat slammed shut.

As Rosie and I went back inside, I felt a shiver down my spine, and I couldn't help but think that Clare was most definitely watching me.

I had a relaxing soak in the bath and then in my dressing gown, Rosie and I sat watching the television. She sat purring loudly on my lap, then Rosie came up on the back of my shoulder.

Life could be enjoyable but at the same time, there was a black cloud that seemed to follow me about wherever I went, and Clare was usually involved in it at some point.

Chapter 29

The next few days passed quietly and thankfully without incident.

However, I must admit, I still felt that the historian Damocles sword would eventually come down on me for some unknown reason.

The following morning, I sat and had my breakfast with Rosie on my knee. Purring contentedly.

I gave Rosie a big hug before setting off to work.

As I locked my front door to the apartment, I noticed a young woman arrive in a white uniform with red edging. She went straight up to Clare and Ian's apartment, and she knocked and walked in.

I made my way to work.

I passed Ian's consulting room. His door happened to be open, and he appeared to be in deep thought sat with his elbows on his desk with his hands supporting his resting upon them.

I was in two minds whether to knock on his door.

However, that decision was soon taken out of my hands, as he must have seen me walk past, and called out to me.

"Natalie, would you spare me a minute, Come and sit down and I'll pour you a coffee"

"Ok, thank you" I replied.

"How are you?" He asked, his desperate eyes searching mine.

"I'm ok at the present I falsely reassured him,

"how about you and of course, how is Clare? Nobody seems to have seen her at present"

Completely to my surprise, Ian responded,

"I'm just under a lot of pressure at present. Clare is acting a bit like a psycho now, and I apologise profusely for the noise you have been suffering in the meantime, she's just kicking off. Even her mother had enough and went back home"

I nodded in agreement but felt slightly irritated, surely, he of all people, her husband and a doctor would know the key to her behaviour.

"So, what's the answer? I pressed.

"I don't think counselling's the answer in her mental state" he replied to which I readily agreed.

"I've had a word with Dr Ross at Pine fields Hospital, but due to him being near retiring age, he only works part time, so I was told it will be about three weeks before he can see her, and his secretary said that he didn't consider her an urgent case as yet, which I don't agree with." He said a little exasperated.

I felt it wasn't really the right time for express my fears about Clare especially as I hadn't any proof. In my own mind, I wasn't aware that Ian had any knowledge of any bitterness towards me as I had suspected, even though I didn't know why. Sadly, for me, Ian knew a lot more that he was letting on.

Later, as I arrived back home, I noticed the early spring sunshine bursting through the French doors and that Rosie had been sat right on that spot on the carpet, having been asleep and obviously enjoying the warmth.

Rosie immediately sprang up on her legs and greeted me eagerly, she fussed round my ankles and meowed. It was so special how she always welcomed me back home as if she had been waiting all day to see me back home.

I made my tea, an appetising ham salad, Rosie with her usual treat of tinned salmon today. I and sat down to watch the news, with Rosie nestled round my neck like a cushion.

When I had finished and washed up, I said to Rosie,
"Let's go and sit on the patio and enjoy the sunset"

Rosie raced over to the door with me, and laid out, soaking up the evening sunshine.

That evening was thankfully quiet upstairs and without event. I had to admit that these outbursts of Clare's were getting less often. It went through my mind that maybe the specialist that Ian had mentioned had managed to get to see her, and hopefully had prescribed some sedatives. Whatever, it seemed that things were calming down. I couldn't help but wish that those next three weeks would pass rapidly and that the Doctor who was seeing her would let us all have a break from Clare.

Before I retired to bed, I gave Jayne a call, and one of our regular topics had now become Clare. Jayne was relieved to hear that the problems seemed to be abating.

The next day passed without incident and had been quite fulfilling. One of my long-term clients had made such terrific progress that she had decided to try and get signed off to see how she managed for the time being.

It was always a good moment to be able to see someone take charge of their life again.

Rosie looked pleased as usual to see me and greeted me as always, her loud purring was like a song to my ears.

I chatted away to her, as I always did, especially at teatime.

“Right Rosie, my little bundle of joy. You are going to have a treat as well; you can have some tuna steak tonight”.

After tea I rang Grace to arrange another evening out.

I decided to sit out on the patio again for a few minutes, making the most of the lovely evenings we seemed to be having now, and taking in that glorious aroma of the gardens and the countryside.

As I was sat outside, Mary came out too with a mug of tea in her hand. This wasn't a sight I often saw. She had her time taken up more and more with George and so I thought that maybe she was so exhausted in an evening, she perhaps just relaxed in front of the television. I could tell when it was on by its volume because of her lack of hearing these days. I didn't mind. I'd rather listen to that than Ian and Clare.

Mary was saying that George was going into hospital for a few days for a hernia operation and that it was also give her a bit of a rest. The ambulance was coming in the morning and she was going to visit him later that evening. I offered to take her to see him and I rearranged my schedule the next day so that I could go with her.

After arriving home for work, I had a quick shower and gave Rosie her tea and a cuddle before I set off to the hospital with Mary.

I just briefly popped into to see George for a few minutes, but he was still very sleepy, so I went and bought myself a coffee and sat and read a magazine until visiting time had finished.

Mary offered me a drink at her home when we arrived back, but I did turn her offer down, and thanked her, saying I could do with getting back and Rosie would be waiting for me.

Rosie was pleased to see me.

Rosie was an extremely well-behaved companion, and there were very few “accidents”, but I did notice as I went to close my thick cream velvet curtains, that there was a slight trail of muddy paw marks by the cat flap, despite the mat next to it. I pretended to tell Rosie off in a scolding manner, but that little girl look and the usual brushing against my legs, made me pick her up and cuddle her.

It was only slight, so I managed to clean it up and washed Rosie’s paws. I just thought that maybe she had been moussing and had accidentally been in some earth around the surrounding fields.

I had no idea of the horror that would greet me the next morning.

I decided to get ready for bed and read my book and Rosie sat at my feet. Despite the occasional rumblings from upstairs from Claire and her stamping about, I did drift off.

I must have been extremely tired as I had overslept. I called the surgery to explain and said that I would be slightly late and contacted my first client with my apologies.

The sun was streamlining through the French doors, and I decided that, as I had been managed to rearrange my client for later that day, I would leisurely have my cereal and take five minutes on the patio to have my cereal. Rosie came and sat at my feet.

As I sat down on the garden chair, I almost dropped my cereal bowl as I could sight of the destruction before my eyes.

One tub of my pansies had been completely flattened as if it had been sat on and most of the stems had been snapped in the process. The other pot had been forcefully set upon, the pansies had been dug up, the soil scattering over the patio and this one had a crack right down one side.

I stood there for a few moments absolutely stunned and my immediate reaction was just to scoop Rosie up in my arms, and once dressed, set off.

I couldn't help but glance up at Ian and Clare's upstairs windows on my way back through the door. I saw the sitting room curtains, pull forward slightly, but I couldn't see who was looking out, and then they were pulled shut again.

I immediately dressed and rang Ernie and distraughtly asked if he could give me his opinion as to how this could have happened.

Ernie didn't take long to come, and as I opened the door, I just couldn't help but burst into tears. Ernie stroked my arm, and, with compassion and reassuringly.

"Try not to upset yourself lass. Go and pop the kettle on while I have a good look and see what I can do".

My hands shook and I tried to stop the tears, hot and stinging down my cheeks. Stupid as it may sound, I think my reaction was one of shock. I would have been extremely annoyed had it been an animal that was responsible, but this just seemed too much like a coincidence.

Ernie stood at the door and said that there was it was certainly a mass destruction, but he couldn't say what it could have been caused by.

I quietly asked him if he would come inside and have his cup of tea and laid out some shortbread biscuits. I also explained that I didn't want our conversation to be overheard, but that I would explain in a minute.

Ernie sat down on the armchair opposite me.

"Well," he started. "Squirrels are very destructive when it comes to outdoor plants and so can rabbits, but I must say that this is usually towards autumn when food is becoming rare. I must say though, I've never seen anything quite like this". "Oh" he quickly continued, "I don't mean to point fingers, but cats would sometimes like to sit in

big pots like that, especially when the sun has been out, for the warmth”.

He gave a sip of his tea and seemed deep in thought, until I suddenly and nervously began to tell him my fears. I was quite sure I could trust him.

“Ernie, I know it isn’t Rosie, I just know. She loves being out and about in the fields, but I’m sure she wouldn’t do that. Anyway, Mary’s Garden and mine aren’t fenced off, and Mary has some pot plants out, that she put out weeks ago and Rosie hasn’t sat on those. I don’t think Rosie’s light weight would come near to destroying those plants beyond salvage. Also, how come the other pot has that great crack down it? Surely an animal couldn’t manage that. I blurted out.

“Yes” Ernie began thoughtfully. “I think you have a point there, but how do you think it happened. I feel as though you already have your suspicions” he said gently.

“I do Ernie” and I bent my head in despair.

“I know 99% that Clare has a grudge against me. Don’t ask me why because I don’t know. Ian has commented on her strange behaviour, and, I don’t know, I just have a hunch and it’s all since she lost the baby, almost as if she’s taking it out on me.”

“Aye lass, we never got to the bottom of your furry unexpected visitor, did we? I know what you mean, this is all very suspicious I must admit especially with the problems being ongoing”

I then quickly added “I think Ian is finding her too much to cope with. I know he is trying to get some help. Apparently Pam won’t come up for a while as she finds her hard work. Ian must put up with her having tantrums and being very destructive at times, I’ve heard it regularly. She really needs professional help” I continued.

Ernie nodded. “I had heard that Ian is trying to get some respite care, and, in the meantime, I think he’s managed to arrange carers to come in at least twice a day”

Ernie then continued, "I could have a word with Ian about today if you like" he suggested trying to be helpful.

"No, I'd rather you didn't, I've no proof unfortunately, and saying anything would just make matters worse" I said firmly. As I mentioned before, little did I know that Ian was very aware of Clare's mental state and what she was capable of and where this hate campaign against me had started.

Suddenly, Ernie had an idea.

"It's always been very quiet around here, but I do know that when the manor was being converted into the apartments that CCTV was supposed to be installed. If you just look up there, near the guttering, you will see that everything has been put in place, just overlooked to connect it. Let me contact the Estates Office and ask permission to arrange to get it all rigged up properly and working. I won't say anything about all this, but I can add pressure because it should have been all sorted before anybody moved in.

You may feel at least a bit more protected. I know perhaps people give teenagers a bad name but it would certainly rule out any half-hearted excuses that might come forward. I know the entrance is like a fortress but that isn't the case down yonder past the trees at the back. Anyway lass, in the meantime you know where Elsie and I are, and you just pop in when you want to".

That made me feel tons better in some respects.

I did, however, decide to take some photos of the tubs and all the mess surrounding them. I just felt that I needed to gather evidence where I could until this mess was sorted sooner or later.

I quickly gave Rosie a hug and set off to work.

Grace called me at work and reminded me we were supposed to be meeting up that evening. I apologised and said it had been a rough morning and invited her round instead.

Grace had been a couple of times before, and so she had no problem whatsoever in finding me.

I made a cheese selection with a choice of biscuits and some slices of ham, washed down with a small glass of Shiraz each.

I showed Grace the “crime scene” through the windows as I didn’t want to give Clare the satisfaction that we were surveying the damage.

Grace shook her head in disbelief that someone could be so hateful.

I made sure that Clare didn’t spoil our evening by letting her be the total focus of our discussions.

We had some good laughs, going over some of our memorable moments at college, and even better than that, discussing where we were going to have our annual few days off.

Rosie had really taken to Grace. Mind you, Grace also had a cat called Tigger, so that probably helped.

Eventually Grace carefully picked Rosie up and gently laid her on the settee, stroking her and saying goodbye.

Grace hugged me and said to ring her any time and hoped that things would settle down now. We arranged to go to the Cinema the following week as usual.

I looked at the clock, it was 9pm. I took a chance and rang Greg although knowing that if he was at home, it would be midnight. I still felt wound up and stressed and I just needed to talk to someone who knew me inside out as it were. Greg had become more of a big brother these days.

Fortunately, Olena was flat out asleep upstairs, and he was at his desk in the dining room, going through his accounts.

Greg listened to my latest plight and outburst of emotion.

“It could be squirrels” he said. “I mean you’re really out in the countryside there, it’s an ideal habitat for them” he replied.

“I know, that’s what Ernie said” I replied.

“I’ve taken some pictures of the state of the patio and the damage, you never know, they might come in useful. I’m telling you Greg, I

spoke to Ian a few days ago and he did actually admit that Clare is mentally ill” I added emphatically.

Greg said that he was flying over in a couple of days to the factory, and he would come and see me at home. I felt quite reassured by that.

With a heavy heart I walked into the surgery the following morning although I really didn't feel like being in listener mode today. I knew my supervisor wouldn't really approve of me working today. I felt drained with nothing left to give. I was trapped in a vicious circle. I couldn't prove anything, but I knew without a doubt that Clare was behind this.

Little did I know, however, that this “revenge” behaviour was going to get a lot more personal and result in a tragedy?

Chapter 30

In the following days, I noticed a regular team of carers coming into see to Clare while Ian was at work. I did feel sorry for Ian for he was having to juggle work and then when he come home, Clare was still prone to her outbursts, and admirably, he didn't seem to bite back and, from what I could tell, he was very patient with her.

The next morning, I arose very early after a fitful sleep.

I decided I needed to clear the patio up. I just hadn't been able to face it until now when I made myself move into action. I thought if I set to work on the clear up early and as quietly as I could, Clare would be unaware. I just couldn't face it when she would be up and about and have that gloating look which I now began to imagine would be on her face.

With great strength, I managed to deftly move the unbroken tub next to the other one and, for the time being, I laid a green garden bag over the top of them with a couple of large stones on each to weigh the bags over them. I quietly picked up my yard brush, and as quietly as possible, brushed the scattered earth on to the open lawns

at the back. This was followed by a quick swill down of the flags on the patio. Satisfied, I surveyed my tidy up. At least it was all clean and clear again and I wouldn't have to be reminded of the disaster. Although I'd kept the pictures of the dreadful event if I needed them. Rosie took the opportunity to go and stake out her territory and have a good nosey round while I was outside.

I gave Rosie her breakfast and morning cuddle and settled her down on her cat blanket.

We sat together on the settee like two old pals watching the morning news. As I showered and dressed, I did hear some banging and clattering going on from Ian and Clare's apartment. I gave a quick look out of the kitchen window that looked onto the parking area and noticed Ian's car had already gone. I then concluded it must be one of the carers perhaps being a bit more noisy than usual in the process of giving Clare her breakfast, although I must admit, it did seem out of character for them.

I gave Rosie her goodbye cuddle and told her I'd see her later. Walking into the kitchen, I suddenly remembered I needed to pick up my lunch box and bottle of water. Why I am mentioning these seemingly insignificant matters, is, as you will read on, those few extra minutes that I took to get ready, and been out of the door, could have avoided the dreadful shock that I had when I opened my front door.

Again the "flight or fight response", now came over me with force, for there stood Clare with a vacant and glazed look, a bit like a zombie.

She stood inches away from me. In fact, she was hardly recognisable, apart from those distinctive sea blue eyes. Here before stood someone almost recognisable.

She stood there with bedraggled greasy hair. Her delicate frame was now replaced with an extremely chubby body. Instead of her business-like attire and image, she had an old-fashioned sloppy

jumper and baggy skirt down to her feet which were bare, standing on the stone slabs.

I stood rooted to the spot, desperately trying to handle this situation in the best possible way. I felt so alone. Alison and Connor were both away, Mike was away as was Jo and Mary had stayed down at the hospital the last night or so.

I was also unnerved by the fact that Clare had one hand behind her back as though she had something in it. My mind went into panic, "was it a knife, or some instrument or another to attack me?" Then I suddenly thought, if I made a run for it, she was now heavy enough to overpower me, and what about Rosie, I couldn't move to shut my door.

At that moment, at the height of my panic, one of the carers came through the main entrance, and came over and took a grip of Clare's arm.

"Come on Clare" said the carer taking charge, "Let's get you sorted out"

As she turned Clare towards her, Clare's other arm swung out, and a bundle of tiny baby clothes were hurled at my face, mittens, and bootees etc.

I didn't respond, and felt the soft feel of the scented fabrics, cross my face before they tumbled to the floor.

As the carer hurried Clare back up the stairs, the lady turned round and looked over her shoulder and mouthed "Sorry" apologetically and gave me a sweet smile as they ascended the stairs.

My body went into shock, and I felt tremors in my hands and legs. I shut and made sure my front door was locked and made it to the car.

Once in the car, I put on a CD that I had bought as advertised in a Psychology magazine. It was like the familiar babbling of a brook across the stones, and you could, if you closed your eyes and relaxed, imagine a bright summer's day with the scent of bluebells with their delicate petals slightly swaying in the light breeze. The smell of wild

garlic, and that undeniable yield and buzzing from spring to summer and its treasures and the yellow meadow laden fields.

I often played this quietly in the background of my consulting room, especially with new clients to put them at their ease, as it was not unusual for new ones to feel a bit on edge, not knowing what counselling meant or entailed.

Well, it certainly helped me at that moment. I took a deep breath in and then exhaled slowly. I opened my eyes and now felt calm enough to drive to work. My first port of call was Ian.

I walked straight into the kitchen when I arrived and poured myself a coffee from the percolator.

I checked first with the girls on reception when Ian had a free slot and was more than pleased to find out he had a slot within the next ten minutes, and I had too.

As I sat in my room, sipping on the glorious taste of the rich coffee, my mind began to rehearse different ways to confront Ian, but I knew that it would be really a case of “go with the flow”, but one thing I was now determined about, I wasn’t leaving his office until he gave me his word that this was it, he had to do something immediately.

I couldn’t live like this anymore. I knew it would be a shock, or at least that’s what I thought, but something had to be done without delay.

As I approached his room, I saw his door was ajar, but I could hear he was on the telephone. I would normally have apologised and crept out the room until he had finished, but “No” I thought, this has gone too far now and he has to take responsibility. I sat myself down opposite him, defiantly, and waited for him to finish his call.

As he put the receiver down, he said,

” Ah, Natalie”, his eyes lit up as he said my name, “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“No, it’s not a pleasure that I have to be here” I said curtly but bravely.

I saw Ian’s facial expression, as he seemed a bit taken aback.

Then I continued, “I don’t mean any disrespect, Dr Crowther” I began formally.

“I have had strong suspicions’ over the last few months, which I has been confirmed today, that Clare has a serious grievance against me, and it’s got to stop!” I mustered all the strength in my voice without shouting,

I told him all about the passing and disturbing events of the last few weeks and her reaction at their baby’s funeral which was apparent, just directed at me. I also complained about the continual screaming outbursts. I also conveyed my suspicions about my car incident and then the mouse, the destruction of my flower tubs and then the incident that morning of having the baby clothes thrown at my face. I’d had enough!

Ian looked uncomfortable as I spoke.

“I am not picking those baby clothes up. Maybe someone will before I get back, but I’m not.”

Ian now looked aghast and was extremely apologetic. I then hit him right between the eyes that it was unacceptable and WHY? What had I done to deserve this?

I couldn’t help that Ian was trying to avoid directly answering my question and all he could say was:

“I’m trying to get Clare into Faversham House Residential. I can’t apologise enough for all this distress, and I should have let her go into care a long time ago. I just kept thinking that she would improve, and it was just a hiccup and part of me felt guilty because of our baby. I do need a break myself and the two carers that come each day just aren’t enough, she really needs care 24/7” Ian explained.

“Yes, I can see that” I replied albeit unsympathetically, “However, that doesn’t explain why me! Why am I the target of her anger? It’s not as though I have a baby myself for her to feel resentful about” I replied getting quite irritated now as though Ian wasn’t really addressing the situation.

I then continued as there was no immediate response. “Look, I can appreciate that Clare has been through hell. Clare knows that I lost a baby myself when I was married to my first husband. I know it wasn’t the same as Clare, clinging onto the hope that your baby was going to pull through and doing everything within her power to ensure that, and yet still facing the tragedy of losing that much loved baby. I’m not surprised that all the insurmountable grief has perhaps pushed her over the edge. As much as I feel for her, I am not going to be the continual brunt of it, and I don’t deserve it” I was quite surprised at my righteous outburst.

Nor was I prepared for the shock and terror of what Ian was about to reveal.

Ian now lifted his head from his hands that I had been talking to.

“I think I know” Ian replied slowly.

I made no comment, but intrigued at his reply, but at the same time, nervous at what I could feel was about to be revealed.

Ian continued. “You remember the day Clare came home from hospital, that last time after losing our little girl?”

I nodded, “How could I ever forget?”

“We stopped and spoke on the stairs for quite a few minutes, didn’t we? I think you were on your way up to Alison’s?” he continued.

“Yes, I think I was” I affirmed, but not understanding the relevance of that event.

“As we were talking, your hand was resting on the bannister, and I put my hand over yours and looked into your eyes and patted your shoulder” Ian continued.

“I vaguely remember. That was the evening you told me the terrible news about losing the baby?”

I answered expectantly, waiting for the answer.

“Well, Clare saw us. Do you recall, Clare slamming the apartment door? She had seen us” he burst out.

“ I replied annoyed and irritated. “I’ve sometimes given someone a slight pat on their back, in a caring manner with my clients at times. In my experience, when there has been a sudden bereavement, people do express themselves in different ways. What are you getting at?”

“Well Clare automatically took it as though there was something between us. I suppose it didn’t help her being on an emotional roller coaster.” He finally explained.

“Just a minute” I said quickly beginning to piece things together all of a sudden, “Does this have any connection with when all the arguments that suddenly began on that evening and the smashing of crockery or glasses, whatever it was?”

Ian nodded but kept quiet.

Slowly, I then carried on with my train of thought and my memory began to rapidly kick in.

“I remember Clare shouting at you and saying, “Go on you can have her if you want her, you can have her, but at a price? Something like that anyway. That wasn’t referring to me by any chance, given the revelations you have come out with today?” I carried on becoming infuriated.

“Yes” was all he replied and levelled his eyes at me.

“You’ve known all this time that she has had a grudge against me, and I might add, a completely concocted, imaginary grudge for no reason whatsoever, and yet you’ve let it fester and get dangerously out of control?” My voice became raised. By now, I wasn’t really bothered if I was overheard.

“The problem is” Ian continued, his eyes still level with mine, “It’s not all imaginary Natalie” he confessed. “I do have feelings for you. Clare had picked up on that before then. I first became aware of how I felt about you when you used to come and sit with Clare at tea times before I came in from work.

While I loved seeing Clare, for once, acting more like the Clare I married and having a light-hearted laugh and a joke, I began to realise it was you who I was looking forward to coming home to see, that infectious giggle and the light in your eyes as you did so. Your sense of humour and playfulness” he petered out then.

“Then, obviously it escalated when you came to work at the surgery, and I was able to see a lot more of you. Clare’s not stupid and began to have her suspicions about my feelings, I think she reasoned that once the baby was here, everything would change and bring us closer together again”

“So” I retorted angrily, “This has escalated beyond control, and I have been totally unaware of the cause and become her victim and target, and you knew about it!”

I didn’t wait for a response.

“I can’t live like this anymore, even if you do manage to quickly get Clare into Faversham, I’m done here. I am giving in my months’ notice. I can’t work here anymore and too much water has gone under the bridge for me to stay anywhere round here. Something needs desperately to be done about Clare for her own safety, and mine before there is any more damage or I am taking it further” I threatened

I didn’t wait for Ian’s reply and turned and walked out of his room and slammed the door, much to the surprise of the receptionists.

The devastating thing was, that “help” for Clare didn’t happen soon enough, and there was more devastation afoot.

Chapter 31

The anger that had fired up inside me and my outburst, I now knew the truth about the situation and that actually me made more determined to not let it affect my professional work, and I successfully completed my appointments for the day.

I made sure I kept well out of Ian's way and decided that if he tried to ring through to my room, I wouldn't speak to him, but he didn't even try much to my relief.

I decided to make a few calls before I set off back to the apartment.

I rang Greg first, who I must admit, was extremely sympathetic. He was becoming a lot more tolerant of my calls and, especially now, seemed to be taking my plight a lot more seriously. Greg agreed that this was getting rather serious. He thought that this could be a case of malpractice, but I disagreed for the time being.

Greg joked inappropriately, "Well you'd have turned my head, doctor or not, anyway you did remember?"

"I swore vehemently at him. It's not funny!"

Greg then came into serious mode.

"Well, you can't really say its malpractice, and, although it grieves me, I can't imagine that he, as a doctor, and someone who makes out that he has feelings for me would have knowingly let Clare carry on as she has.

It unfortunately still boils down to proof. I would be home and dry with definite proof, that's the irritation of it to put it mildly. At least I know what the situation is, and I've made a positive decision to get out as soon as possible" I assured Greg.

I was relieved that Greg said he would be down this way, the day after next and would call and take me out for a meal. I felt warmed by his protective persona.

I then rang Jayne, who was totally aghast at everything, and as always, assured me that I just had to ask if I needed any help and

invited me up for the weekend. Jayne was relieved that I had handed my notice in and was going to look at coming back up North.

As I drove home, with very mixed feelings, and not looking forward to being in the same building as Ian and Clare, but I had Rosie to look forward to.

It was horrible that it was also so quiet at Marten Manor. Alison and Connor were on their annual Caribbean cruise, Mary was still at the hospital most of the time and Jo was still at her sister's house.

I almost gingerly made my way through the large heavy oak door through to the foyer and glanced warily to see if the baby clothes were still on the floor outside my door where they had landed earlier that morning. I saw that they weren't and thought if Ian hadn't picked them up, one of the carers must have done.

Rosie was pleased to see me and the welcome she gave me each time I came through the door was something to treasure.

Again, I didn't sleep well. Although it was unusually quiet upstairs, I felt like I was on a human ticking time bomb with those two upstairs. I had half wished that I had just walked out of work and set off with Rosie, but I was trying to be logical and sort my next moves with a clear head.

I awoke the next morning and put Rosie out her breakfast and went and had my shower.

Rosie strutted back through the cat flap in the meantime. I made my usual fuss of her, and she came and sat on my lap as I ate my breakfast, purring loudly. I didn't have to rush off to early this morning as I had had a cancellation and my next client wasn't until midday.

I took the chance to do my housework, and as I did so, I again couldn't help but notice that it was quiet upstairs. I could just about hear one of the carer's voices as she busied herself about and trying to chat away to Clare, with little response.

At 11.30am, I came out of my door, ready to set off for my first appointment of the afternoon. As I did so, I saw a carer, I think it must have been the one that had been there from breakfast time, came rushing down the staircase and as she caught sight of me, hurriedly explained that her cover worker, Tessa was running a bit late. I gathered the carer was aware of the situation and knew that Clare needed constant supervision.

“I’ve explained to Clare that I will be about 20 minutes. I desperately need to pop down to the corner shop on Main Street, I’ve locked the door, and I’ve left her sleeping tablets to take as she’s a bit agitated today” the carer explained.

I wasn’t too happy about the situation from the point of view that I didn’t think that would be strictly allowed as Clare was still left unsupervised but didn’t think any more of it as at least the door was locked, and Clare should soon be asleep. Those prescribed sleeping tablets were strong as per my limited knowledge of such had accumulated.

As I drove off to the surgery, it was with mixed feelings. Everything once upon a time had seemed to fit in so perfectly unlike now where life seemed as if it was being balanced on a knife edge and full of uncertainty. I had a lovely home, and the job I had really wanted and enjoyed and some good friends.

As a counsellor, I knew, that to give of your best to clients, it was an absolute necessity to keep your private life from interfering with your professional life, the two mustn’t cross. This was now getting impossible, and for the sake of myself and my clients, I felt I had made the right decision to call it a day and start afresh.

I had also made the decision that now I had given my notice in at the surgery, I was going to put my apartment on the market within the next few days. I knew for a fact; I wasn’t going to stay there. I had already told Jayne I was going to move back, and that I had decided to move near to Ryedale again.

When I arrived in my room and switched on my laptop, I could see that Greg had left me an email to say that he would be at the Hilton later that evening, but could we meet up for dinner the following evening?

That suited me, as Grace and I were going out later this evening.

I really was looking forward to seeing Greg. In fact, I realised “home” no longer existed and was just a base for the time being for Rosie and I to live until further arrangements could be made.

I kept hoping that Ian had really taken things seriously instead of burying his head, and used his medical influence, as it were, to finally get Clare a placement for all our sakes.

These days, Rosie was often on my bed when I came in, if she wasn't on the carpet sunning herself through the window when the weather allowed.

Today all was quiet as I let myself in. Although it was unusual, occasionally she would still be out on one of her adventure trips or bird watching from up one of the nearby trees.

I took my bit of shopping into the kitchen and began putting it away. Often, the opening of the fridge was enough to make her jump into action. Still no reaction. Although I thought it was odd for Rosie, I carried on making my tea. Grace had text me at the last minute and said she couldn't finish until later but would pop round later in the evening.

My tea was soon ready, and I put Rosie her favourite tea out, tuna chunks with some of her usual cat meal underneath.

I decided to have my tea after my shower and change of clothes. It was my usual cold tea, a nice plateful of mixed salad.

As I put my clean clothes on, I did begin to dwell on the fact that this just wasn't like Rosie at all, and suddenly became slightly panicky. I worried at first that she might have become caught up somewhere, in a tree or something which I had heard cats can do at times.

I reached for the remote control for the television and just put it on low, not really watching it, but filling the silence and eating my tea catching short snippets of news as I did so.

After washing up, and still no sign of Rosie, I made my way to the French doors and decided to call for her and maybe she would come running back now that she knew I was back.

As I opened the doors, a terrifying sight met me, and I almost collapsed with shock.

There before my eyes was Rosie, laid out still and hardly breathing. Besides her were bits of chicken, spread here there and everywhere over the patio, which could only have just been thrown out any old fashion, and from the way that these lumps had landed, it looked too much of a coincidence that they looked as though they had been thrown from above, more than likely from Clare's window! Besides half eaten pieces of chicken was a small patch of vomit which must have been from Rosie. That also made me come to the conclusion that there must have been something wrong with the chicken or it had been tampered with beforehand.

Before panic totally took over, I tried to keep my head. I went into my room and picked up her blanket and very gently picked her up and laid her out on the sheepskin rug that she liked to sleep on to keep her comfortable and warm, then immediately rang the emergency vet requesting a house call. I knew that there was little hope as her breathing was getting erratic and time was probably running out for her.

I quickly left the latch off the door so the vet had immediate access and went back to be with Rosie, stroking her head gently and kept talking to her, hoping that would keep her alive and that she could hear my voice.

From my mobile phone I also rang Greg straight away to see if he had arrived at the Hilton yet and he said he had just checked in, but when I explained the dreadful situation, and he said he would check in and come straight round.

I also rang Ernie, who arrived at the same time as the vet, Marie Tindall.

I blurted out everything that I had seen when I arrived home from work and in the state of shock, I also blurted out my fears as to how this had come about and by whom.

Marie talked to Rosie as she examined her as if she was still very much alive, but in my heart of hearts I already knew that Rosie was gone.

Marie touched me gently on the shoulder and said that the best and kindest thing to do was for her to give Rosie an injection. Marie explained that although Rosie was unconscious and would not regain such, it depended on how strong her heart was before it finally stopped. I tearfully agreed and held Rosie in my arms while she took her last few breaths.

After sensitively cradling Rosie back in her arms and placing her in a cat basket, Marie asked me if I minded taking some samples of the chicken pieces and a sample of the vomit to try and establish a definite cause of Rosie's sudden death. I agreed.

At that point Greg arrived. On seeing the devastating sight, he demanded the police be called.

Marie was a bit wary to get involved and said that it was her job to see Rosie was taken away and to get these samples looked at in the laboratory before anything or anybody could carry any blame.

Fortunately, Ernie's head was in gear.

"Eh lass, don't forget I've had the CCTV set up and working now" he said helpfully.

"Right" Greg said, "I'm ringing the Police regardless" and he did.

Marie said nothing more and made her way towards the patio to get her specimens that she needed.

The police were soon at my door, and Greg took charge and explained everything and briefly managed to update them on the previous events over the past months. Ernie said that he had his

computer with him and went out to his van for it, after which he went on to recover the CCTV coverage. I couldn't watch, it was enough to hear Ernie explaining everything on the screen. He confirmed that the meat was being thrown from an upstairs window, down on to my patio, and the culprit was Clare.

I overheard, Ernie then went onto show Rosie coming along and start to eat some of the pieces that had landed down on that spot. That was enough torment for me, and I went into my room for the next few minutes. I didn't want to be reminded of what must have happened next.

Greg came and knocked on my bedroom door, as the two Policeman needed to know whether I had any idea if Ian was at home or not or whether Clare was being looked after by one of the carers who should have been giving Clare constant care. I said I wasn't sure and looked through the kitchen window. Ian's car was there but he looked as though he was still sat in it and was on his mobile. So, the policemen said that they would go and have a word with him outside first, and then accompany him up to his apartment to confront him with the evidence.

They asked me to stay for a short while in case they needed to ask me any more questions, but they assured me that Clare would be sent to a secure unit the same evening and not to worry, I would now be safe. Greg said that I was too shaken up and would not be staying there. He insisted that I needed away in a safe place, and that they had both our numbers if we needed to be contacted.

I thanked Greg for taking charge of everything and whilst I was glad that he understood that I wanted to get as far away as possible from there, I didn't know where to go. He smiled down at me and said, "I've already thought of that".

I might have known; he was always one jump ahead of me.

"Why don't you come back to the hotel with me? I'm sure there will be a spare room with it being mid-week." He suggested.

Ernie chipped in. "That makes sense. I'll lock up for you once the police have gone"

I was in no fit state to drive, and Greg wouldn't have let me anyway. It was such a relief to get out of the building, and I was fortunate that there was a spare room at the hotel.

Greg offered to join him in having supper with him. I just wasn't hungry. I had a couple of drinks with him and then went to bed. Greg said comfortingly that I could ring him if I needed to. "What a difference" I thought, "Not having to fit around Olena for a change".

The next day just went by in a haze. Greg carried on with his visit to his client nearby and caught up with some office work.

Also, I did get a call from the Police asking me if I wanted to press charges against Dr Ian Crowther as he had known about his wife's state of mind and was aware of my suffering and that Clare wasn't safe to live at home, and especially he, as a doctor was more culpable. However, I decided not to, as much as it hurt, I just wanted out.

Grace popped into the hotel for elevenses, and we chatted away over coffee in the lounge. She asked me what I was going to do. I replied that I thought that I ask Jayne if I could stay with her for a few days and that I wanted to move back up North again. I knew Jayne would help me, we were always there for each other come thick or thin. I gave Grace a hug and said that I would keep in touch and let her know where I was, and we could arrange one of our holidays once I was settled.

Greg turned up at lunch time and said he was going to take me out to eat, and that he had a proposal for me – a business one of course!

I was extremely intrigued as we sat down in the rather posh restaurant, in Sowby, the next town on from Easterly.

Greg put it to me that I could take over from the agency that he had employed to run the business at Ryedale while he was away, which was now most of the time. He said it would be ideal as I already knew how to practically run it with my previous experience. Also, he

said that I could live in his cottage in a sort of a “tied house” arrangement. It certainly sounded very tempting, and it didn’t take long for me to make up my mind. I did however say that due to the fact I intended to put the apartment up for sale as soon as possible, I would look for somewhere to buy as soon as possible.

Greg said there was no time like the present. I agreed and asked him if he would take me back to Marten Manor the following morning to pick up my car and I would just pack most of my clothes. I wasn’t interested in moving anything else for the time being.

Ernie was working on the grounds and mowing the lawns when we arrived. Greg went to talk to him while I hurriedly went into that apartment – now not my home, and pack a couple of suit cases with most of my clothes in. I felt myself going into a panic attack at just stepping over the doorstep. I couldn’t wait to get out.

I gave Ernie a hug and thanked him for all he’d done over the past few weeks. I also said that I was going to sell up and that I would keep in touch with him. Ernie confirmed that Clare was t permanently in a secure unit of the home that she was now in. He wasn’t sure whether Ian would stay on there or not. I felt mean, but I couldn’t care what he was going to do.

Finally, Greg set off first back up to Ryedale, and I followed but obviously, I soon lost him with his Porche, but I didn’t mind, I was free and safe after months of torment. I would eventually meet him back at the cottage, but I knew he would arrive a long time before me, but I didn’t mind, I was driving into a new life.

However, life still carried is fair share of surprises around each corner as I was to find out.

Chapter 32

It was a long drag back up to Yorkshire, but I didn’t mind, I was glad to be so far away from the nightmare of a life that I had been going through.

Greg, of course, had been back quite a while by the time I arrived at the cottage. At first, I wasn't sure how I'd feel stepping over the doorstep again, but it felt good, oh so good.

Greg had very thoughtfully been shopping and had prepared one of his "taste de la resistance" Italian meals, and for once I was hungry and looking forward to our meal.

I was cold and very tired, so Greg suggested I take a shower before we eat and in the meantime he would get the fire going.

When I came down the stairs, the glow of the fire burning its logs, filled the room with a glow and the light from the television that was just on quietly in the background, made the room look so cosy.

As we sat enjoying our food, Greg said that he would go and do a "proper shop" as he called it as there wasn't any food in the cupboards or fridge, but he would sort that out the next day.

Greg poured me a glass of my favourite Chardonnay. He also poured himself one and held his up to mine and said, "Cheers, out with the old and in with the new"

I laughed and said, "It's not new year" I chuckled.

"No, Nat, but it's a new start. It will take time to recover from this ongoing nightmare you have been through, but that's gone now and time to move on" Greg said reassuringly and positively.

The conversation between us just seemed to flow, like old times, and we had a few laughs about events and antics of the past, and occasionally he would have something to tell me about Olena which was amusing but not unkind.

This was then followed by a glass of top-notch port. It wasn't a drink that I had really tasted, but Greg swore by it when a good sleep was needed, which fair enough, sleep had evaded me for the last few nights, and I welcomed it.

Finally, I said, "I really must go to bed, I'm exhausted."

I turned to go up the stairs, and suddenly had to hold on to the bannister as I was rather unsteady.

Greg quickly came to my aid and helped me upstairs. As we reached the top, he hugged me and said softly,

“Can I stay tonight, Nat?”

I burst out laughing,

“Why are you asking me, it’s your house at the end of the day? Anyway, I think that might be a good idea after all the alcohol we’ve consumed between us” I said amused.

Greg then gently tilted my chin towards him and added,

“No, I mean, can I stay tonight?”

“I know exactly what you mean. And the answer is still yes!” Then I added provocatively, “Your settee is really comfy you know”.

Without saying another word, I looked up at his lips, longing for him to kiss me, and as he did so, it was like being in a time machine. Our tongues met each other, and the ferocious passion renewed. The years just flew by as if we were back to our first kiss.

I giggled as Greg scooped me up in his arms and carried me on to the bed.

I was excited in anticipation.

Greg quickly undressed before me, and I savoured every moment. I had missed being with him, especially in a sexual relationship. Maybe the wine and port had gone to my head, but no, I knew exactly what I was about to do. I didn’t really care about Olena or feel guilty, why should I? It was delightful to be back with Greg, even if it was for just one night, but I ached for him to satisfy me. It had been a long time and despite the hurt that had gone before, I had moved on and I felt safe with Greg and tonight felt right after all he had rescued me.

I lay on the bed in a haze, longing for Greg to enter me.

Greg came upon my body and first kissed me tenderly, and then more forcibly as we engaged our tongues in our prolonged kisses. Then came the surprise!

“Please Nat, just stay as you are” he asked politely.

I giggled, pre-emptying the surprise he would very soon get.

Greg started sucking my nipples and kissing between my breasts and softly kissing each part of my body. He placed his erect penis between my breasts and on his way down, past my navel etc., He then came to my “landing strip”

Greg sat bolt upright as he took in the sight before him.

He then uttered affectionately,

“WHAT?”

“What’s what?” I replied amused.

Then I continued,

“Oh that” I giggled “Oh well” I carried on casually, “I suppose I’ve learnt something about the modern woman and her sexual prowess. I never knew if I would meet somebody in the meantime. Here I am with you tonight, and let’s enjoy every moment to the full”.

Greg started to kiss me again, including that part.

I ached with agony but pleasure for him to enter me and my body arched in anticipation as he positioned himself to thrust inside me, and within seconds we both gasped in sexual climax as we both came at the same time. We wrapped ourselves around each other, satisfied and contented and ready to fall asleep.

I must have slept like a baby in the peacefulness of my surroundings as it was around 9.30am when I finally awoke.

I felt a pang of disappointment that Greg wasn’t beside me.

However, he had left a note on the pillow next to me, which read, “Just gone shopping. Will cook you breakfast. Won’t be long xxx”

By the time I was showered and dressed, Greg was coming in with a pile of goods that he put down on the farmhouse kitchen table.

As he whistled “Mozart’s Andante – piano concerto No.21”, while he made my favourite blend of coffee in his machine and his unprecedented, scrambled egg on toast, while I glanced through the morning paper that he had brought in.

At first, we just sat in comfortable silence as we both tucked into our breakfast.

Then said, quite apologetically, I noticed,

“I’m sorry Nat, but my flight back is at 6pm this evening from Manchester”

“That’s fine, Greg” I replied cheerfully.

“Are you sure?” he asked concerned. “It’s still such early days since everything” he continued, obviously not wanting to say the actual words about the past few days.

“Look Greg, despite all the water that’s gone under the bridge, you are and have been an extremely good friend to me. You have literally saved me from a feat worse than death and out of the clutches of that awful couple.” I started reassuringly and then continued,

“I know you need Olena, and she needs you, but I know you will always be here for me, at the end of the telephone, so no grudges or regrets, we’ve both been through enough”

Greg smiled and paid me a tremendous compliment as he said.

“You truly are amazing Nat”

“I know I am” I replied giggling and teasingly.

“I’ve been so stupid at times” Greg began reflectively. “I forgot what an outstanding person you are, and underneath that gentle exterior is a real fighter and warrior. I miss you Nat”

I took charge of the situation.

“Now Greg, don’t go back, go forwards. We are and always will be the best of friends, but nothing else. Thank you for letting me stay here and giving me the chance to get back into work, I really appreciate that.”

Greg looked emotional for once in his life and came across and hugged me and kissed me on my head.

“I’m sorry I cheated on you. You know that Leylandii comment I made all those years ago?”

“How could I forget” I replied but without anger or resentment this time.

“Well, it’s true. I have had many women over the years, and you aren’t the only woman I have cheated on, I haven’t been faithful to any one of them” he confessed.

“Going on our night together, you haven’t even been faithful to Olena, and that does surprise me” I replied.

Greg looked down almost as if he was regretting at least some of his affairs.

“You have always been the best in all sorts of ways – the most caring and full of warmth Nat”

I didn’t reply, I just stroked his head like a mother would do to her young son in reassurance.

“Well, I’ve just to go down to the factory for about an hour and then I will be back to say “Au revoir, and until we meet again” Greg said with a glint in his eye, that glint I had come to know when he was up to something, but something pleasant.

I began unpacking my cases and then unpacked all the shopping. It felt good to be back here. I was almost sure I would settle, and I knew my three neighbours quite well from before, and couldn’t foresee any problems for the future, especially nothing like the past ones!

I put on some soothing easy listening music and started to prepare Greg some lunch which I was sure he would appreciate before he left. He had brought in some smoked salmon and plenty of salad and new potatoes, so I made sure that it was already in the fridge for him when he came back.

I heard the Porche in the distance, driving slowly up the drive to the cottage.

He stepped out of the car, and as he came through the door, I noticed his expression had a sheepish look.

“I’ve two things I would really appreciate your help with as soon as possible” he said, still in an unusual manner.

“Right?” I replied with an air of query.

“I’ve some files that I’ve brought back in my briefcase, and I would like it if you could ring the clients with outstanding invoices for me, and if need be, reissue them. You know what to do anyway. I just thought you might not be ready to go straight down to the factory on Monday as you will be busy getting sorted here.”

“Yes” I still replied expectantly.

“Well, the other thing is”, and as he said those words, he turned to the car and brought out a small bundle which was a cocker spaniel puppy called Sam. I was bowled over straight away.

“I hope I haven’t been presumptuous” he started, “but, I thought he might help you settle, and he’ll certainly be a safeguard”

“He’s lovely” I said immediately falling in love with him at first sight putting my arms out to welcome the lovely black and white spotted bundle of fur.

“We’ll be just fine, thank you” I said, stroking Greg’s arm.

Greg came into the kitchen and sat and had his lunch while Sam sat on my knee snoring those lovely baby snores.

Greg took the time to just go over the paperwork he wanted me to do and made sure I had all the keys that I needed for the factory and the cottage.

Finally, Greg said he go. I did feel a mixture of emotions. I didn’t want him to go, I had enjoyed our time together, but deep down I knew it wasn’t to be and Olena would always be a big part of his life that I wasn’t prepared to share.

I knew Greg and I would still have plenty of contact due to the business side of things.

I soon got back into the swing of things and, although there had been such a mixture of emotions and events surrounding my previous time at Ryedale Business Park, I still looked forward to a new start.

Greg had very “thoughtfully” rearranged his factory slightly and moved his office to the back with new furniture that he had let me choose, so that served the purpose of it by more like my office and also, not to remind me of that fateful day when I caught him and Olena in the act!

Rob and Tim were still in Accounts and made me very welcome, and, although their jokes and humour no longer centred on Greg, they were still very humorous, and I enjoyed their company.

There were one or two new businesses that had sprung up in the meantime. One was a curtain making business which looked as though it was run by a mother and daughter, and another one was a sports outlet with other amenities attached to it, such as bicycle repairs etc.,

Greg kept in touch almost daily, usually by email, but I’m sure that this was to keep an eye on his “baby”, his business. We did keep in touch as friends and on one of his regular visits, when he was staying at the Newsholme Inn, we went out for dinner.

It was on one such occasion, I decided to put it to him that I would like to buy the cottage off him as my sale of the Marten Manor apartment looked as though it was going to go through successfully.

A few weeks previously, I had telephoned Mr Bates down in Broughton about the sale of the apartment at Marten Manor and he had given me a date in which to meet up with him and go through the formal procedures for the sale. Jayne’s mother had been across to stay with her and agreed to look after Callum for a couple of days while we came down to Broughton.

I was so glad to have Jayne with me that day. Just going back in the place had brought back so many ugly memories.

The meeting with Mr Bates went well, and the apartment was put on the market straight away. Apart from picking up a few small sentimental items from the apartment, I assured Mr Bates, for obvious reasons that I would not be back, and could the viewing and hopefully consequent sale go ahead under his direction without me

having to be physically present, and this was agreed with the estate agents. I knew that to someone else, as I originally felt, would be eager to live there and think it was close to paradise, and was quite confident that it would sell easily.

I kept in regular contact with Alison. That had been to my advantage as I was able to arrange the above meeting with Mr Bates, the week that Alison had told me that Ian was away on a medical training course for the week.

Alison did tell me sometime later that year that Clare had died while still in Residential Care. Alison believed that it was due to a similar hear condition as her father had suffered. Of course, it was sad for her family, however as they say, "Gone but not forgotten", but my memories of Clare would always be unhappy ones.

I kept in touch with my friend Grace, whom I am pleased to say, had successfully built up her practice and it had gone from strength to strength.

I told her that she was always welcome to come up for the weekend to stay with me, but I would never be able to for the foreseeable future, go back down there. Being a Counsellor herself, she perfectly understood.

We would still meet up each year for our annual holiday and had even ventured abroad.

One morning, on arriving at Ryedale, I caught sight of a removal lorry with a vast number of different types of equipment being moved into the new extension across the yard. Everywhere there was a rush of activity.

On entering our reception area, there was Tim as usual with his mug of tea and cigarette. I asked him what the new firm was going to be.

"As far as I gather, it is going to be a Veterinary Practice, run by a Mr Jacob and Sons"

"Oh" I replied, "That sounds posh for around here"

“Mm” Tim murmured, then continued, “When you think about it though, it is really what we need as the one in the town centre is only small and quite limited, this will be a farmer’s dream for agricultural livestock, and don’t you think?”

“Yes” I said affirmatively.

As the day went by, I kept having a nosey at the coming and goings over the yard.

I always took Sam to work with me, and it was ideal up at Ryedale for him. Each break time, Sam and I would have a wander round. There was a lovely place called Langside. You could either drive up the track past the business park, or if you were feeling fit and the weather was good, you could walk up to it. It would be about two miles from Ryedale Business Park.

Once up there, the view was breath taking. It was like being on another planet. It was like a crag cut out from the hillside on the edge of the Dale. I would often take Sam up there at lunchtimes and take a picnic. Sam could have a good old sniff round and a play and even the sheep up there didn’t seem to worry him.

Everything seemed to go into overdrive at once, but I must say that didn’t bother me, I liked the excitement!

Firstly, about two weeks after Mr Jacob and his son had finally moved into their Veterinary Practice, they looked ready for the launch. The connection is, I arrived at work one morning, with Sam under my arm and my briefcase in the other. As I passed Tim’s office, he opened the door and said he had been chatting to Mr Jacob the previous evening, “More to be nosey than anything” said Tim laughing.

Anyway, Mr Jacob had mentioned that he and his son were hoping to open the following week, they had most of the staff they needed, like nursing assistants etc., and two receptionists, but just needed one more. Tim said sheepishly, “I mentioned you might be interested. I hope you don’t mind”.

My eyes lit up with delight, and I said that was perfect but how did he know I would be interested.

“Well, Natalie, forgive me but I’ve noticed that you aren’t exactly rushed off your feet. Knowing Greg, he’ll still have his reign on most of the work from overseas?”

I nodded, almost wanting to giggle as Tim had Greg well and truly summed up!

“I thought it would be practical and ideal. You come to the park each day, so there isn’t an issue of getting here. You are more than qualified as a receptionist. One other thing, I think you could do with having a more sociable job. You would certainly have the opportunity to meet some characters!” Tim quite rightly reasoned with me.

“Everything you say is absolutely true. I couldn’t agree more. “I would love the opportunity to work there, and I must admit, life can be pretty humdrum each day. I can’t imagine that at a Vets, no day will be the same”

“No probs” Tim quickly responded. All you need to do is go over there sometime today and have an informal chat with one of the office staff and go from there. Right must get on Natalie, see you later”

I was in a complete whirlwind, but a very appealing one.

“No time like the present” I thought.

I rushed round to the office and quickly read through my emails and listened to the messages on the telephone.

A quick look in the mirror to see if my makeup was still intact and my hair was still tidy.

“Come on Sam, what better place to take you with me for an interview”

As I hesitantly entered the building, that lovely aroma of new furniture and surroundings entered my nostrils. Also, the smell of disinfectant was heavily present, which would be natural of course.

I approached the bright shining round reception desk. A lady with greying hair and rather sporty pink glasses, looked up at me smiling and welcoming.

“Can I help you love?” she asked in a broad Yorkshire voice.

“Yes, I hope so. I’m Natalie Smethurst, I work just across the Car Park here for Mr Whitely. I was told that there may possibly be a part time vacancy for a receptionist?” I said expectantly.

“Hello Natalie, my name’s Kim. Yes, Mr Jacob did say that we really need three of us on the team, and someone who could cover at short notice”

“That would be ideal for me seen as I am here every day anyway” I said replied trying not to sound too pushy.

“I see you are animal friendly, looking down at Sam in my arms” Kim said chuckling.

“ Sam goes everywhere with me” I said as I looked down at him and stroked his head softly as he nestled into my arm contentedly.

“Well, Natalie, I’ll just go and see if I can find Mr Jacobs to come and have a word with you. We are all very informal here, but you will need to know all the details of the post before you apply. Won’t be a minute. Have a seat, and there’s a coffee machine if you fancy a drink” said Kim as she bustled away.

“Wow” I thought to myself. This maybe in quite an agricultural setting, but it’s all very up market at the same time.

Sam settled on my knee, totally oblivious to my heart beating fast and my mouth going dry as I tried to think of the right words to say when I met Mr Jacobs.

As usual, I heard the ping of my text mail go off on my mobile, always at the wrong time. I promptly switched it off, it was Greg and he would have to wait.

Mr Jacobs came into the reception area. He looked rather like farmer Giles. He had his flat cap on over his thick dark but greying hair. His face was very weathered. His eyebrows were thick and dark and

almost met in the middle. His expression was friendly, and his smile seemed warm and genuine. He wasn't much taller than me and his build was stocky but not overly so. He had a thick brown checked shirt under a green warmer jacket with tan working trousers on covered up to his knees by industrial green wellingtons.

As I stood up and he approached me, he put out his hand in a welcoming gesture.

"It's Natalie, is it?" he asked checking my name.

"Yes, that's right" I confirmed nervously.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Jared Jacobs" and he shook my hand very firmly.

"Who's this little fellow?" Mr Jacobs asked as he gave Sam a soft pat on his head, to which Sam opened his eyes and let out a yawn.

I introduced him to Mr Jacobs.

"I'll show you round first so you can get some idea of the facilities we have and what we do"

It was all a bit awe inspiring as I followed Mr Jacobs round and he explained in detail the day-to-day procedures. During our course of conversation, he asked me about my previous working experience. I did tell him about working down in the surgery near Broughton in Hampshire but skimmed over it as briefly as possible.

"Ah, so you're used to working in a surgery. That's good. May I tell you though, despite what people say, animals are often easier to work with than humans!" and he roared with laughter.

Mr Jacobs was interested in how I came to work here at Ryedale. I kept strictly to the professional side of things and explained about Greg's business and that it was my position to keep up with his UK clients and keep things ticking over here.

"Yes", began Mr Jacobs. "I've heard Mr Whitely is overseas most of the time, I will be pleased to meet him when the opportunity arises".

I decided to take the plunge and use some of Tim's initiative.

“That’s the thing” I began. “I’ve only so much I have the opportunity to do especially certain times of the year, business can quiet in between”.

“Yes, I can see that would sometimes be a problem” agreed Mr Jacobs and then he added,

“Why don’t you a month’s trial at the surgery?”

I couldn’t believe my ears; it was music to them.

“I would love to” I replied eagerly.

“Well,” continued Mr Jacobs, “If you come in around 12pm tomorrow when the two other ladies are both here, we could work out a tentative rota and see if you would be able to fit in without it affecting your present duties. If Sam’s well behaved, you can even bring him in with his basket” He said generously.

“That would be amazing” I replied enthusiastically.

As I drove home, I felt as though I was in a dream, and chatted away to Sam nonstop as though he was my listening ear. His response was every now and again to give a little wag of his tail and look up to me with those gorgeous appealing eyes.

The following morning Sam watched me from the settee as I made phone calls, replied to emails, sent out invoices and followed up some quotes to send out with Greg’s final approval. There were some deliveries coming but the lads in the workshop took care of that.

Suddenly the office landline rang, and it was Greg He sounded slightly irritated.

“I’ve been trying to get hold of you since yesterday”

I secretly smiled to myself, feeling very much in control and excited about what I was going to tell him.

“ I had to turn off my phone as I was going into an interview” I said and waited amused for his reply.

“What? You’ve got a job” he said tersely.

I briefly explained about Mr Jacobs and the previous afternoon and that I was shortly going across to meet the team with a view to starting my trial period.

“Oh, that’s nice” he replied mockingly. “What about my firm and the work you are supposed to do for me?”

I was beginning to get irritated myself now,

“Oh Greg, I wouldn’t let your business suffer. Mr Jacobs knows I work for you and manage your business for you. I wouldn’t jeopardise that. Honestly, I’m only going to be the other side of the car park from the factory. That is what we are going to discuss today, whether the extra help they need can be flexible enough for me. Can’t you at least be pleased for me?”

“Yes, I suppose so” he responded like a spoilt child.

I found him really annoying and I suppose I was a bit spiteful myself and threw in a remark, “oh and by the way, I’m going to make you an offer for your cottage. I need my independence”.

I very quickly terminated the call, politely but more as though he was a customer.

I scooped Sam up in my arms and took his small dog basket with me.

As I was ushered into a small waiting room, there were adoring expressions as each person met Sam.

Kim was there as the other receptionist, Mandy, Mr Jacobs and Lucas, his son. Sacha, one of the veterinary nurses was present as well.

The meeting went very well, and then everybody apart from Kim and Mandy went out and they had the task of explaining my expected duties and we worked out a rough rota to try for the next couple of weeks and we came to an agreement that I would be the emergency back up most of the time.

I didn’t mind that there would at times be late evenings, and weekends and I was sure that now I did have some idea of the hours

on the rota, that I could fit Greg's work in without it being affected in anyway.

I was elated as I returned home that evening, however, I did feel a twinge of conscience regarding my earlier conversation with Greg.

As I sat at the dining table with a celebratory glass of white wine, gentle music in the background and Sam softly snoring in his bed, I set about composing an apologetic email to Greg. As I was about to do so, I notice I had an email from the Broughton estate agents, via Mr Bates. Apparently, there was a couple of potential buyers of the apartment, and he just needed to speak to me as soon as possible to get my further instructions. From what I gathered the offers made were almost the same, but still quite satisfactory. Anything would have been potentially so. I just wanted rid of it.

Therefore, in my email, despite it being a throw away remark to Greg about the cottage, it might be quite a feasible arrangement to come to.

Within minutes of me sending his email, he was on the phone.

Greg sounded a lot calmer than earlier. I told him about my trial at Mr Jacob's and reasonably explained how it could work very well. Anyway, I hadn't even started my trial yet!

We did discuss the sale of the apartment and I said to Greg that although the money that had paid for it was in settlement of the divorce, it was still mainly his money, but he would still benefit from it if he would let me make an offer for the cottage.

Greg seemed to have come round about the extra work at Mr Jacob's but did seem reluctant to discuss about the cottage. He did however tell me that he was coming over at the weekend and would stay at his usual spot. Apparently, he had to go through his annual accountants with his Accountant, who I might add, was not Tim!

Greg suggested we have our usual dinner out and we could have a catch up ten and said he would pick me up at 6.30pm.

It seemed so strange. The total shift in a relationship and its emotions. Waiting for Greg felt poles apart from that first time. Tonight, I was looking forward to seeing him, but as a good friend and someone I could talk to without being judged or made to feel small.

There wasn't that "heady" longing feeling, desperate for his body to be inside me as had always been before, but a loving hug from someone who I had been to hell and back with and yet here we still were, friends through thick and thin. That's what I thought and felt anyway!

Greg turned up promptly. He looked dapper as ever in his casual clothes and sunglasses.

As I sat in the car, he came across and gave me a kiss on the cheek and said it was good to see me.

This time Sam wasn't with me and looked dejected as I gave him a cuddle and said I would be back later.

The meal was divine and our conversation flowed naturally.

When I tried to divert the conversation to the cottage and the sale of the apartment, he seemed somewhat reluctant. I explained that I had now potentially accepted an offer on the apartment, but I felt that it was only right that he had some say in the monies. I told him that I was contacting Mr Bates on the Monday morning. Greg did remark that he thought that was very decent of me to do so considering the events leading up to my moving and how I came to be there.

I smiled sweetly at him and said that I understood that he may want to still keep the cottage on, but that my happiest times had been there, and it would be like a return on his investment, with possibly some capital left over.

Greg nodded and said that he perfectly understood my reasoning. However, things didn't seem to be that simple for him. He didn't have to explain that the business was expanding still and that it was thriving. His concern was that the cottage was something he owned

and that, really, it was always a means of escape if necessary. His usual hotel was there to stop in whenever he was over here, but the cottage was like a security.

I twigged where he was coming from.

I gently proceeded.

“Are things a bit uncertain with Olena and you?”

He gave a huge sigh.

“I love her very much and we do get on well, but she is very wary. We both want and need very different things and goals in life. I wouldn’t want to separate from her totally, but I can’t manage to be with her all the time.

She gets very wound up when she’s that way out and her temper flares with a load of Russian expressions coming out, I don’t know if she’s swearing, but I can imagine the names she calls me aren’t flattering to say the least. I feel the cottage is like my haven that I can rely on”

“I perfectly understand” I said patting his hand.

“I’ll start looking for somewhere in the area. I’m sure you’re not in a hurry to evict me” I said jokingly.

“You can move next door. I gather he’s having to move near his mother-in-law, poor thing” Greg said half seriously. “That’s the investments you get on the jokes”

“Mm” I thought, I can imagine he is almost serious about that, but it wouldn’t work.

We drove back as the sunset began to fall. It was so intoxicatingly beautiful around here, especially this time of the year, but all seasons carried their beauty in this part of the countryside.

Greg was unusually quiet as we journeyed back to the cottage.

He came and opened the car door for me as he always used to.

We could hear Sam barking excitedly and then I saw him sat on the windowsill, his tail going nineteen to the dozen.

As I turned the key and opened the door, Sam came rushing out and Greg crouched down and made a fuss of him. He remarked how much he had grown in the short time since he had seen him the day that he brought him home.

Sam then turned and went to his bowl in the kitchen as though he was saying it was his supper time.

“Thank you for this evening, it has been perfect, and it has been good to see you and catch up and be able to talk to you about everything” I said appreciatively.

“Can I come in Natalie” Greg said softly with those brown eyes that used to make me melt at the mere sight of them.

“You can Greg” I answered. “After all, it is your house” I continued a bit clinically.

Greg stepped over the doorstep.

“I’ll put the kettle on if that is ok. I think I’ve had enough wine today” I chatted away as I walked into the kitchen.

I brought the percolator into the living room with my best China mugs and a few short bread biscuits that I had bought that morning.

Greg and I just chatted generally for a short while and had a bit of a laugh and some of the amusing and good times that we had had in the past. The only time Marten Manor was mentioned, was when I went and fetched my laptop from the kitchen table and showed him the email from Mr Bates.

Greg seemed to agree that the final offer from the first couple seemed quite reasonable, and he said he was more than happy for me to accept it.

As Greg put down his mug after finishing his coffee, he turned to me and came closer to me, and I suddenly realised where the conversation and the mood were about to turn.

“Natalie” he began gently, “Please can I stay tonight, I really need you”

He put his hands gently on my shoulders to pull me towards him as he looked down longingly at my lips on the tip of a highly charged embrace.

I kissed him briefly then pulled away.

“Greg” I began frankly.

“I don’t regret our night the other week, but I am not going to repeat it tonight. I am not willing to be your “knock off” as I feel this would be. I love you as a friend and you have done so much for me, but our sexual relationship ended a long time ago and doesn’t feel right” I said trying to be firm. It was true, as much as I needed him as a friend that was where it ended. I wasn’t going to be a stand in for when he was over in this country and away from Olena.

You could cut the silence with a knife as I watched this all sink in with Greg.

“Does that mean you’re going to be a nun then? Surely you still have the needs a young woman of your age has?” He said almost sarcastically.

I laughed at his reaction. “Of course, I do, but when the time is right, and with someone who has no strings attached. You never know, I might meet a farmer and become a buxom farmer’s wife with rosy, red cheeks and work doing all sorts of imaginable duties in the running of the farm”

“You really are such a totally different person Natalie. I’m having a job getting my head round it all. I do respect your integrity and openness though” Greg said.

“That’s me told” he said as he got up and walked towards the front door.

He turned and hugged me but now like a big brother.

“I’ll keep in regular touch. I’ll email you about that large order from Hanson’s on Monday and I’ll forward you the details, I’ll let you know what happens with Mr Bates and this offer” I said assuring him.

We parted on good terms, and although I was excited about my new position at Mr Jacob's practice, and the final closure on Marten Manor with quite a handsome pay out from there, no one could have prepared me for how my life would go full circle and change to a totally different direction.

Chapter 33

Juggling my work between Greg's factory and Mr Jacob's practice was going quite well.

I told Tim how grateful I was for his advice and that he certainly was right, working with the public again directly, was just right for me. I had the opportunity to meet so many different types of characters from the surrounding farmers to little old ladies with their pets. I wasn't too keen on the young ones who brought their pet rats and mice in for a consultation, and it did make me reflect on my previous encounters back in Broughton. Guinea pigs were about the smallest pet I could deal with.

One Saturday lunchtime, after finishing my shift at the Vets, I came out of the surgery with Sam on his lead and walked towards the car. It was a boiling hot early summers day.

I didn't feel like going straight home. The weather was too lovely to be indoors, and I talked myself out of doing any more housework and gardening.

After putting Sam in his seat at the back with his belt on, I drove to the main car park in Grassingdon.

Sam and I had a walk round the village which, this time of the year was heaving with visitors.

I prepared myself for a walk down memory lane. Sam and I walked slowly past my parent's old house.

It seemed a hive of activity.

There were children's toys in the front garden and a slide in the back garden.

There were shouts and screams of excitement as the young children played.

Sam's ears pricked up and his little tail began to wag excitedly as he caught sight of a ginger cat that was following the children around.

Sam and I had a short wander round the village shops and then made our way back to the car park.

I decided on the spur of the moment to make my way to the next village called Blundell.

It was a little village and had won many awards for the upkeep of the village green and flower displays.

Running through the village of Blundell was a wide river. On a day like today it was still and calm.

Quite a few families were sat on either side of the banks of the river having picnics and the children playing various outdoor games.

The Blue Pheasant public house was not far away. It was always a popular place. Outside there were tables with umbrellas and it looked extremely busy.

In my rucksack that I had brought with me, I had a salad sandwich which I had made at work and some doggy treats for Sam.

We made our way down to the banks and sat down on the warmed grass from the sun.

Sam surveyed everywhere after he had feasted on his treats and then laid himself out for his afternoon nap in the scented fresh air.

I too felt sleepy and put my rucksack behind me as a pillow.

Not long afterwards I suddenly became aware of a shadow behind me, as Sam obviously did and jumped up, his tail wagging ferociously.

On sitting up and looking at the figures behind me, I could see that one was a man, and a dog, a cocker spaniel just like Sam only with different coloured markings.

Upon looking at the man's face, I thought it seemed familiar somehow. It was and when he spoke, I realised who it was.

"Natalie?" he asked.

I then realised it was Matt!

He was obviously older, as so was I. To be correct, he must be twelve years older. He had filled out slightly and had grown into a mature looking man. Mind you, I must have changed a fair bit too.

"Yes" I answered rather nonplussed.

"What a coincidence. It is you. I've been sat at the other side of the river, and I noticed you come from the car park, and thought that looks like Natalie, I'll go and investigate" said Matt.

Before I had chance to reply, Matt continued,

"I always hoped I would bump into you again someday".

I was rather speechless by this sudden encounter and flurry of information, but I asked,

"Do you live round here now Matt?"

"Yes" Matt replied, "I moved back about five years ago".

"How about you?" Matt asked.

"I live just out of Ryedale in a small village now" I replied.

"So you did manage to move away?" he smiled and then teasingly asked, "How's your mum and dad these days?" He then sat down on the grass beside me.

"It's a long story, and parts of it I try not to bring to mind if I can help it" I said with a sigh.

"Well, I've all the time in the world, so you can fill me in on the last twelve years if you have time" Matt said smiling.

He then added, rising to his feet,

"Why don't we go and have a drink outside the pub and these two can have a drink from the dog bowls?"

The time flew as did our conversations.

Matt listened patiently as I went through the gruelling parts of the past.

When I spoke of Greg, I never ran him down. I did tell him about Olena, but I did say that in the short time our relationship had been good, it was very good and that now we were just good friends.

Matt had been working out of the country, teaching languages at various schools.

“I hope one of them isn’t Russian” I retorted and then we both laughed.

Matt said that he had been in a short relationship while he was away and had been in a relationship with a teacher at the college but who had married since then.

I made the first move and said I had better be getting back home.

Matt asked if he and “Lady”, his cocker spaniel could walk us back to my car, and Sam obviously approved.

“Look Natalie” Matt said looking me straight in the eye. “I realise that you have been driven to rock bottom and back with life, but you are definitely on the way back up. I don’t want to destroy that. Here’s my number, and it’s certainly completely up to you if you text or ring me. I would like to see you again” Matt said gently rubbing my shoulder.

“Thankyou” I responded. “I would like to see you too and keep in touch” I said smiling in return.

“I better say goodbye, until we meet again” Matt said looking as though he was stalling the moment of departure.

I turned towards my car and commented,

“What a lovely end to the day”

I felt Matt gently touch my arm, and I turned to face him.

“It needn’t be the end, it could be a whole new beginning, and this is the first chapter of a new book”

Matt said softly and tilted my chin with the tips of his fingers, and we engaged in a passionate embrace.

“Mm” I thought to myself, “There goes that familiar throbbing, wanting feeling once again. I’ve grown up a lot though, I’m all woman and I’m ready for your sunshine.”