

CAN SHE SOLVE A MYSTERY THAT HAS BEEN HAUNTING A FAMILY FOR OVER SIXTY YEARS?

# DRIVING ME MAD



L.T. Smith

## **Part 1**

“Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! It is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!”

Emily Bronte

# Chapter One

I'd been driving for over four and a half hours. Four and a half bloody hours. It wouldn't have been so bad if I hadn't already been awake and on the go for nearly twelve hours before I'd plonked my backside in the car, but I had. The convention I attended that day had overrun its time, and I'd been stuck with a mishmash of sales reps from all over the UK, some of whom would bore a train spotter. Believe me, I was surprised I didn't catnap standing up.

Like a fool, I thought I was good to go when the final speeches were over, thought I was alert enough to get to the hotel where I was staying for the night without any mishaps. I couldn't have been more wrong. I think I must've had some kind of mild brain trauma, considering I'd been afflicted with shite all day. It was sort of a sales rep version of concussion, wherein the violent shake to the head was me trying to keep awake.

Like a fool, I thought I would beat my rivals to the next venue, which was to take place the following day, one hundred and ten miles away. By getting to the hotel just on the outskirts of Morley in the Peak District that same evening, I would be refreshed the next morning. I'd only have to stroll down the stairs, eat breakfast, and take a pew right at the front.

Unfortunately, I didn't allow for tiredness, shite directions, or a crap signal for my mobile. I found myself in the arse end of nowhere. The journey to the hotel should have taken me just shy of two hours, but I'd been driving for over four and a half naffing hours, and I had no clue where I was.

Trees, trees, and more trees continuously lined the sides of the narrow road along which I was driving. The trees were

overgrown and half hanging over the road, limiting my view of the route ahead. These trees would not have looked out of place in *The Wizard of Oz* or some teen *Cabin in the Woods* slash horror flick. The full beam of my headlights barely made an impression on the darkness, and I couldn't make any sense of my bearings.

"Turn left."

The disembodied voice that sounded from beside me made me grip the steering wheel a little too hard, forcing a slight, sharp swerve to my left.

"Fucking Susan," I ground out between gritted teeth.

Susan was not a ghost, not a phantom hitchhiker suddenly appearing in my car, reminding lost travellers of the terrors that claimed people along this stretch of tarmac. Susan was the name given to the useless piece of shit Sat Nav sitting on the passenger seat.

"Speak now, yeah? Now there isn't a left turn."

My hand fumbled for the device I had tossed on the seat earlier. The cool plastic of the casing slipped into my grasp. Eyes still riveted on the road, I felt around the oblong casing and pressed the off switch. With even that tiny decrease of light, my car's interior dipped into deeper darkness.

It was too quiet, both inside and outside the car. I'd killed the radio miles back, because all I seemed to be picking up was the tune of interference. Although music today does mainly sound like it is "off key", it doesn't usually sound as if it is white noise with distorted voices drifting in sporadically. Not the most reassuring sound when driving on my own at just turned midnight at the end of October. Not reassuring at all.

I glanced down and checked my petrol. I was just under half a tank. That made me feel a little better about my dilemma. Not much better, but a little, and at that stage, a little was better than nothing.

My eyes were aching. It was at least partly due to me being tired, but staring intently into darkness half lit by crappy headlights didn't help the growing headache that was inching up my forehead like a mini mountain climber using small sky hooks to dig into my skull. I also needed to pee. My bladder was bulging, and if I ever reached civilisation, I was definite that it was going to be a case of getting my car seat valeted, especially if that bugged up Sat Nav had the nerve to speak again.

A fleeting hope of finding a public toilet skittered into my head. Why I honestly thought there would be a public toilet out in the middle of nowhere is beyond me. The powers of the local council hadn't even thought it necessary to put up road signs, never mind a toilet to help the stranded.

Another half hour went by. My belly was as bulging as that of an eight months pregnant woman by this stage, and I was feeling the pinch of it every time I shifted my feet on the pedals. I was still in the middle of Deliverance country, and I knew I wasn't going to see the bright lights of Civilisation any time soon.

That settled it. It was pee time. Pee time behind a bush, behind a tree. Hell, pee time in the middle of the fucking road. It wasn't as if I was going to be spotlighted by headlights as I was flashing my arse to passing cars. Not surprisingly, I hadn't seen another soul for the past two hours. Normal people were in bed by now.

Of course that didn't mean serial killers weren't out and about.

A nervous laugh escaped with difficulty through my tightly clamped lips. "I'll set Susan on them." A snigger came next. "If she decides to work."

Decision made, I pulled over to the side of the road. If I thought it had been quiet before, this beat it tenfold.

I turned my engine off and opened my car door. The ping pinging started, alerting me I'd left my lights on. Too right. My car

could ping ping as much as it wanted to, but there was no way I was getting out into complete darkness. I was also going to leave my car door open so the interior light would aid my call of nature.

Stretching, I looked about. Nothing. No one. There was just the dark, with a glint of light from the car. A memory of peeing at the side of the road with my mother popped into my mind, and I opened the back door too, making a little cubicle between car doors.

“Nice trick, Mum.”

I was not too sure why I was hiding myself from prying eyes that weren't there; I also wondered why I was talking to myself. I doubted anyone would be out there, and even if they were, the lights from inside my car would illuminate me to a voyeur anyway, making the “cubicle” idea redundant.

For the first time, another thought hit me. What if there actually was someone watching me? What if that person wanted to do a little more than watch?

Back to the thoughts about a serial killer, or rapist, or person with a pee fetish. And there I was, knickers around my ankles, silently inviting them to come and get some.

I wish I could say I decided I could hold on until I found a lovely, clean, white, and sterile place, safe from death or sexual assault, but I had passed that point. It was a case of taking my chances with my life or my bladder.

Squatting, I slipped my underwear down to the point where it was just beyond being peed on. It would have been a damned sight easier if I'd been wearing a skirt, but alas, I was in trousers. It would also have been a damned sight easier if I hadn't been such a twat and decided to beat the rush to the next venue, but that, too, was a matter for retrospection, although being a twat still stood.

Amazing, isn't it? When you're bursting to go, it won't come immediately. It aches, it cries, it deliberates before trickling out

slowly, and all the while I was on watch for an attacker. Every whisper of the wind, every movement of the leaves, I involuntarily clenched and stopped the flow. My ears seemed to grow into points, and I perched like a German Shepherd on guard duty in the tiny hub between my car doors.

Finished. Finally. And I'd forgotten to bring some tissues from my glove compartment. Joy. It was October. End of October. Nearly one in the morning on a bloody cold end of October, at that. I doubted I would "air dry" in this environment. I was more likely to freeze my fou fou instead of drying her.

I stood and began to pull up my underwear and trousers. A noise from my left alerted me to something moving in the foliage. Like my fou, I froze.

There it was again—a crunching, a snapping of twigs, like someone moving towards me. My hands hovered over my zipper as if I had a concealed weapon beneath it. The rustling stopped, then started again.

As if on cue, the interior light went off, and I made a noise I could never have imagined would come from me. I couldn't even tell anyone, onomatopoeically, how it sounded. It was just a sound of fear, if fear could be summed up in wheezing and choking, with an additional indescribable noise thrown into the mix.

The noises from the darkness came again, and I staggered backwards, totally ignoring the recently made puddle. This wasn't the time to worry about standing in my own urine. I was more concerned about lying in a pool of my own blood to care if I had pee on my shoes.

"Who's there?"

My voice reflected how I felt—shitted up. Why I'd decided to confront my nocturnal assailant was beyond me. If there even was a nocturnal assailant to confront. Imagination can be a powerful thing, especially in the wrong hands, or head, or whatever. My

imagination was usually limited to my work, but apparently, as I had only just found out, also images of death and destruction. Pity I couldn't amalgamate all three into my daily life. I would have been the top of my imaginative field and the CEO of my own little fucked up company instead of travelling in the middle of the night to get the best seat, so I could get the latest and best information about how to sell shit.

I realised my thoughts were rambling. I tended to ramble when I was scared. Since the fear was still with me, I knew that I would probably continue to ramble for several more miles.

I knew that imagination could mess with a person so that they believed things were knocking about when they were not. I wasn't going to risk finding out if the noises I had heard were just in my head. Bravery was not my forte. I was more of a "run and hide" kind of girl.

It wasn't until after I slammed the driver's side door, put on my seatbelt, and started my engine that I realised I'd left the back door open. I was tempted to just drive off and hope the damned thing would shut on its own, but knowing my luck, whoever was in the woods would grab the door, get in, put a knife to my throat, and growl, "Drive."

Leaning over the seat, I struggled to grab the edge of the door. I didn't want to climb out into the darkness again, but it looked as if I was going to have to.

"Fuck it!"

One hand moved to undo my seatbelt whilst the other grabbed the handle on my door, but I stopped before opening either. It wasn't because I was undecided; it was because the back door did something I wanted it to do, though not in the way I wanted it to, if you know what I mean. It slammed.

The squeal of my tyres surely left a mark on the road, and I didn't want to think about the marks that had just as surely appeared in my underwear. I never knew I could drive without

holding on to the steering wheel, but considering one hand was on the door handle and the other was on the gear stick as the car started forward, I must have. And there was certainly not the recommended safety progression from mirror, to signal, to manoeuvre.

Almost as if I was joyriding, my heart was racing wildly. It was driving faster than I was, and I was clocking up the speed in my haste to get away from whatever had slammed the door shut. It wasn't until I was a couple of minutes down the road—and it did not hurt so much for me to breathe—that I had another thought: What if the door slammed shut *after* someone had climbed inside the car with me?

The blood in my veins seemed to freeze. A tingling of apprehension rippled over my skin, making the hairs stand to attention. I wanted to look in my rear view mirror and check out the back seat, but I just couldn't summon the nerve. What if I did look, and someone was looking back at me? What if I saw the glint of a blade or the prominent curve of vampiric teeth? Jesus. This wasn't *Twilight*.

A little voice piped up inside my mind, "But you could so easily be on the front page of a national newspaper by tomorrow."

Weirdly, I took a detour in my head at that point and wondered what photo they would use of me on the front page.

What the...?

I had to make a decision, and quickly. I didn't have the nerve to look, and I couldn't really risk not looking. But I had to do something. Had to... Had to do what? Deliberate? Do nothing? Act stupid instead of acting quickly?

SLAM!

My feet jammed on the brake and clutch, and my body snapped forward. Thankfully I didn't hit anything with my sudden stop, either in the road or my body hitting the steering wheel, so the air bag didn't deploy. I wanted to see if the person,

if there was a person in the back, would slam into my seat, or come flying through to the front. I doubted the would-be killer/rapist/attacker/hitchhiker would have thought to put on a seatbelt, but then I wasn't au fait with the etiquette of frightening the shit out of someone by climbing through an open door into a backseat.

As soon as my heart slid back down my throat to its proper position, I was out of the car and standing about four feet away. The back seat looked innocently empty, but I was still not sure. I slowly moved towards the exposed vehicle, my door open, the lights blazing eerily into the darkness. I tipped my head from side to side, trying to gauge the "emptiness" of the rear seat.

The breath I'd been holding began to seep out and mix with the cool night air. White puffs floated in front of me, and I felt overwhelming relief to still be breathing at all.

I climbed back into the car and placed my hands on the steering wheel. Not surprisingly, they were shaking. I was cold, scared, lost, and tired. I was imagining things. I was becoming desperate and hysterical. These were not a very promising foundation for careful driving at night in a place where everything looked the same. For all I knew, I'd been driving in circles for hours.

Tears brimmed in my eyes, and I could feel the rumblings of a full-fledged breakdown inching through my body. A sob broke free, and I angrily swiped my hand across my eyes. I was not going to lose the plot. I was going to keep on driving until I found a sign of life, or even a road sign that would direct me to life.

Suddenly I saw something, something that looked almost familiar. Well, it was familiar, but something I hadn't seen for the last two and a half hours. It was light, and it was coming from a house. Out in the middle of nowhere, I was approaching a house. It might shelter a person, or people, or a family with a dog and a cat and a phone and directions. I no longer cared

that the person living at the house might be out to get me. By this time I was willing to take my chances. I wouldn't care if the dwelling was the Bates Motel and Norman offered me a shower, I was going to knock on the door and ask for help. Of course I would take my wheel brace with me, hidden inside my jacket. That was a given.

Instead of feeling scared, a bubble of excitement rushed through me. It wasn't from anticipating the duel to the death between me and a could-be attacker, wielding our weapons for changing tyres. What had me excited was just the thought of getting back to light and life. I slipped the car into gear and moved forward, towards the yellow glow a few hundred yards up the road.

Gravel crunching under my tyres as I pulled into the driveway of the house gave me a bit of reassurance. It was the outside light I had seen, but the lights downstairs were also on. At least I wouldn't have to wake someone up to ask for help, unless they had fallen asleep with the lights on. If that was the case, they should be happy I was about to save them from a huge electricity bill at the end of the quarter, and so should welcome me with open arms instead of a shotgun. Yep. That was my fucked up reasoning to help me keep calm.

Alas, it wasn't working. As soon as I stepped out of my car, I felt someone watching me. I still had to get my wheel brace from the boot of my car, but that idea was losing some of its lustre. Bending over into the blackness of the boot to rummage around for it would leave me open and exposed to anyone who was watching. I'd seen *Silence of the Lambs*. I was well aware that an attacker could thwack a woman on the back of the head, shove her into the back of a van, and drive off to claim her skin as his trophy.

My overactive imagination was back full force. I didn't have a van; I had a Mazda 3.

Decision made, I grabbed my keys and my handbag, sucked in a breath and slammed the door, then made a run for the welcoming light on the porch. I didn't look about to see if there was a doorbell. My fist went straight to the wood and hammered hard. I couldn't seem to stand in one place, couldn't seem to just wait innocently for the person in the house to open the door. I was too busy checking my perimeters, looking for someone sneaking up on me.

Hands grabbed my shoulders and pulled. The scream I had been saving for that very moment seemed to lodge in my throat and refuse to budge. I had to get it out before the person assaulting me covered my mouth and silenced me forever.

I was turned roughly, and the same hands that had grabbed me now slipped around my shoulders and pulled me more fully into a body. Warmth blanketed me, along with a distinct sense of protection.

How could I feel protected when I was being manhandled by a stranger? A stranger with breasts and a strong grip. A stranger who was shaking just as hard as I was.

I knew that if I was to save my life, I should kick, punch, bite, and scratch this person, but I couldn't seem to make myself move away from the cocoon that surrounded me. The stranger's hands slipped down my back in reassuring strokes, then one lifted to the back of my head and pulled me more securely against the softness of her chest.

"I knew you would come. I knew it!" The female voice above me was fraught with evident agony. "God, I've looked everywhere for you! Everywhere."

Me? Looked everywhere for me? And what did she mean by she knew I would come? I'd never been in this area before. I think I would have remembered if—

A soft kiss on the top of my head stopped my thoughts. The woman gently kissed my hair again before nuzzling my cheek.

This wasn't right, not right at all. But strangely, it *felt* right. It felt right to be held in the arms of a stranger at gone one in the morning, in a place I didn't know. In her arms, I felt safe, like whoever had been watching me from the woods couldn't hurt me now that she was holding me close.

My eyes fluttered closed and I nestled into the contact, inhaling a scent that seemed familiar. I didn't care that I didn't know her, didn't even know what she looked like. All that mattered was that she keep holding me.

"Come on, Ellen. Let's get you inside."

Who was Ellen?

"You're shivering."

The woman drew away slightly to lead me inside the house. Still on the porch, I looked around. Maybe Ellen was the person I had thought was watching me. But I couldn't see anyone there other than me and the unidentified woman.

"What's up, Ellen?"

Her soft voice sounded concerned, as if it was directed to someone who was acting strangely.

The light dawned. Did the woman think *I* was Ellen? Considering there was a light right outside the door, I didn't think it was dark enough for her to have mistaken me for someone else.

I twisted slightly and she released me from her grasp. Taking a step back, I turned and faced the woman. The light behind her cast a shadow over her face. "Who's Ellen?" I asked.

She took a small step forward, then faltered. Her head cocked to the side, and she appeared to absorb every aspect of me. Given the tilt of her head, I could see the outline of a firm jaw, a jaw that was moving as if it was chewing words, but no sound came out.

"I'm Rebecca." She seemed to stiffen when she heard my name, so I thought I would elaborate. "Rebecca Gibson."

She stepped backwards, as if she was trying to back into the house. Not without me she wasn't. I took a step forwards. "Sorry. I...well...I'm lost and..."

"Rebecca?"

"Gibson. Yes."

For each step she took backwards, I took one forwards. Soon we were both standing in her hallway. Beautiful, dark brown eyes looked into mine, quizzical brown eyes framed by long lashes. They showed confusion, as if what they were seeing wasn't real. My own eyes drifted down a straight, defined nose and settled on full red lips, parted slightly as if they were readying themselves to allow words to come forth.

"I'm sorry to impose on you at such a late hour, but..."

Her shoulders slumped before straightening again. "Not a problem. *Rebecca.*"

Why did she feel the need to separate my name from her statement?

"Come inside. You must be freezing." Her voice had lost its initial softness, and there was a distinct edge to it now, almost business like.

She moved past me and grabbed the door handle. Before she closed the door, she stared out into the darkness again, then sighed as she clicked the door into place and attached the chain.

"Come in here by the fire." She walked past me and disappeared into a room to the right. I shrugged and followed her.

There was an open fireplace in the room, the flames long gone but the embers glowing fiercely. The furniture was in keeping with the age of the house, classically rustic and well worn. My hostess was standing beside the armchair closest to the fire, and she gestured for me to sit. As I moved past her, my arm brushed hers. A spark seemed to ignite between us, and she jerked away with a gasp.

As I sat, she hurried from the room, and I found myself alone again. The ticking of a clock seemed to be the only noise I could hear, and my eyes searched it out. One thirty-four. Shit. No wonder she was pissed at me. It certainly wasn't etiquette to knock on someone's door at such a late hour, especially since it was apparent she had been expecting someone else.

The memory of how it had felt to be held in her arms flitted into my mind. I couldn't shake the feeling of belonging there, however strange that might sound. It wasn't just the feel of her, the protection I felt, or even the smell of her. It was so much more than that. But whatever it was, I couldn't say.

My eyes flicked back to the clock. One thirty-nine. Where had she gone? I looked around the room—a leather sofa with throws draped over it, a coffee table littered with magazines. Might as well occupy my time doing something other than noting the décor. If I didn't, I would probably start rooting through the drawers of her sideboard. I reached out and pulled one towards me.

*Picture Post* magazine, October 31, 1953. I couldn't believe I was looking at a magazine that was sixty years old. It didn't appear to be that old, although the picture on the front was not exactly worthy of *Hello* magazine. It was far too dated for that. London smog? Nurses? 4D or 4 pennies—the price, that was—before decimalisation.

“I thought you might need a cup of tea.”

The sound of the woman's voice made me start, and the magazine flew from my hands and onto the floor.

“Sorry. Didn't mean to make you jump.”

An awkward moment, that. I had been nosing around her collectable magazines and got caught, then tossed it into the air and ruffled the bugging thing up.

Shooting out of the chair, I went to snatch it up, but due to my haste, I felt a page tear slightly. Fuck. And fuck again.

Carefully—a little late for that—I lifted the magazine and offered it to her as if it was a sacrifice.

The woman just stared at me, a tray laden with teacups, sugar, and a teapot and milk jug balanced in her hands.

“I...well... God, I’m sorry.”

A laugh warmed her cool façade. “Don’t worry. I’ve already read it.”

Considering it was a vintage piece, I opened my mouth to apologise again, but she shook her head. “Just throw it to the side, will you? I need to set this down.”

I didn’t toss it. I placed it neatly on the floor underneath the table. A couple of minutes passed as she was finalising the tea. After she’d poured, and I had accepted milk but no sugar, she settled into the seat opposite mine.

“So, Rebecca, you were saying you’re lost,” she prompted.

I sipped my tea, wincing at the heat of it before placing my cup and saucer onto the table. Before I could answer her, she spoke again.

“Annabel Howell.”

“Excuse me?”

“My name. I thought it was past time I introduced myself.” Annabel leaned back into the armchair and raised her cup to her lips, but she didn’t drink. She just stared at me over the rim, as if she was assessing me.

I was being scrutinised. It wouldn’t have been so bad if her eyes weren’t so intense, weren’t so beautiful, but I felt as if I was under a microscope and she could see every single one of my shortcomings. A blush crept up my neck and spread over my face. I never blushed. Being a sales rep demanded that skill. So why was I blushing now?

“Erm.” Good call, Rebecca—three letters and a little intonation. Could work on the pace, though. “Yes. I... Well, I’m lost.” Jesus. Why did I repeat the only thing apart from my name that she already knew?

As if she was aware I was a moron, a smile flitted over Annabel's face before she sipped her tea. The thought of her smirking at my unease raised my hackles. I was tired and pissed off, and my headache was still clinging to the inside of my skull. The blush receded.

"I was travelling up from Cambridge to Morley and took a wrong turn somewhere along the line." Annabel tilted her head as if indicating I should continue. "I'm supposed to be at Breadsall Priory for a convention in the morning."

"Breadsall Priory? Do you know the Haslams?"

"Haslams?"

"The owners."

Why on earth would I know the owners of the bloody Marriott? I laughed. She glared. I laughed again. "Not really, no. Although I have contemplated adding them to Facebook."

Her face scrunched as if in thought, and I believed she would laugh with me. But no. She just looked pissed off.

"You're not too far from the Priory. About ten miles." She leaned forward and placed her cup on the table, her eyes fixed on mine. "But I wouldn't advise driving at night. Not here."

It seemed as if Annabel wanted to scare me, and I was fully expecting tales of goblins and will-o'-the-wisps. I felt like laughing again, but thought better of it.

"The trees block the view of the road in parts, so it's wisest to travel in the day."

Maybe she was just being practical.

Annabel kept looking at me, staring into my face. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable, and yet not, if you know what I mean. Soft eyes scrutinised my features. They dwelled on each aspect of my face for what seemed an interminable amount of time. All the while she was looking at me, I couldn't help but be amazed by her natural beauty—the finely chiselled jaw, the high cheekbones, the way the glow from the fire seemed to dance

over her skin and enhance each line and muscle. I felt as if I knew her, had known her, but I couldn't say from where.

"I feel as if we've already met." It wasn't me who spoke; it was her. "Have you been to Kirk Langley before?"

Her voice was soft, lilting, almost addictively so. There seemed to be an aura around her that was not caused by the fire. The moisture in my mouth evaporated, and I swallowed a couple of times before remembering I had a cup of tea. A quick sip, a wince at the heat of it, and I felt able to answer.

"I don't even know where I am, never mind having been here before."

Her eyes were riveted on my mouth, and I licked my lips in reflex. She did the same. Then it seemed to occur to her what she had done. Her face froze, her eyes widened slightly in acknowledgement, and then she slowly leaned back in her chair.

Back to the sound of the ticking clock. The atmosphere was charged with something indefinable, but also expectant. There were so many questions I wanted to ask her, but for some reason I didn't feel as if I could. I wanted to ask who Ellen was and why Annabel had thought I was her, but that would have seemed as if I was prying into her private life.

"Who's Ellen?" What the fuck? Couldn't I take my own advice of it being something that a person didn't bring up?

Annabel's eyes met mine, and I saw a flicker of pain surface before being buried once again.

"She's my friend." Her voice was calm, but also guarded.

I couldn't think of a single time I had ever greeted my friends the way Annabel had greeted me at the door, though she'd thought I was someone else at the time. Come to think of it, I didn't think I had ever greeted any of my girlfriends with such fervour. If they went AWOL, they usually stayed AWOL. I didn't know whether they were coming back, probably because I didn't

care if they did. I certainly didn't "look everywhere" for them, like Annabel had looked for Ellen.

It was obvious that Ellen was more than Annabel's friend, but I wasn't going to push it. Annabel's relationship with the other woman was none of my business. After several moments of uncomfortable silence, I stood to leave. I had definitely overstayed my welcome. "I think I'd better take my chances at getting to the hotel."

Annabel shot to her feet, her hands reaching out to me. "No! No. Stay. I insist."

The sheer panic on her face made my heart clench. Didn't she want to stay there alone? Nah. That couldn't be it.

"It really isn't safe for you to go at this time of night."

"But..."

She quickly moved around the table and grabbed my arm, and I could feel the heat of her, smell her scent. It was intoxicating.

Looking up, I met her eyes. I had thought they were beautiful before, but I was wrong. Up close, her eyes enthralled me. Brown, so very brown, and deep and soulful and all-consuming. I believed I could see my future within their depths.

"I insist."

Two tiny words that were tender, inviting, magical. I couldn't answer her, just nodded my agreement, my heart pounding in my chest.

Annabel released a breath, and the softness of it touched my skin and sent sparks through me. She was still holding my arm, as if she believed I would disappear if she released it.

"You can sleep in my bed."

Huh? Even to me that sounded a little bit forward.

"I'll sleep down here."

Her hand continued to rest on my arm. I looked at it, and then looked back into her eyes. They held a question, and I answered without it being asked.

“Thank you, but...” She squinted as she waited for me to continue. “If I do stay, I’ll sleep down here.” Annabel looked as if she was going to decline, but I beat her to it. “Now it is my turn to insist.”

She pursed her lips and tilted her head to one side, as if she was assessing me again, then a sigh slipped through her lips, followed by a single nod of her head.

Her hand left my arm, and I missed the heat of it immediately, desperately missed the contact of her skin on the sleeve of my sweater. Annabel took a step back, her eyes glancing away from mine before returning to devour me again. In my peripheral vision, I saw her hand stretch towards me, then drop to her side. Her eyes closed so deliberately, it seemed as if they did so in slow motion. She kept them closed for a long moment before opening them. Annabel inhaled deeply, held it, and then exhaled in one long breath.

All the while, I was transfixed.

“I’ll get you some blankets.”

And she was gone, and I was left wondering what on earth had just happened.

I heard her on the stairs, thuds against wooden slats. I listened to her quick footsteps across what must have been a bare wooden landing. And all the time I just stood there, just bloody stood there as if my feet were nailed to the floor.

What had just happened? What had been going through her mind as she touched my arm, held my gaze, closed her eyes and held the image of something only she could see inside? We had never met before, but it seemed to me that I had known her before, known her as something more than a woman who had been kind enough to offer me shelter. By the way she was acting, I had a feeling she felt the same way.

“Here you go.” Annabel was back, arms full of blankets and pillows. “It’ll get colder in here when the fire is banked.” She placed the stack onto the sofa, her back to me.

I didn't comment, just watched her shoulders working as they arranged the linens over the place where I was to sleep.

Annabel interrupted her task to peer over at me. "Or I could put more logs on, if you'd like."

I forced a smile and shook my head. "I'll be fine. Honestly." Her brow furrowed slightly and her mouth opened to speak, so I tried to reassure her. "I get quite hot in bed."

Fuck. And fuck. Not because of my inability to phrase things better, but the blush was coming back full force.

A crooked smile lit her face. "Really?"

This was a clear opportunity for me to flirt shamelessly, but I just couldn't. I didn't want to flirt with Annabel. Didn't want to cheapen how I felt about her by coming back with corny one liners and moving my eyebrows suggestively, like they do in trashy novels. I didn't even stop to question what, exactly, I did feel for her. I just turned away and started to stack the tea things back onto the tray.

A couple of minutes later, I was carrying the tray into the kitchen. The odd thing about that was, I didn't know where the kitchen was, and yet I knew where it was. The room was rustic, as I expected it to be. There was no sign of the usual things one would expect to find in a kitchen. No, that wasn't quite right. It did hold the usual, but then again, it didn't.

I wasn't making any sense, and I knew it. The Aga cooker seemed dated, as did the steel kettle that sat on top of the stove. There was no microwave, no toaster, no coffee maker, just a huge wooden table with four chairs, cupboards, a cooker, a rectangle pot sink and drainer, and a cream coloured fridge. Copper pans hung from a rack over the cooker, and I could see my distorted face in their shiny surface.

Plonking the tray on the drainer, I stood back and stared at the small window above the sink. It was dark outside, obviously, and I could see my reflection in the glass. My face seemed to

be cast in shadow, but I could see the definition of my nose, mouth, and eyes. My expression was intense, like I was trying to work out the meaning of life. I don't know why, because the only thing I was concerned about was why I suddenly had the sensation of feeling something more than gratitude toward my hostess.

Something wasn't right, didn't add up. In the window pane, my face looked distorted, like it had when I'd looked at the side of the copper pans. It wasn't like when a person checks his or her reflection in the back of a spoon, not like that at all.

I leaned closer, and the image in the window moved closer too. Squinting, I tried to decipher what the image was. Maybe it was because the window was double glazed that it appeared I was wearing one face over another. But the glass didn't seem as if it was double—

The image blinked. I didn't blink, the image did. I swear. It must've been fatigue; I'd been up for over seventeen hours. No wonder I was imagining things. I scrunched my eyes and shook my head and looked again. Now everything looked as it should. I was just—

**Tap**

I pulled back from the glass.

**TAP TAP**

Something was tapping on the window pane from outside. Initially I thought it was a branch, until the noise came a third time.

**TAP TAP**

I realised it wasn't a branch. Branches don't have knuckles.

My scream was loud and long. It reverberated off the walls, bounced off the copper pans, and hit me like a punch. Scrambling backwards, I rammed into the table, which made me scream again.

The tapping became insistent, and I looked at the window and saw myself still waiting there. That was impossible. I couldn't be reflected in the glass; I was halfway across the room.

Annabel came rushing into the kitchen. "What's...?"

I couldn't speak, couldn't do anything but grab hold of her and clutch her to me. I was shaking, the sobs intermittent between words that scrambled for coherence. Annabel placed her arms around me and pulled me close, her hands rubbing my back in long, soothing strokes.

I couldn't believe how wonderful it felt to be in her arms, how reassuring it was to be held in such safety. She was making shushing noises to calm me and, strangely, it was working. At least it was working enough for me to splutter out a little of what I had seen.

Her body stiffened, her hands freezing in mid stroke, as did the look on her face. She slipped away from me and moved towards the window. Strong hands rested on either side of the frame as she peered into the glass, her shoulders rigid.

The tapping had stopped. When I cast my mind back, I realised that it had stopped as soon as Annabel had entered the kitchen. "I'm so sorry," I said. "I must've imagined it."

Annabel didn't turn or acknowledge me, just kept staring out into the inky blackness.

Slowly, I moved towards her, my hand reaching out to touch her back. The stiffness I felt seemed to evaporate on contact, but there was a slight trembling in her.

"What did you see, exactly?" Her voice was cold, distant.

"Nothing, I guess. It was—" She turned abruptly, and my hand fell dejectedly to my side.

Brown eyes bored into mine. "No. You did." She took a step forward. "What was it?"

I held out my hands palms up, and shrugged. Her expression didn't change. She just stared into me.

I felt like a fool. I was tired, that was all. There wasn't anyone outside tapping on the glass like Catherine fucking Earnshaw. It was a case of playing Bloody Mary, like I had when I was a kid. Stare at the glass and say Bloody Mary three times, and you'd see...

As I recalled it, though, the game had never said anything about hearing a tapping sound, nor had it mentioned BM's knuckles.

"It was just my reflection. It seemed odd, though."

Annabel stepped forward. "Odd?"

"It was just your double glazing."

"Double what?"

"Glazing. Your window glass."

Annabel shook her head and glanced back at the window. I could see the outline of her in the glass and part of my face peering around her. Her eyes looked at me from her reflection in the pane, and I knew she was expecting me to say more. What could I say? That I saw my doppelganger at the window and it had tapped on the glass? Fuck that.

"Honestly, Annabel, I just freaked myself out." I stepped back and started to turn away from her. She grabbed my wrist. "I'm just tired, that's all."

It seemed as if time held its breath and waited along with me. At last the stiffness of her touch gentled, and she released me, along with a sigh.

"I suppose you'd better get to bed then."

I nodded.

Annabel walked past me and out of the room. With a last glance at the window, I followed her. There was no way I wanted to be in the kitchen on my own.

## Chapter Two

Within ten minutes, I was alone in the living room and sprawled on the sofa. Woollen blankets covered me, their heat seeping into my skin. Annabel had offered me something to wear, but I refused. I had a suitcase in the car, but there was no way I was going to go back outside and root around to find my pjs, not after what I thought I had seen. I was too much of a chicken shit to step outside until daylight arrived. Sleeping in my underwear and sweater would suffice, as my hostess had put another log on the fire to warm the room for a while longer.

I could hear her getting ready for bed, walking around directly above me. The sounds were like a comforter, a sense of safety after everything that had transpired that evening. It wasn't long before I felt the pull of sleep, and my eyelids submitted to the respite of rest.

My dreams were definitely fucked up. The first one had me standing at the side of a road that was obscured by bushes. It was dark and cold. I tried to keep warm, but warmth escaped me. In addition to the cold, I felt fear, fear of something, but I couldn't quite grasp what. Pain shot through my chest as if I had been running and had finally stopped from utter exhaustion. The reasoning part of my brain questioned why I was still cold when I should have been sweating. Maybe the fear coursing through me took dominance over the weather conditions.

A noise came out of the blackness, and my heart lurched into my throat. I felt as if I was a hunted animal that believed it had escaped the hunter, only to find that was not the case. I wanted

to run, to hide, to find safety of any sort, but I couldn't. In my dream I knew where I was, knew I was close to reaching a safe haven. The vivid lights of a car came into view and pulled over at the side of the road. It was not just any random car. No. It was my car, distinctly *my* car. I watched in rapt fascination as a person climbed out. Me. *I* climbed out of the car.

I gripped the trunk of the tree and tried to steady myself. This was too fucked up even for a dream. How could I be twenty feet away, watching myself get out of my car? Was this a somnambulant out of body experience?

My breathing was becoming shallow, and I believed if I couldn't control it I would pass out. I tried to take a deep breath, but panic made it impossible. I tried again, and again, and again. My other self was opening the back door to the car to make what I knew was going to be a cubicle. I knew exactly what was about to happen. I should do. I'd experienced it.

The memory of how scared I actually *had* been when I'd lived that moment compounded how I was feeling now. I wanted to contact my other self and put "my" mind at rest, but I couldn't speak. I just needed to get into the car and escape. Stumbling forward, I bumped into a tree and the bark grazed my arm. I could feel the pain of it, believed that if I woke at that precise moment I would see the mark of it on my skin. My other self was getting up, pulling up her trousers, and readying herself to leave, when "I" stopped before zipping up "my" fly.

Another stumbling step forward, another attempt to shout out there was nothing to worry about, but the words still wouldn't come. Twigs snapped underfoot and leaves scattered away as I staggered toward the road, a single halting step at a time. The interior car lights dimmed, and I could sense the panic from the other me. A noise squeaked from my panicked other self as I moved forward again.

"Who's there?"

I wanted to shout back, “You,” but what good would that do? I already knew I was scared. To be accurate, both of us were.

Instead of calling out, I decided it would be better to reach the car before it sped away, although I didn’t have any idea how “I” would cope with seeing myself come stumbling out of the darkness.

Just as I reached the edge of the forest, the engine roared to life and I knew I had mere seconds to get there before it was too late. The back door was still open, and I reached out to grab it. All thoughts of revealing myself to the driver evaporated. What was the point? I was freaked out enough for the both of us.

The door had barely closed when the car drew away at lightning speed, tyres squealing. I just stood there in the middle of the road, staring at the disappearing car. Just bloody stood there, remembering how frightened I’d been as I’d sped away from that spot in my car.

And yet, I felt even more frightened standing in the middle of the road in the dead of night, knowing there was someone still out to get me.

A noise alerted me that I was not alone. It was time to run.

\* \* \*

Jolting awake, I shot up, grabbed the covers, and pulled them up around me as if they had the ability to protect me from whatever was coming for me. Sweat slicked my body. I didn’t want to push away the blankets lest I be seen. I know. Fucked up.

My heart was racing. The dream had been so real that it took me a moment to realise I wasn’t standing in the middle of the road at all. I was, in fact, hunched up on Annabel’s sofa. The fireplace was still giving off heat, but the flames had long since died down.

I didn't know how long I had been asleep, but I knew it wasn't yet time to get up. I didn't know what to do. It wouldn't be right to get up and look around Annabel's house. That would be no way to reward a hostess. I figured I wouldn't be able to sleep again that night; I was too scared to close my eyes. So I lay there, and lay there, and continued to lay there.

Minutes seem like hours when you're waiting for morning to come. My eyes were burning, and my joints were seizing up from being cramped up on the sofa. Sleep beat me in the end.

In this dream, I wasn't standing in the woods. This time I was outside a window looking into the bright light of a kitchen, Annabel's kitchen.

I saw "myself" enter, carrying a tray. The shock of it immobilised me. "I" came to the glass and stared out. I could see the greenness of "my" eyes, the loose tendrils of my hair falling forward as "I" leaned forward. It was so different seeing myself that way. It was not like looking into a mirror at all. The movements were all fucked up, out of synch.

I had to get away, had to leave before I scared the living shit out of myself—both myself and "myself."

I did say my dreams were fucked up.

I turned away, but my jacket clipped the window, making a tapping sound. I saw the person inside straighten, cock her head, listen. It was too late to slip away unnoticed.

From behind me I heard the distinct sound of footsteps on gravel. He was here. I didn't know who "he" was, but I knew for certain that he had found me. I also knew it would not be a pleasant thing when he caught me.

Fuck it. I had to get the attention of the people inside the house, had to try to get them to come outside. I tapped on the glass. Tapped and tapped and banged and banged. But all that seemed to do was frighten the other me, make "me" rush backwards, make "me" scream out.

I saw Annabel enter, saw the woman I loved enter the room and race to the other “me.” I lifted my hand to get her attention, but I was grabbed from behind. My body fell backwards and was pulled in against a hard chest.

“Ya thought she’d ’elp ya, eh?”

It was *his* voice, just as dark, just as cruel, just as wickedly spiteful as he had always been. This time it wouldn’t be a just beating, not just a fall. No. This time he would take everything, including my life.

\* \* \*

‘Fuck!’ I shot up again and saw that the room was filling with the first touches of dawn. The fire was completely out, and there was a chill in the room. My heart was drumming a staccato rhythm in my ears.

“You okay?”

Just the sound of her voice drifting into the room eased the residual fear from my dreams. A sob, then another, then another, until they blended together into a cacophony of weeping. Strong hands slipped around my shoulders and pulled me close, the softness of her chest a contrast to the hardness of the man in my dream. I didn’t care that it seemed I was always an emotional wreck when she was near; all that mattered was that I felt safe. Annabel made me feel as if that man could never hurt me.

She held me until the tears abated, and then a while longer. Her voice was gentle, the words incoherent, but being in her arms and hearing her voice was so comforting that the sluggish drag of exhaustion overrode my need to cry. My fear had subsided, assuaged by the sensation of being close to Annabel. I remembered a wisp of my dream. When I saw Annabel in the kitchen, I had the sense that I was seeing the woman I loved.

Loved? I had only just met her, so how on earth could I love her? Attraction, admittedly, but love?

Annabel leaned back slightly, her eyes glistening. “How are you feeling?”

So soft, so enticing. I shifted forward, our faces impossibly close without touching. Her hand cupped my jaw, and the thumb stroked my skin. My eyelids fluttered as an out of control urge raced through me to close the gap between us and take those beautiful lips with mine. I didn’t get the chance.

Annabel’s kiss was initially a brushing, a tasting, a chaste connection between one person and another. Then her lips became firmer, more demanding, more delectable. Her hand moved from my jaw and cupped the back of my head, pressing us closer, connecting us more deeply.

I knew these lips, the texture and the taste. I knew just how they would claim my own, which I believed in my core they had done a thousand times before.

I leaned backwards and pulled her down onto the sofa with me. The warmth of her body seeped through the blankets and connected with my own heat.

A tentative tongue trailed against my lips, a tongue that was begging for access. I couldn’t refuse her. I never could refuse her. At that moment, it didn’t even occur to me to wonder about that thought.

The sensation was overwhelming. A moan climbed up my throat and surrounded her tongue as if it was the welcome committee. Annabel moved over me, her body pressing more firmly into mine, her breathing raspier, needy.

I slipped my arms around her and pulled her nearer. I needed to feel the solidness of her, to know I wasn’t dreaming. This was real. This was happening. I was back with her.

*Back with her?*

My eyes shot open and I looked at the woman who was kissing me. Her eyes stayed closed, her mouth and tongue still searching mine.

*Back with her?*

My brain hurt. It remembered her, but it didn't. Remembered the feel of her lips, the smell of her, the brownness of her eyes, but it didn't. It was almost as if there were someone else's memories working in synch with mine and totally confusing the situation.

Annabel stopped in mid-kiss. Her mouth was warm against mine, but immobile. Her eyes opened and looked straight into me—not just into my eyes, but into me. When she pulled back, I felt the loss immediately.

“Ellen?”

Ellen? Had she thought she was kissing Ellen? The Ellen she believed I was last night?

“I'm Rebecca.”

My voice sounded as if it belonged to someone else. The assertion was quiet yet firm. I didn't want to be kissed by someone, however much I was attracted to them, if they believed they were with someone else.

Her face contorted as her mouth moved around the feeling of my name. A flash of pain flitted across her face and she stumbled backwards and fell to the floor.

I watched in fascination as she scooted backwards, as if I would hurt her if she turned away from me. Her eyes filled with panic, then hurt, then what I could only identify as grief.

Then she was up and gone, and I was left dumbfounded on the sofa, alone.

## Chapter Three

I didn't stay for breakfast. There was no way I wanted every time I looked at my hostess to remind me about what had happened. And I certainly didn't need to experience the repeated emotional slap for not being who she wanted.

When we parted at the front door, Annabel was very quiet. Her face was pale, those beautiful eyes dull. As I began to back away, she reached out to me but I just stuck out my hand to shake hers. There was no denying the sensation that raced from her to me, and from me to her. No denying the irresistible pull of connection or the sudden surety that I definitely knew her.

Her face brightened, and her mouth opened as if she wanted to speak.

"Thank you, Annabel." I held up the directions she had written down in small, neat handwriting. "It was lovely meeting you."

Her mouth closed, and so did her expression. She gave a brief nod of acknowledgement.

Then, without a backwards glance, I was on my way to Breadsall Priory and a day of more shit.

The drive to the Priory bore no resemblance whatsoever to the interminable trek of the previous evening. Roads I had thought to be deserted actually were lined with houses and shops. Why hadn't I seen them the night before? Perhaps they were closed then, so there had been no lights on to catch my attention. Or perhaps it was sheer panic that had made me pass them by without notice.

I signed in at the hotel and offered my apologies for not arriving the night before. I didn't go into detail, as I doubted the man on Reception actually gave two shits about my life story. The room was being paid for by my company, so it didn't matter either way to them whether or not I used it.

Then it was up to my room, toting my own bag instead of having to make small talk with the bellboy. Showered and changed, I was in the meeting hall, seated at the back. I didn't want to be an eager beaver today. Far from it. I wanted to wallow in self-pity and forget everything that had happened the night before.

Today was the final convention stop for me for a while. I had booked an overnight stay at the Priory for that evening as well, but I decided to go home instead. But then the scenes from the previous evening kept popping into my head throughout the day, and I eventually decided to stay the night and drive back to Norwich as soon as the sun was up the following morning. At least I would have little chance of getting lost in full daylight.

It was more of the same old faces, same old shit, and same old me. Actually, I had always loved my job and so I suffered through the obligatory conventions, but now they seemed just a waste of my time. I found myself mentally drifting off, thinking about what had happened that morning.

I usually used meetings as an opportunity to network, but not today. Today I isolated myself from the other reps, shut myself off from the rest of the world.

Bedtime was earlier than usual. I was mentally and physically exhausted. No surprise really, considering I must've had no more than three hours sleep the night before. I opted for a bath instead of a shower, and soaked myself until my skin pruned.

When I opened my case and pulled out my pjs, I thought again about the previous night. Pulling off the side of the road and feeling as if I was being watched; the feelings of fear, of

being hunted; meeting Annabel and her believing I was someone else.

I stopped, my pjs hanging loosely in my hand. Everything that had happened after that seemed out of place, as if I'd entered a world that I did and didn't belong in, like I was stepping into the shoes of someone else and the shoes fit perfectly.

Fuck that. I wasn't Cinderella. I must've been even more tired than I'd thought the night before. How else could I explain the face at the kitchen window?

Then I remembered the dreams, the feeling of being on the outside of my life and looking in. I snorted derisively as I acknowledged how true that was. It seemed I'd always felt that way—on the outside of my own fucking life and looking at it as if seeing it under a microscope.

That didn't change the fact that my dreams were even more fucked up than my real life, although I did recognise that was usually what happened in dreams.

For the first time in a long time, I felt the pangs of loneliness. I didn't get lonely; I kept busy. Kept on the move and didn't allow people to invade my private life. Even visiting my family was a chore, something to be endured at Christmas and on birthdays. I was happy being on my own, happy not having anyone to answer to. So why was I suddenly feeling as if my life might not be quite enough?

This introspection was too deep, too intimate. I was tired, that was all. I needed a good night's sleep, and I would be good to go. A night of restful sleep would take care of these feelings of loneliness, of not belonging and not fitting in.

I slipped into my pjs and then under the covers. Sleep was waiting for me almost immediately. So were the dreams.

\* \* \*

The scene was different, so very different from the night before. I was inside Annabel's house, sprawled on the sofa. Soft music was playing in another part of the house, and the sound of it was calming. A fire blazed in the hearth. Candles scattered around the room added to the ambience. It was relaxing, peaceful. I felt completely at home.

In my dream, I closed my eyes and allowed the serenity to completely envelop me. The warmth, the music, the perception of safety was wonderful.

Someone came into the room, but I didn't feel alarmed. In fact, I didn't even open my eyes. Fingers danced over my face, tracing from eyebrows to mouth and back again. They focused on my lips, following the curve of the lazy smile the stroking had conjured.

"You are so very beautiful."

The words seemed to seep into my skin and warm me to the core. Fingers were replaced by soft kisses, kisses that I returned. I knew those lips—the texture and the taste of them, and how they would claim my own. I also knew without a shadow of a doubt that I had kissed those lips a thousand times before.

Even before I opened my eyes to drown in pools of chocolate, I knew it was my Annabel. Just the feel of her lips, the smell of her skin—it was all her, the love of my life. This was the woman who had made me feel alive from the moment I met her nearly four years ago. It was a pity I'd met her younger brother just before that. Her brother was my husband.

This wasn't the time to remember his cruelty, wasn't the time to recollect his fists, his biting words, his hatred for anything that didn't fit into his bigoted view of life. This was time for me to be with Annabel, and I wanted to make the most of it.

My eyes opened and I absorbed her beauty. My breathing stopped whilst I examined every feature of her face. One eyebrow

raised in question made her expression sexy. I trailed my fingers down the side of her face, and she turned and kissed them.

“Is Bella asleep?” My voice was husky.

Annabel made a mewling noise before answering. “Yes. Like a lamb. She always has liked the bed in the spare room being especially her size.”

More kisses along my fingers, until she slipped one inside her mouth and sucked. I gasped at the sensation of her mouth and tongue. Heat raced to my core, and I shifted closer to her. “Did...did you read to her?”

“Ahuh. *Madeline’s Rescue* is going down well.” Her lips curled into a smile before she pulled away and looked lovingly into my eyes. “She wants me to tell you she wants a dog.”

“Really? My three-year-old daughter said she wants a dog, eh?”

Her eyes widened in feigned innocence. “Yep. One like Genevieve.”

I laughed. “You mean *you* want a dog like Genevieve.”

Annabel scrunched up her nose before grinning widely and nodding.

“Thought so.” I cupped my hand behind her head and pulled her to me. I wanted to feel those lips and that tongue again. Before I could kiss her, she pulled back and looked straight into me.

“You will, won’t you?”

I didn’t have to question what she meant. I knew she wasn’t talking about a dog. Annabel was asking if we were still leaving Kirk Langley the following evening, as we’d planned. It was a monumental step for both of us. I would be leaving my husband and taking our only child away from him; Annabel would be leaving her home.

Freddie would never accept our leaving together, never let the shame of it die. No one left Freddie Howell, no one, especially not his wife. He would hunt us down like animals.

Until now Annabel and I had kept our love a secret, but it would all come out when she left with me. People would not understand that two women could be in love and want to spend their lives together. Freddie would definitely not be happy that someone else now possessed his property, even if it was his own sister. I knew I was committing adultery, but that sin paled in comparison to the abuse Freddie had heaped on me over the years.

I sat up and met her gaze. “Nothing will keep me from you. Nothing.”

The force of her kiss pushed me back onto the sofa. My fingers threaded through her hair and gripped. Just having Annabel with me made all right with my world. Everything we had suffered would be worth it.

She moved over me, her body making contact with the full length of mine. The kiss was intense, and desire sparked throughout my body.

My hands slipped around the front of Annabel’s shirt and began to release the buttons. The heat of her skin against my fingers made me hunger for more. I pushed her shirt over her shoulders and shifted my lips to her bared flesh. Annabel’s head tipped to the side, exposing her throat. I kissed my way up to it, taking the opportunity to taste her.

Annabel leaned back and sat up. She grabbed the tail of her shirt and pulled it free from her body in one swift movement; she wasn’t wearing a bra. The light of the fire danced over toned muscles and caressed the soft swell of her breasts.

My hand explored the dips and curves of her. Brown eyes met mine, almost black with their desire. I opened the button on her slacks and then slowly moved the zipper down. Slipping my hands back up, I grabbed the waistband and moved the pants downwards.

She placed her hands on top of mine and stopped me. “I want to see you, feel you.” The words seemed to be dragged from her throat, as if each was difficult to say.

I lifted my arms so she could unwrap me like a gift. Annabel lifted my jumper and pulled it over my head, then leaned forward and unclasped my bra, freeing my breasts.

“Jesus, Ellen.”

The shock in her voice made me freeze for an instant before my eyes followed her gaze. Bruises purpled my ribcage, dark and angry blotches that marred what should have been pale soft skin. Anger choked her, and tears filled her eyes with the effort of pushing it down. Tentative fingers traced the outline of each one, and although they were tender, I suppressed the wince.

Her eyes shifted from my skin and captured my gaze. “When?” She spluttered just the one word.

I shook my head. I didn’t want to ruin our time together by discussing how my husband had used me as a punch bag to vent his frustration over something that had gone wrong for him at work.

Annabel didn’t give up. “When, Ellen?”

The pain in her eyes made me cave in. “Tuesday.”

She pushed away from me, and I felt the loss of her.

“Tuesday?” she spat. “Tuesday! It’s Friday today. Friday!”

Her anger boiled over, but it was not aimed at me. I knew part of the reason she was angry was because I hadn’t told her about Freddie hitting me, but what was the point? Women were battered by their husbands all the time. It was a cold, hard fact that men could do as they wanted. It wasn’t right, but it was still done. Annabel and I were leaving the next evening to start life afresh somewhere else. I knew if I’d told her, she would have confronted him. We were so close to escaping this life that I didn’t want Annabel giving her brother any indication that she

was in love with his wife. He was bound to realise that was the only reason Annabel would try to defend me.

“Annie.” I used the nickname I had for her. No one else called her Annie. No one else was allowed to. “Please, don’t.” I could see she was trying to let go of her anger, but so far it wasn’t working.

I stood up and moved over to her. My hands slipped around her waist and pulled her close. She was slightly taller than me, and I had to tilt my head back to look into her eyes. “Baby, we are close, so close. Let it go.” I could feel the rage vibrating through her, so I kissed her chin once, then again. Slowly, the emotion drained from her, and she slumped against me.

“I’m sorry, so sorry.” Tears were streaming down her face, so I brushed them away. “I just...just...”

More tears. I was making shushing noises and stroking her face and hair. I felt her body stiffen, and I knew what was coming next.

“I’m not like him, am I? You know—with my anger?”

I smiled at her and shook my head. Annabel Howell was the gentlest woman I had ever met. The thought of anyone being hurt made her hurt right along with them, and it came out as anger. It was a mystery how she could be related to that bastard Freddie Howell. They looked alike, but that was where the similarity ended.

I took her hands in mine and gently led her to the sofa and sat her down, then guided her back until she was lying down. Before I joined her, I slipped out of the rest of my clothes and stood before her naked. Her eyes drank me in almost reverently, like I was a divine creation sent to earth for her. No one else had ever looked at me that way, had ever made me feel so loved with just a look.

I leaned over, my mouth close to hers. She lifted her head, expecting me to kiss her, but I pulled back. “Your turn to get naked,” I murmured.

The shiver that passed through her was visible even in the half light.

I kissed along heated skin, glorying in the involuntary flexing of taut muscle. Gripping the top of her trousers, I pulled them down and then moved up to take off her panties. One hand on each foot soon got rid of her thick socks, and she lay before me completely undressed. Annabel was a vision, a balm to my soul. Each time I looked at her, my heart understood why it kept beating each day.

She reached forward and tentatively touched my bruises, but instead of getting angry again, she sighed and drew me closer until my body covered hers. “I love you so much, Ellen, so very much.”

Her words found their way into my soul. “I love you, too.” And God, I did.

Mouth met mouth, lips and tongues and teeth. Hands explored secret places, longing for no one but each other. I nudged her legs apart and settled between strong thighs. It felt so right to be with her, no matter what society forbade.

Annabel lifted her hips, seeking firmer contact, and I happily obliged her. Heat pooled at my core and I wanted to share it with her, share my essence with her, mix our essences until we two became one.

I kissed her skin, tasted her, revelled in her. A rhythm built between us, the tempo increasing with each thrust of our bodies moving in practiced synchrony. At that moment, it was all that mattered—the two of us reaffirming our love, our connection.

I kissed her and pressed harder against her. I wanted to climb inside, love her from the inside out, live forever within the woman who had stolen my heart almost from the moment I met her.

Annabel’s fingers were digging into my back, and I gasped into her mouth. Her thighs moved higher around my waist and

opened her secret sanctum more fully against me. I could feel she was wet, and I wanted more contact. With her, I always wanted more.

I gripped one leg and then pushed the other thigh down to the sofa. I positioned myself over her thigh and slicked my need across her skin. When she groaned, I nuzzled her ear and whispered, "I want to make love to you." The soft moan that slipped from her mouth almost made me cum right then. I took it as a yes.

I slid against her again and again, full strokes, my thigh pressing against her heat. My mouth moved to her breast, and I licked around the pert nipple before capturing it between my lips. The sensation of holding such perfection was divine.

Annabel's hands gripped my backside and drew me closer, and my nub rubbed along the glorious length of her thigh. Desire flooded me, and I released her nipple and returned to her mouth. My lips met hers ferociously, and I am definite I heard myself growl as I pulled away to kiss her neck again. I could feel her heart hammering against my mouth, hear her ragged breathing, the scent of her need radiating in the air.

Her hands were in my hair, wrapping around the tendrils and tugging slightly. My hips were gyrating on her thigh, and the shocks of pleasure rippling through me made me pant, made me groan, made me need her even more.

Slipping my hand between us, I felt wetness, heat. Slick folds parted and permitted me entry to her most secret place, a place reserved for only me. I slowly circled her opening. Annabel rocked forward in an attempt to force my fingers inside, but I drew back.

"Please!" The word was a gasp.

I lifted my head and looked into beautiful eyes that were hooded, expectant. The rhythm between us never faltered.

She whispered, "I love you."

A wonderful ache began in my heart. I loved this woman so bloody much.

I entered her slowly, gently, watching her eyes flicker at the sensation of being filled by two fingers. I held them still, giving her time to become accustomed to the feeling, but Annabel was impatient for more. Her hips moved backwards and forwards, creating a tempo I was happy to follow.

My own orgasm was simmering and would careen out of control if not held back, but I wanted to share my release with Annabel's. Seeing her lying there open and vulnerable made it difficult to hold back, but I tried.

Her hips moved more quickly as my fingers took her. I reached deep inside her, pulled back, delved deeply again. Sweat coated our skin, and the movement of our bodies each against the other was smooth. My wetness was dripping onto her thigh, and the sensation of rubbing against her was delicious torture.

Faster, deeper, harder. I couldn't get enough of Annabel, would never tire of hearing the delightful sounds of pleasure coming from her. I could feel her walls tightening around my fingers and knew her release was imminent.

Our breasts rubbed together, heightening the bliss of the moment. So soft, so feminine, so perfectly and magically us. Annabel tensed, clenched around my fingers, and held her breath. I curved my fingers inside her and felt for the spot I knew would tip her over the edge.

We had shared our bodies before, shared our love, but this time seemed to hold something more. It was as if at the moment of climax, something inside my head recorded the image of her, the absolute perfection that was Annabel Howell. Her head was thrown back, her mouth open, eyes closed. Breasts lifted and pressed into me, as did her fingers. I rubbed the spot again, pressing and caressing until another orgasm ripped through her.

Blinding white light shook me as I orgasmed. I wanted to tell her I loved her, but words were impossible. There were just the primitive sounds of two souls reuniting.

I fell forward, my body covering hers. Strong arms wrapped around me and held me close, soft kisses pressing into my hair, and a feeling of contentment flooded through me. This was what I wanted for the rest of my life—to be with her, to be held by her, feeling safe and loved and wanted.

This time tomorrow, our “forever” would begin, Annabel, Bella, and me starting over. The three of us together at last.

And then Freddie could never hurt us ever again. How perfect that would be.

\* \* \*

With a start, I sat up in bed. The room was dark and at first I wondered where I was, since the last thing I remembered was being on a sofa. And where was Annabel?

Stumbling from the bed, I nearly fell to the floor but caught myself at the side of the bed and plonked back onto the mattress. It felt strange, the room I mean. I should have known where I was, but everything seemed foggy. I was still wondering where Annabel had gone, but I didn’t call for her. I guess I knew it hadn’t really happened. That wasn’t the best feeling in the world, but that was the length and breadth of it.

Focusing my attention, I peered around and tried to make out the shapes in the darkness. I was in a hotel room. *My* hotel room to be precise. To be honest, the feeling that came with the realisation was an ache that clawed up from inside me and travelled up my throat. I knew it had only been a dream, but apparently my heart couldn’t accept the disappointment of it quite yet. Stupid, I know. I had never before allowed the vestiges of sleep to overrule my practical side, and I wasn’t about to start now.

I clicked on the bedside lamp and felt even worse. So much for my determination to be practical. Seeing the room bathed in a subtle orange glow banished all hopes of actually being in my fantasy world. It was just me on my own again, like usual.

I tried to swallow down the nausea. I couldn't understand why I was feeling sick in the first place. It wasn't as if my dream had been so horrific that I should want to dump the meagre contents of my stomach over it. The dream had been pleasant, very pleasant. Too pleasant, actually. And that thought helped me understand why I wanted to vomit.

Racing to the bathroom, I barely got bent over the toilet before I let loose. Heave after heave after heave, and then the dry kind, the hurting kind. My legs gave out on me and I hit the cold hard tile, the chill a reminder that this was my real world after all.

I sat there for what seemed like an age, but was only about fifteen minutes. Tears were streaming down my face, and I put it down to my feeling ill. Even at that stage, I was trying to fool myself.

The smell of putrid stomach contents was making my gut roil, and I knew I had to soak underneath the hot jets of the shower and allow them to work their magic. Maybe they would wash away the sadness that was swamping me from the inside out. I could only hope.

Readying myself for my shower, I removed my sleeping top. Something in the mirror caught my attention, something underneath my breasts.

I walked over to the mirror, lifted my arm, and leaned closer. Deep, dark purple bruises peppered the ribs below my breasts, bruises I hadn't noticed earlier when I'd been soaking in the bath. Could I have hit myself as I slumped next to the toilet? And if that was the case, why hadn't I felt it?

Gently pressing the bruises, I winced. They were fresh enough to still cause pain, but that didn't add up. I would have

felt it if I'd hit myself on the toilet seat. And even if I had hurt myself, the bruises wouldn't be all over me. It was almost as if I'd been beaten.

"Fuck!" Battered. "Fucking hell!" Battered as if I had been on the receiving end of someone's fists. I knew I would have remembered that.

Weirdly enough, I did, but not in the way I should have remembered it.

My hands were shaking as I traced the outline of the dark mass. Were they the same as the bruises I had seen in my dream? No. That would be *too* fucked up, even given everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. People didn't have dreams about being bruised and then wake up with bruises, not on this scale they didn't. It wasn't as if I'd banged my hand on the bedside table.

Turning the cold tap on full, I cupped handfuls of water and splashed my face. Part of me believed I must still be in some kind of sleep/wake limbo. But when I looked back into the mirror, the bruises were still there.

It was then that I felt it—something behind me, something waiting to be acknowledged. I knew I should be scared, should almost be shitting myself, but I wasn't. It was as if, on some subconscious level, I was expecting it.

"I'm so sorry. So sorry."

The voice drifted into me, as if it bypassed my ears and went through my skin, through my pores. And it was a voice full of pain and torment.

I spun around and looked for her, for Annabel. She was the one who spoke. I knew it was her. I could sense her presence, feel her near me. But apart from me, the bathroom was empty.

That was not even the most worrying thing about the whole situation. The thing that worried me the most was the disappointment I felt when I realised I was on my own. How

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fucked up was that? To be disappointed when the woman from my dream wasn't manifesting in my hotel bathroom?

And why was I disappointed that I hadn't seen a ghost in my bathroom? Simple. If Annabel Howell *had* been standing behind me, I might not have started to believe I was losing my mind.

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# DRIVING ME MAD

BY L.T. SMITH

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