

# A Crown of Thorns

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## PROLOGUE

**Surrey, Spring 2001**

*Journal Entry:*

*Today I feel insignificant, not dissimilar to other days. It is a feeling I am becoming accustomed to, like an old familiar overcoat wrapping itself around me but giving me only cold comfort. As I walked I marvelled at the beauty of the day, so fresh and crisp like fresh washing on a line blowing contentedly in the breeze. The scent of daffodils and bluebells pervaded the air with their intoxicating fragrance. The day was bright and there was just a hint of warmth from the sun. A gentle wind blew through the daffodils and they seemed to dance before my eyes. I squinted against the sun and for a moment lamented my sunglasses which I remembered leaving on the hall table. I pulled my scarf tighter, its roughness chafing my neck. I wouldn't wear it but for Rosemary Peterson, who seemed to stand like a centurion at the front door whenever I made to go out.*

*"You'll need your scarf Rector, it's chilly out there today and we can't have you catching your death can we? Not you of all people," she would say, making me sound like the prime minister.*

*Sometimes I want to retort,*

*"Yes we do want me to catch my death" for then I would finally be released. Then I found myself wondering as I walked, how does one go about catching their death? Would death show itself in all its dank macabre state and like a playful child expect you to give chase until finally you caught it? Hence you catch your death. But then what? You may decide to let it go and not keep it after all. Did I want to catch my death? I wondered. Perhaps at times I wanted death to catch me.*

*The reason I am writing this is because I want to remember all my thoughts this morning, for it is remarkable to me that it should be this morning that I was again allowing myself the shameful thoughts of death, my own death in fact, while appreciating at the same time the pleasure and beauty of life. The green rolling hills that overlooked the cemetery and continued for miles, the bright blue sky as though painted that morning by an artist, devoid of cloud, the flowers dancing in the breeze celebrating the arrival of spring. It was a day to celebrate life, not to contemplate death. But perhaps I was not considering death in the physical sense. There are many types of death. This morning I once again felt as though my soul had died and I had paled once again into insignificance. If one died emotionally, what would be left? Without love people wither like flowers starved of water.*

*It was as I turned to walk back that I saw her, she was kneeling on the ground intent on something in front of her. I walked closer and on hearing me she looked up. Her eyes were a soft pale blue and she looked pleadingly at me.*

*"Can we help it?" she asked, holding up the baby finch that was cupped in her hands.*

*"Its wing is broken," she explained, her voice was soft and held a slight huskiness to it. She looked pale and seemed more fragile than the broken bird she held. I bent down and gently took the bird from her noticing her slender fingers. There was a sadness that pervaded her and I embraced it, immediately sensing her need but not knowing how to fill it.*

*"I will take it to Thorton, he's our local vet," I said and she looked reassured. She had stood up then revealing a rather odd bohemian shawl style coat, and beneath it I glimpsed the hint of a colourful skirt. Her long dark hair was tied back and she wore no make up but I thought her the most beautiful creature.*

*"I'm Virginia, we moved here yesterday." The huskiness was more apparent now, like someone who smoked too much. Virginia, the name suited her. She smelt of Jasmine and Vanilla instantly reminding me of hot summer holidays at Aunt Vanessa's. Mother would lean across and marvel at my sand castles and I would smell her delicious fragrance, a mixture of Nivea cream and some wonderful perfume that would smell of Jasmine and Vanilla.*

*"So clever aren't you poppet?" She would say admiringly and I would swell with pride.*

*They had moved to 'Starkfield House' she said, but she seemed restless and preoccupied with the injured bird held loosely in my hand. I promised to take care of it immediately and sadly had to make a hasty, if reluctant retreat from her. Thorton had later assured me the bird would be fine. Would the fragile broken bird named Virginia also survive I wondered? I could visit but then perhaps...*

"Jonathan," it was a panicky cry followed by a crashing sound and the pen slipped from his fingers, scratching a dramatic black line across the page. He looked at the large oak grandfather clock given to him by his parents. It was seven p.m. Mrs. Peterson would most certainly have left and a grateful sigh escaped his lips. How did they manage to live this lie? Or did they? He closed the journal with a thud and wearily Rector Jonathan Byrnes left his study, locking the door behind him.

CHAPTER ONE

I arrived earlier than expected. I thought my journey would take me a day and half at the least and had anticipated the possibility of finding lodgings and continuing my travels the following morning. However, to my surprise I reached the town closest to the village of Millbridge late in the afternoon on the same day of my departure. A sign ahead directed me to the village that was now ten miles away. I was breathlessly impressed by the snow-covered landscape that seemed endless. The small country lanes that directed me to Millbridge had been roughly cleared and mountains of snow sat on the roadside. It was bitterly cold but I wore only a shirt and trousers for the car heater was keeping me comfortably warm. On the back seat was my jacket and overcoat. I began to feel pangs of nervousness. I knew how close knit villagers could be and this was my first post as rector. I was armed with very little information. I knew that St Marks was one of the oldest churches in England, but of the previous Reverend I had been given no explanation. It was surreal. Three weeks ago I had been ordained and now here I was a few miles from my new community. A sharp bend took me over the bridge of an iced stream and then I saw the sign, 'Millbridge, please drive slowly through the village'. Ahead of me was a clearing and I took the opportunity to stop and study my instructions although I knew them off my heart. 'Key to front door of Vicarage will be under doormat. All other keys for house will be on hook in the porch.' I couldn't help but wonder who had arranged the keys for me and what the house would be like. I again read the directions to my new home. I was to drive through the village; past the post office and then about hundred yards to the left I should see the entrance to the Rectory. I drove slowly as the sign had instructed and admired the small hamlet of Millbridge. All the front gardens were covered in snow, and the delicious smell of burning wood stealthily crept into the car. Smoke billowed from chimneys and I pictured the inhabitants sitting snugly in front of their open fires and dearly hoped the rectory had some other form of heating for it would take me forever to get a fire going, should I need to. There were no street lamps and I silently cursed, for it was becoming quite dark now and I had not thought to bring a torch. I then glimpsed what appeared to be the post office but in the gloom it was difficult to distinguish. Reluctantly I stopped the car and climbed out, the icy air cutting through me like a sword. As soon as I read the words 'Millbridge Post Office' I ran back closing the door quickly behind me. For a while I sat shivering and again dread seized me when I realised there may be no heat at the house. I drove a little further and it seemed as though I was leaving the village when suddenly I saw a house on the left. An outside light was on and I could make out a plaque on the old wooden gates, 'The Rectory'. Carefully I manoeuvred the car onto the gravel driveway and with a contented sigh turned off the engine, leaving the headlights on. The house was larger than I had imagined. I grabbed my overcoat and struggled to put it on. The search for the key was quite easy and once in the house I began wandering from room to room. I was astonished to find them all fully furnished. My allowance for dwelling would now go much further. I had been advised the house was partly furnished but this surpassed all my expectations. Had my direction to the Rectory not been so clear, I would seriously have considered myself in the wrong house. The sitting room was as cosy as I could ever want. A large sofa and a comfortable old chair occupied most of the room, apart from an old dresser that housed a single bottle of whiskey, which filled me with comfort. Faint dust covered it like talcum powder but I could distinguish small areas that had avoided the dust onslaught. On

closer inspection one could see the marks of where, once, perhaps there had been a photograph or an ornament of some kind. All the rooms were the same, each adequately furnished. One however, I could not enter for it was locked, immediately arousing my curiosity.

Surprisingly the sitting room was still warm from the dying embers of a fire. I was about to collect my luggage when the door opened and an elegantly dressed woman entered.

"You must be Reverend Kelston. I'm afraid you have taken us a little by surprise; we were expecting you tomorrow. I'm Jessica Ridgeway, deacon of the Parish." Her voice was as clear as crystal. I imagined her to be about mid sixties and admired her appearance; she was well built but not overweight and carried herself with a superior sophistication. Her hair was thick and wavy and just reached her strong jaw line. Her eyes were wide and watery and she dabbed at them several times with a tissue, which she then transferred to her small neat nose. I presumed she had a cold.

I held out my hand.

"Please call me Matthew. Thank you for the fire."

She barely touched my hand before pulling it away again.

"There is a basket of wood by the fireplace and lots more outside. I made a casserole for you; it's in the fridge. The beds are freshly made, I will drop by tomorrow and take you to the church"

She turned to leave and I was disappointed she had not mentioned the reverend that had previously occupied the house.

"The Rector that was here before, what happened to him? Most of his furniture is still here. It's rather nice for me but quite strange." I tried to sound light hearted for I had already deduced something odd must have taken place and wanted to tread carefully.

She stopped instantly and became for a second very still and then I saw her breathing had become rapid and her motionless figure seemed suddenly to tremble.

"We don't like to discuss Rector Byrnes, I hope you will respect that. All keys for the house are hanging in the porch. I will see you in the morning. Good night."

I stood transfixed as the door closed behind her. My mind began churning. Something was amiss here of that I was certain. Bewildered I walked to the fire and threw on some logs, then realising I was quite hungry, went into the kitchen and put the casserole dish in the oven. I then went out to the car to fetch my luggage; this took me close on an hour for I had brought many books and paintings. In all that time not one person came to acknowledge my arrival, which I thought surprising, as there were many cottages nearby.

It was much later after feeling satisfied from my meal, that I chose to explore. Most of the rooms were uninteresting and all the drawers in the bedrooms were empty. One bedroom I somehow felt to be more masculine and chose that for myself. Tomorrow, I decided, I would try the keys and attempt to enter the locked one. I went into what seemed to be the study and began to rummage through the drawers. This time, I struck lucky finding headed stationary, which, disappointingly, I couldn't use, but instead tried it in the old battered typewriter that sat on the desk. It was rather quaint but I decided life wouldn't be the same without my Laptop. Yawning, I realised it was time to retire. Just as I was about to close the top drawer, I saw a leather-bound book pushed to the back. Curiously I pulled it out and opened the first page. The words were beautifully written and simply said, 'Journal of Jonathan Byrnes'. Suddenly my breathing became rapid, and I closed it abruptly. I couldn't read another

mans journal, or could I? For if Jessica Ridgeway had been speaking for the whole village when she said 'we don't like to discuss Rector Byrnes', then perhaps only one person could tell me what had happened to him. Instantly awake now, I opened the journal. A small sheet of paper fluttered to the floor. I retrieved it swiftly and read the untitled hand written poem slowly.

*The life that I have  
Is all that I have  
And the life that I have  
Is yours  
The love that I have  
Of the life that I have  
Is yours, and yours, and yours.  
A sleep I shall have  
A rest I shall have  
Yet death will be but a pause,  
For the peace of my years  
In the long green grass  
Will be yours, and yours, and yours.*

There was an indiscernible single letter scribbled at the end, presumably the mark of the writer.

Not understanding what it meant, or from whence it came, I carefully replaced it and then with apprehension, began reading the journal.

\* \* \*

*May 2001*

*Journal Entry:*

*Mrs Peterson knows our secret, or at least one of them. Rowena collapsed again last night. Poor Rosemary Peterson. Such a pious woman, I could not lie. But I would have done, had it been anyone other than her. I saw the horror in her eyes and also the pity. She thinks I am God, if she knew of my sin what would it do to her? So many people I am lying to.*

*Dear Rowena. How she is tortured. I ought to free her; allow her to be what she is. I no longer know how to help. I cannot take away this thing that eats away within her. Almighty Father, why do you test me unmercifully? I am helpless. I watch this suffering every day and I know I am the only one that can release her. Today I wrote my sermon for Sunday and as I did so I could not help wondering if Virginia would come. Suddenly she is a light in my slow decline. I sense a pain in her; it is as though I know instinctively that, like me, she is heading to perdition. I can see she is imprisoned in much the same way. Or am I just trying to find a kindred spirit? I, unlike everyone else, can never share my hell. I am in a dark abyss where there is not a chink of light to show me the way. I am alone in this painful void. I feel so weak. I give hope to so many people. I am the one with all the answers. I am entombed, hovering on the brink of something I don't understand. I now only have questions and who will give me the answers. It is ironic how afraid I am to let go. My life once had purpose. I am a lost soul. Why will they not aid me? Once angels protected me, now I am tormented by those who represent what I once believed. We will move you to a new diocese, that will help Rowena, give her something to focus on; they had said half-heartedly. They didn't want to know about her, she was a shame they would*

*extinguish like a candle if they could. But Rowena is my wife and that makes her somewhat a liability.*

*What should I do? Take her to a doctor; ask him to remove this thing inside her? It cannot be done. Only she can free herself, by releasing her strong religious beliefs. If I let him go from my life what will I do? Could I stand the loneliness and isolation? Without his love and guidance, how would I live? But, I no longer feel I can continue. Answer my questions Lord and restore my faith. I watch Rowena suffering and although it goes against all my beliefs, I cannot condemn it for I no longer believe it to be a sickness. I do not know where I am heading but I am desperately afraid for I feel you are no longer with me and I fear maybe you never have been. I no longer believe in your existence. I cannot see you; but I can see Rowena's pain and am so torn. If I reveal my lack of faith I may release her and she could accept herself, but at the same time I have to disillusion so many people. If only I had someone to talk to and share this with.*

\* \* \*

Abruptly I closed the book. It was incomprehensible to me for a Rector to lose his faith. What terrible tragedy could have befallen upon him and presumably his wife? I felt my hands tremble as nightmarish thoughts entered my head. What had been wrong with her? How could he say they would extinguish her like a candle? I couldn't for one moment imagine the church abandoning him. I knew if I read on I would probably discover more but as a newly ordained reverend I was almost afraid of what I should read. I leant back in the large leather chair that I imagined he had once reclined and sipped from the whiskey I had allowed as an indulgence after my long journey. Why did he leave it behind? I found myself wondering about the woman named Virginia and shuddered when I remembered his words that she was heading for perdition. Did she still live in the village? How many secrets did this village hold? My heart sunk at the realisation that I might never be accepted here. I looked at my watch and gasped. It was almost one a.m. I closed the door of the study wearily and went to bed where I had a fitful sleep. The Journal had disturbed me immensely. I arose early and was relieved to find fresh bread and jam in a plentiful pantry. It occurred to me that I would need to ask Jessica how I would go about finding a housekeeper, for there would be precious little time for me to undertake domestic chores, that was, of course, if I chose to stay. I felt quite angry but was not sure whom with. Certainly someone should have informed me about what had happened. Most importantly I had resolved to elicit from Jessica all she knew about Rector Byrnes. After breakfast, with a bunch of keys in my hand I attempted the locked door. I was bitterly disappointed when none would fit. I went back to the study and again hunted through the drawers, only to be left frustrated. In earnest I began to search frantically throughout the house but to no avail. Then, as if sent a vision I raced back upstairs and reached above the door with my hand, encountering a pile of dust as I slid it along the ledge. My heart lurched when I touched it. How simple, why did I not think of it before? Now I had the key, I felt trepidation at opening the door. I took a deep breath, turned the key and flung the door wide. Light filled the room for the drapes had been tied back. I stared uncomprehendingly. It was the room of an artist. Paintings covered both the wall and the floors. The room was the largest in the house. Shelves lined the walls, full of art books and everywhere there were paints and the odd blank canvas. The light in the room was almost magical casting strange illusions on the paintings. In one corner was a large easel, an unfinished painting sitting on it. I began to walk towards it when a voice stopped me.

“Good morning Rector.”

Jessica again stood in the doorway. I felt cross with her and I hoped it showed.

“Mrs Ridgeway.” I acknowledged

I gestured with my hand.

“So rector Byrnes used to paint?”

She gave me a cold stare.

“Would you like to see the church?” she asked as if I hadn’t spoken.

I sighed.

“Actually no.”

She inclined her head and her eyes widened.

“But...” she began before I quickly interrupted.

“You see there is no point. I am not staying. I cannot gain the confidence of a community that seems to have a secret. I am well aware that no one in this village is going to tell me what happened here. I shall inform my superiors and ask for another diocese.”

I was being unreasonable and knew it but I couldn’t stop myself. It was petulant of me to judge a whole village so readily but I felt I ought to be told the truth.

She seemed to have difficulty in swallowing. Then she straightened her body and looked me directly in the eyes. I noticed her eyes were clearer today and all signs of her cold had gone.

“You may wish that you had never been told.” She warned leaning towards me almost menacingly.

“I think that is my choice, don’t you?”

Continuing to look directly at me she seemed to consider her next words.

“Actually, it was Rowena who painted, not Jonathan. Rowena was his wife.”

She turned from the room.

“Could we perhaps have some tea?” she asked.

In my excitement I almost rushed her downstairs. I told her about the journal as I made tea.

“It does not seem right to read further.” I said virtuously.

“It was left for a reason. Besides he won’t need it now” she sounded weary. Perhaps for her there had already been too much talk of Rector Byrnes.

We sat at the kitchen table and through the eyes of Jessica Ridgeway and the words of Jonathan Byrnes I discovered the story I am about to relate to you now. For you see this story is not about me but another Rector. I am simply the storyteller. It all began one hot summer in London just over two years ago with preparations for a birthday party.



## CHAPTER TWO

### ***London, Summer 1999***

The incessant whirring of the all too familiar lawn mower creeps into her dream and she struggles against the mild irritation building within her. For a time she lies in the blessed state that is neither quite sleep nor wakefulness. After a time she opens her eyes just enough to see the bedside clock, she winces, turns over and closes them again. Seven forty five. She hears movement downstairs as Robert 'potters about'. What does that mean? She wonders idly, to 'potter about'? How can someone potter about if they are not a potter by trade? How odd to use such meaningless phrases as people tend to do. Robert was always using some phrase or other and it irritated her dreadfully because they didn't make any sense. She turns over again and concentrates on regaining her peaceful sleep state. But all is lost now. She will speak to Tom Mitchell herself, she decides. Surely it is not necessary to mow one's lawn every week and certainly not so early in the morning. She turns onto her back resigned now that any more sleep was doubtful.

The list is ready and neatly placed on the bedside cabinet where she had left it last night.

"Just in case I wake in the night and think of something," she had explained to Robert who had nodded in response and then continued reading his gardening magazine. But she hadn't woken in the night because everything was perfect. All she needs to do today is check with the caterers (to be on the safe side), phone Sofia about the cake delivery and collect her dress from the cleaners. Robert was collecting the car later this morning and leaving it with Josie and Carl to decorate it for them. Sighing she climbs from the bed and walks to the window where she draws back the curtains to reveal the lawn mower culprit portrayed in full swing. At that moment Robert strolls out of the back door, contentedly puffing away on his pipe and gives a friendly wave to their neighbour.

An irrational anger overwhelms her for a second. It is almost as if he is giving the man permission to disturb his wife every Saturday morning, typical acquiescence from Robert, accepting anything and everything. He disappears into his greenhouse. Often she had wondered if the greenhouse held some kind of esoteric hold over him. Was it just innocent seed plantings and germination that existed in there or something far more sinister and menacing?

Robert was enticed into the small building like a magnet on a daily basis. In fact she couldn't remember him missing one day. Throughout the years she had been inundated with excessive amounts of carrots, parsnips, cabbage and numerous other vegetation. Often she cruelly wondered if Robert was a vegetable masquerading as a human. Hearing the shower she realises Edward is already up.

Carefully she makes the bed, the whole time her mind occupied with thoughts of the day ahead. Absently she tidies Robert's gardening magazines into a neat pile on the bedside cabinet. What should she wear? Nothing too classy, she would be in town for most of the morning and she wanted to feel comfortable.

Worriedly, she checks the list again and panic punches her in the stomach: flowers! She must buy flowers, masses of them, enough for the entire house. Quickly she makes a note and then looks through her wardrobe, finally choosing a beige silk blouse and casual slacks. Satisfied that the bedroom is tidy, for she hates disorder of any kind, even more so after Dorothy has cleaned. This week she had stayed an extra hour to help prepare the house for the party and Gina had emphasised that

there should be no muddle in the house whatsoever once Dorothy had left. Mercifully Robert had complied, even to the point of tidying his own study.

"All in apple pie order now," he had declared and she had found herself speculating on whether he spoke to his clients that way.

"There you are Mrs. Williams, your divorce is now legal and in apple pie order."

But of course he didn't and she knew that. He would be genteel, understanding and nod at the appropriate moments. After all, weren't they renowned in London as one of the most established law firms? Odd how he looked when leaving the house for the office, almost like a stranger in his elegant tailor made suit and hand made shoes. Immediately on seeing him one would recognise him as a man of cultivation, well refined, urbane and proper, definitely the image of a successful solicitor with his own law firm.

Slowly she walks into the en-suite and pulls back the doors of the shower. She takes ten minutes to shower and then applies her make up. Back in the bedroom she debates between two pairs of earrings, finally choosing the diamond studs. Then with graceful ease she slides two combs into the sides of her long rich auburn hair. A sapphire-studded gold bangle is just about to enhance her wrist when the phone rings. Pushing the bracelet over her knuckles she rushes to snatch the receiver before Edward picks up one of the extensions.

"Gina Spencer speaking," she says in a soft, yet clear voice.

"Hi Gina, it's Marcus. Just to let you know I am collecting him at eleven thirty. He has sent me a text to confirm. We're taking him to Luigi's for a long birthday lunch and Lucy is dragging us to her flat afterwards. What time do you want him back?"

Gina grabs her list. There it was, heavily underlined in black ink, 'Edward not to return before four thirty'.

"Quarter to five would be perfect"

Everyone had been asked to arrive by four p.m. There was to be a reception and then the present giving ceremony of the car followed by the party.

"Fine, no worries, leave it to me. It's going to be a great night"

The enthusiasm in his voice fired the fervour within her.

"I can't believe he is eighteen." She says incredulously.

He laughs merrily and she smiles. There was affability about Marcus that was very contagious. He and Edward had known each other since primary school and she had always been charmed by his affable personality. Soon he would be off to Cambridge and Edward, hopefully, would be accepted at Oxford, following in his father's footsteps. How privileged she was. It was scandalous almost to have so much when many had so little. To be celebrating an only son's eighteenth birthday with such extravagance was really quite absurd. This morning she would go out and spend an extortionate amount of money simply on a party and not give it a second thought.

After making her arrangements with Marcus, she begins to realise it is getting hot and perspiration has already stained the armpits of the beige silk blouse. Taking it off she throws it carelessly onto the bed and chooses a thin cotton dress, then pulls the combs from her hair, and brushes it back, twisting it expertly and clipping it up with a pin. After taking another look in the mirror she leaves the room satisfied that she looks fine to go into town.

Edward barely glances at her as she enters the kitchen where he is sitting eating toast at the table. Her arms go around him instantly and her perfume catches in his throat and he coughs.

"Morning mother. I trust Tom's lawn mower was the perfect alarm for you?" he says good-humouredly.

"Oh, him," she replies dismissively, but mentally reminds herself to speak to him later. "What about you? Happy Birthday darling, have you opened all your cards?"

He smiles but it seems forced and she feels mild panic that she doesn't understand.

"Do you feel alright darling?"

He sighs.

"I'm fine and I am looking forward to our family dinner tonight."

She smiles pleased. An overwhelming urge to run her hands through his thick wavy brown hair has to be promptly curtailed. He has no idea about the party, she is sure of that. She knows her son, or at least at that moment in time she thought she did. How we deceive ourselves in a variety of ways. For even though she saw a look in his warm brown almond eyes that wasn't harmonious with the day, his birthday, she chooses to ignore it. It suits her to see only the false smile on his lips and beyond him through the kitchen window to the resplendent glory of their garden in its entire magnificent colour.

"What a glorious day. I remember it was hot and humid the day you were born." She reaches behind her to the kitchen drawer. She needs a cigarette, for suddenly she is feeling very edgy.

"Gina!" It was stern, a father reprimanding and she pulls her hand back from the drawer with a start and looks at her husband who had entered through the back door.

"You promised not to smoke until after lunch. It's the best way to cut down, we both agreed that."

She nods, he is right. She really should smoke less.

"You must speak to Tom, really Robert it is getting ridiculous and that cat was in here yesterday, please stop giving it milk" she says to change the subject and mentally cross Tom Mitchell off her list. Robert pulls a face and yawns, irritating her immensely.

"What does that mean?" she asks

"What?" he looks surprised.

"That look. Oh, forget it, I'll speak to him myself."

She grabs her handbag; relief flooding her as she remembers the cigarettes confined there and feels comforted. She kisses Edward on the cheek and winks at Robert as she does so.

"Enjoy lunch with your friends darling, we'll see you later. I'll be out most of the day Robert; I have a facial at twelve. What time are you playing golf?" Golf was the key word to discuss when he would leave to collect the car they had bought Edward.

"Meeting Carl at one, don't worry I will be home in plenty of time for our celebratory dinner."

Edward smiles and seems to devour their conversation, memorising it as though he would later be asked to write some composition on the morning's events. The whole time Gina Spencer had been arranging her party with such aplomb, Edward had also been making some very significant plans of his own.

The front door closes with a bang, he and his father exchange a knowing look. The BMW scrunches on the gravel as Gina reverses out of the driveway. They wait silently and then, when all is assured, Robert says bravely,

“Right! I am having three of those home made scones of Dorothy’s with lots of jam and fresh coffee made in the new percolator and I am drinking it out of my chipped mug. How about you?” Edward loves his father when he is like this, with an almost John Wayne bravado as he breaks all mother’s rules. He will miss his dad more than her, he decides in that moment. The acceptance letter from Oxford is still in the pocket of his fleece top, where he had placed it first thing this morning and he can feel the crackle of the paper through the fabric. He should tell them. He looks at his father cheerfully spreading jam onto the scones, whistling as he does so; reminiscent of a child playing happily in the sand such was his concentration. He will miss these moments he thinks sadly. The daring adventures they share when mum isn’t at home. He knows they will wash the percolator thoroughly and replace it carefully and while she reprimands them for the scones they will be feeling victorious because of the percolator. He walks into the lounge, the bright sunshine floods in through the French windows and furniture shines like gold. He gazes with disinterest at the many birthday cards that sit on the grand piano. He fiddles with the letter absently wondering who will miss him the most when he has gone. He expects it will be her and a moment’s doubt enters his mind but it is too fleeting to have any impact. He has no choice now. He carefully removes it from his pocket and re-reads it; his fingers lazily drift over the words.

“It’s ready” Robert calls.

The smell of freshly made coffee reaches Edwards nostrils and he closes his eyes and inhales, savouring the aroma. The grandfather clock in the hall suddenly chimes and he opens his eyes in unison and is surprised to feel tears run like gentle raindrops across his cheeks. He brushes his hand angrily across his face and goes back to the kitchen where his father is halfway out the back door.

“Left yours on the table” he indicates the scones. “I must finish this potting, give me a shout when you are leaving.”

Edward stares at his father intently and Robert finds himself rooted to the spot as if hypnotised. Their eyes lock.

“Are you alright old chap?” Robert asks, forcing an air of joviality he doesn’t feel.

“Are you happy dad?”

Robert looks thoughtful and hesitant all at the same time. He forces a laugh.

“What kind of question is that?”

Edward smiles and picks up a scone.

“I don’t know, eighteen year old son’s curiosity I guess”

Robert shrugs, this type of conversation is beyond his comprehension. He turns towards the garden and begins whistling, then turns back.

“Yes, I am happy, happy as Larry in fact. Let me know when you leave.”

At eleven o’clock Edward calls to his father that he is going, Robert waves, and then sees Tom Mitchell stroll into his garden.

“Getting hotter,” it sounds like a complaint and Robert ignores it.

“The sun shines on the righteous” he says and walks back into his greenhouse believing in that moment that it truly did.

\* \* \*

With armfuls of flowers she walks tiredly into the hall and slams the front door behind her. She is relieved to be home. It is unbearably hot now and it had seemed a hellish journey with congested traffic everywhere. Sometimes she thinks she hates city life and at others could not imagine a life without so much social activity. A gruesome smell reaches her nostrils and she grimaces and it crosses her mind that Robert may have let that hateful stray cat into the house again and she cannot bear cleaning up its disgusting spray again. She makes a mental note to phone the cat protection society because she knows it is futile asking Robert to close the back door behind him.

As she walks to the kitchen she sees her reflection in the hall mirror. Her face blooms like a young girl's and she smiles for there is little modesty about her, she knows she is attractive and likes the fact that she has what is termed a fragile face, high cheekbones, a soft sensuous mouth, warm blue eyes that empathise just by looking at you, her nose is a touch too long and she has a small frown line between her brow which is quite evident now. The facial has made her feel good, it was just a shame she didn't have time for the manicure. As she gets closer to the kitchen the smell becomes intolerable and she begins to feel cross. Today, of all days, she really didn't need that cat. Really, Robert can be infuriating at times. How often has she told him not to feed the thing with milk? It occurs to her that perhaps she complains at him too much and he does these things deliberately to annoy her.

The flowers are heavy and already, as she opens the kitchen door she is planning which vases for what flowers. The freesias would look beautiful in the crystal, and the roses, red ones especially for Edward, would look beautiful in the blue porcelain, a wedding present from Robert's parents, coupled with a fifty piece bone china dinner set. It occurs to her as she kicks the door slightly, what a charmed life they lead and a quick fix of guilt hits her but instantly she consoles herself with reminders of her good works. The smell now hits her like a gust of wind and she retreats slightly.

Good God, what on earth... Then she is in the kitchen, the flowers fall like leaves from her hands and a thorn from a rose scratches her palm as it slips from her fingers. The kitchen floor is suddenly a garland of flowers but Gina isn't looking at them but stares ahead to the heavy oak kitchen table that is overturned and her only son whose lifeless body hangs from the saucepan rail above. She opens her mouth to scream but someone is strangling her vocal chords and she is mute. Her heart pounds, and her eyes just keep staring. She tries to move towards him but her legs are paralysed. A loud roaring in her head deafens her. She stares at the dressing gown cord as it dangles from his neck. Time seems to stand still for an eternity but it is just a moment in time. She remembers in a second the Christmas they had given him that dressing gown, and then like a volcano she erupts, the scream pouring forth, a sound of unimaginable pain is torn from her, a pain as inconceivable as that of birth. Robert, she screams inside her head, but he is not there. Must get someone, she thinks, but whom? Oh God, do something. She stands there, her son is dying, oh God he is dying, but why? It is his birthday. She turns to the phone and then stops. Jesus I have to get him down. Oh Robert, please please come home. Her legs suddenly galvanise into action and she pulls a drawer from its runners, cutlery and flowers cover the floor like confetti. The large bread knife is grabbed with desperation and her hand catches on the blade of another. She pulls the table back onto its legs, blood flows profusely from her hand now but she feels nothing. She climbs upon the table and slips on the loose faeces of her only son and loud racking sobs pour fourth.

Carefully she tries to support his head as she struggles to cut the cord. It seems to take her forever and perspiration begins to run into her eyes and she has difficulty focusing on Edward. She forces herself to ignore the way his head hangs loosely to one side and then finally he is in her arms and they fall to the floor knocking the kitchen chairs over.

“Edward, Edward,” she screams and begins to pummel his chest. Frantic she grabs the phone and with trembling hands tries to punch in the emergency number. Her hands shake so much that it isn’t until her third attempt that she does it while screaming obscenities to God the whole time. Then she cries frantically when she gets through.

“Help me, please please, it’s his birthday,” she sobs.

For fifteen minutes she struggles to save her son who had died quite some time before. Her lips touch his as she tries desperately to breath life back into him.

“Please, Edward please,” she sobs convinced he could hear her. His fleece top is damp now from her tears and the blood that is still flowing from her hand.

“Someone help me” she screams, and wants to leave him to get help but at the same time is too afraid to leave him alone. She is barely able to breathe into his lips, and she finds herself banging his chest with inhumane pressure.

“Come back, Edward come back,”

Then they are there and gently pull her off him.

“No!” she screams, “Do something, please. Give him something, anything. Oh God, please just save him.”

She watches as the two men listen to Edwards’s heart and gently lift his head. Is this unspeakable horror really happening? She diverts her eyes and sees the flowers that litter the floor and remembers with crystal clear clarity the shop assistant’s parting words.

“Have a wonderful evening.”

Robert! Someone must phone Robert.

“My husband should be...” she begins and stops.

One of the paramedics looks sadly at her and she watches as the other covers Edward with a blanket and she can no longer see his face and it is as though her life has ended. She sits amongst the flowers and for a second she is silent and then she begins to scream and it seems as though she will never stop.

It was inexplicable, there was no letter, and there seemed no reason. It was as if he wished to torment them. Pieces came together like a stitched tapestry, but threads were missing and no matter how hard Gina tried she couldn’t restore the tapestry to its original form. Robert remembers when he left the house, describes him as seeming cheerful but acting strange. Gina immediately pounces on the word strange and then suddenly he is defending himself and accusations begin to bounce between them like warfare. Robert retreats to the greenhouse and sits silently on the small stool with the wobbly leg that Edward had made at woodwork class and mourns the loss of his son. It could be months before he is able to return to the office. Gina is too distraught to be left alone he had been advised. In the meantime, he was overseeing the business from his study at home. Gina hates him for being so eminently sensible about everything. How could Edward have done this to them? The rage that possessed her could find no outlet and ate away inside her like a parasite. It was now evidently clear that he had planned it for some time. By the time his friends realised he had left the restaurant and wasn’t in the toilet it was too late. The time of

death was difficult to establish but the coroner said he had probably died at about one thirty and Gina had found him just after two. Now she never goes for a facial, or bothers with her face creams. Some days it is too much even to shower and when she does she stands like a statue as the water rains down upon her and wishes one could drown in a shower. They had been shamefully charmed, scandalously privileged and cruelly penalized. She walks about in a haze of smoke, one cigarette after another. All the rooms in the house are heavy with the smell of nicotine. She smokes all through the night because sleep eludes her and all she remembers with clear lucidity is that day. At other times she panics when she cannot visualise his face anymore, or if she does it seems more obscure than before. Every day she feels more wretched than the last and feels her path through life will now be a desert one. She demands all the saucepans are removed and the rack pulled down. Robert graciously complies with all her requests. He listens to her scathing rages and fights to control his own anger as she refers to their son as "a hateful bastard with an unfeeling heart and gutless spine." He feels a gulf building between them and doesn't know what to do. Gina is no longer the gregarious socialite but a grief stricken women who lives under a grey cloud where the sun never breaks through. There are permanent dark circles beneath her eyes, and her long hair hangs loose and lank. It is as though all life has abandoned her. He cannot for one moment comprehend what she is suffering, but can only imagine that moment of appalling horror. It haunts her at night for she screams out often and his comforting arms feel inadequate. She finds herself impelled towards Edwards's room where she languishes on her haunches for hours outside the door but never enters. Sometimes she paces stealthily across the polished floor of the hallway always arriving again outside the same room. It seems in an invasion to go inside. The house that once breathed warmth and laughter now clings to the coldness of her heart and everywhere she goes is desolate. The mirrors sparkle and the furniture shines but all she can see is Edward's face in their reflection.

How ironic she thinks, so many flowers discarded only to be replaced with others. Instead of a party they had a wake. How hateful and cruel of him to not leave a note. Robert walks to the newsagents on a Sunday morning and Tom Mitchell crosses the road, lowers his eyes and pretends he doesn't see him. Is our suffering not enough, our punishment not sufficient that you all have to add to it day by day by abandoning us? He wants to scream at him. If he could he would keep a respectful distance from Gina too, for at times he feels so imprisoned in her pain that he is helpless to deal with his own. How can two people's life change in a few hours, literally a few hours? One minute they are preparing for a momentous occasion, an only offspring's eighteenth birthday, and within days they are burying him. In the confines of the greenhouse he tries to unload the weight of grief that threatens to engulf him like a tidal wave, but he is open to the elements for Gina can still see him through the glass. Edward's death has divided them and they recoil from the unspeakable horror.

The walls of the house are bare where all photos of Edward have been removed and it grieves him but he tries to understand her despair while feeling desolation himself. Soon it becomes painfully obvious that they can no longer live in the house.

Dorothy is aggrieved and her vexation is clear.

"What nonsense! People don't move when someone dies."

Someone? It echoes in his head. Edward isn't just someone. But how to explain to Dorothy, a spinster, living a life of happy desolation, comforted by an abundance of cats who ravage her house with amazing regularity and fragrance it with an acrid

smell that would turn one's stomach, that to continue living in a house where your only son spent a happy childhood and eventually killed himself was infinitely impossible.

Robert decides they will move to the country. Fresh air and country views would lift Gina's spirits, he is certain.

Almost Eighteen months after Edwards's death they leave their home in London. Gina seems indifferent. Robert promises they will come home every weekend and place flowers on his grave, but she doesn't want to place flowers on a grave, she wants to go back eighteen months. Every day she lives through her imaginary scenario on what could have happened. She walks into Fiona's beauty salon and says cheerfully.

"I'm going to have to cancel, so sorry, I just have so much to do at home." Then she drives home, missing the traffic hold-ups. Edward is about to climb on the table and she screams. He freezes and begins to cry, she holds him in her arms and he tells her what is wrong. The party goes ahead and Gina's life is still intact. But she didn't cancel her appointment and Edward did hang himself, and she could have saved him, it is an error she will torture herself with forever.



## CHAPTER THREE

### *Surrey, Spring 2001*

Starkfield house stands alone, desolate and mournful, surrounded by a vastness of fertile land where over the years, amongst the many shrubs and numerous willow trees, a pernicious growth of weeds have invaded and spread like a forest fire. The house stands centre stage, a strong brick building, emanating a distinctive impression of masculine strength. Two tall imposing black wrought iron gates protect the house.

As soon as the removal vans arrive news spreads through the village rapidly. Seth Martin arrives at the post office with the latest gossip.

"New people at Starkfield" he announces, proud to see the shock on everyone's faces. For, although everyone had watched with interest its transformation the past few months, curiosity had diminished when new occupiers hadn't moved in.

"Look like comfortable types too." He nods knowingly, eager to impart his limited knowledge while not being averse to expanding on the truth; after all he had everyone's undivided attention now. The existing everyone was, James Truman the postmaster, and highly acclaimed church organist, a tall lanky man who seems to tower above everyone even with his slight stoop encouraged over time by avoiding low ceilings and doorways. Miriam and Elizabeth Greenwood (two spinster sisters, whose lives revolved around everyone else's.) and Jessica Ridgeway, former headmistress of the local village school and deacon of the parish. It was enough for Seth, however. He has just left old Matt's place, and was tidying his gardening tools into the van when he sees the removals arrive.

"At least three vans, if not more", he exaggerates.

"Did you see them?" Miriam asks, trying to keep the excitement out of her voice.

"Who?"

She tuts.

"The new people, did you see them?"

He shakes his head.

"Saw the furniture and stuff though, phew they've got money I can tell you. I thought I'd pop in tomorrow. They will need help with that garden."

Elizabeth nudges Miriam indicating she wants to go. They have more shopping to do and now this news to share with everyone. Jessica is still sticking stamps onto her letters and seems not to be listening but is acutely aware of all that is happening around her. Like a teacher in the classroom her ears are highly sensitive while her eyes alert.

"I'd give them time to settle in before you offer your services Seth and besides they have had people working on the land these past few weeks." her voice still carried the authority she once used, it's tone resonant and strong and still receiving the attention it commanded. Seth nods in agreement.

"Yes, of course, tomorrow may be a bit soon."

Immediately he feels overshadowed by Jessica and moves towards the door along with the two sisters.

"See you James," he says to the postmaster who is leaning against the counter. The post office is the only shop in the village and is a colourful combination of general store, post office and meeting place for the newest gossip. A prominent notice board at the entrance holds a jumble of leaflets, overlapping with odd scraps of paper advertising local events and reminders of the next Women's institute meeting, which is comprised of frail minded elderly women and headed by Lady Fisher. The shop

proprietors, James and Julia Truman are highly regarded, for there is nothing they cannot acquire if needed. Lady Lily Fisher asked them for fresh Ginger on the Monday and she had it in her hand by the Wednesday. Everyone in the village, not because of the title but rather the mystery that surrounded it, held Lady Fisher in great esteem. All wanted to but no one dared to venture an enquiry into the whereabouts of Mr. Fisher, until one day a stranger visiting made the impertinent remark.

“A pleasure to meet you, Lady Fisher, and Sir Fisher?”

To which Lily had adopted a sobering expression and dabbed delicately, with a lace handkerchief, at an imaginary tear, while waving a hand extravagantly as if to say.

“It cannot be spoken of.”

So no one ever did. As time passed, Lily Fisher also forgot what it was that had happened to Sir Fisher. But it didn't really matter. She was too old to care or wonder anymore. Men were an indifference to her. Emotional survival was not linked to a man; all that really mattered was the princely sum she received each month from an anonymous bank account, which was connected, in her mind, in some obscure way to the mysterious Sir. It arrived month after month and kept her in a style she had no intention of giving up. However, she was, highly interested in the affairs of others, especially those of the heart and had often made her home available to the most secret assignations of which she was totally loyal. She would smile sweetly at the locals, thinking them all fools for their naivety. So much scandal and deceit went on under their noses and they were totally blind to it. Or were they? It would be a dreadful reflection of their cosy village, I suppose, she would muse and always kept her secrets in the safe recesses of her mind.

On a pleasant day you could sit directly outside on the two wooden benches that faced each other. It is not unusual for Miriam and Elizabeth to dawdle there all morning. For each time they attempt to leave someone would approach them and they would reside on their bench for yet another gossip. The village had coped well enough all these years with just the post office, church and pub and so it would remain. Miriam and Elizabeth follow Seth out and Jessica watches from the window as they gossip. She is sixty-three this year, and is in disgustingly good health, her delicate porcelain skin is clear and her pale blue sparkling eyes have only laughter lines around them of which she is proud. Her natural grey hair has been cut into a sensible style becoming a woman of her age and when she laughs, which she does often, she displays perfect teeth. All this she credits to a happy marriage, and the consumption of much water over the years. She leaves the post office and decides she will drive to Woodfield, the next village and buy some flowers for her new neighbours. The thought of flowers makes her think of Wallace and she decides to visit the cemetery this week. Normally she would go once a fortnight, but if she was buying flowers anyway... thinking of her husband, even now, ten years after his death, provokes a deep sense of loss within her. It is shameful to admit, and she never will to anyone, that even a woman of sixty-three misses the intimacy shared with a man, for she and Wallace shared a most joyful coupling all their married life, and she smiles as her mind lingers on memories. Then she thinks about the new people at Starkfield house. She feels excitement and it saddens her. There was a time when she and Wallace would do all kinds of exciting things, stunning their friends with their escapades. How she wishes she were young again. She would return home and look through the old scrapbooks and again feel that thrill of the

parachute jump, and the tickle in her stomach when Wallace took their plane off the ground, oh how exhilarated she had felt. Now, her only excitement comes from the knowledge that new people have moved into the village. She hastily buttoned the top of her coat, for although the spring weather had at last arrived there was still a chill in the air. She lets out a heavy sigh, something she does not often do and nods her head as though making a decision. The bus to Woodfield can be seen approaching. It is almost empty and she decides to go now. It will be a treat and she can buy some of that aniseed twist there. With that thought in mind she boldly puts her arm out to stop the bus. Tomorrow she will visit the owners of Starkfield house.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

Robert watches Virginia from the window. He is careful to stand back so she cannot see that he is observing her. The house is like a stately home but she cares little for it. Everything she ever loved is here but she seems disinterested in all that is around her. He no longer knows how to live with this woman. It was simple for him to please her in the past. Now, she seems no longer interested in all the things she once adored. Gina would always be happy when she was spending money. It is beginning to irritate him that she wears the same clothes for days on end and sometimes doesn't bother to brush her hair. It angers him that she has never cared about his feelings. He tries to talk about Edward but she looks through him and simply says,

"You weren't there, how can you ever understand?"

I still miss him he wants to scream. However, Robert is not a person who screams or shouts. He wishes he could call out to her now, ask can he walk with her. But he knows she desires to be alone. He had hoped the new house would have kept her busy, had actively encouraged her to get involved in the interior design but again, she had shown little interest. The house didn't feel like theirs and maybe they didn't belong in Millbridge, after all what the hell did they know about village life? Although he had to admit the summer fete sounded interesting and he had thought of offering his services. He knew Gina thought him uncaring and hard because he still spent so much time with his plants. What she didn't understand was that without the simplicity of the earth he would go insane with the unbearable loss of Edward. Looking past Virginia's tall slim figure his eyes rested on the newly built greenhouse, and for a moment he deliberated, she said she might be some time.

"I will probably get lost but I'll do my best not to." Her voice was dull and husky and it worried him the amount she smoked these days. The greenhouse was tempting but he had work to do. Tiredly he pulled his attention from his wife and walked into his study.

Virginia leaves her large ornately furnished house by the back door. From the coat rack she removes a long heavy shawl and wraps it around her. For a moment she considers whether to take a scarf but decides against it. Instead she pulls the shawl tighter and immediately smells the gentle undertones of a perfume still lingering. She pushes her hands into her skirt pockets and looks at the wide green fields beyond and decides to take that route for then she will avoid the village that she has no desire to frequent as yet She chooses a short walk for she does not want to stray too far from the house. However her pace is measured because she does not want to return before lunch. She is a woman with nowhere to go and infinitely worse, in her mind, nowhere to return. She doesn't wish to meet Mrs Miles, although she knows she should, for she is to be their housekeeper and will be instructed of her duties this morning although Virginia has no idea what she is expected to do each day. Robert informs her it is for the best.

"Darling we will need someone, if only to prepare meals. Soon you will be back to your old self and we won't need a housekeeper, but until then..."

It was left unsaid. They both knew she was never going to be her old self. How she hated those stupid phrases. How could she get back to being her old self? Who is one's self anyway? And one can't go back and besides she wasn't old. Why didn't he say, when you feel like you used to, before Edward died? At least that would make sense. She dislikes the new house with its elegant interior design and newly polished

furniture. She resents waking up every morning for it is not her right to do so and certainly not her right to live in such exclusive splendour. Lifting her face to the sun, which is warmer than she had anticipated, she takes in a deep breath and lets out a long sigh. How dearly she wished to be the way she once was. There are times when she glimpses her old self, but then all too soon the memory disappears like an elusive butterfly. If she could just see Edward for one last time and ask him why? Had she let him down? Were they not close? Surely he could have discussed any problem with her? But he hadn't and she can't understand why. It tortures her every day. I was too self-centred she punishes herself. I thought more about massages, lunch with the girls, days at the Spa, stupid irrelevant things while my son was undergoing some kind of terrible crisis. There was no sanctuary for her. No escape from her pain. At some moment in time her son had needed her and she had not been there for him and no matter how hard she tried she couldn't prevent herself from picturing him climbing onto the table and looping the cord around his neck. The image would repeat itself over and over like a video being rerun until she wanted to scream. Robert had been absent from her thoughts throughout. For Virginia it was as though Robert didn't exist. There was no feeling of hate towards him, in fact he seemed almost, like everything else, irrelevant to her. Of course she knew she should make some kind of effort to get on with life but she didn't want to live and Robert had removed everything possible that may aid her in ending her own existence. How could he ever understand what she feels? How she detests living, despises herself even because she does so. If anyone should be dead it should be her, not Edward.

Ahead of her she sees the outline of a church spire and heads towards it, deciding that if the village seemed too close she would quickly retreat. She calculates that it should take her at least ten minutes to reach the church where she would then rest, and possibly another thirty to walk back, by which time, she hopes, Mrs Miles should have left. The Church Cemetery can now be seen and she realises it is a small distance from the village and is relieved. The church stands, gloriously isolated, on a slight hilltop overlooking fields from all directions. An old wooden gate invites entry and respectfully she closes it behind her. As she approaches the back entrance to the cemetery she sees a bird flapping on the ground. Its wing is broken and she gently picks it up. She looks up for help and as though sent by God she sees a man approaching her. He has a kindness about him and smiling eyes. She notices he fiddles uncomfortably with the scarf about his neck. He has a well-trimmed beard the same rusty brown colour as his hair, which in contrast is unkempt and although he smiles warmly at her she is unable to smile back. She holds up the bird and asks if he can help. He takes it from her and offers to take it to the local vet. It is then she sees hidden beneath the scarf his dog collar and wants to beg him to give her answers that no one else can, but instead she says,

"I'm Virginia Spencer, my husband and I moved into Starkfield House yesterday."

She doesn't notice his admiring glance, but keeps looking at the bird for it must not die, she cannot possibly let something else die when she could save it. There is a large ornate wooden bench to the left of the gate and he sits upon it to study the bird.

"Will you take it now?" she asks.

"Yes I will. I do hope we see you again, at Church perhaps?" He enquires gently as though seeming to sense some deep distress within her. She inclines her head, which tells him nothing. I cannot attend your church she thinks, for I hate your God more than I hate life itself and if you are his servant than I hate you as much. She

watches him walk swiftly away and when she can no longer see him she begins her slow walk home.

Returning the same way enables her, unknowingly, to miss Jessica who has walked through the village and approaches via the front door. Jessica has never entered the imposing black gates that lead towards the long driveway to Starkfield house. On entering one is led through a gateway of trees creating a dark tunnel with their abundance of overhanging branches. All that can be heard is the rustle of the leaves as they sway in the breeze. For a moment she shivers for she cannot see the sun any longer and feels stifled as though the trees are engulfing her. Then she sees the house and gasps in surprise and awe. She has never been this close before. The size of the house is quite impressive but a feeling of desolation sweeps over Jessica. It is a harsh building and it's greyness dull in contrast to the blue skyline. There seem to be numerous chimneys that tower above the roof like red brick ornaments. Whoever had designed the house had obviously made some attempt to soften the harshness of it's appearance, however, for as she approached the detail under the eaves become visible, like ribbons, vainly trying to soften the sharp triangular archways above the two upstairs front windows. The house is strong and masterful and watches her curiously while she stares back admiringly. Just as she raises her hand to push the doorbell the large black door opens and she is staring into the face of Celia Miles.

"Why, Jessica, what a surprise. I was just going to give this front step a good clean and there you are, standing on it," she laughs.

Jessica is unsure what to say. She wasn't expecting to see Celia and is highly conscious of the flowers in her hand.

"You've come to visit then, that's nice. Come in, I'll let Mr. Spencer know you are here. I'm their housekeeper you see," the information is relayed with pride. Jessica enters the hall to Celia's constant chatter.

"It's a big house as you can see," Celia says gesturing to the stairs. "Five bedrooms and three bathrooms on one floor alone. I said to Mr. Spencer only this morning, I won't be able to cope with all this on my own with only coming two hours a day. It's my first day you see and you have to set the ground rules."

The impressive paintings and fine furniture had little affect on Jessica, it was something she had experienced in her own lifetime and it had given her little pleasure. The house was far too large for two people and she wondered why on earth they were living there. Celia led her into the lounge with an expectant look on her face.

"What do you think?" There was awe in Celia's voice.

Jessica's eyes were instantly pulled to the grand piano. There wasn't much she could say about the room. It was perfectly designed, ideally decorated and intolerably tidy. Robert breezes in and she is saved from responding to Celia.

"I thought I heard voices," he smiles warmly, and holds his hand out to her.

"Robert Spencer. Forgive me, I didn't hear the doorbell."

He is dressed casually and one hand rests easily in his corduroy trouser pocket. Although his smile is warm and welcoming, Jessica senses that it is somewhat forced.

"Jessica Ridgeway," she says and then hesitates. Quickly she remembers the flowers and hands them to him only to have them grasped by Celia.

"I'll put them in water."

The door closes behind her and immediately they both smile.

"It's her first day. I think she is trying to make a good impression," Robert comments, gesturing to a sofa.

"She is certainly doing that. I only dropped by to welcome you and your wife to the village. I live in 'Rose Cottage', opposite the rectory. If you are passing do drop in."

Robert stretched.

"I've been at my desk all morning. I could do with a nice mug of coffee, do join me."

Jessica relaxed and nodded. She was relieved when he took her through to the kitchen. He made fresh coffee and offered her cake while they waited for it to brew.

"I'm afraid Virginia isn't at home. I expect her back at any time but she has gone walking so it is difficult to tell." He says handing her a steaming mug of coffee. They sit opposite each other and she struggles to think of something to say to him. She thinks what an appealing man he is and is instantly stunned by the thought. She has never even noticed a man since Wallace died and feels a slight flush suffuse her cheeks. He begins to fill his pipe, laboriously slowly; it is obviously a labour of love. He then looks up suddenly, surprising her.

"I'm awfully sorry, do you mind very much? I should have asked."

She shakes her head, 'No, it's fine.' and sips her tea while he puffs away until he has the pipe heartily smoking.

"It's a large house," she remarks

"Yes, our other home was large too."

Jessica nods.

"I use to be the head-mistress of the village school. I'm retired now, of course. My husband died several years ago."

"You must miss him?" Robert says sympathetically.

"Yes. We didn't have children you see. I think that makes a difference. Still, that was our choice. You must have a large family with a home this size?"

She sees his face blanch and suddenly there is some clarity for her. Why else would they live like this? What were they trying to replace?

"I'm sorry. I can see I have hit a raw nerve" she apologises

"We had a son," he says so softly she almost doesn't hear him.

She feels a churning in her stomach.

"His name was Edward. He died eighteen months ago. Virginia is still grieving intensely. We moved in the vain hope that she may recover more easily if we removed some of the memories."

"I'm so sorry. It must be very difficult for you both."

The pain emanating from him was so strong and it seems to enter her unwilling soul.

"Virginia does not wish to speak of it. Our son committed suicide you see."

Jessica shudders. All her life she had believed her soul captured both good and bad auras. This man she senses has a good aura but carries a terrible burden that weighs him down and she can see he is practically to his knees. Or could it just be that for the first time, since Wallace, she had found another man attractive?

"Do you wish to speak about it?"

He bows his head, swallows and then looks at her again.

"You are very kind, but please tell me about life in the village. I am interested in your fete, are you involved in that?"

So she told him about life in the village and her own role as deacon of the church. Several time she mentioned Rector Byrnes in the hope that perhaps he would approach him. Finally her coffee was drunk and there was no reason to stay.

He led her to the front door and again shook her hand. It felt warm and clammy and she squeezed it gently.

"If you feel the need to talk please don't hesitate to drop by. I'm not a gossip so the whole of the village will not know about your son, unless you choose to tell them"

He smiles gratefully and watches as she walks back down the drive.

A hand had reached out to him for the first time in eighteen months and he desperately wants to grab it.

The back door shuts and he hears Virginia's footsteps on the kitchen floor. They meet in the hall.

"Was it a good walk?" he asks.

"I found a wounded bird." She sighs and makes her way upstairs.

"I'm going to lie down."

He watches her; aware she is wearing the same skirt she wore yesterday and the day before that. She stops halfway and turns to look at him. Hate deeply etched on her face.

"Yes, I forgot to tell you, I met the rector of the parish. I should have told the bastard servant of God where to go but I didn't. He hopes to see us in Church. Next time I think I will tell him I would rather go to hell."

His shoulders tense and a nagging pain begin in his temples.

"Virginia, we need to register with the Doctor tomorrow."

She opens her mouth to protest,

"Tomorrow!" he says firmly and walks into the kitchen. He hears the bedroom door slam.

Celia walks in from the garden and he quickly forces a smile.

"Mrs. Spencer has returned but is feeling a little under the weather. I am sure she will chat with you tomorrow about what needs to be done."

Celia grabs her coat from the rack.

"I've prepared a cold lunch for you and there is a hotpot in the oven for this evening. I'll get my instructions from Mrs. Spencer for tomorrow."

He slumps into a chair the minute the door closes behind her. He can feel the beating of his heart and finds himself breathing too rapidly. Oh God! Why? Why? I cannot go on like this much longer.

Virginia lies upstairs. Her face turned up to the ceiling as she watches the smoke from her cigarette form intricate patterns as it floats into eternity. Robert doesn't enter her mind once.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Rosemary Peterson is agitated. It has been one thing after another. Lucy, her beloved cat, had stayed out the entire night, something she never does. It had meant no sleep for Rosemary. Most of the night she had sat upright in bed praying that her lord would help Lucy find her way home. As soon as light dawns she begins to look for her but to no avail. However, her faith in God is unrelenting and she prays again, first her normal thanksgiving prayer, always adding her eternal grateful thanks for sending her to the rector as housekeeper and then her prayers for all others in need. In her hand she holds tightly the gold cross, that had belonged to her mother with the image of Jesus beautifully crafted upon it. After her prayers she replaces it on Mother's old dressing table, which sits centre stage. It is an old fashioned bedroom. Almost all the furniture in the house had once belonged to her parents. On her father's death, Rosemary's only inheritance had been her mother and the furniture from their home. The shocked revelation that her father had run up huge debts, had left her mother no option but to sell the family home, leaving her both penniless and homeless. Rosemary as her only child was expected to take in her widowed mother. For five years she lived with her daughter and son in law until her death and Rosemary had been relieved, for it was then becoming a burden. Slowly she tidies the bedroom, hoping that any minute Lucy will stroll in. A single bedside cabinet is piled high with books, most religious in nature. Rosemary likes to read a daily verse each morning and night. A small picture of Jesus is the only wall decoration that hangs in the bedroom and she rests peacefully at night knowing he is watching over her. A half open crime novel rests on the bedside cabinet; it is Rosemary's other pleasure in life. If there is one thing she really enjoys it is a good murder story. They were the few pleasures in her life for she had no friends even though she had lived in the village for close on twenty-eight years. People had kept their distance not knowing how to respond to her and she had been happy with just her own company. She knew everyone thought her slightly odd because of her strong religious beliefs. There had been several times she had walked into the post office and heard her name mentioned alongside the words 'Religious fanatic'. Often she had thought it would do those people good to find God. The only real friend she had was Jessica, although she didn't visit much. The last time she visited all she talked about was those stupid letters, asking Rosemary in an almost childish voice, if she had sent them.

"It isn't nice to send rude letters without signing them, you do know that Rosemary? Mr Roberts is entitled to have a dog even if he does live next door to you. The dog isn't going to hurt Lucy."

Well, of course, she had replied. It was obvious the dog wasn't going to hurt Lucy and why would she write silly letters anyway? Had she written them? It was always odd that sometimes she had a feeling that she had done something but could never quite recall. It was true the rose coloured paper was similar to that which she owned. Anyway, after the letter business everyone was friendly, but she knew it was a simple acknowledgement of her existence and that not one of them would drop in for coffee and she hadn't minded.

The radio alarm had automatically switched itself on and she finds herself only half-heartedly listening to the morning church service on Radio Four. Soon, she will have to leave for work. Sighing, she goes downstairs to the kitchen and makes breakfast while trying to gain comfort from the service now broadcasting on her kitchen radio. Once breakfast is over she reads the daily verse, hoping it will give her

reassurance that Lucy would be fine. The food dish is still full and she puts more water into the other dish even though it isn't needed and checks again in the garden calling her name several times. Finally she forces herself to abandon the search and makes her way drearily to the vicarage. The house is quiet but she knows the rector is home for there is a faint clicking sound coming from upstairs. Every day she would dust his old typewriter with sacred joy. Rosemary admires Rector Jonathan Byrnes like a fan idolises a rock star.

In fact, she thinks of him too often. Once, not so long ago, he had an article published in a popular Christian magazine and she framed the photo of him that accompanied it. It sits beside her bed upon a small table, where she also keeps the novel she is reading and copies of all Rector Byrnes sermons. She would see the first draft as she lovingly dusted his typewriter. One day she asked him if she could have copies as they inspired her so much. At the time she had been disappointed by the look on his face. Obviously, she had expected him to be proud but he looked almost disturbed by her request. However, he complied and now she goes to service on a Sunday, and mouths the words along with him. Jonathan has no idea of Rosemary Peterson's infatuation. If he had, he would be horrified.

Rosemary removes her wedding ring which she wears every day, even though her husband left her for another woman over twenty years ago. It never occurs to her not to wear it. It is placed, as usual, beside the bread-bin, and her coat hung on the second hook of the coat rail. Rosemary pricks her ears for some indication that Mrs Byrnes has arisen. The woman must be ill, she decides again for the umpteenth time. I wish I could stay in bed half the morning, she thinks disdainfully. This morning especially would have been nice. Then her thoughts go to Lucy and her stomach lurches. Morbid thoughts enter her head and she visualises Lucy laying bleeding by a roadside, and hate springs from her for the evil culprit that has left her there. An inspiring thought then occurs. I will ask the rector to pray for her safe return and relief floods her body instantly. She lingers for a moment at the foot of the stairs and then casually ascends them noticing the bits of rubbish on the carpet. For goodness sake! What does Mrs Byrnes do all day long? If she were heavily involved in church matters then one could understand her slovenly behaviour. Rosemary has seen her attend only two services and even then she didn't seem interested and barely looked at her husband. Rumours fly around the village like carrier pigeons. Some say, although Rosemary doesn't believe it, that it is a hormonal problem and that some days the bleeding is so bad Rowena Byrnes is unable to leave her bed. It had been an odd situation from the beginning, a year and a half ago. The Rector had interviewed her, which she had thought curious. In the past when she had applied for housekeeping positions it had always been the lady of the house that she had seen. He had seemed preoccupied that day and asked her just a few questions before offering her the post. When she had enquired about Mrs Byrnes, he turned pale and explained that his wife was somewhat fragile and that she needed a lot of rest. After working at the vicarage for just a short time it became quite apparent that the rector and his wife occupied separate bedrooms. The main bedroom displays only masculine clothes and when she changes the linen it is quite obvious he sleeps alone. There are five rooms upstairs. Rosemary always cleans the main bedroom and both bathrooms. Mrs Byrnes' room is cleaned when requested and the other is always kept locked. On enquiring about the key she had been told it was just a junk room and didn't need cleaning. Most days the rector would tell her to leave his wife's room for she was resting. Occasionally Rowena would materialise and float downstairs like a ghost and

Rosemary would make a quick dash to clean the musty interior of her bedroom. The room was sparsely furnished for its size. It housed a double bed, a single battered wardrobe and a dressing table; the dresser was cluttered with an abundance of perfume bottles, old unused make up and a hairbrush. The bed was always unmade whenever Rosemary tidied and clothes would be scattered about the floor. One day when there had seemed to be no one in the house she had attempted to enter the locked room, trying every key she could find. Finally, dismayed she gave up. But there was something strange about the Rectors wife and she was certain, the answers were in that room. As usual, today, she follows her normal routine and knocks softly on the study door and the clicking stops.

"Come in " he calls.

She savours the atmosphere of his room and breathes in the smell of the spring flowers that sit in a vase on his desk.

"Won't be a moment" he says and smiles at her.

She waits patiently and hovers around him like a bee, all the time she struggles to see what is being typed.

He stops and turns in his chair.

"Good morning, how are you today?"

Her lips quiver.

"Lucy has gone missing. I waited up all night but she still hasn't come back. I would appreciate it, Rector, if you would pray for her safe return."

"Of course. Now, don't you start worrying, cats can go off for miles and they always come back."

She smiles. Of course he is right and Lucy will probably be home tonight.

"Is there anything special today?" it is her usual question.

"Just the normal." He turns back to his typewriter. "Leave Mrs Byrnes' room today. She is resting."

I should be so lucky, she thinks.

She is just about to close the door when she remembers.

"New people have moved into Starkfield house. Celia is their housekeeper. I expect we will see them at church. It will be nice having new people involved."

"Yes." It was abrupt, unlike his normal self.

She stands there for a moment and then finally leaves the room.

Rosemary believes there is a reason for everything in life and that her heavenly father, although seemingly sometimes cruel, knows best. The church is her salvation and the rector is the servant of her lord, and as such, should be given the highest respect. She descends the stairs and again wrinkles her nose at the stair carpet. Ten minutes later she is vacuuming the floors. Now, she no longer thinks of Lucy bleeding by the roadside. Lucy is in the hands of Rector Byrnes and all will be well. When some time later the kitchen is finished and she can find no more to do she makes her way again to the study.

"I'm away now. I've brought you a cup of tea. You haven't had a break all morning." She admonishes.

Again he smiles. Rosemary thinks him a handsome man. Sometimes she imagines running her hands through his thick rusty coloured hair. His mouth appears to be set in a permanent smile and his eyes always sparkle. However, his complexion is rugged, almost that of a man who has basked too long in the sun, which of course she knows he never has. In fact she cannot remember the last time he took a holiday.

"You need a break," she says.

"I think we all do, you included you Mrs Peterson. Go home and rest and I'm sure when you arrive, Lucy will be waiting"

With that thought in her mind she says her goodbyes, grabs her coat from the peg and walks briskly to her cottage.

It is later in the evening and she relaxes on the couch with her beloved Lucy on her lap and sips delicately from a small glass of sherry, for Rosemary has a penchant for this luxury. Lucy purrs lovingly and Rosemary feels content. Her hand caresses the warm fur and it is then the observation is made. Her ring is missing; she has left it at the vicarage. Butterflies flutter unmercifully in her stomach. In all these years she has never taken her ring off except to clean. The thought of sleeping all night without it is unbearable. Lucy meows her protests when thrown to the floor. Rosemary looks at the clock on the mantelpiece. It is always five minutes fast. It now tells her it is almost eight o'clock. In her rush she forgets her coat and has to go back. She is feeling unwell now. A sense of loss is enveloping her coupled with an enormous bereavement of security. A ring, simple, indistinctive fills her with a wealth of emotions that she does not understand. She only knows that she needs to get the ring now! Harassed and flushed she arrives at the rectory and relieve deluges her when she sees the lights are on. It is as she reaches the back door, for it never occurs to her to enter the house any other way, she hears a crash followed by a woman's loud hysterical laughter. It stills her and she listens in shock as obscenities pour forth from the lips of what can only be Rowena Byrnes. Time stands still as she seems to languish in her shock. Then the back door suddenly opens and she sees Jonathan Byrnes. His shirt seems torn or maybe it is just unbuttoned. She turns to walk away and is stopped abruptly.

"Why Rosemary! What perfect timing. I've just made a terrible mess, perhaps you could help us clean up" Rowena calls out with obvious mirth.

She stands at the entrance to the kitchen and wears only a nightdress, which, Rosemary notes, is stained and torn and her long lanky hair hangs in a tangled mess about her face. She looks almost demented and her voice sounds unnatural. Rosemary looks into Rowena's bulging eyes.

"Well!" Rowena demands.

Then as Rosemary watches, Mrs Byrnes crumples to the floor in a fit of giggles. The rector hurries to her side and lifts her to her feet. His shoulders seem to twitch and Rosemary feels decidedly uncomfortable at the sight in front of her.

"Come inside" he says gently to his wife and Rosemary watches as he helps her back into the house. She waits for a moment, unsure what she should do. Then the door opens again and he steps outside. It is then she sees he is holding something. She walks closer. He looks at her, he is embarrassed, as is she. Now, she sees it is a dustpan and brush he is clutching. He notices her looking.

"Rowena had an accident." Rosemary wasn't sure if it was meant as an explanation or if he just wanted something to say. He is not wearing shoes only his socks and the bottom of his trousers look wet as if something has been spilt on them. Then she sees he is not wearing his dog collar and has to suppress her gasp. Slightly visible through the gap in his shirt she glimpses the hair on his chest and feels herself blush. She looks towards the ground.

"Is she all right, she didn't look very well?"

He bites hard on his bottom lip.

"I'm sorry you had to witness that. I apologise for the way she spoke to you," he speaks slowly and seems weary.

Rosemary shrugs for she doesn't know what else to say.

"I would appreciate it immensely if you kept this to yourself," he looks at her pleadingly.

Rosemary bows her head; she doesn't want him to see her face when she speaks.

"Was she drunk? I heard a crash and then... I heard her swear."

He sighs. He knew one day this would happen. He is torn. Should he tell the truth? Oh, the relief if he could. Then he looks at Rosemary. There is confusion on her face. He must tell the truth.

He rubs his eyes and she wants to comfort him but knows she dare not  
."Rowena is troubled. I'm afraid sometimes she turns to drink for solace,"

He looks deep into her eyes and she sees his are anxious.

"I would appreciate it greatly if you didn't mention this to anyone. I know you are a God-fearing woman Mrs. Peterson. All I ask is that you let us keep this shame within the confines of our home."

Rosemary wants to cry. She hates Rowena for what she is doing to him.

Rosemary hesitantly lays her hand on his.

"Of course and please call me Rosemary. It will be as though nothing happened, but if you ever need anything..."

"I should go back" it was a deliberate interruption.

"I left my ring."

He looks confused.

"Your ring?"

She explains that always before cleaning, she removes it. He nods knowingly and asks her to wait while he fetches it from the house.

The ring again on her finger she feels restored. Again she assures him she will not be the bearer of hearsay.

He feels self-pitying tears threatening and quickly retreats.

"Thank you," leaves his lips and then she sees the door close behind him.

She feels cumulative anger with every step that leads her home. What a dreadful burden for him to carry and no one to talk to. Rowena is now seen as a ruinous influence on her husband. How will he survive and serve God if he has to live with such iniquity? It is a disgrace. She vows that she will pray for him every night until his suffering is at an end.

## CHAPTER SIX

He has no choice. It is out of his hands. Robert needs to attend the office at least three days a week, rather than the one. Several important clients had clearly specified they would only discuss issues with Robert whom, everyone at the office thought was taking part time retirement and had no idea of his tragedy. He didn't want to see the horror or pity in people's eyes. The only person he had shared the truth with had been his partner, Gerald.

Virginia walks in as he replaces the receiver. She wears a different dress and her hair is freshly washed. A delicate scent radiates from her. This morning she has showered and he feels relief. Perhaps this is the beginning of the end. In her hand are the morning post and newspaper. She wrinkles her nose at the sight of scrambled eggs and grilled bacon that Celia has prepared and is keeping warm on a hotplate. She pours coffee from a freshly made pot, and sits at the dining table.

She hands him the newspaper and letters, with the exception of one, which she clutches to her chest.

"A letter from Marcus. He is settling down very well at Cambridge." She says as she removes the contents from the envelope.

"Gina..." he begins but is stopped abruptly.

"Don't call me that. My name is Virginia and that is what I wish to be called." She cries angrily.

He recoils at her outburst and lets out an almost mocking laugh.

"Don't be ridiculous. I have called you Gina almost from the first day we met."

"Well, you will now have to get used to calling me Virginia." She says sharply.

He shakes his head uncomprehendingly.

"Just tell me what is wrong with Gina?"

She lets out a deep sigh and slams the letter down onto the table.

"Because, Gina was self centred and thought only of beauty salons, clothes and numerous other irrelevant stuff."

She rubs the back of her hand roughly across her forehead as if trying to remove an ugly mark.

"Gina was self absorbed she couldn't see beyond her own nose. She didn't see her son was suffering. I am no longer that woman. I owe that much to Edward."

He sits opposite her at the table.

"Gi...Virginia, I have to resume work at the office. I have told Gerald I will go in three days a week."

She spills coffee onto her dress and quickly dabs at it with a serviette.

"Why? Gerald is coping isn't he?"

"Several clients are asking for me. They are important to the business, Virginia, and I can't afford to lose them."

"I suppose you have to go then," she concedes.

He pushes the newspaper to one side.

"You really you should try and get involved in village life. It's so easy. You could help with the summer fete. Jessica said..."

Her head snapped up.

"Jessica?"

He sighs.

"She came to visit, remember? She brought you flowers."

"Oh, yes," she nods, now disinterested.

"When is this fete? What is it for anyway?" she picks up the letter again.

He laughs.

"The usual thing, you know, repairs to the church roof."

She drops the letter.

"You've offered to help at a fete that is raising money for a church?" he hears the pain in her voice, like a wounded animal.

"What is wrong with that? It's a good cause."

She stands up abruptly. The coffee pot is knocked over as she hits the table with her hand.

"Because he killed our son. Have you forgotten that so soon?" His body jerks at her uncontrollable anger.

Robert clenches his fists and struggles to remain calm. His heart is racing.

"The only person that killed our son, Virginia, was Edward"

"No! No!" she covers her ears.

"I think about it too you know. I worry that I may have let him down; sometimes I think that I pushed him to Oxford when perhaps he had a different choice. Maybe he didn't want to go into law. Don't you think I am tortured every day too? I don't know why our son killed himself but he did and God had little to do with it. We have to get on with our lives Virginia."

She looks at him, pity in her eyes. Suddenly she is in his arms and sobbing into his chest.

"Robert, I am so sorry. I have never once thought of your suffering. Please forgive me."

They embrace and hold each other for the first time since Edwards's death and Robert clings on tightly. But, although she comforts him her thoughts are still with herself.

"Please understand Robert, that I cannot forgive God. I don't want to help fund raise for a church."

He nods. They part reluctantly at the sound of the doorbell. She mouths 'Sorry' as he walks from the room and he blows a kiss. Alone, Virginia contemplates. Poor Robert, how, like her, he has suffered. But he sleeps; she thinks enviously, for he is not taunted daily by torturous memories. She decides to ask the doctor for some sleeping pills, although she feels her endeavour will be in vain, but if she could elicit just a few then surely that would reassure everyone that an overdose is unlikely? How ridiculous it all is anyway. No one would miss her. Certainly not Robert, already he is involved in the Village fete, and her mind conjures up images of balloons and fairground music. Shrugging the thoughts aside she retrieves the single sheet of paper from the brown envelope and begins to re-read the letter from Marcus. She hears voices and Robert seems to be in animated discussion with someone. Their conversation fades into the background as she immerses herself in the colourful life of Cambridge, painted brilliantly by Marcus.

Seth stands at the front door apprehensively. He is uncomfortable in his newly ironed shirt. It is a rare occurrence for him to be wearing one. They are an attire Seth saves for weddings and funerals. The last funeral he attended was his father's three years ago. The trousers feel tight. It is the first time they had seen the light of day since Lizzie's wedding, and he'd gained some weight since then. To top it all were the new shoes that pinched his toes and rubbed his heels. The walk to Starkfield house had been grim, each step an unbearable agony. Now, he feels quite wretched and would turn straight back but for the fact he can't walk another inch, at least not without a rest. He imagines his old worn boots as they sit in the hallway and yearns

for them like a thirsty man for water. He can take a short respite on the bench just inside the gates and then when he feels able, make his way back and nobody will ever know he came. However, he waits at the entrance to the house and admires the splendid grounds. He would have enjoyed working here, but rumour has it that the folk at 'Starkfield house' aren't too friendly. He sighs, for Seth, like Robert, has a close affinity with the earth and feels truly alive when he is at one with the soil. Even as a child he was only carefree when digging around in the garden. Then came a turning point. Miss Marshall had told all her pupils to go home and plant some cress seeds. It amazed and astonished him daily, how quickly they grew. Soon after he was reserving all kinds of obscure plant books from the library, and subscribing to every gardening magazine he could. Although, bemused by their son's interest, his parents encouraged him. In the beginning the adults had watched him pityingly, as he limped to school, but the foot impediment never bothered him, although the constant teasing about his name from the other children did; so it suited him to avoid them. Even now, he dislikes it, for he feels it is far too biblical for such an agnostic man as himself. Eleanor had always been a deeply religious woman and it seemed an almost saintly thing to name her son Seth. When it had become clearly obvious to the parents that his future lay in agriculture they actively encouraged him to attend Horticultural College and they had been the happiest years of his life. He knew he ought to be more ambitious, but it suited him working in the village. He particularly enjoyed his day at Lady Fishers. He had spent over a year planning and preparing the best landscape for her five acres of land. Since then, he had maintained it and felt like it was his own original abstract painting. He had designed his masterpiece to also accommodate her stables and one-acre field that were essential for her two horses. Mostly when there now he enjoyed sitting outside the stable eating his lunch and waiting for Minnie to bring him some lemonade, which she would do this week. Last winter, when she had first come to work as housekeeper, she had brought him hot flasks of coffee and chocolate cake. He could not say why he liked her, she is not what a man would describe as a pretty woman, but she was comfortable, yes, he decides as he thinks about her now, she is at ease to be with. Some times, she would sit silently beside him while they both drank lemonade and then with a silent smile she would pick up the tray and leave and he would go back to his work feeling happier somehow but not sure why.

About to leave, he turns and collides with Celia.

"Seth Martin! My, you look a grand sight."

He blushes. He is not used to compliments. At twenty-four, he is unmarried and can see no point in being so. He is not an attractive man, for his nose has a tendency to slant slightly to the left giving the impression he has been in a fight but Seth is no fighter. The eyes are very dark, almost as black as his hair. He is well built but ungainly due to the limp. Seth lives with his mother Eleanor, whom he feels totally responsible since his father died suddenly from a stroke. At one time, his sister, Elizabeth also lived with them until her marriage a few years ago. Seth doesn't care much for Celia. He thinks her bossy and interfering. She mumbles something about forgetting her keys, asks him has he come to do gardening and before he can reply or make an escape she is jamming her finger on the doorbell.

He moves slightly and pain shoots through his feet. He hears the bell jangling throughout the house and quickly removes his hands from the pockets of his trousers as the door is opened. The man is not what he expects and suddenly he feels uncomfortable in his shirt and trousers. Robert wears loose slacks, and a casual



sweater. Seth is surprised that there is not even a shirt beneath but recognises the good quality of the clothes, however, and again feels discomfort at the cheap inferiority of his own dress. Celia strolls in confidently apologising for forgetting her keys as she does so.

“Is Mrs. Spencer home today?” she asks and Seth knows she is doing it for show because he is there.

Robert nods. “Having breakfast. It’s a beautiful morning isn’t it?” he says to Seth who just nods in response. Robert looks up at the clear blue sky and then as if suddenly remembering something turns back.

“Celia, I’ll need to speak with you before you leave today,” he calls out quickly.

Celia stops in her tracks.

“Is something wrong?” she frowns and avoids Seth’s eyes.

Seth watches, unsure whether to make his exit but already he finds he likes Robert Spencer and is reluctant to leave.

“No, I have to return to work next week, so I’ll need to rearrange a few things with you.”

She nods understandingly and walks to the kitchen.

Robert extends his hand to Seth.

“It’s Seth Martin isn’t it?”

Seth shakes his head in astonishment on his face. Robert laughs.

“Jessica Ridgeway described you, said you might drop by and offer your services in the garden”

“I thought maybe you could use some help. A garden this size is hard to manage on your own”

Robert closed the front door.

“Let me show you the garden and my greenhouse. Jessica tells me you grow a lot from seed.”

Seth nods enthusiastically.

“I’ve been doing a lot of plantings for the fete. I’m having a stall.” He says proudly.

Robert looks interested.

“Well, I have some plants in the greenhouse, you know geraniums that kind of thing. They should be ready in time. Would they be good for your stall?”

Seth feels the pain in his feet less now. He hadn’t expected Mr. Spencer to be so friendly and so keen on gardening. He stares in awe at the size of the greenhouse. Together they pick out plants for the stall, and Robert agrees to help set it up on the day.

“I’ll be running between you and Jessica but at least it will be fun. Will your parents be there?”

“Mum is organising the refreshments. We’ll have scones coming out of our ears for the next few weeks.” He laughs.

“Does your father enjoy gardening to?” Robert asks ignorantly.

Seth looks down at his shoes and flexes his toes. God, he will be glad to get out of these wretched things.

“Dad died of a massive stroke just over three years ago.”

Robert feels ill at ease. He doesn’t know what to say, he ought to but doesn’t.

“I’m sorry, you must miss him.” He says simply.

Seth nods. “Yes, I miss him at the oddest times” he responds thoughtfully.

They begin to stroll around the garden and their walk lasts almost forty-five minutes. Robert watches as Seth lovingly touches the shrubs.

"That one will be a beauty when it flowers." He says knowingly.

"So when can you start?" Robert stops Seth in his tracks.

"Really? I thought with you being such a keen gardener you would want to do it yourself."

Robert gestures with his hands.

"All this? I don't think so. Anyway I have to go to the office at least three days a week. Besides I will enjoy working with you. I think of myself of something of an expert in the garden but I think you will quickly put me right about a few things."

Seth smiles proudly.

They arrange two days for Seth to come and work with Robert.

"I'd get better shoes before you come back" Robert laughs as Seth leaves.

Seth smiles.

"I have to get home first, to come back"

Robert roars with laughter and watches Seth limp along the drive.

Shrieking cries reach Robert's ears and two elegantly dressed children thunder into the garden followed by a young woman heavily weighed down under several carrier bags.

"Vanessa, Georgi come back right now." She calls.

"So sorry," she says, biting her lip on seeing Robert. "Awfully glad you don't have a beastly dog"

She drops the bags and runs to grab the children.

"Miranda Richardson, we live across the road. The white house with ghastly green shutters."

Both children safely ensconced in her grip she leans down and speaks gently to them both. They look wide-eyed at Robert.

"Hello, it's nice to see you" they say, almost but not quite in unison.

Miranda Richardson is slim, pretty and seems to be in a state of perpetual harassment. Her long blonde streaked hair fights to release itself from the slide that holds it messily in place.

"Robert Spencer. We should have introduced ourselves."

She struggles to hang onto, what Robert envisages to be, the troublesome child.

"Vanessa, hold still. No, really. I have been meaning to drop by for days now. I even have the plant and everything. Vanessa!" she sounds weary now.

"I ought to get back. It was nice meeting you. We'll have to get something sorted, drinks one evening. I'll pop over and sort it out with...sorry?"

Robert smiles. He really was beginning to enjoy village life.

"Virginia. However, she does go out a lot," he begins to feel uncomfortable.

She seems distracted and is arranging her bags and children in preparation to leave.

"It's good to get the air. I have seen her walking. It must be nice to walk for pleasure. Come on you two, say goodbye."

They leave with the same amount of shrieking. When all is silent again, Robert makes his way back to the house and his chat with Celia.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

It is Sunday. Rosemary looks critically at her reflection in the mirror. She feels agitated again. In fact she has felt restless since that night at the vicarage. First, of course, she had expected an apology from Rowena. After several days it became quite apparent that it was not going to be forthcoming. This distressed her greatly. It worries her how the rector is coping. It must be agonising for him. Whenever she remembers that evening she is again frozen with horror. But she must support him, for she is his only ally. Mrs. Byrnes really should leave him, she thinks heartlessly. After all she is an embarrassment to him. How can the poor man give his life to God and his community when he has the constant worry of what she may do next? A grim thought occurs to her, why! She may even try to kill herself. That would be a relief for him, she thinks caustically and realises then just how much she hates Rowena Byrnes. If she, Rosemary, were looking after him, then things would be very different. She adjusts her boater hat so it leans slightly to one side. It is the first time she has worn it and she hopes he notices her. Today she even applied a little make up. Not much, for she doesn't want to look cheap. She feels weary. This morning she has cleaned the entire house. There is a vain hope that the rector may come for tea later and she wants everything to look just right. After that altercation she is very fragile and she feels it important for him to know. So she is sure he will come to tea and talk with her.

The kitchen is immaculate and she fills Lucy dish with water and leaves the house for church via the back door.

\* \* \*

Robert senses the disapproval. How can he not when she stands angrily in front of him.

"I cannot believe you are doing this. Surely you have some respect for me at least."

Robert elegantly dressed in his best suit feels immediately deflated as he does most days. He had hoped, prayed even, although he doubted there was a God, that Virginia would make some progress. Every positive attempt he makes to resume his life is always pounced upon and daily he is accused of being unfeeling. She had viciously snarled at him that he had forgotten Edward. How could he ever forget his beautiful son? She believes him to be merciless to her. Doesn't he realise how little she sleeps? Does he care! With each day he feels his wife will thwart any effort he makes to come to terms with his sons death. He is wistful for the old Gina. He misses her giggly laugh. Now she walks sulkily around the new house as she did in the old. It seems as though Edward died only yesterday. He worries how she will cope in the coming week when he returns to the office. There isn't anyone to check on her and she would hate it if he were to ask Jessica. Now, again he has to justify his actions. Explain why he is being disloyal to his dead son, and callous to Virginia. How ironic that only a few days ago they had comforted each other. But quite soon after she had declined again and he now wonders if she will ever recover. He had attempted yet again to encourage her to join him at the morning service, assuring her she would like Jessica but that had provoked her even more.

"Jessica. You make her sound like some guardian angel. I am resolved never to attend Church again. I do not wish do-gooders such as Jessica to assist me in any way. Do I make myself clear?"

They are doomed he is certain. For if Virginia is determined to be so stubborn then neither of them will ever be free from this prison she has created.

She had sat cross-legged on the floor, a floral dress hanging loosely on her and wrapped around her knees as if for comfort.

He tries to ignore the pain in his stomach that had suddenly attacked him like a punch and wishes he could take some aspirin. He has been suffering these bouts for some time now and had expected them to ease. It is the stress, he tells himself. If only she would help us and stop this maudlin behaviour. It was a grim prospect for their future if this continued. For the first time, this morning he noticed his hair had turned grey at the temples and there were heavy bags beneath his eyes.

She buries her head in her hands.

"If only I could sleep." She moans.

"We'll speak to the doctor again..."

She shakes her head emphatically. "He won't do anything."

"Yes he will. I'll ask him for the sleeping pills. I'll make it quite clear that I will keep them in my possession."

She looks hopeful.

"Oh, Robert, would you?"

He feels he is sailing towards a ravine from whence there will be no return. Edward hanged himself and Robert has given up wondering why. Virginia is hovering on the brink of suicide almost daily, he knows that and now he offers to acquire the very pills that will help her. Gently he eases his painful body from the chair.

"Will you change your mind?"

There is no response. He waits a while and then walks towards the dining room door.

"I'm sorry, I have to go. It's something I need to do Gina."

She gives him a sharp look.

"Oh, of course, I forgot. It's Virginia now isn't it? Well, I'm sorry but it may take me a while to get used to that."

For the first time in their marriage he slams the door behind him. In the kitchen he takes some painkillers and fights an overwhelming urge to cry. He loves her so much and she is killing him. He looks upwards and asks, why?

Virginia does not call out to him but waits until she hears the front door close. She lights a cigarette and without a single thought in her mind, smokes one after the other.

Robert enjoys the walk; the weather is really quite warm and he begins to regret wearing his suit. As he reaches the entrance gate to the church he hears his name being called. It is Jessica who walks behind him. Robert is quite taken aback, for she looks stunning and he hardly recognises her. At their first meeting she had been wearing casual slacks and a sensible blouse. Today she is wearing a smart beige suit, complimented by a brown silk scarf that is held securely with a beautiful marquisette brooch. She smiles brightly and it is such a contrast to what he is constantly becoming accustomed to that again he has to fight the urge to cry. Don't be too nice to me he thinks.

"How lovely to see you." she says cheerfully. There is no mention of Virginia. Questions are not asked and Robert is grateful that he doesn't seem obliged to provide answers.

He comments on her brooch, it reminds him of one his mother used to wear. Oh, how wonderful it was to think of other things for once.

She touches it lovingly.

"It was an anniversary present from my husband, our tenth if I rightly recall."

He opens the gate for her. Ahead of him the church is impressive.

He is pleased to note that he recognises several of the people that are congregating at the entrance.

Seth waves warmly and Robert smiles for he sees that the lad is wearing his best shoes again. A dark haired, rather short woman stands beside him and waves.

"Eleanor Martin," Volunteers Jessica. "It was a very sad time when her husband died. The whole village was in shock. I don't think Eleanor has ever properly recovered."

He is very aware that everyone is looking at him, some openly, while the others are more discreet, but there curiosity is obvious.

"The church is incredible," he says in awe.

"It's one of the oldest in the country." Jessica says proudly.

He reaches the entrance porch and immediately notices on the doorjamb several little crosses that had been carved there. The gentle soothing sound of the organ reaches him and he begins to feel more serene. He touches the crosses.

"It is thought they were carved to commemorate vows made during the middle ages, but of course much of these things are folklore as you know. I'm Jonathan Byrnes, rector of the parish. Welcome to the village of Millbridge. I believe I have seen your wife out walking"

Robert takes the offered hand. He had expected the man to be younger. He has peacefulness about him that Robert warms to instantly.

"I'm afraid Virginia couldn't make it this morning."

Jonathan waves his hand dismissively.

"It is not law to attend church. How are you settling in?"

Robert begins to answer when they are suddenly approached by what seems to be a rather agitated woman in a boater hat. Politely the rector excuses himself and walks away with her.

They enter the church. After being in the sun. Its chillness hits them instantly. The smell overwhelms him, that slight sweet musty fragrance that one always connects with a church. He sits next to Jessica on a hard wooden pew and wonders why church seating is not made for lingering. A small plaque faces him and he begins to read it.

"This pew is dedicated to my husband," Jessica says softly.

He reads the inscription, "In remembrance of Wallace Ridgeway".

Unsure what to say he looks ahead at the large crucifix and the stained glass windows. Then his eyes travel to the walls of the church. Over the chancel ark is a painting of the crucifixion, with Jesus flanked by his mother Mary and St John. He looks behind him to the entrance as people are milling in. He is amazed at how full the church is becoming. His eyes are momentarily mesmerised by another damaged painting over the entrance door, of St Christopher patron saint of travellers. People he doesn't know offer friendly smiles. Some approach and Jessica introduces them. If they should ask after his wife it is Jessica who offers the information explaining that Virginia is very tired after preparing the new house.

Miriam and Elizabeth arrive disappointingly late, for they had very much wanted to see the new owners of 'Starkfield House'. Now, they will have to wait until the service is over. Miriam yawns for she knows the service will be long and boring.

Silence falls upon the congregation as the rector walks towards the pulpit. Robert enquires about the Rectors wife and asks Jessica where she is sitting.

Jessica swallows and seems to contemplate, finally she says.

“Mrs Byrnes hasn’t attended for over a year. It is quite sad. There is a problem, some sickness but no one seems to know what. It’s all a bit odd to tell you the truth. We have just accepted it. I don’t think anyone would ever expect to see her here now.”

Robert just nods but wonders how such a thing can be so accepted in a small village. The service is long and laborious and Robert grieves the softness of his armchair. He fidgets constantly during the sermon He cannot help but let his mind wander back to the funeral service conducted at their old church. He pictures in his mind again, Gina’s taunt body as it followed the coffin to the grave. He lowers his head as the memory of her attempting to throw herself onto it deluges him. Several people had grabbed her for she had almost fallen into the grave. He shudders at the memory. Oh, Edward, why? Why did you do this to us?

He suddenly realises everyone is standing for the final blessing and quickly rises. The service over he finds himself almost mobbed. He tries to remember everyone’s name, and yes, he promises to send his or her best to Virginia. Two elderly sisters ask when it is convenient to visit. He takes their phone number promising to call claiming he doesn’t know his wife’s diary arrangements. He knows Gina would hate it if he agreed for them to visit. He realises that he keeps thinking of her as Gina. How hard it will be to start calling her Virginia again after so many years.

“I hope you didn’t find the service too long or my sermon far too boring.” The rector broke into his thoughts.

Robert notices the woman in the boater hat is standing a short distance behind Jonathan and again looks agitated but he seems unaware of her.

“Of course we may not be what you are used to?”

Robert laughs.

“The seats are the same.”

Jonathan howls with laughter, and Robert admires his white even teeth. The lips are hidden under a neatly kept beard. Although the same can’t be said about his hair, which seems rather neglected. Robert is quite meticulous about getting his own hair cut regularly and views this as quite sloppy. Although the man laughs with such gusto, Robert sees something in his eyes that he has seen elsewhere and it disturbs him.

“I enjoyed the service. The atmosphere is very warm and inviting.”

Jonathan extends his hand.

“Visit us whenever your bottom is up to it.”

Robert is highly conscious of the woman in the boater hat and begins to make his departure.

“Thank you, I will.” He takes the offered hand, shakes it and begins to walk towards the entrance.

“By the way could you tell your wife the bird is fine?”

“The bird?” Robert doesn’t understand.

Jonathan smiles.

“She will know.”

He turns then to the agitated woman and Robert asks Jessica,

“Who is the woman hovering around the rector?”

Jessica laughs and it is a warm sound that has a strange affect on Robert. It is a laugh he would like to hear a lot, he thinks, surprising himself.

“That is Rosemary, their housekeeper.” She sighs and shakes her head. “That one would take a whole hour at the least”

Robert feels a sudden cramp in his stomach again and gasps before he can prevent it.

“Robert are you alright?” she asks anxiously.

Robert feels the perspiration running down his forehead. Seth approaches him at the moment and tells Robert he will be at ‘Starkfield house’ nice and early.

“That’s champion Seth, champion. We’ll get that garden ship shape in no time.” It is a struggle for him to speak and he can see the concern on Jessica’s face.

She takes Robert by the arm.

“I think a cup of tea and a bit of a rest. My cottage isn’t far from here, certainly closer than your house”

Robert nods. He can’t walk home yet.

Jessica was right. It wasn’t far, just a short stroll down a pretty lane and then he was standing outside her home that faced the Vicarage. Rose Cottage lives up to its name. The front garden was a mass of wild flowers and rose bushes, some of which were already in bloom. It was a small cottage and Jessica suddenly feels embarrassment, for compared to Starkfield house it will seem like a shoebox.

Robert follows her through the small, rusty, creaky gate. The moment he enters the hallway the smell of beeswax pleurably hits his nostrils. It is a smell he grew up with. A well-worn dark green carpet covers the hall floor but it is clean as he imagines the whole house to be. A small scratched table is the only furniture and upon it sits a very old telephone with a small personal phone book beside it making him wonder who her other friends are. He is led into the kitchen that smells of freshly baked cakes but before he can observe it she walks through another door and into the small living room, then, at one and the same time they experience contrasting feelings regarding it. Jessica feels it is too small and is sure he is embarrassed. Robert finds it instantly comforting with its clutter of furniture.

The room is exquisite and the very walls seem to breath the love that had been contained in them.

The main feature, a large log burner sits in the centre of a rather undersized fireplace. Small vases of dried flowers were placed at each side. A very inviting sofa sits cosily in front of it and Robert looked admiringly at the throw over that covered its aged shabbiness.

“We bought it in India, as we did many things.” She is pleased he admires it. “Please sit down, you still look very pale. Would you like some tea?”

He sat on the sofa, for it was situated in a good position for him to study the room.

“Thank you.”

He relaxes for just a second and closes his eyes. Soon he opens them and looks about him as he hears Jessica clattering in the kitchen. To the right of him is a chair, covered in elegant cushions, which again he notes is of Indian design. One wall has totally disappeared under an abundance of books, and he reminds himself to have a browse before he leaves. A beautiful painting of the exodus from Egypt hangs above the fireplace and on closer inspection, Robert is amazed to see that it has all been stitched with silk. His eyes travel to the large round table that sits just beside the French windows. It houses a garland of photographs, all in numerous frames of ethnic design. His curiosity gets the better of him and he walks towards it. Immediately he stops and looks in awe at the beautiful well-kept garden. The sun beats down on the windows and he feels warm and content. Carefully he picks up a

photograph of Jessica with her husband. They are arm in arm smiling contentedly in what seems to be a large garden.

"That was taken at our friends home in France. They have both passed away now I'm afraid."

She carefully places a tray onto the coffee table.

"You have many photo's" he comments, sitting down again.

She pours milk from a small jug that matches both the teapot and sugar bowl, into two china teacups.

She hands him his tea. "Could you eat some cake?"

He realises that he is a little hungry.

"Do you know I believe I could."

He watches her cut the cake. It is the smell he observed when entering the kitchen. It is rich and fruity and again he feels like a son that has returned home. He hadn't realised until this moment how much he missed walking into a kitchen where baking was a regular occurrence. In the early years of their marriage Gina had baked, cooked and cleaned. When did things change? Of course it is inevitable. Suddenly he was the golden boy and the clients flocked like bees to honey. They began to entertain regularly and Gina was suddenly the main hostess or at least so it felt. Before he knew it, some other woman was making his bed and cleaning his house.

A lady named Iris collected and then ironed his shirts, while another would pop by when needed to cook supper.

"Mrs Spencer has a fund raising meeting." He would be told as a beef stew was placed in front of him.

Until eventually a stage was reached when they named the day to discuss their separate schedules. From then on life had been hectic, but they had prospered and by all accounts had been happy, until Edward. He realises Jessica is talking to him.

"Robert are you alright?"

He laughs. "Yes, sorry, your house reminds me of many things, the beeswax in particular. My father keeps bees. It's a very interesting hobby. My mother only ever uses that as polish. It's nice to smell it."

He knows he hasn't answered her question. The cake is good and he tells her so.

"I'll wrap some for you to take home." She offers.

He nods gratefully.

She looks concerned. He explains he has had the pains for some time and seeing her anxiety promises to register with the health clinic in the morning.

He quickly changes the subject to the fete. They laugh at the prospect of Robert diving from one stall to another but Jessica's pleasure at the friendship formed with Seth is apparent. He finds he wants to ask questions about her life but feels it is inappropriate. He has one more cup of tea and then prepares to leave.

Outside the heat is now quite oppressive and he removes his jacket.

"I hope to see you again soon," he says and then hesitantly leans across and kisses her on the cheek. Jessica seems unperturbed and he feels even more comfortable with her.

"Come and visit anytime and do go to the Doctor."

He nods. He realises he has been gone sometime and wonders what Gina has been doing, then quickly corrects himself. He must learn to call her Virginia. With this thought in his mind he begins to walk briskly home.



Rowena doesn't belong. She is irrelevant. At least this is what she believes. In her lowest moments when life seems pointless and she considers the ultimate sin, she struggles to find meaning. The bible isn't a source of comfort, but a survival manual. For, every time she will manage to find a verse that will save her, for that day at least. Feelings of unworthiness torture her daily, but the one emotion that is destroying her more than any other is loss, although she feels almost demented by shame. Sometimes she wishes she could go mad. If she were insane then none of this would matter anymore. They would sit her in a pure white room with a single bed, perfectly made with crisp clinical linen and she would sleep and sleep because they would sedate her for fear of the harm she may inflict upon herself. Now, she sits at the kitchen table like a stranger in someone else's house. The sun forces itself on her through the large window and she begins to feel very hot. A big heavy woollen jumper hangs baggily on her. The sleeves are too long and her hands cannot be seen. Beneath it is well-worn jeans. She sits cross-legged on the chair. It doesn't feel like her home and anyone looking in at that moment would also think her some waif that the rector had saved. Her hair is too long and split at the ends, she hasn't brushed it and it lays flat and matted. The only reason she has ventured to the kitchen is because it is Sunday, and she knows that Rosemary won't be here. There are dark rings beneath her blue eyes, which once bright are now noticeably dull and dry patches mar her complexion. The kitchen is tidy and she doesn't need to enter any other rooms to know they would be too. Tears began to flow softly down her cheeks. Oh, God, she is so lonely. Every day is the same, and the hours, where do they go? So many of them and yet she remembers very few. At the beginning she knew how much alcohol she had drank and vowed the next day she would stop. Now she has no idea how much she drinks. Every few days, Jonathan would enter her room and remove the bottles, which he obviously later disposes of discreetly. With great effort she forces her body from the chair and walks slowly towards the fridge where she removes a bottle of water. It is then she stands and stares at the cupboards that seem suddenly intimidating with all their numerous contents. Rowena cannot remember which one holds the glasses. One by one she opens them, slowly at first and then frantically as her agitation builds. Each door is left so all the contents of the cupboards are exposed. At last she finds a glass and pours water into it. At that moment Jonathan arrives home.

His mouth opens and closes. He doesn't expect to see her. Immediately he feels resentment and hates himself for it. This is not how it is. On a Sunday, after service he would come home, sit quietly in the kitchen with a coffee and his thoughts. It was not the best day for him. He had spent well over an hour preaching just about everything he now despises, and spent a good thirty minutes trying to calm Rosemary and finally assures her that Rowena will apologise. He begins to close the cupboard doors. Rowena seems not to notice his arrival and sits back down. "Why are all the cupboards open?" he asks closing the last one.

"I couldn't find a glass. Has Rosemary moved things about, because she has no right and you should speak..."

He fills the kettle, all the time he wants to leave but knows he has to stay.

"No one has touched the cupboards in two years Rowena," he interrupts.

The table is covered in papers, leaflets and notices and she begins to rifle through them.

"When is the fete?"

He waits by the kettle as it boils.

“The date is on there. Do you want to help?”

She laughs, spilling water from her glass.

“Oh, sure. Just give me a job. I can do the refreshments.”

He makes coffee and then hesitantly says.

“You could have an art stall, sell some of your work. You could even start painting some new ones.”

She stands abruptly.

“I shall never paint again and you know it.” She scoffs.

Before he can retort she leaves the room. He looks at the coffee and then angrily spills it down the sink.

He walks to the back door. For a moment he wonders if he should call to her that he is going for a walk but decides against it.

Rowena enters the room that has become her life. The acrid smell doesn't even reach her nostrils, for she is so familiar to it. The curtains are drawn but a faint chink of light steals its way through an opening at the top, where a broken curtain hook hasn't been replaced. Again she lies on the bed that she only recently left. Beside is a small cabinet; upon it is one glass and a bottle of aspirin. On the floor there are three empty bottles of whisky. Jonathan will probably remove them when she is asleep tonight. But she is unworried for there are four more in the old battered wardrobe that stands opposite the bed. To anyone else it would seem odd, for it is Jonathan who provides her with the alcohol. Now, struggling to keep her eyes open, she removes from beneath her pillow a soft lemon coloured cashmere sweater. She buries her face into it and inhales the fragrance that still lingers there. How she wants to be found but at the same time is so afraid of being so. Again she thinks idly of the summer fete and a memory swoops down and attacks her tired mind like a vulture attacking its wounded prey. Charley's words flood into her brain like blood from a haemorrhage.

“If you ever leave me, I'll find you. I'll come to one of your famous, or should I say infamous church fetes. I will most certainly see you then.”

“You wouldn't dare,” Rowena had laughed, for it had been in jest.

“I would search you out, because I could not face life without you.” Charley had gently kissed her hand and Rowena remembered feeling warm and safe.

Fear numbs her for a minute when she imagines Charley turning up at the fete, and then there is a slight tingle of excitement. To hear that voice one more time. To be coveted with love again. But of course it would be impossible for her to be found, for Rowena had never given any indication of where she lived and her letter had clearly conveyed that she did not want to be found and Charley should respect that. Her eyelids slowly begin to lower, covering her now slightly sparkling eyes and within seconds she is reliving a memory that seems like only yesterday.

### ***Surrey, Winter 1999***

Rowena adores the room, simply because it belongs to Charley. It is small, feminine and always seems, at least to Rowena, to be permanently overflowing with the most wondrous things. She lingers now at the entrance and inhales the soft, almost elusive fragrance that is Charley. She doesn't announce her arrival but closes the door gently for she wants time to savour the atmosphere. Her heavy overcoat is now drenched from the rain, for she had forgotten her umbrella. She lays it over a radiator and shakes the rain from her freshly washed hair spraying droplets onto her

blue silk blouse. It is quite dark. The only light comes from a small lamp in the corner. It casts stark shadows but she can still clearly see the beautiful paintings on the wall and in one corner the faint outline of Charley's easel

. The dining table is prepared; there are two plates, a bottle of red wine and one glass, the glass indicative of an intimacy shared. Paint pallets have been placed haphazardly at the end of the table as though hurriedly pushed aside to make space. She hears Charley moving about in the tiny kitchen and feels a mild stirring in her loins and guilt engulfs her instantly. A recently lit fire crackles and pops and she jumps slightly at the sound. This is the place where she wants to be but is the place where she ought not to be. She walks towards the small couch beneath a large bay window; the very reason Charley had bought the flat.

"The light from this window is incredible to paint by, I just adore this room." Rowena, who at that time had eyes only for Charley, was equally enthusiastic. The curtains are still open. She looks out as people shelter from the downpour and harsh wind. Shivering she draws the curtains. Feeling relaxed and somehow almost tense but understanding completely both feelings, she removes her shoes and warms her feet in front of the fire. It feels like home but it isn't home, she shouldn't be here. She has done many things she should not have done. She has lied obsessively to fulfil her own self-gratification. She feels all this but still, even now, with all her guilt she cannot stop. Her feet are damp from the rain and it sends a chill through her. But she knows the chill comes from something more powerful than the rain. The open fire is comforting and she watches the darting flames as they flicker and hiss at her. She feels God is watching her every move. The shiver this time is one of fear. I want to stop, she screams, I know it is perversely unnatural but when I am here it feels so right. But she feels God's wrath. She has lied so many times, broken a string of promises. Her punishment will be terrible and soon she has to make a choice. Oh, please not yet. It is a silent plea and her eyes are closed when Charley suddenly bursts into the room and causes Rowena to gasp.

"Oh, you're here" Charley cries surprised, quickly pulling off her apron and hurriedly dusting a smudge of flour from her cheek. Her hand reaches to the back of her head to the slide roughly holding her mass of red hair.

"Don't," Rowena says gently, "I like your hair that way."

Charley pauses and fingers her large gold hoop earrings instead. She looks earnestly at Rowena who appears troubled. Rowena draws her legs beneath her and smiles lovingly at the woman who stands in front of her now.

"You've been painting today. You've been cooking our meal. Sometimes I feel you have a whole other life I know nothing about and I wish so much I could be a part of it." Rowena says, not with sadness but with resignation. Charley stares at Rowena intently and sits on the floor in front of her. The numerous ethnic bangles on her arm jangle as she does so. She is thirty-five and impressively attractive. She wears no make up and doesn't own any. Her hands are nearly always stained with paint and confidence exudes from her like a heavy perfume. She has never married but has had men seek her all her life. There is a sensuousness about her that is almost threatening to other women. But Charley will never be interested in another woman's husband for Charley Moore is a lesbian.

"You are the only part of my life that matters, isn't that the most important thing and anyway you know you can move in here anytime you want?"

Rowena's eyes begin to water.

"You know I never can."

Charley sighs and lifts her eyes to the ceiling.

"Because of him?" she says cynically.

Rowena hates it.

"Don't, Charley."

Charley stands up abruptly.

"Well," she scoffs, "If it's so awful why hasn't your precious God struck me down?"

Rowena begins to ring her hands in agitation and Charley watches feeling remorse.

"I'm sorry,"

"It's just different for me."

Charley nods and leans forward to kiss her. Their lips touch, a tender kiss and Charley strokes Rowena's face soothingly.

"Let's not talk about it. Come and help me finish supper."

Rowena obediently complies.

Soon it is dark and dinner is over. The kitchen sink holds the remains of their supper. The wine bottle sits on the floor by the bed. They lie side by side. Rowena rests her head on Charley's shoulder while one hand absently strokes her breast. Their lovemaking leaves her always with mixed emotions. During it she is overcome with desire and is fervent in her passion and love for Charley. But it is always followed by post orgasmic guilt. She tries to hold back but she can't, she feels it building and wants it so much and cries out with pleasure as well as pain. How she loves her and how she hates God. She leans over and kisses Charley passionately on the lips and lets her hand slide down until she feels the bushy mound. Her hand caresses slowly and she feels Charley tense. Gently she pushes her hand against one of her legs and immediately Charley spreads them, becoming open and vulnerable to the rhythmic stroking. Rowena enjoys the power and pushes the guilt to one side. This may be her last time. Her hand moves faster and her eyes never leave Charley's face. Then she slows down and Charley begs her not to stop. Watch me you bastard, she cries in her head and waits for her fate, but she knows it will come later. She moves her hand faster, encircling just as Charley had taught her until she is pleading with Rowena not to stop. Then Charley screams and Rowena watches her face contort with the intensity of her orgasm knowing it will be the last time. She allows Charley to hold her and breathe in her smell, and in that instant decides she will take one of Charley's sweaters when she leaves.

"I love you," she whispers, "And I always shall." She wonders if they will be the last true words she will speak. For how can she ever speak the truth? Who can she ever share this terrible shame with? If God really loves her, as surely he truly does, why is he tormenting her this way? Is it a test? If so, then she has failed miserably. The shame is so intense she wants to destroy herself but she can't. Often she has these kinds of thoughts and once had even seriously considered it and hating the part of her that couldn't go through with it. Is this the work of Satan? If so she should be stronger and fight harder against him, after all, she more than anyone knows how powerful he is. She looks at Charley, sleeping peacefully, unaware of Rowena's turmoil.

She thought back to how they had met. How lucky she had thought herself to get a place on her course. How much she had admired her and then it was over. There was the thank you party for Charley, nothing big just a few drinks. But Rowena had drunk too much; she had not been able to face not having the class to come to

anymore. She was going to phone for Jonathan to collect her but Charley had said it was unsafe for a woman to wait alone, especially in Rowena's state.

Rowena had agreed, for she was far from unattractive and probably would have been approached. One could not call her beautiful, however, for her nose was too long and her forehead too high, but her eyes were a brilliant blue and her mouth soft, with an appealing Cupid bow. Charley had later said that she had always adored Rowena's lips and had ached to kiss them for weeks. It was that night that she finally did kiss Rowena's adorable lips and was surprised when no resistance came. She had made coffee, and Rowena had sat on the couch beneath the window listening intently to Charley as she explained why she chose this particular flat as opposed to many others she had seen. Rowena, then surprising them both had said,

"I have thought often about your home and what it looks like. In fact I think about you often and I don't understand why?"

Rowena hadn't expected the kiss, or the tender lovemaking that followed. But it was the only explanation she was to receive. Even now, as she prepares to leave she still feels she has been given no real explanation. Of course, she knows she has indulged in a lesbian affair. But that isn't love, not love as she has been brought up to understand it. It was unnatural and unhealthy. Shame overwhelms her again. Quietly she dresses and with her eyes on Charley she stealthily removes one of her cashmere sweaters. I will see a doctor, she resolves but doubts whether she could bear to communicate this shame to anyone. As she closes the door for the last time she deliberates her own survival and the form it will take. There are no tears for she has resolved to save them for a time when they can be shed with freedom. Out of respect for Charley she does not want to cry while carrying the emotion of guilt. One day she hopes she will look back with pride and then may the pain be torn from her and the tears fall in abundance like a monsoon on parched earth.

Now a year and half later, she falls into a deep sleep clutching the same cashmere sweater, enveloped in a shroud of love.

Jonathan begins his walk with no clear destination in mind. He realised now that he should have stayed at home, for no doubt Rowena was fast asleep again but he feels his special time has now been stolen. During the dreary months of winter he had begun to feel more and more alone with his feelings and these were enhanced following, what can only be considered, an ordeal with the Bishop. Rowena's difficulties had been consistently dismissed. Concealed expressions of shock were obvious when divorce was mentioned. Finally the meeting had ended with, what were considered good solutions to the problem. Jonathan should move to a new diocese and they would be given all the counselling help they needed. It was made profusely clear that there was no cure for Rowena's illness and that she must learn to overcome these satanic urgings. On leaving, he felt as though he had fallen into mourning. The only people that could and should have helped them had without doubt abandoned them.

He realises he is still dressed in his cassock and so cannot even endeavour to work on the allotment. He finds himself strangely incited towards the church but cannot imagine why, for normally at moments like this he would retreat to his secret place, the place he terms "His Haven", the allotment but instead he comes to the church. He enters the back gate and walks around the old building that holds little fascination for him now. He turns the corner and sees her, sitting on the old bench at

the back of the cemetery. He feels a flutter in his stomach. He is unsure whether to approach. Solitude is a great comfort, as he knows. To disturb her would be an intrusion. For a time he looks as she sits languidly smoking a cigarette and admiring the views. He watches as she lights another from the one she has just finished. Today she isn't wearing the heavy shawl coat but a simple summer dress with a matching cardigan. Reluctantly he decides not to invade her privacy and begins to walk back. Virginia hears the slight rustle of his movements and sharply looks behind her.

"Was the bird alright?" she calls out, recognising him immediately. He looks odd in the cassock, she thinks and wonders why that should be, for surely that is when he should look at his most comfortable. He looks weary and the smiling eyes she remembers from their first meeting now look bloodshot and red.

"Did your husband not give the message?"

She blows smoke into the air and inhales again. The smell still arouses him, even now, six years after quitting. She shakes her head to his question.

He points to the bench.

"May I?"

She laughs.

"Well, you have more right to sit here than anyone I would think." There is a cynical note to her tone. It feels to him like an accusation. He lets out a deep sigh, and sits.

"Are you angry with me for disturbing you?" he asks as he leans back wearily.

She lowers her head.

"I think I am angry with everyone, but mostly God and unfortunately you represent him."

He wishes to tell her that he doesn't act for God, even though it seems like he does.

"The bird was fine. I told your husband but I think Jessica talked him into tea and cake after the service, so you really can't blame my sermon if he is late home." It is an attempt to make her smile but fails.

"You look tired. Do you not sleep well?" She asks her tone insipid and he wonders if she is really interested.

Gently and taking her completely by surprise he removes the cigarette from her hand.

"You smoke too much." Then to her amazement he takes a deep drag with the expertise of a regular smoker and blows the smoke out with immense satisfaction. He hands it back and she takes it, shock written across her face and he can't help admire her clear almost porcelain complexion.

"I quit six years ago." He explains. "That tasted good though. Some days I really miss it. So why are you angry with God?"

Stunned she offers the packet to him. A need so desirous overcomes him. He removes a cigarette for one reason only; he hopes it will help build an affinity with Virginia, who is still an enigma to him.

She flicks her lighter but the slight breeze extinguishes the flame. She tries again and this time he cups his hand around hers and leans towards her to catch the flame. The physical contact produces a strange tingling along her spine.

"I thought priests weren't allowed to smoke," she says quickly, to cover her embarrassment.

"I'm not a priest and are they not? Even I didn't know that. I'm a Reverend, and no one has ever said I can't smoke."

She shrugs. The breeze blows through her hair and he discerns several grey ones streaked within the dark auburn.

"All the same thing isn't it? I don't really want to talk about why I am angry with God "

He is enjoying the cigarette and she smiles as he blows smoke rings in the air. He coughs suddenly and laughs.

"Haven't done that for a while. Actually, no it's not. Priests belong to the catholic church and their forbidden to do just about everything."

They sit silent for a while. It is a pleasant day; a warm breeze floats around them and the faint scent of grape seed vaguely touches their nostrils. Virginia watches its yellow plant sway like rippling waves.

"I love it here. It is so peaceful," Her thoughts spoken aloud surprise even her.

He stubs out the cigarette with his shoe, and on doing so notices her feet. The nails are lightly stained yellow from constant nail polish and he wonders why they are not painted now, for it is obvious that once it was important to her that they were. The sandals she wears are modern and seem hardly worn. Seemingly unaware of him, she lights yet another cigarette and stares ahead.

"Have you eaten?" he questions.

She shakes her head. "Mrs Miles will have left lunch for me, in case God forgive, I may starve." She looks appalled. "Oh, sorry"

He is puzzled.

"For what?"

"The 'in case God forgive' thing"

He begins to laugh and it is so infectious she laughs too.

"Well, aren't you supposed to be offended?" she asks, curious that he doesn't seem to be.

"It doesn't matter," he avoids the question.

She looks closely at him for a second and then offers the cigarettes again.

He shakes his head.

"I don't know your name, or at least I can't remember it," she admits honestly.

He tells her it is Jonathan and she again tells him her name.

He stretches languorously letting out a big yawn.

"I should get back. Pastoral visits and all that." He hesitates and then quickly adds. "Shall I see you again?"

In that moment she decides she would very much like to see him again. How could she though? He represents what is profane to her. There is strangeness about him but an odd familiarity too. It is as though he needs her, in much the same way as she needs someone.

"I am here most days."

They go to shake hands but it becomes just a touch and something exceptionally powerful enters her and almost takes her breath away. Suddenly her heart is beating so rapidly she is certain she will faint.

"Thanks for the smoke. I'll know where to come next time I'm desperate."

She smiles then against her will, says. "I hope to see you soon."

He looks into her eyes and she is drawn to his. They pull her to him like a drowning woman to a raft. What is this intangible entity that seems to draw them

together? For he cannot help wonder how he has survived without her presence in the past.

“You will,” he replies softly and gives her a gentle wave as he walks away. It is just moments before she turns to watch him. He strides purposefully, a man who knows where he is going, at least that is what she thinks and she watches him fascinated, until eventually he disappears behind the church. What she doesn't know is that Jonathan concentrated very hard on making his walk look confident and assured.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

**June 2001**

*Journal Entry:*

*Who is Virginia Spencer? I wonder, and why is she so troubled. I met her again today; she was sitting as usual in the cemetery. I did the oddest thing; I smoked a cigarette. It left me feeling quite light headed. I wanted to connect with her; at least I believe that was my reason. Always she is smoking and I should encourage her to stop but it was so wonderful to experience that habitual pleasure of simply holding it between one's fingers. It was a relief also for I feel so stressed and it helped me. Rowena was home when I got back from Church today and my shock must have been clearly evident. I really needed my time alone. Rosemary is getting quite aggrieved, as Rowena hasn't apologised. Just the thought of discussing it with her sends dread running like acid through my bones. I know I must, else I am sure Rosemary will leave us But I also feel Rowena shouldn't have to. It is yet another problem to add to our burdens. I must not brood on it. The stress is not good for me; I am feeling quite unwell of late and suspect I should visit Dr Marshall. I also met Robert Spencer when he attended the service this morning. He is very different to his wife. I rather liked him and was quite amused to see Jessica take him under her wing. I found him very pleasant and imagine him to be even-tempered and level headed, unlike Virginia who plainly speaks what she feels. I was surprised to see him at church, while his wife's hatred of God seems to be profoundly deep. I found my meeting with her rather intense and want very much to see her again. I feel I may have met the kindred spirit I have been searching for. In her, I believe I have discovered someone I can open up to. But I really should not have left Rowena this afternoon. I just feel so helpless. Soon something will have to be done, it is inevitable. The strain will kill us both. I love Rowena with all my heart as I would love a sister. I have accepted that her heart belongs to another. I wish she would break free from her chains and claim her happiness. I often wonder what Charley looks like, how could I not? Perhaps one day I can share this with Virginia. I hope she really does want to meet again.*

*I have just looked back to the entries I have made in here and realise they are very erratic in nature. Has all this begun to drive me just a little mad? The day Rowena broke her news changed our lives forever. How could my life that was so devoted to God change in a matter of minutes? I do not even ask God's forgiveness for obtaining the one thing that gives Rowena her solace. I risk my own reputation to buy her alcohol and the truth is I want to be discovered. Oh, how can there be a God, how could I have been so naïve. But what am I do? I am tired, so tired. I am plagued by demons graphically reminding me of wretched days. The Sunday I poured her whiskey down the sink and watched the woman I thought I knew beg like a dog for me to stop. Is this hell? Am I there already? I deserve to be. I cling to some desperate hope that maybe, just maybe I could have someone to share this with, to share my shame. No longer will I need to immerse myself in the earth to forget. Perhaps I can at last relieve myself and tell Virginia. No, no, fool, how can you ever tell anyone the story of Rowena? There is to be no escape, only memories and an allotment to bury them in.*

Carefully he lays down his pen and leans back into the large leather chair. A glass of whisky half drunk sits on his desk. Vivid memories of the day Rowena destroyed their lives invade his mind and it prevents him continuing. A glass of

whiskey, half drunk sits on his desk and he downs the remaining liquid and allows his memories free rein. How happy he had been that Sunday. It had been a family service with much merriment. There were no feelings of uncertainty about his faith. He walked home with a spring in his step. It was a cold winters day but the thought of a hot bath and a relaxing afternoon with the Sunday papers kept his spirits up. He shook his coat and hung it on the porch rack. The faint strains of Beethoven's moonlight sonata reached his appreciative ears. Rowena was sitting cross-legged on the floor, a glass of red wine in her hand.

He slumped onto the couch his eyes straining to see the newspapers.

"You're starting early," he smiled as he made the comment.

She looked up at him and he was astonished at how pale and fragile she looked.

"We need to talk. I just can't go on," she immediately burst into tears and quickly he was by her side.

"I don't understand, what's wrong?"

Promptly, as though afraid she would not be able to speak the words if she didn't do so instantly, she said.

"I have been having an affair for almost six months. I ended it yesterday."

He fell back onto his haunches, for he had been kneeling beside her.

It took some time for him to understand what she was telling him. He knew their sex life hadn't been good, well if he were truthful non-existent almost. But neither had seemed to mind. Rowena was often tired and he was up many nights working and if he ever felt the need and approached her, she had never rejected him.

Slowly he went back to the couch. Rowena had been making love with another man for almost six months? Why hadn't he realised? Was he totally blind?

An uncontrollable anger seized him and he sprang from the couch knocking the wine from her hand.

"Is it someone I know? Have you had him here?" He was shaking her like a rag doll. The liquid from the glass stained the front of her white blouse.

Terrified and eyes bulging she struggled to escape his tight grip.

"It's a woman," she screamed and was abruptly released.

His eyes gleamed like a man demented.

"Oh no, please Rowena, not that. Oh God, please."

She began to sob.

"I'm sorry, I am so sorry. If you only knew the guilt I carry. I realise what a dreadful sin it is, but Jonathan, please understand I could not help it. It felt so right..."

He turned and marched towards the door.

"I don't want to hear it."

"I love you," she whispered.

He stopped and turned to look at her.

"So why did you do this? Why did God even allow you to?"

She bowed her head, her shame apparent.

"I don't know. But I love you and I never wanted to hurt you, or sin before the lord. But my love for you is different than what I feel for Charley"

He was lost; this was not a world he understood.

"Is that her name, Charley?" he couldn't understand why he was asking this.

She nodded.

"Don't walk away, please. I need to talk to you about this." She implored.

He felt traumatised almost. How could this be happening? They had been preparing for Christmas only a few days ago. As though in a daze he sat back down

and after a time she sat beside him and softly laid her arm on his knee. They had been married ten years, their joint dedication to their Lord was equally matched and upon meeting her parents who were devout Christians he was certain he had found the perfect woman to become his wife. Their union was dispassionate in the bedroom, however. At the beginning Jonathan had found it frustrating but came to accept the rarity of their lovemaking. It was always very quick and although she didn't verbally hurry him, he felt the need to hasten. As time passed he became more and more adjusted and their life together became affectionate, if not passionate. Now he felt totally inadequate. In truth it would have been so much easier to accept if it had been a man. At least they could discuss what had gone wrong, perhaps try again. How could he possibly ever fulfil her needs now? Did he even want to touch her again?

"We met at that Art course, you remember? It was held in the village of Appleby. Charley was the tutor. Do you not recall how difficult it was to get on the course because of her popularity?"

"Yes, yes. I remember. What does it matter? Have you always been like this?" he didn't want to hear about Charley. For if he did, visions of them naked together would assault his disturbed mind.

"Perhaps, I don't know." she said dully, for she now felt quite somnolent after her confession. A huge weight had been lifted and a desperate pain assuaged.

"Is it why you never wanted children?" her face was blurred, and he realised he was crying.

She went to comfort him but he pulled back almost in disgust.

"No. I just wouldn't have made a good mother. Jonathan..."

"I thought you were happy. You had your studio and your paintings. I've respected everything you ever wanted. How could you do this?"

She began to weep softly. She told him it was over and that she would overcome it. They could start again.

There was a long silence. Confused and feeling at a complete loss, he finally stood up.

"It is done. I shall move into the other bedroom. You will need to give me time. I don't know what we do. I could arrange a meeting with the Bishop, they may advise us."

She nodded emphatically.

"Yes, maybe they will help us. Jonathan you don't have to change bedrooms."

"I know. I want to."

With that he turned away from her and left the room.

From that day to this life had continued. Jonathan had turned to the bible for solace but received none. He prayed daily, sometimes hours at a time. Rowena, however, continued her decline with the help of alcohol. Eventually she ceased attending Church. They had visited the Bishop and Jonathan had left feeling deflated. Then one day he woke up and for the first time in almost thirty years he didn't read from his bible. Instead he looked for answers elsewhere. The library had many books that gave him a deeper insight to Lesbianism, and enlightened, he no longer saw it as an illness. He read his Bible again and again, now outraged at many verses. He no longer had his faith, but Rowena clung to hers as one would to a life raft. Slowly, he would watch her destroy herself. Time and again he told her to go to Charley. That he had no fear of the consequences and nor should see. But she was immersed in her faith. Every day she repented. At night she had demonic nightmares, where angels of

death floated down from the ceiling claiming her for the hot fires of hell. Some days she would become hysterical because she was sure God hadn't forgiven her and she would not be allowed into the kingdom of heaven. He would pacify her and for a time she would be reassured. The hypocrisy of preaching the gospel had been so torturous he had felt almost compelled to commit suicide; such was the strength of his guilt.

Hardest of all was the arduous acceptance that he was now alone. He missed talking to God, the person that had been his closest friend nearly all his life. As time passed they sank into darkness together. Jonathan never did return to their bedroom. Now, weary, he sits thoughtful and then lays his head onto the desk and within minutes falls into an exhausted sleep.

The next morning, Rosemary walks leisurely to the Rectory. Today she feels very smug, because she is confident Mrs. Byrnes will apologise. It is a perfect morning. The sun is hot and she is delighted that her small garden is flowering profusely. In her hands she carries a round tin that holds a cake for Jonathan. For the first time since her husband left she wears 'Bond Street' perfume, by Yardley. It has sat in her bedroom drawer for years and the fragrance is now musty. Rosemary is not an unattractive woman but constant frowning makes her seem so. The fine dark hair has been pulled back into a tight bun. Black rimmed sunglasses that cover her small brown eyes are perched upon a long beaked nose. It was nearly midnight before sleep had seduced her; such was her anxiety for Jonathan Byrnes. Now, she blames her tiredness on Rowena. She had even ruined her bedtime reading. It has been three nights since she had read her book, for she just could not concentrate. At least she had read her bible and is consoled. As she nears the Rectory she begins to wonder how Rowena will approach her. A tingle caresses her spine as she visualises the repenting woman. Of course, Rosemary will respond virtuously and tell Rowena there is no earthly reason to apologise. Why, of course, she understands everyone gets stressed, she will tell her kindly. The cake will give her added reverence with the Rector. For he will think how kind and good a woman she is to bake a cake when still she had not received her apology.

The back door is unlocked and she feels a small flutter of apprehension. The door creaks slightly as she opens it. Quietly she hangs her handbag on the porch rack and enters the kitchen. It is empty. On the table is a typed copy of yesterday's sermon. Furtively she picks it up and reads it, every word savoured and duly admired. Today, he will probably give her a copy and she will add it to her scrapbook. Rosemary is obsessed with Jonathan Byrnes. During one sermon he had shared his own conversion. His vision of Jesus had drawn tears from her. Later she had learnt that he had studied social sciences at Oxford and she had felt so proud of him. His devotion to God was unyielding. Even though his parents didn't share his faith they encouraged and supported him. One day she had seen a small black and white photo on his desk and had casually asked if it was of his parents. After confirming it was she had slipped it into her apron pocket two days later. That day, such was her haste, that she didn't even remove her apron on arriving home, before sticking the photograph on the cover of the scrapbook. Then she searched on the map for Woodstock, the small village in Oxfordshire, where he had been born and raised. Then, with meticulous care she had cut the small area from the map and again pasted into her precious book. Now, with her ears pricked for the slightest noise, she slips on her apron and walks through the door that leads to the hallway. She stands

at the bottom of the stairs and listens intently. There is no tapping of the typewriter. It is well past the Rectors rising hour. Cautiously she climbs the stairs, ears alert for the sound of movement. On reaching the top she stops and quickly suppresses a gasp. The study door is wide open and Jonathan Byrnes is slumped across his desk. Tears spring to her eyes and anger as ferocious as a lions possesses her. Oh, my dear Lord, please, not him, she prays as she rushes towards him. Hate for Rowena consumes her. Where was the evil woman? She should be here. She stops abruptly as he stirs and lets out a soft moan. He lifts his head from the table and looks puzzled. Rosemary sees an empty glass. The poor man was now driven to alcohol. That wife of his should be shot.

“Rector,” she says softly.

He stiffens and swivels his chair to see her staring at him.

Intensely conscious of his unshaven state and rumpled clothes he quickly apologises.

“Rosemary, good morning. Sorry, I must have dozed off whilst working last night.” In his dazed state he forgets to call her Mrs Peterson.

He stands up, and excusing himself, leaves the room. He reaches the bathroom and a curse leaves his lips. How irksome that she should discover him like that. There is a soft tap at the door and for a moment he does not know what to do.

“Rector, would you like some coffee?” Rosemary almost whispers.

His neck is stiff from where he had been laying and his head throbs.

He accepts her offer and looks in the mirror. He must get a haircut. He wonders, as he looks at his own reflection how Virginia views him, does she think him attractive? He imagines that she probably doesn't even notice, for she sees him only as a servant of the God she hates so passionately. But she had wanted to meet again. Fleetinglly he thinks of Rowena and a feeling of dread overcomes him, and a mild fluttering teases his stomach. Everything seems to be suddenly out of his control. The summer fete holds little interest for him where in the past it had evoked such excitement for everyone and his then sanguine personality had been uplifting to the whole village. How so much in one's life can change in so little time. To think that Virginia Spencer would be in the least interested in him was absurd. He looked closer at himself in the mirror. Had he changed? The lack of affection in his life has left him desolate and at times melancholy has set in. The physical desire he had learned to channel elsewhere and often at those times he would disappear to the allotment where he would drift in his mind to happier days. Seldom, when there, did he notice anyone else. He decides that he will visit this afternoon; it will be cathartic to just flow with the earth. He has found that Virginia Spencer has disturbed him a great deal. In his dreams it was something he had hoped would happen, while at the same time dreading it may. Again, his life had become more complicated. Quickly he showers, the hot water seeming to make his head ache even more. Once he is in his bedroom he relaxes, for he knows Rosemary would never enter. He quickly dresses, and goes downstairs. Today he is hospital visiting. Toast and marmalade were waiting on the kitchen table for him.

He sits down conscious that she has something to say,

“I really hate to burden you Rector, especially after last night and you having such a bad night,”

“I didn't have a... he begins but is halted instantly

“But I am really quite distressed that Mrs Brynes has made no attempt to speak with me. I haven't slept for three nights,” she broke off as a stifled sob escapes. She

waits for him to tell her that Mrs Byrnes has every intention of apologising today. Jonathan fights to suppress a sigh. He is finding this whole business rather tedious and unnecessary. Why is she making so much of this? He knows she is a highly-strung woman and really quite lonely. One of the reasons he gave her the position was because both Jessica and James had recommended her, suggesting it would help her a great deal. But it is becoming a huge burden for him. It is important to encourage her, help her to feel part of the community but in her unstable state it worries him that he depends so much on her discretion and is afraid that if this apology is not soon forthcoming she will leave and no doubt their secret will be out. Again he will have to appease her and practically beg Rowena to make some effort.

"I'm sure she will it's just she isn't always feeling so good and things slip her mind. I will remind her, I promise. Please don't let it upset you too much."

Rosemary wipes away a forced tear.

"It's just that I would hate to leave." It is a veiled threat.

He feels he is going mad and for a brief moment wonders if perhaps he truly is. Would he know? His dreams are tortured and his sleep disturbed. His waking hours are as tormented as those of night. If only death would release him but he cannot take his own life. It is not cowardice that prevents him but a deep responsibility to others. He feels quite intimidated as she stands over him. Purposely he looks at his watch and then stands up.

"I am rather late. I'm afraid I will have to leave my breakfast this morning."

Realising she has not yet given him the cake she panics and rushes from the kitchen. Jonathan is instantly bewildered by this sudden retreat and awaits her return. Her hand holds a round tin that she hands to him as one might hand over a sacrifice. He finds it difficult to not be discomfited by her wide eyes. There is madness in them he thinks and shudders. He has not taken the tin and she thrusts it roughly into his hands.

"I made it for you," then quickly adds. "And your wife, of course." She feels like a woman drowning. It is as though she had been prepared for a leisurely swim, and then unexpectedly the sea had chosen to engulf her rather than pleasure her. All her plans had gone ridiculously wrong and she was struggling to get her body to surface. Jonathan holds the tin unsure what to say.

"I baked it fresh yesterday. I thought you would be pleased" Her voice is high pitched and excitable.

To please her, he opens the tin and forces a suppressed gasp of pleasure.

"It smells wonderful, Rosemary, thank you very much. I promise I will talk to Mrs Brynes this evening and everything will get sorted out."

His words he is certain hold no truth but he does not know what else to say to her. She fidgets uneasily and he watches uncertainly as she wrings her hands. She shakes her head almost frantically and adventurous strands of hair escape from her bun and unmercifully tease her face.

"It's such a burden, that's what it is, keeping all these goings on to myself."

He cannot help wonder what 'all these goings on' were, for surely it cannot simply be that one episode with Rowena. Rosemary turns from him and begins rummaging in the cupboard for her cleaning tools.

"I'll get on then."

Now he feels guilty and another sigh is suppressed.

"Thank you Rosemary. We very much appreciate what you do."

He sees her flinch at the word we.

Then a thought occurs to him.

"I left my sermon on the table for you. I know how you enjoy collecting them although I don't understand why?"

He sees her face light up and the frown lines seem to disappear like an instant face-lift. There is suddenly a warm glow to her cheeks and a slight flush develops at her throat. The thin lips become redder and fuller and he watches in fascination at the transformation. It is then, with unmistakable clarity that he recognises the look of love. He fights to conceal his horror and discomfiture. With enormous effort he manages to keep a fixed smile on his face.

"Oh! Why Rector you are just so good to me." She smiles happily.

His jaw aches and he needs to escape.

"Enjoy it. Have a good day."

She is barely able to respond before he has left the kitchen. Baffled and still distressed she sits at the kitchen table and glances briefly at the sermon. Tears however are beginning to roll down her cheeks and she is demented with rage at the callous treatment that Rowena has shown not only her husband but now to her. The front door slams and she realises with disappointment that he has left. So again she is alone with Mrs. Byrnes. Abruptly she dismisses all thought of her and decides to give the house a good clean, especially Jonathan's room for he deserves to come back to a clean fresh house. First she cleans the sitting room, dusting all the photographs with care, studying again each one as she does so. Those of Rowena painting, and punting on the river she pays little attention to. It is those of Jonathan that she studies. The wedding photo she dusts without even giving it a glance. The group photos of him with fellow students are her particular favourites and she stares lovingly at them. Realising that time is quickly passing she vacuums and dusts the various ornaments scattered about and then makes her way upstairs, deciding she will leave the kitchen till last. She enters the study and her eyes zoom to the Journal. It lies forlornly on the desk, open, vulnerable to those with prying eyes. In his haste to leave, Jonathan had forgotten to replace it in his drawer, which he always locks. She looks furtively behind her as though expecting to see someone. Quietly she walks to the door and closes it gently. Then with deep concentration she begins to polish the large desk with thoroughness never known before, her eyes recurrently glancing at the open pages of the journal. She is still uncertain what it contains and is not fully aware that it is a personal journal. Anything written by Jonathan Byrnes evokes both curiosity and wonderment. She allows her eyes to linger for a second and the words hit her like a bolt of lightening and she has difficulty remaining on her feet. Even after she has removed her eyes the words are engraved in her mind.

*"The strain will kill us both. I love Rowena with all my heart as I would love a sister. I have accepted that her heart belongs to another."*

She falls into the chair and then with hand poised she debates with herself the rights and wrongs of looking through what has to be Jonathan's journal. In the end she decides it is her duty to do so. For someone must aid him. Her eyes scan the page quickly for she is eager to read others and knows she may not have long. Her eyes are alert for any sound from Mrs. Byrnes' room. Then she lets out an audible cry and quickly covers her mouth as she stares at the words.

*"Rowena was home when I got back from Church today and my shock must have been clearly evident. I really needed my time alone. Rosemary is getting quite aggrieved, as Rowena hasn't apologised. Just the thought of discussing it with her*

*sends dread running like acid through my bones. I know I must, else I am sure Rosemary will leave us"*

Oh, my goodness, and the wife of a religious man. Does she not study the scriptures? Rosemary thought with disdain. A woman should submit to her husband not make his bones chill as she has done. Why, you only had to read the Book of Ephesians, and she spoke the verse in a soft whisper.

*"Wives submit to your husband as to the lord, for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church"*

Her mind was a jumble, like scrambled knitting wool. How could Rowena's heart belong to another as Jonathan had stated? Carefully she turned back the pages. The whole time her mind buzzing. Of course that would explain the separate bedrooms. Rosemary had always thought that a terrible burden for the Rector. A wife should fulfil her duty to her husband. Every woman knows it isn't pleasant. Rosemary had found it utterly distasteful but had endured it all the same. One must follow God's law and for a rector's wife to blatantly ignore them has to be the greatest sin. There was a thud from what she could only presume was Rowena's room. Frantically she turns the pages and scans the words, many indistinguishable. Then four words jump from the page taking her by surprise like a Jack in the box slapping her brutally, an unmerciful punishment leaving her face stinging. For a moment she struggles to breathe and has to rush to the window for air. Oh please Lord, don't let her vomit in his study. It cannot be true, but of course it was, for he had written it. Perhaps she should go back and read it again to be sure. The thought provoked extreme panic at the realization that she had left the book open on the wrong page to that which she had found it. Her heart beats madly and perspiration runs from her armpits and forehead as she races back to the Journal. Her eyes again see the words as if magical, standing out from all the others

*"Rowena is a lesbian"*

Vomit is now threatening to pour forth and she takes deep breaths and tries to force herself to forget the obscenity of what she has read. It is as she turns the pages back with trembling hands the door opens.

"What are you doing?" Rowena stands with her hands on her hips, her eyes suspicious.

"Cleaning," Rosemary's response is weak and her voice shaky. She wishes so much to sit down. At the same time she wants to leap at Rowena and rip out her throat and then is instantly appalled at such a thought. Rowena marches towards her and Rosemary steps back nervously. The Journal is roughly slammed shut and put into a drawer that Rowena locks with much ceremony. She begins to leave the room and Rosemary can barely look at her. A slight fragrance fills the room and Rosemary can only presume she has just left the shower for she is not properly dressed. At the door she stops.

"We expect trust from those we employ. Please do not read any personal correspondence."

Rosemary could feel a blush suffusing her face and hated the woman with a passion so intense as to be unendurable.

"I was not reading..." she began.

Rowena looked her straight in the eye.

For a moment no words were exchanged, then,

"You may do my room if you have time."

There was an insincere smile with the last words and then she was gone.



Rosemary stands like a figurine. The tears that she is desperate to shed are being forced back by sheer will. There is an impulsive so strong to walk out that she has to calm herself with verses from the bible that she repeats like a mantra. She will not allow thoughts of that woman and what she is, to enter her head. Not yet. Her body feels weak and lifeless like a dolls and she does not think she can continue with the rest of the cleaning. How will she face her? Silently she prays for Rowena to keep out of the way until she has finished. If only he would come back. Oh heavenly father, why have you done this to him? There is no way she can even speak to him without revealing her terrible crime. But perhaps God meant for her to see it. After all, she has been coming here close on two years and not once had she seen that Journal. God knows how much she wants to help Jonathan for he is in her prayers every day. God has shown her something and he only does these things for a reason and now she had so much to think about and decisions to make. I will ignore her and get on with my tasks and then I can go home and think about all of this carefully, she decides but feels depressed and afraid to be in the same house as such an obscenity. Silently she prays to God to protect her and to give her strength to enter the room of perversion. God answers all her prayers and Rowena is nowhere to be seen. Quickly she cleans her room and the two bathrooms and then leaves. Deliberately she leaves the kitchen in the vain hope that the Rector may ask her why? She rushes home, for she wants to read her bible and make her decision about Rowena Byrnes. It is a disgrace for such a woman to represent the church and an insult to all the community of Millbridge. Before even arriving home Rosemary decides that Rowena has to be stopped.

\* \* \*

Jonathan drives back from the town of Hawksworth, he feels drained He thinks again of Rosemary and feels repulsion sweep over him. How long has she been in love with him? What a fool he was not to have noticed. Now they were in a worse predicament. This morning she had quite unnerved him with her excitable almost frantic behaviour. If only he still had his faith to call upon. How comforting God had been. But of course there was no God, of that he had no doubt. How did it happen this loss of faith? He could not blame it on Rowena, although the reception they had received from the church had not been as sympathetic and caring as he may have anticipated. Their eyes reflected their warped fascination with her. The Archdeacon, in fact could not even find it in him to raise his eyes to look at this obscenity that was Rector Byrnes wife. Jonathan had stressed that Rowena's strong beliefs would not allow herself to leave him, even though he sought this for himself. He virtually pleaded with them to give Rowena her freedom but they blatantly refused, firmly advising her to forget all this nonsense and aid her husband, as a good Rectors wife should and fight this sickness that had overtaken her. Rowena had begun to cry then and Jonathan had tightened his jaw. Resign now, he thought, tell them where to stick it, but then Millbridge would torture him as it has done ever since. They had not spoken on the return home and Rowena had gone straight to her room where to all intents and purposes she had practically stayed ever since. Jonathan now lost in the only world he knew struggled to find solace in his bible but nothing made sense anymore. Then one day Rowena had thrown herself upon him in frenzied fear.

"Look! You see! Oh what have I done, Jonathan help me please." She had pleaded, thrusting a verse from the bible into his hand. He recognised it immediately and scorned it, as he had many other writings in the past months.

"I'm condemned," she sobbed hysterically. "It says God sent his angel of death to destroy everyone for their sin of homosexuality. I am doomed Jonathan. I will never be allowed into the kingdom of heaven. Oh why am I so weak to have let the devil enter me?"

It was then for the first and last time that he had referred obliquely to his own doubts, but she had been so demented and had not heard him. After sometime he had calmed her and eventually that had become the way of their lives. There would be long periods of silence and drinking and then the inevitable terrifying outburst when fears for her soul would paralyse her. As time passed he had looked for answers, but found none. Instead, the more he looked the more disillusioned he became. Now, driving home he tried to concentrate on the music. A favourite of his, "Song for Athene" began and he felt utterly beleaguered as though the haunting music had finally attacked his shattered nerves. Without any clear understanding of what he is doing

he turns the car around in a clearing and headed back to Virginia Spencer's house which he had passed just minutes before. Virginia sees him as she is about to enter the back door. She carries rhubarb from the garden and feels self-conscious but does not know why. He asks her has he called at a bad time. She hears her voice sharp when she asks a bad time for what! After all every minute of her day is a bad time. He looks sad and she feels a need to comfort him. It is an alien emotion, one she has not felt in a long time. She asks him why he has come, and then regrets it for somehow she knows he will not tell the truth. Virginia is stunned when he almost spat her,

"Don't worry I shall not bother you. I realise I am anathema to you,"

He looks close to tears and she wants to hold him but can't. Oh why have you come? She wants to beg, why have you made me feel? I don't want to, don't you understand, I don't want to. You revolt me and yet awaken something I have not felt in years. It cannot be desire that is unthinkable. He turns to leave and she wants to scream, I don't hate you, I just hate what you represent. Then suddenly the words leave her lips uncontrollably like vomit. Now looking back she cannot remember what they talked about, maybe a poem was mentioned and she vaguely offered him some bluebells from the garden for his wife. But it is her he came to see and she was pleased but her pleasure was embellished by anger.

"I have avoided everyone in this village and yet, you, somehow, I cannot. Why will you not leave me alone? Has your God not punished me enough?"

How she regretted that. Then Celia came and he was gone and now all she holds are his glasses, which she clutches to her breast, like a loved one.

*Journal Entry:*

*What a stupid man I am. What recrimination I have suffered today, and humiliation. I felt so lost after my hospice visit. How arrogant I was to think that Virginia Spencer might be pleased to see me. I hungered for her coldness in a strange way for I knew oddly I would gain comfort from it. I know it is directed at God and somehow I feel an affinity with her because of that. I was timorous on arrival and quite overawed by the size of the house. I cannot think why I had never been there before. It is set in the most splendid grounds I have ever seen. I lingered when I saw two large cars in the driveway and it was then I reflect now, that I should have reversed back because if I had I should not now be doomed to writing this with an old pair of reading spectacles I fortunately retained in my desk drawer. But such was my*

arrogance I continued. Then I saw her as she turned the corner of the house. She had a basket of rhubarb in her hand. She looked fragile, her underweight body was draped in a thin summer dress and I recall with shame now, how the nipples of her breasts seemed to strain against the thin material. It was evident she was not happy to see me. My delicious thoughts of us sharing confidences over a cup of coffee were blown away along with the poppy seeds in the breeze. I wanted to tell her I felt helpless, distressed, that I was sinking into a decline. I had lied to a dying patient, collaborated with her belief that after death all would be well. I was wrong, and now she is dead. But instead I responded to her hostility with my own like a petulant child. I began to feel something indescribable. There was an alien sensation pressing against my chest and a terrible panic welling inside me. I was suddenly like a fountain that has just been switched on and the water was rushing unmercifully through my body attacking my already fragile nerves that I felt soon it would erupt. The water hovered on my eyelids, threatening to burst forth. I said something stupid like I know she hates me. I must have seemed like a man demented. Then something strange but I am afraid to even attempt to define it, she began to talk, incessantly almost, passing the basket from hand to hand that I focused on her yellowy nails, that I realised at one time must have been painted. I cannot recall all she said, lots of things about Robert working now, taking the train, that she had bluebells, lots of them, she would give me some for Rowena. Then she went silent and after a pause softly recited part of an Emily Bronte poem, and loving that poem so much I could not help but recite the final verse. She did not speak but smiled and her eyes were warmer, incandescent but not cold as before. She offered me a drink and by then my throat was so dry from the heat and my anxiety at seeing her. I felt afraid to remove my jacket for I feared my dog collar would offend her but she insisted. Then, oh why Virginia, did you have to ask why I had come? I could not lie; I did not know what to say but the truth, to see you. Her words are crystallised forever for me and I now know I must stop this and learn to live a more abstemious life. Any thoughts I had about us being kindred spirits were broken like a spell.

"I have avoided everyone in this village and yet, you, somehow, I cannot. Why will you not leave me alone? Has your God not punished me enough?"

I tried to tell her. Oh, Virginia I tried to tell you that he is not my God, but Celia interrupted us, I cannot remember why. I just felt like my one salvation had gone. Oh, yes we looked for Celia's purse that she had lost and I felt we were searching for all my hope. Then I was unforgivably cruel to Virginia. I cannot recriminate myself enough. I said I should leave, would not bother her again. I even refused bluebells she offered for Rowena. She looked shocked. I am resolved never to go there again, not even to collect my glasses, which must have dropped from my jacket when I removed it. I must stop these stupid wistful thoughts that Virginia materialised magically to rescue me. My dreams have been shattered.

Today was a bad day. Tomorrow my torture endures, drifting aimlessly as it always has. I will no longer tolerate thoughts of salvation.

## CHAPTER NINE

"This, I adore! I sat on a small hilltop and from there in the distance you can just make out the faint outlines of the cemetery and church spire. There was a cloudless sky the day I sketched it but I feel it looks better dark and overcast, like something out of a Bronte novel"

His name is Brock Weiss. They had met as students but his superlative flair was quickly recognised and within a short time he had become widely acclaimed, while Charley and her peers, although successful, led a much quieter, bohemian lifestyle. Drinking coffee, together they observed the paintings he was to exhibit in London that weekend. In three days he will be gone and already she knows she will miss him for she rarely has company.

"The two I painted in Scotland I think I will give to my agent seeing as she is how you say it? A bonny lassie." He laughs.

"Won't you sell them?" she asks as she stares in awe at the detail, trying not to envy him but failing miserably.

"Too many! This one, I think will sell very well," he points to the one that has captured her imagination.

"I think it is beautiful," she says pensively. "Where was it?"

He roars with laughter and she thinks how gloriously attractive he is. His visits, although disruptive, enthrall and enchant her and tales of his tangled love life never fail to amuse her. He holds the painting in front of her.

"You don't recognise it?" he seems surprised.

She is perplexed.

"You took me to this place Hawksmouth for dinner.."

"Hawskworth" she corrects him.

"Whatever. Do you remember I wanted to see some of these quaint villages you have here, so we quickly drove through this one. I went back a few days later. I am going to title the painting "Millbridge"; it's such a charming name. Come on darling, you must have been there? It has one of the oldest churches in England."

A presentiment suddenly overcomes her. A cold hand clutches her heart and her body feels clammy.

"I believe I do remember. Did you go through the village?" she hopes he does not detect the mild distress in her voice.

"It was pretty. There wasn't much there if I recall, just a post office and a pub. There was the church of course, which is amazing to see. I wonder, do you think it would be a nice gesture to send a pencil sketch of that picture to the vicar? A bit of a bonus for them."

She runs her tongue across her bottom lip and then pinches it with her teeth, before she asks

"I think it would be a lovely thing to do. But won't you need to get his name?" She holds her breath.

"I took one of the parish newsletters. I wanted to remember where I had painted it."

He looks around the room as though surveying it for the first time and then his eyes widen as he spies his camera case.

"Ah, I took a photo of the interior of the church. It must be in there."

He rummages through it, unaware that she has now turned totally white.

"Where shall we go for dinner tonight?" he asks thrusting the newsletter into her hand.

She opens the first page and stares like a woman in a trance. The Rectors name in bold. In her whole life she had never been so prescient and it almost terrifies her.

"My God," she exclaims. "All this time, so close."

For never had a day passed that she had not thought of Rowena.

Brock's eyebrows rose. Charley can't be referring to the village for it is obvious she knows where it is.

Without warning she is in floods of tears that stream down her face into her mouth, down her chin finally splashing onto her cream blouse. He is beside her instantly, her fragile state unnerving him, for it is not his custom to comfort distressed women.

"Well it's not my painting, so what is it?"

She can barely say the name and it comes out as though forced from a strangled woman.

"Rowena"

He shakes his head, disbelief evident on his face.

"But that was two years ago, you would have known it was Millbridge."

She fumbles for a tissue and he leaps up, relieved to escape if only for a second and fetches kitchen towel.

"She asked me never to look for her and I haven't" she accepts the substitute tissue and blows harshly causing him to grimace.

There is a silence between them. He tries to think of comforting words for he knows how much this woman has meant to her. Charley is wondering how she can keep her promise to Rowena whose whereabouts she now knows. She is uncontrollably desirous to visit Millbridge, if only to familiarise herself with the home of her lover. Has Rowena missed her as much? Or, worse still, had she forgotten her? So much must have gone on in her life. But, hadn't she written in her note that she would never forget Charley and love her forever? Charley feels if she does not contact Rowena, then she herself will be unbearably tortured, for the loss of her one true love, had, at the beginning, almost driven her mad. Brock's arm slides around her shoulders, and she clings to it like a child might to its mother's breast.

"Well you didn't look for her. It's almost as if she has come to you. You have to see her Charley, or you will go mad, either that or move." Brock says sensibly.

The thought of going to Millbridge alone terrifies her. What if she should bump into Rowena in the street? How would they both react? She turns to Brock.

"Give me the newsletter," she says, hope in her voice and yes there it was, the summer fete.

"Can we go to the pub tonight? I want to see the village, but I can't face it on my own."

Rowena may have forgotten her but feels sure that isn't the case. If she has endured the same agonies the past few years then she must still be missing Charley dreadfully. The afternoon of the day Rowena had left, Charley, after slashing the only painting she had of her, tried to kill herself. A student arriving to collect his work had found her and she had been forced to resume life again against her will. For a long time she didn't paint, and only took art classes so she could pay the mortgage. The fridge had always been bare and when she did get hungry she would eat from a tin. Slowly as time passed she allowed her mind to absorb the fact that Rowena would not come back or make any contact. Charley's hatred of God began to consume her

and in truth was probably her saving grace. Night after night she would read endless books, searching through one after another, making notes as she did so in her aim to substantiate, if only to herself, the untruths and hypocrisy of the bible. Eventually, she had practically written a Thesis. Finding comforting consolation in published commentaries that viewed some people naturally homosexual. *For reasons that may be partly generic it is a natural affection and therefore God given and not wrong*, she had quoted in her notebook that cluttered her small kitchen table alongside countless books including numerous popular science classics. Charley began to accept invitations to dinner parties and would always influence the conversation towards her own hobby horse, and would argue the relevance of the Bible today and almost bully her point across that Jesus' teaching on sexual relations belongs to a different age. But none of this stopped her thinking of Rowena every day. She had respected Rowena's wishes and had never sought to find her but now it was as if she were calling to her. Brock let out a long breath; he knew they would be visiting Millbridge. However he did not refuse and later that evening they creep into the village like thieves on an errand. The pub is practically empty, apart from two men playing darts and another at the bar. It is small inside and Charley looks frantically for a corner table. The two men stop playing as they enter and nod in a friendly but detached manner. The man at the bar stops talking to the barman and all that can be heard is the faint background music, normally deafening in most pubs.

"Evening," says the man behind the bar who is scrutinising them both intently. "What can I get you?"

"I'll have a red wine, and ask about food." She hisses into his ear. She feels massive panic as one of the men who had previously been playing darts approaches them. He has a bushy ginger beard and she can hardly make out his features. He stares at her for a time and then turns away.

Charley points to a corner table and begins to head towards it when she hears Brock speak

"Actually you are quite right, there are beautiful spots here and I have painted several in fact, only a matter of days ago I painted one of your Church. I wonder if the vicar would like the sketch?" he sighs heavily and continues. "For the painting will probably fetch thousands, they normally do you see."

"Really! You're quite well known then?" the man was impressed and two men playing darts even more so.

"Well Jonathan would sure like the original sketch." Said the barman

"You should look inside the Church, it is one of the most beautiful in the country you know," chimed in one of the darts player.

"We're not ones for Churches," Charley heard herself say and quickly sat down at a table in a discreet corner aware that that the young man who had been standing at the bar when they arrived was staring at her but as yet had not spoken.

"Even if you don't like Churches, the view from the cemetery is something special. I maintain the grounds." It is all said clumsily and she senses he does not speak to strangers often. She tries to think of a reply but instinctively knows he isn't expecting one. Brock offers him a drink but he declines graciously. They are told their food is ready and they make for the table.

"Enjoy your meal," he says and Charley suddenly feels deep curiosity about this man.

"Are you the church caretaker?" she asks.

Seth laughs. "Me! No. Like you, I don't believe in God, so I don't think that makes me the best person to be caretaker. I just care for the grounds. Like I said the views are beautiful."

"So, you don't know the Rector very well?" she asks, all caution thrown to the wind. For some reason she feels safe talking to him. She knows he belongs in the village but in an abstruse way that she cannot fathom.

He is uncomfortable. He wants to speak to her but is conscious of his shabby dress. He is painfully aware that his shirt is stained with the juice of Mrs Marshall's freshly picked plums. He had only dropped into the pub for a long cool drink before returning home to the pleasurable prospect of a comforting hot bath.

"Oh yes, he's a good man, the rector," he adds the last bit almost defensively as if he senses she will criticise him.

Brock is tugging at her arm and Seth smiles understanding the man's hunger.

"Do you know his wife also?" she sees her own eyes reflected in his for a second, and then he looks away. Brock releases her arm and gestures to the girl, who carries their plates of food, to a table in the corner.

Seth fidgets. He is tired now. It has been a long day. Four gardens in all and then he had promised Matt he would help him cut down some trees, so his wife would stop complaining about how they blocked the light. He still hasn't eaten. This woman seems too interested in the Rector and his wife, considering she apparently has no faith.

"I know her. We don't see her much though. I think she is a frail woman." He downs the last dregs of his drink, and then turns to leave.

"Nice meeting you. Have a good journey home." She watches as he waves to the other men and hears friendly banter pass between them. Brock tries to get her to the table but she cannot take her eyes off the limping man as he leaves the pub. The men are laughing and playing darts again and she finally follows Brock.

What did he mean she is a frail woman? Is Rowena very ill? How can she learn about her? That young man perhaps? But she shakes her head, for how would she ask him? Ask the dart players?

"The man who just left, what is his name?" she asks succinctly. Charley has no time for pleasantries and Brock cowers in his seat

"Why would you be wanting to know that?" he is pleasant but she hears the underlying suspicion in his voice.

She thinks quickly.

"He's a gardener isn't he? I have a garden that needs a lot of tender loving care."

"Not local though are you?" he asks.

Charley sighs.

"No."

He shakes his head.

"He doesn't travel out too far..."

"I didn't ask how far he travels. I asked for his name. I am sure he can tell me whether he can cope with the work or not." She says abrasively.

Brock stands up, he has had enough, he grabs her by the arm and she glares at him.

"If you could direct us to the rectory, I'll drop that sketch in tomorrow," he tries to appease.

The men are still staring at Charley.

"The Vicarage is about hundred yards on your left as you leave here." He answers bluntly.

Brock virtually drags Charley from the pub. As they reach the door someone calls out.

"His name is Seth Martin and we happily welcome well mannered people here but we don't tolerate rudeness."

Charley pulls herself away from Brock and turns back.

"You call this welcoming. I have had better welcomes in cemeteries." She slams the door behind her.

"Well done Charley, you've made more friends." Brock says sarcastically as they get into the car.

"Pompous, pretentious, self important, snobs," she snorts.

"What now?" he starts the engine.

"We go home. I will contact Seth Martin."

Somehow, she knows, it will be him that will lead her to Rowena. She leans back and lets out a contented sigh.

Brock, meanwhile, not being of a violent nature cannot kill her as he may have wished, so instead drives back at high speed to relieve his frustration. Charley, rapturous to have found Rowena, does not even notice.



## CHAPTER TEN

It has been over a week and he has not returned for his glasses. Virginia has waited in the vain hope that he might before daring to venture into the village alone. It is a terrifying prospect for her, and she visualises, with great exaggeration, the number of village people who will apprehend her on her visit to the Vicarage. Worse still she may have to ask directions and then everyone will know where she is heading. It occurs to her that she really doesn't have to go; for surely had he been desperate for them he would have phoned. But he hasn't and she really cannot keep them for much longer without it seeming rude for he must certainly realise that she has them. Celia Miles walks past her, where she sits deliberating at the kitchen table. Virginia winces as she crashes about in the cupboards.

"I cleaned all the silver. I don't know if you want to me to stay a little longer and make something for your dinner," she asks heartily.

At the beginning Celia had behaved impeccably and had not given in to the speculation in the village. To all their questions she had replied with courtesy.

"It is not for me to discuss their private business, after all trust is very important in these positions."

Curiosity, had of course established itself within her mind several times, and upon contemplating its dangers had harshly discouraged it. But, when dusting dressing tables, the impulse to open the drawers is devilishly overpowering and her hands have ached with the desperation to do so, until last week, when she gave up her fight. With her ears firmly alert for the slightest sound and her eyes flitting from the door to the dressing table, she endeavoured to open one of the drawers with as much silence as she could muster. It was not easy to see what it contained at first, for there seemed to be just a scarf, which Celia carefully removed, memorising how it laid so everything would be perfectly replaced. Beneath it were several photographs of a very attractive young man, all expensively framed and carefully wrapped in tissue paper. After that she never looked in another drawer and resolved not to tell anyone what she had seen. When people hide photographs, it often means that at some time their life has been shattered and she didn't want to know more. She waits patiently for Virginia's response regarding the evening meal.

Oh, dinner, Virginia thinks with dread as though preparing for a dinner party. Food is so unimportant to her these days but she realises that Robert will need something when he returns from work.

She nods absently and thanks Celia.

The sun is shining brightly into the kitchen and she thinks it would be nice to walk.

"I have to go out, I need to go to the vicarage. Could you tell me how to get there?" Virginia tries to sound nonchalant for she doesn't want Celia to interest herself in the visit. But Celia does not even turn from her baking preparations.

"The vicarage, you say? Are you familiar with the village?" she asks, already knowing the answer, for nearly everyone had asked about Virginia, even more so after seeing her husband at church.

Virginia feels she ought to say yes, for it would sound odd to say no after living here for so many weeks.

"I know the Church" she offers, and by so doing avoids answering Celia's direct question.

Celia nods thoughtfully.

“You’ve walked across the fields though haven’t you? If you walk into the village and keep going you will come to the post office, now you can’t miss that for it’s the only shop. Opposite is the green; I think we may have the fete there this year...”

She sees Virginia stifle a sigh and quickly continues with her directions. Virginia notes it all in her head.

The kitchen window is open and the birds are merrily singing and she finds that she is beginning to enjoy the sound, especially the dawn chorus. Often she is awake for hours before they signal the arrival of dawn and then to their soothing melodic voices she often drifts serenely back to sleep. She wears a loose cotton dress that hangs baggily on her. She cannot find anything to wear that is not too large for her now. Robert constantly nags her to eat more and smoke less but what does she have to eat for? She does not care if she wastes away. She grasps the handle of the back door and as she does so her wedding ring slips easily from her finger breaking the silence with its dull tinkle as it rolls across the flagstone floor. She stares aghast and Celia bends to retrieve it.

“You need a piece taken out, Martins in Hawksworth is the best and he wont charge the earth like some of those jewellers do.” Celia says. She knows it is pointless to tell Virginia that she ought to eat more, besides it wasn’t her business. Virginia takes it from her and it seems like a premonition for not once has she removed her ring since the day she and Robert married. She looks at Celia.

“I don’t want to lose it when I am out, perhaps you could put it on the dressing table for me.” It is a gentle request, a final admittance of acceptance. Celia smiles and gladly takes the ring. As Virginia makes to leave again Celia stops her.

“Of course, if you didn’t want to go through the village you could walk along the river bank and make your way to the rectory that way.”

Virginia’s eyes widen A way to bypass the villagers is precisely what she needs to hear.

Celia wipes her hands on a damp cloth and dries them on her apron, then taking a pen and paper from a box on the kitchen counter she begins to draw a small map.

With Celia’s instructions clutched in her hands she begins to stroll to the Vicarage. It is a pleasure for her to cross the familiar fields and bask her face in the sunshine. She sees the clearing described by Celia and the footpath sign and heads cautiously down the tree shaded lane. Normally she would have continued on to the next field bringing her to the back of the Cemetery. Butterflies swarm around her and she feels happy and that makes her ashamed, for she vowed she would never allow herself happiness again. She hears the sound of the River ahead, its gentle lapping already soothing her jagged nerves. Celia said to follow the bank to the left until you see a small gate that should clearly say ‘Entrance to Rectory’ She looks at the map and remembers Celia’s words.

“The river runs at the bottom of their house although hardly anyone goes that way. You’ll find yourself entering by the back. Keep a look out for the gate else you’ll keep walking for miles.”

The walk along the river is delightful and she is tempted several times to slip off her sandals and dip her feet into the cold water. The smell of wet grass is delicious and memories drift in and out of her mind like waves, bringing both despair and happiness as only memories can. She allows her mind to go with the waves and watches Edward wade into the sea as a young boy of seven and smiles as he poses grandly for his father’s new camera. The sea washes over her and she can smell the seaweed as Edward drops it into her lap and both she and Robert laugh as he rushes

off to collect more. An enormous wave suddenly seems to assail her brain and she fights to release herself but cannot and drowns in the memory of the day she held her dying son in her arms. A wasp lands on her hand and she stares fascinated waiting for it to sting her, for she wants to feel something, anything that will replace this nothingness, but it doesn't and she is disappointed when it flies off. A short distance away she can make out an old worn gate and walks closer. A worn piece of rope keeps it tied to a rotting post and although the gate is quite dilapidated she can clearly see the words 'Entrance to rectory'.

Carefully she removes the rope from the post unaware that Rowena is also removing a chain from a post at precisely the same time. Virginia enters and closes it gently behind her and slowly walks along a private lane that leads to the back of the Vicarage, feeling blissfully happy with the nature that surrounds her.

Rosemary stands calmly watching from the kitchen window although her legs are trembling beneath her.

This morning she had her resignation letter tucked firmly in her handbag only to be bitterly disappointed when on arriving she sees a note from Jonathan.

"Rosemary, just the normal today. Thank you." He hadn't even properly signed it, just scribbled R. Byrnes. She had finished cleaning the lounge and just started on the kitchen when that image of perversion had come downstairs looking like an old tramp. Quickly, Rosemary had crossed herself.

"May the angel of death destroy you as he did all those sinners at Sodom and Gomorrah," she had hissed quietly.

Rowena is oblivious to her and continues straight past into the garden. Rosemary is appalled, where on earth can she be going in her nightdress? She is barefoot and walks across the freshly cut lawn mowed by Seth only yesterday. It takes only seconds for Rosemary to realise she is heading for the river and her heart leaps. Has God finally answered her prayers? Is Rowena going to oblige her by falling drunk into the river? A flutter of excitement tingles her spine like a warm caress, and like a vampire stalking its prey her eyes do not leave Rowena's fragile body. Rowena is unaware of anyone; her mind is repeating the same words.

"The wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God, nor homosexual offenders." Her panic is wildly out of control she had called for Jonathan for solace but he had left the house. It is not the first time that these dark delusions had enveloped her whole being. She wakes feeling desperately afraid and prays with the wildness of a mad woman. Jonathan, her only salvation is not home to calm her and she can only hear God's voice, directing her fate. She can fight no longer. Is the sky darkening she wonders as layers of sadness cover her like blankets? Her mothers voice echoes in her head.

"The Lord will always guide you."

She feels confusion. Did God guide her to Charley? God gives us freedom to choose. She chose hedonism and must pay. Oh, the agony of waiting, that's what it was, an agony. To have it over, face her fate, be it hell fire and damnation, to face it and be free of the fear is the best gift she can give to herself and Jonathan. She should have left him a note. But she knows with complete faith he will understand.

A gold cross adorns her neck and she walks to her father as a naughty child might, prepared for her punishment. Rosemary stares wide eyed as Rowena unties the metal chain from the post that secures their small boat to the bank. Rowena is calm now for she knows that soon it will be over. The chain comes away easily and she watches the boat float empty and alone down the river. The chain is heavy

enough and she listens for Gods instructions. It is easy to wrap around her and as she ties a knot, unbidden memories of her student days rush into her head. Rosemary holds her breath as she waits for Rowena to climb into the disused vessel and is amazed when she doesn't and watches as the boat begins to drift down the river, eyes riveted she stares as slowly and carefully Rowena begins to wrap the metal chain around her waist like a snake. Her legs are trembling so much she can barely stand and watch but her eyes refuse to leave Rowena, she is not panicking or recoiling from the scene in front of her. There is no sympathy for the woman in the garden. Rosemary imagines the house breathes a sigh of relief knowing that soon it will all be over. There is no agonising decision to make, just a heartless speculation of what the future may hold for her once Rowena has gone. It is now clear to Rosemary that God is going to put everything right. Rowena stands at the edge of the bank, her bare feet black from the mud. Slowly, she turns and looks back towards the house and her final perception of life is Rosemary Peterson's face at the window and her own reflection in the opaque water. Her feet suddenly slip on the mud and she is standing in the cold stream, she gasps and waits a few seconds as though there is a ritual to follow.

Without mercy Rosemary watches Rowena turn back just once before wading into the river. Rowena knows precisely what she is about to do and her last thought is,

'Rosemary will not try to save me. Poor Rosemary, she is totally mad and someone should be saving her.' Neither of them here Virginia enter the back gate. At first she wavers, unsure that she is in the right garden. She looks to the river and sees the empty boat drifting along and then her eyes turn to the house and she suppresses a gasp at the sight of it for she had expected it to be much smaller. It is then Rosemary sees her and fear clutches at her heart and suddenly her whole body is constricted. Her eyes do not blink as they meet Virginia's. Virginia lifts a hand to wave but the woman is looking straight ahead again. A stab of doom hits her in the chest and she looks in the same direction as Rosemary. At first she cannot make out the figure ahead, or make sense of what seems to be attached to her waist and then in a flash she remembers the boat. She looks back to the woman staring from the window and now the woman's mouth seems to open as if she is screaming the words 'Leave her.' Rowena begins to wade gently into the murky stream and just as she thinks it will not work the chain pulls her down and she is lost to the current. Waterweeds attack her face and hair but she floats like an angel, happy at last. Virginia forces her face from the window back to the river but can no longer see Rowena and begins frantically to run towards the riverbank screaming at the woman in the house to help her. She falls with a thud as she skids on the wet bank and instantly she reverts back to that hot summer almost two years ago when she had slipped on the warm faeces of her son. Oh, God not again, please let me save her. Again she slips on the wet mud and curses, then without removing her sandals she dives into the river and gasps as the cold hits her like sharp needles. Immediately she sees Rowena. With super human effort she desperately attempts to bring her to the surface, but the chain is too heavy and she cannot hold onto her and swim as well. Urgently she comes up for air and looks again at the window and waves frantically to the woman. Is she mad? Why doesn't she help?

"Call someone for Christ sake," she shouts. She takes a deep breath and goes under again and anxiously struggles to untie the chain but her hands tremble too much. She must keep calm she knows she cannot let another person die. Again she

surfaces and looks hysterically about for something to help her. She moans at the barrenness around her and takes in a large gulp of air before diving in again.

Her hands fumble impatiently with the chain but she cannot remove it. For a second she forces herself to think of Edward and suddenly with remarkable strength she is pulling Rowena to the surface and with a heave throws her onto the bank, where she collapses gasping beside her. Quickly she is on her knees, shocked to see the woman still watching at the window.

“Call an ambulance,” she screams hysterically and sees the face finally disappear. She fights back the urge to vomit and practically chokes on the dry mud in her throat. Her hair is plastered to her face and she feels water dribbling down her back.

Relieved that help is now on its way she turns Rowena onto her back and leans close to her lips begging her to breathe but she doesn't and a painful sob wrenches itself from Virginia. The woman is no longer Rowena and Virginia has a second chance to save her son. Rowena's mouth is full of river reeds and vomit and Virginia hurriedly scoops out the contents, she recoils for an instant as the stench of vomit and stale alcohol assaults her nostrils, then taking a deep breath begins to breath her own life back into Rowena's. With each breath she looks around her expectantly for the long anticipated help. It seems like hours have passed and no one has come to her aid. She has to rub at tears that blind her before she bangs on Rowena's chest again. At no time does she think of herself, she is focused only on saving a life. Suddenly the unresponsive woman is vomiting profusely and begins to thrash about wildly as she fights for breath. Virginia raises herself to her knees and forces the woman to sit up. She retches uncontrollably onto Virginia's dress, before she slowly falls down onto the muddy bank. She is silently crying and tears wash down her face like a torrent. Virginia is about to speak when a scream, filled with inexplicable tortured pain is torn from the woman, whose name she does not even know. The scream sends a chill through Virginia.

“Everything is going to be alright. The ambulance should be here soon.” She says reassuringly.

Rowena's eyes widen and fear is evident within them and she shakes her head vigorously. The chain rattles with her every movement and Virginia can't stand it any longer and tries to untie the knot, but the woman pulls away. Her hair is covered in reeds and vomit is still evident on her lips. Virginia tries to imagine the sight they must both look.

“No, please, please cancel the ambulance,” it is a struggle for her to speak.

“But...” Virginia begins.

“Please, for Jonathan, the shame.”

They stare gazing into each other's eyes like lovers until Virginia's finally register understanding. My God, it's his wife. Rowena's eyes plead. They are heavy lidded from the water and alcohol. Virginia sits silent and then jumps up and races to the house. She stops abruptly at the back door. Rosemary is sitting at the kitchen table reading what seems to be a bible. She turns and stares appalled at Virginia.

“You are dripping onto the floor. I cleaned that this morning, and Rector Byrnes won't be pleased.”

For a second there is silence as Virginia tries to understand what is happening here.

“Did you phone the ambulance?” she asks.

Rosemary turns back to her book.

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness” she then looks up at Virginia.

“Is she dead? I was in shock. I forgot to phone them. I expect she’s dead now. God punishes you see.”

Virginia swallows, she feels sick. This woman is crazy. She walks slowly into the kitchen like a stalker and grabs the book from Rosemary, who looks horrified as it is thrown across the room landing with a thud against the fridge.

“You bitch, you fucking religious freak. She could have died, we both could and you are sitting here reading the bible.”

“How dare you,” Rosemary stands up indignant. Virginia walks towards her and fear enters Rosemary’s eyes.

“How dare I? Get out of this house now before I throw you out, and keep your mouth shut about what went on here today. Believe me, God will not protect you from me.”

“I’m the housekeeper here, you are the one who should leave.” Rosemary replies bravely, although she does not feel it.

“You really believe the Rector will want you here after you left his wife to drown herself?? I don’t think so. Now get out.”

Rosemary is helpless and feels herself hovering on the brink of panic.

“I didn’t know what to do, I was shocked. I have a nervous disposition and these things unsettle me. Mrs Byrnes odd behaviour has disturbed the whole village. I cannot afford to lose my job because she keeps frightening people with her mad actions.”

Virginia doesn’t believe her for a minute but wants her out of the house. Quickly she checks the window to make sure Rowena is still sitting by the bank.

“Leave now and I will say nothing, where is the Rector?” She throws what she presumes is Rosemary’s bag towards her. For a second there is a slight hesitation before Rosemary retrieves it from the floor. Her face is grim. The anathema lives on then, she thinks cruelly. Surely this repulsive woman could see for such immorality to exist in the home of God was agonising for the rector? It is then she feels as though a noose had been slung around her neck and is slowly being pulled. Her throat constricts and the pupils of her eyes dilate. She tries to open her mouth to speak but nothing happens. She panics wildly as she realises she is in the same room as Rowena’s lover. Vomit rises in her stomach and threatens to pour forth in the rector’s kitchen. Beads of perspiration appear on her upper lip and forehead and her heart beats rapidly. She must say something for his sake.

“Do not be deceived, homosexual offenders will never enter the kingdom of God.”

Virginia checks again on Rowena who is lying still on the side of the river.

“Thanks, I’ll bear that one in mind. Where is the Rector? He ought to be contacted.”

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” she threw the remark stupidly and Virginia just glares at her before she turns towards the back door.

“No, but you’re bloody mad.”

She ran back to Rowena, her mind in total chaos. Rowena looks up her eyes sorrowful.

“It’s fine. There will be no ambulance. That housekeeper woman didn’t call them.”

She begins to untie the chain when Rowena grasps her hand.

“She hates me,” she says huskily and coughs painfully.

“Seems she hates everyone. She defiantly hates me, I threw her bible across the kitchen.”

Rowena gives a weak smile and Virginia cannot help smiling back.

Slowly and with much effort she manages to get her back to the house. She is extremely frail and Virginia struggles to climb the stairs with her. Rowena allows her to wash her like a mother might a child. Neither seems to feel embarrassment at Rowena’s semi nakedness. Virginia leaves her sitting on a cane chair in the bathroom while she searches for the bedroom. Instinctively she recoils from the combination of odours that hit her senses as she opens the door of Rowena’s room. The curtains are drawn and she pulls them open and stares in dismay at the disarray. Two empty bottles of wine sit on the floor by the unmade bed. Virginia wrinkles her nose at the stale sweat and unwashed body smell that emanates from it. On the cabinet by the bed is a bottle of painkillers and a half a bottle of brandy. She puts the pills into the pocket of her dress and leaves the room. The other bedroom is cleaner and she knows immediately Jonathan Byrnes sleeps there. She pulls the drapes and prepares the bed. Ten minutes later she has Rowena lying comfortably.

“Try to sleep. I will stay until your husband comes home. Do you know where he is?”

“A conference in London. I’m sorry for what you had to do I panicked again you see.”

Virginia sits on the floor by the bed, her hair still wet and tangled with weeds. Her dress hangs outside in the sunshine and she wears a grey flannel-towelling robe that she found in the bathroom. It has a masculine smell about it and she presumes it is Jonathan’s. The roughness of it against her naked skin strangely excites but disturbs her at the same time. She is desperate for a shower but is afraid to leave Rowena.

“Panicked?” she asks, “Because you were left alone?”

Rowena shakes her head. Her eyes are red and sore and she fights to keep them open. Virginia lowers her head.

“Why did you do it?” she asks quietly, certain it will give her the answer she has needed for over two years.

Rowena doesn’t respond and Virginia watches as tears like gentle snowdrops drift down her pale face

“I don’t know you.” Rowena says after a silence.

Virginia shifts her legs and rubs her feet.

“Virginia Spencer. My husband and I moved her just a few weeks ago. We bought Starkfield House. My son hanged himself and I don’t know why”

Rowena suddenly reaches out a thin hand and Virginia not understanding what she needs stands up and instinctively takes it into her own.

“Please don’t tell anyone what happened.” She implores and Virginia strokes her hand gently in reassurance. She sits down again and Rowena falls back onto the pillows.

Rowena wants to tell her why she tried to kill herself today but of course she can’t. Her eyes are heavy and she feels sleep overtaking her. She jumps from her sleep state at Virginia’s voice.

“I don’t understand... That woman, your housekeeper, she did nothing. I screamed at her to get help but she didn’t do anything. She quoted a weird bible verse to me.”

Rowena closes her eyes.

“What did she say?”

“I can’t recall it all, but it was about God punishing, and stuff about homosexuals.”

Rowena cringes but she is unable to answer for sleep overtakes her. Virginia watches her for a time and then leaves. Downstairs she makes tea and wanders from room to room. She wonders if the rector will be much longer. The thought of a hot soothing bath is very enticing but she couldn’t possibly have one here. She finds herself almost inexplicably drawn to the piano that sits in the lounge. It is dust free and she imagines it is used a lot. It creaks as she lifts the lid. Her well-trained fingers travel across the keys and she winces for it is severely out of tune. She closes it quietly. It is growing dark now and she ought to contact Robert. She decides to use her mobile and it is then she realises that her bag must still be in the garden. She opens the back door and a security light snaps on startling her. The bag is just by the gate and she quickly retrieves it. Jonathan enters the kitchen from another door as she rushes back in and they both freeze at the sight of the other. She is insensible at seeing him and stupidly thinks how unappealing he looks in a suit. He stares transfixed at the woman that has so captivated him as she hovers like some ghostly figure cloaked in his own dressing gown. He then sees her hair is damp and matted.

“My dress,” she says, for she can think of nothing else to say and again goes into the garden. She feels her heart as it pounds against her chest. Why hadn’t she got dressed? What is she going to say? He seems to be in exactly the same place when she returns. She closes the back door slowly and without facing him she says softly.

“Your wife tried to kill herself this afternoon.” She hears a gasp and turns. He is sitting on a kitchen chair.

“I came to return your glasses and saw her wading into the river. She used the chain that moors your boat to weigh herself down.”

He does not speak but lets out an agonising sob that chills her bones and buries his head in his hands.

“She is sleeping now. I put her in your room, I hope that is alright.”

He nods and she knows he is fighting to gain control.

“You saved her?” he asks in disbelief.

“Yes. Her reason was that she panicked but wouldn’t elaborate further.”

She pulls the cord of the towelling robe tighter and instantly a fleeting image of Edward with the cord around his neck sweeps through her mind. God, she needs a cigarette.

“She begged me not to call an ambulance so I didn’t. She has been very sick so I am sure she will be all right.”

She begins to feel like an intruder and is becoming increasingly uncomfortable standing in front of him in his own dressing gown. She walks past him to the hallway.

“My dress is dry. I’ll get out of your robe.”

He simply nods. She quickly disappears upstairs. Once washed and dressed she goes back to the kitchen. She notices immediately he has also changed, and is wearing a loose grey jumper over a pair of well-worn jeans.

“I checked on her and she is sleeping peacefully,” he says filling the kettle. It is an effort not to look at her but he finds he can’t, at least not at the moment. The sight of her in his robe had created a colourful splash of emotions disturbing him intensely.

“I’d appreciate it if you would tell me what happened. I will drive you home.”

He forces himself to face her and the pain in his eyes reflect her own and she realises he has wrestled with terrible anguish also.

“I must phone Robert,”

He looks concerned.



“Your housekeeper was here and she might tell people what happened especially after I threw her bible across the kitchen.”

She tells Robert that that the Rector’s wife is feeling unwell and she is going to stay with her until he returns and assures him that the rector will probably offer to take her home. Robert is not concerned and tells her he is playing a mean game of scrabble with Seth.

Over coffee she tells Jonathan the whole story. His expression never changes. Her coffee is untouched and cold by the time she has finished. He seems unbelieving, as though she has fabricated the story.

He stands up suddenly his leg colliding with the table and her coffee cup spills over, they both watch as the brown liquid glides gracefully across the table and hovers for a second before tumbling like a waterfall to the floor. He grabs some kitchen towel and wipes it without a word.

“I should take you home,” he says as a father might to a child, and she is feeling incredibly sensitive at the hands of this man.

She stands up and then quickly remembering, removes his glasses from her handbag.

“I came to return these. When you didn’t come back...”

“I’ve been too busy.” He answers brusquely.

She feels she is being dismissed and walks to the door.

“I don’t know the way home through the village but if you direct me I will find the house.”

Her hand is on the door handle and she is trembling, she believes with anger, but is not sure.

“No, I will walk you. There are no streetlights and it is easy to get lost if you don’t know your way. I have locked the bedroom but Rowena will sleep, she always does.”

Virginia curiously wonders what he means. Rowena always sleeps after she tries to kill herself? Surely he can’t mean that. She is appreciative he has offered to walk with her, for though she sounded distinctly calm about travelling back alone it was far from what she was feeling. Her sandals, caked in mud, sit forlornly on the back step and she slaps them against the wall to shift the dirt. It is chilly now and she shivers. The smell of stale vomit where Rowena had been sick on her rises to her nostrils occasionally. She wonders how she will explain all this to Robert. She suddenly feels a rough warmth around her neck and shoulders and again the musty masculine smell. She envelops herself in the warmth that just a few seconds ago belonged to him.

“You’re cold,” is all he says as he wraps his jumper around her. They walk for a time in silence, and she imagined they would hurry but they stroll casually. The sky is clear and she looks at the stars, a mass of bright light.

“So many,” she murmurs, more to herself than him.

He stops and looks upward to a black canvas, haphazardly broken into shards of brilliant white, a shape here, a figure there.

“I used to know all their names when I was a student,” he says.

“Where was that?” she is relieved the silence has been broken.

“Oxford. I was raised on the outskirts.”

She agonises whether to tell him about Edward and how he had been accepted at Oxford before his death but she wavers as again the memories that constantly reside in her mind take precedence. Should she ask to see him again? It is he who takes the decision from her. It quickly comes to her attention that they are standing

outside her gate. It seems like they have walked such a short time. Have they always been this close?

“Can we meet tomorrow? I should be free about two. I will wait for you at the bench in the cemetery.” he asks the question with such intensity that she fears she dare not refuse although she knows she wont. She simply nods and it is only as she closes the gate that she realises she is still wearing the jumper.

“Here,” she hands it to him.

For the first time that evening he smiles.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” He says and begins to walk back.

She walks quickly to the house. She is not used to village life and knows only the lurking dangers of London.

The front door opens before she reaches it and Robert stands grinning on the doorstep.

“So you have had an eventful day,” he comments as she passes him. She looks at him sharply.

“What do you mean?” she asks cautiously, although she desperately wants to share everything with him.

He wrinkles his nose in distaste and looks perplexed at her dress.

“Are you alright? I thought it was the rector’s wife that was unwell.”

She looks at the dark stain, a blot on the landscape. Her life seems to be full of stains; dark colourful blots on the landscape of her life.

She rushes upstairs and Robert follows her the smell of his pipe tobacco makes her feel violently sick.

He tells her that Seth has been round and they played scrabble, he is amazed that Seth has never played before. He looks forward to teaching him. He seems happy to have a friend, or is it a replacement son? Virginia wonders.

“I think I’ll have a bath before bed.” She says and he is easily dismissed. She lays contentedly in the hot water, and wonders about the lives of Jonathan and Rowena Byrnes.

Robert whistles as he makes his Horlicks. Virginia is socialising again, almost a whole day at the Rector’s. Maybe this hate of God may be overcome if she forms a friendship with his wife, and now his own attachment with Seth, well things couldn’t be better. At last it seem like they have turned the corner and there is light at the end of the tunnel. He strolls upstairs with his drink. Everything is going to be as right as rain now, he is certain. Always look on the bright side of life and things get better.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Journal Entry:*

*I don't think I shall sleep tonight, although I am weary enough. I am not certain I can sleep beside Rowena, not after all this time. I did contemplate spending the night in her room but I cannot, for it breathes within its walls what Rowena has become. I feel happier sitting next to her in the cosy armchair that I have carried from downstairs. I can doze between watching her. I wish I could, this very instant, while the desire is strong, do likewise as she had this afternoon and wade easily into the dark, miserable, cold stream. My stomach gurgles with hunger but I feel I cannot accommodate it for I am sure I would retch at the sight of food. Virginia's words echo in my head, "I threw her bible across the kitchen." If Rosemary was in the house why did she not try to rescue Rowena? It was evident that the police and ambulance services hadn't been called. What was Rosemary doing? Surely she had seen Virginia struggling to save Rowena. I blame myself, of course. I had not needed to attend the conference; in fact I hadn't even wanted to. If I desired anything at all it was to escape Rowena. I feel strangely stunned, as I never imagined she would ever try to do this. Virginia said that Rowena had panicked. The demons had attacked her again. Sometimes I want to kill us both so we can be free of this agony, this falseness. We live a life of delusion, believing in a great master plan that only our heavenly father understands. What children we are to follow such mumbo jumbo. How easy the thoughts come of abandoning God but then, oh how difficult is the deed? How remarkable to imagine the freedom of individuality again, and making your own life changing decisions. The wonderment of making an error and knowing it is yours. At last to be an adult without God holding your hand. I feel our lives have become like someone's old house, empty and dilapidated. Our skin old and wrinkled like worn peeling wallpaper and all because of him. If we could just let him go, say our goodbyes to a good but now useless friend. I regret almost begging Virginia to meet me tomorrow, but if I am unable to ease my pain I can at least give her some clarity as to why Rowena was compelled to do what she did. But maybe I also want her pity. To share my grief would perhaps alarm her, because there are times I feel like a volcano that will erupt and such poisonous venom will pour forth that I am unsure if even I am strong enough to cope. Poor Virginia, she looked more fragile and vulnerable than Rowena. What must go through her mind? Not once did she ask why? I owe it to her to tell the truth. I have to tell myself constantly that Virginia is a married woman that nothing can or even should come of this. But she feels it as I do. There is a fire between us and it excites me.*

*Is this what Rowena experienced with Charley? It makes me shudder. Are we heading for the ultimate emotional catastrophe?*

Rowena murmurs his name softly and he quickly closes the journal and leans towards her. The hand he takes is cold and clammy and he gently lays it under the covers and lays his upon it.

"I'm sorry" she whispers hoarsely and coughs.

He lifts her carefully and hands her a glass of water that she sips from, then with little energy falls back onto the pillows.

He suggests calling their Doctor, but she refuses.

"I just need to rest. Do you forgive me?" he wipes the tears from her cheeks and takes her hand kissing it with the passion of a lover, but it isn't a lovers kiss. It is a kiss filled with pain and desperation to ease the suffering of another.

"You know I do."

She smiles weakly with gratitude.

"The woman, did you see her?"

He nods. He does not want to discuss Virginia with her. He assures her the woman will be discreet.

She relaxes again and allows her eyes to close, then suddenly she snaps them open and stares wide eyed at him.

"Rosemary was here the whole time and she didn't do anything. She quoted a verse from the Bible about homosexuals to that woman. Rosemary knows, Jonathan. I always suspected she did. I found her reading something in your office the other day. You do realise she is quite mad?"

He remembers immediately the day she had found him sleeping in the study. He must have left his Journal out.

"Promise me you will never do this again. I will never go away and leave you again. But you must promise me."

She nods.

"I don't want Rosemary here."

He sighs. He will need to speak to Rosemary. He knows she needs the money, but he also knows he needs her for he cannot cope alone.

"You must make her see she has misunderstood?"

"Just sleep now, everything will be fine," he assures, all the while uncertain if it would be.

"What was the woman's name again?" she asked, her voice slurring.

"Virginia," the name tasted sweet on his tongue.

"Poor woman,"

He stares at her puzzled and waits for her explanation.

Finally she sleeps again and he opens the journal.

*Journal Entry:*

*I know her pain. It sears like a knife through her heart. Virginia's son hanged himself and I now understand why she hates God with such intensity. I hope she will confide in me and tell me herself. Oh, I have found my kindred soul, someone who knows what it is to carry a burden that you cannot relieve yourself of, a guilt that lies heavy as stone on your heart. Like me, she has probably asked God for answers and he has rejected all requests. So, she hates me too for I am his servant, but the strength of her hatred for me cannot be stronger than my own.*

Tired himself now, he closes the journal and returns it to his study where he locks it in the desk drawer before settling back in his chair beside the bed, where within a short time he falls asleep. Just before dawn, several hours later, Rowena awakes. The room is still dark and she can see the shady outline of Jonathan's body, as he lays slumped in the armchair. There is no chink of light coming through the curtain but she knows it will soon. It is the first morning in many years that she has awoken feeling that perhaps there is a purpose in her survival after all. She thinks again of the woman, Virginia, and wonders what she has to live for. How does she endure the pain and exist? It is then it occurs to her that she has to go on living, like Virginia. If

she dies, she will probably linger between heaven and hell but if she lives, no matter how grimly that may be, it is better than facing her fate sooner than she needs to. Does Virginia not suffer at the darkness of her son's death? The sin of suicide holds no forgiveness. Rowena had nothing to lose for her sins are already unpardonable. Her thoughts then drift to Rosemary and she flirts with the idea of sacking her but decides she cannot handle it without panicking wildly and decides to leave it with Jonathan, whom she now gazes at with warm affection and wishes with all her heart she could love him with the passion he deserves but she is incapable. It is feeling quite hot already and she throws back the covers and turns onto her side in an attempt to capture another hour's sleep. But instead she lays peaceful and calm, like a ship travelling on gentle waters and floats back to the past, before Charley, before Jonathan, before life really became life and was just a frivolity to be enjoyed. The strong Irish resonant tones sprang forth from her mother's lips.

"Well, thanks be to Jesus. Am I not always right? Does he not always answer our prayers?"

Rowena smells the aroma of freshly baked bread and stares at the newly cooked loaf sitting on the kitchen table. It was a small kitchen and the table took up most of the room, but it was where they spent the best part of their days.

But this time, in Rowena's travel ship memory the water was still calm and vividly blue that it would be possible to drown in it's beauty and best of all her mother was talking of her. Waving a letter for all to see, they all silently agreed how good God was, although as yet Rowena was not sure what he had done this time. But she loved God; he had always been part of her life. Rowena senses that she conceived God the minute she herself was impregnated within her mother's womb.

"Rowena, the Lord has seen fit to send you to Oxford and your uncle Milas has offered to pay for all you need. He wants to do it for he says education is everything and Oxford is the best."

Oh, and how it was. So exciting, free as the wind to contemplate Joyce, Woolf, and Henry James with such tenacity and then to party with such abandonment. To walk through Oxford and marvel at it's history and knowledge, sit on the lawns of the University and feel a tingle of exhilaration at the liveliness knowing centuries before scholars had walked the same halls. Then, there had been Jonathan speaking with such force, quoting verse after verse from the bible, commentating upon it, calling forth opinions. So she did, and they talked into the night and drank cheap wine. Within three months they were engaged and by the time he graduated their wedding was booked. Rowena didn't graduate instead she married a Rector that was the highest mountain she could have attained. Strange, she thought, looking at him now. How so many years ago I achieved everyone's dream but my own. As she drifts back to sleep she decides she must paint again.

\* \* \*

Rosemary paces her house like a caged animal, her rage snarling from her tense body like a wild lion.

There is nowhere to release her pent up fury. It is nearly two in the morning before she finally calms down. It is then she sits like a sulky child, tears streaming down her face as she looks through the photos and mementos she has of Jonathan Byrnes. She moans, rocking back and forth on her chair as she prays fervently for him, begs the lord to release him from the evil presence of Rowena, and now this vile creature that dares to brazenly visit when she knows the rector is away. An image of the two women naked together unwillingly enters her mind and she has to rush to the

toilet where she vomits profusely in her disgust. There must be someone she could inform of this depravity, but who? If she exposes to the highest church authority what will happen to the rector? After all he is her main concern in all of this. The village must never know. People would surely talk and blame him. What could have possessed her? They would ask and then their eyes would fall accusingly on him. Feeling weighed down with a burden far too heavy for her shoulders, she stumbles upstairs to the bedroom. Her initial concern is whether she should go to the house tomorrow. Perhaps she will phone, say she is sick. There is nothing for her to fear really. The other woman would have left by the time he arrived home, for surely she wouldn't want him to discover her. He will probably think Rowena has drunk too much. How can they subject him to this when they know how tortured he is? Do these evil creatures have no control over their disgraceful physical urges? She cleans her teeth with the barest interest and slaps a flannel across her face. Because of Rowena she will need a sleeping pill, else she will never get any rest. She removes the bottle from the bedside drawer and takes one. She knows from experience it will take about twenty minutes to take effect and decides to try and read for a while to take her mind off the day. The Bible cries out to her but she ignores it for she knows to read it will only make her think of them and she doesn't want to. Besides, she doesn't need to read her bible to recognise the sins of Rowena Byrnes. The sin of adultery, coupled with its depraved form must make her the sinner of all sinners. She quickly tucks herself under the covers and welcomes Lucy to join her with a gentle encouraging pat on the bed and within an instant she is purring beside her. She rests her head against the pillow and tries to relax. She had read somewhere that Lavender is relaxing and she removes the tiny lavender pillow from the bedside drawer and lays it beside her. She has not used it before, but has never been this upset at night except when Lucy went missing. The book is boring her slightly but someone at church recommended the writer so she thought she would try one novel at least. She reads for ten minutes, her mind disinterested. The characters are dull and lifeless and she can't seem to get her teeth into this one as she does with her favourite writer. Her head that rests serenely on the pillow snaps up suddenly and her eyes shine brilliantly as though she has suddenly been possessed. More calmly she lays back and rereads the sentence that had evoked such a reaction.

"Rosie read aloud to herself with alarming calmness, the Internet printout she now held in her hands.

"Hemlock is not an uncommon plant in this country and can be found in neglected meadows, and by streams in most parts of England and when properly administered in minute doses is an excellent alternative medicine."

Rosemary quickly skips the next bit, quickly skimming the page she finds the piece she needs and again reads it but much slower this time.

"The drug has to be given with care as poisoning may result. In poisonous doses it produces complete paralysis with loss of speech, the respiratory function is at first depressed and ultimately ceases altogether and death results from asphyxia."

Rosemary jumps from the bed, and almost trips over her slippers in her rush to get a dictionary from downstairs where she can discover what asphyxia means. She gasps in shock and stares at the word for some time, her mind numb. Slowly she returns to her bed and again rereads the same passages. Finally she puts the novel to one side and picks up her bible. She finds the verse in just a few seconds and reads Paul's instructions.

“Brother if someone is overtaken in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.”

She holds the bible to her breast. She realises the novel has been sent from God. Even the main character has a similar name to hers, and she only read it tonight to wait for the pill to take effect. The truth is she was becoming quite bored with it and probably would have given up on it but God had wanted her to read on, she knows that now. It is her duty to restore those who have been overtaken by sin. What choice does she have? She will be helping Rowena succeed, where today she had failed. The Rector will be restored, happy and relaxed again. The Church elders will never know and Jonathan will never have to fear giving up his devotion to God. The village will be forever ignorant, for she knows if something isn't done soon then everyone will soon discover the awful truth. How all their lives could change in an instant. In that moment it would have been quite apparent to an outsider that it was Rosemary Peterson that needed help, but sadly as the years had passed no one had truly noticed the slow decline of her mental health. Tomorrow, she decides, she will go into Hawksworth and look in that weird shop that sells witches books and tarot cards. It is sure to have a book on herbs, and then she just needs to search for the hemlock and find a way of preparing it. A nice walnut cake with lots of almonds should cover the taste, she thinks. She smiles, proud of her brilliant idea.

Opening the novel she continues to read on, for now she needs to know what happens to the intended victim. Five minutes later she is asleep, her glasses hang lopsided and a pale pink tongue protrudes grotesquely from her open mouth. A small dribble escapes and flows down her chin. A small leather bible is embraced in the crook of her arm and the flowing liquid lands softly onto it. It is a distorted still life of a dangerously unbalanced woman seriously considering murder

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Robert in a subtle and unassuming way is becoming immersed in village life. Again he has acquired habits, which although different from his old ones, comfort him. There is something safe about routine it makes him feel secure and settled. The tragedy that befell him is now covered with earthly habits. Regular tedious tasks have encouragingly engaged his mind to gently conceal the pain that would destroy him if he allowed the damaging thoughts to enter his mind. Robert has chosen life, albeit an empty one, without Edward, rather than a slow death that deep grieving brings. Fortunately he is not a deep thinker and many would say that was his saving grace. Robert thinks when there is a need to do so, as is the way with most men. He doesn't torture himself as Virginia does, or brood on what could have been. He simply, to her frustration, accepts what is. Three days a week he leaves the house in his best suit for the office in London and enjoys the train journey. He finds time to read the newspaper and occasionally a book. He arrives back at the station at six in the afternoon and walks straight to Jessica's house, where they share tea and scones and discuss numerous things. He practically knows her life story, and she his. He told her about Edward and felt liberated. They talk about Opera and sometimes she will have a CD playing when he arrives. At 6:45 precisely he leaves her house and walks home. She told him about a bridge club in Woodfield and this evening is the next meeting. He has promised to collect Jessica on the way. As he works in the greenhouse with Seth, he wonders if he ought to tell Virginia about Jessica. He knows he should have told her at the beginning, but they are purely friends and he doesn't want Virginia to start getting silly ideas. If he tells her that Jessica is coming to the bridge evening it may cause another upset. He would take Virginia, but she hates bridge.

"Enjoyed that game last night," Seth says suddenly. They had been silent for sometime, both concentrating on separating seedlings.

Robert looks up. Seth's face is animated. How odd, thinks Robert, to live your whole life and never play scrabble. In a small way he has enhanced Seth's life and is moved by his gratitude.

"We must play again. I shall teach you chess."

"I can play chess," Seth laughs, "Used to play with my dad. He was better than me. I wouldn't mind learning backgammon if you know how to play?"

Robert nods but feels slight discomfort. Edward used to love backgammon. He would often request a game and Robert is uncertain how he will now feel playing with someone else. Would that be betraying Edward?

"These are coming on splendidly aren't they?" he indicates the pot plants they had cultivated for the fete and so avoids answering.

"Geraniums always sell first, then the petunia's" Seth laughs. "It will be nice having you on the stall because you're interested in plants too, in the past it has just been me. Jessica said we are having a punch and Judy show this year to try and attract more people from the other villages. We've always had good weather in the past. I hope you enjoy being part of it. It is great fun."

Robert tries to imagine the village green, now dull and barren, a bright kaleidoscope of colours, with stalls of face painting, home baked cakes and pies, flowers and plants, bric-a-brac and the puppet show centre stage. The villagers had been donating their unwanted novels so there could also be a bookstall. James Trueman has organised the coconut shy, and hired a bouncy castle, and amazingly Jessica's shed was almost full with donations for the tom bola. He only wished



Virginia would attempt to get involved. Last night she had kept him awake with her restlessness and he arose quietly allowing her to sleep in. Celia was cleaning now, so no doubt she was up. He decides he should go and see her and explain about his visits to Jessica for he realises the longer they continue the more suspicious they may seem. It is hot in the greenhouse and Seth removes his oat coloured jumper, revealing a fashionable grey sweatshirt beneath and Robert wonders if Seth would like a girlfriend. For apart from his leg, he wasn't totally unappealing, although how a woman viewed him, Robert couldn't imagine.

"Come to the house on Thursday, I will teach you Backgammon," he says almost involuntary but without the usual exuberance he would feel at sharing such an activity.

Seth wipes the sweat from his forehead.

"Thanks, that will be great."

It is hot and quiet in the greenhouse apart from the tinny sound of Robert's small radio that is playing Greigs piano concerto. Seth is beginning to enjoy this music now, although at first it grated on his nerves and he ached to change the tuner to something more jolly but now he is becoming accustomed to it and even finds he has his favourite pieces. Perhaps one day he will ask Robert if he has some CD's he can borrow. Neither sees nor hears the woman approaching and both are startled when she raps her knuckles on the glass. Seth recognises her immediately, and blushes. The concerto is building up to a crescendo and Seth feels himself carried along with the music and the shudder that creeps through his whole body, he attributes to the music rather than the woman although he knows it is her. There is something abstruse about her that unnerves him. Like prescience, he knew they would meet again and here she was. Robert goes to open the door and Seth wishes he wouldn't. Charley had lain awake all night planning this exact moment. She knows word for word what she is going to say to Seth Martin. Brock had spent his last hours with her discussing this one thing, how to find Rowena? Charley no longer cared if Rowena wanted to be found. Confidently she had driven into the village of Millbridge and through the eyes of an artist saw a subtle colourful blend of blues intermingling with greens. A warm, gentle atmospheric landscape tainted, only for her, by a church steeple that is evident to the eye as you drive across the bridge and follows you like the moon as you venture into the village itself. The first port of call was to be the post office, where, of course, she imagined an elderly lady, who had been there for years, would smile and pleasantly direct her to Seth Martin's house. She has chosen to wear a wide boater hat and large sunglasses just in case someone may recognise her from her previous visit. After driving around the village for ten minutes she finds a small side street and parks her car. After taking a deep breath she fights to control the mild panic that threatens to become major if she pays it too much attention. Several women are sitting on benches at the entrance to the post office and she contemplates whether to ask them about Seth. As she draws near they cease talking and she feels like an intruder. She tries to picture how she must look through their eyes. Much to her annoyance she feels herself blushing and rushes past the women and into the post office where to her dismay there is no old lady as she had stupidly imagined.

"Do you need any help there madam?" a deep voice asks from the recesses of the tiny store.

It has a sense of importance explicit in the tone, someone who really isn't of great consequence in the scheme of life but probably highly regarded in a small village.

"I need directions to the home of Seth Martin"

"And may I ask who I have the pleasure of speaking with?" James answered feeling the woman rude.

At that precise second the door opens to the sound of an old fashioned bell that Charley couldn't recall hearing since a child.

Celia Miles, with all eyes on her, cautiously enters the shop.

"James," she acknowledges

Charley almost throws herself between them.

"Excuse me could you tell me where I can find Mr. Seth Martin? You see I need someone desperately to work on my garden. I know he doesn't travel out of the village but I will pay him well." She realises she is rambling. She looks at the woman as appealingly as she can.

Celia smiles, only too happy to help.

"Seth would be grateful for the work, I am sure. I can assure you he is a hard worker too. He is at Starkfield House working in the garden. I just need to get some breadcrumbs for the meatloaf and you can walk back with me. I'm the housekeeper there." The last words were said with immense pride.

"Celia, you don't know the woman." James says quietly.

She scoffs.

"Oh for goodness sake, does she look like a robber to you. Now, give me those breadcrumbs and we'll be off."

Charley cannot resist giving her a friendly wave as she departs.

At Starkfield house Celia leaves her, hovering in the enormous, well planned, ordered garden and points ahead.

"The Greenhouse is right at the bottom. I imagine that's where they are."

Charley is anxious as to who 'they' may be? She stands and stares in awe at the magnificent fusion of colours. The amazing greens blending perfectly with the pinks of roses, and reds of numerous fuchsias' Celia smiles with such pride, that one would think the house and garden belongs to her.

"It's beautiful isn't it? They had it landscaped before they moved in. It was a shame for Seth because he was hoping to get the work. Still everything works out and he does the gardening now for as you can see Mr. Spencer could never have done all this alone. Seth is an excellent worker and won't let you down."

Charley feels guilty. She is here on false pretences and would have turned back had Celia not encouraged her with a gentle push.

"Off you go, else you will miss him."

Charley sees the greenhouse in the distance and can distinguish shadowy figures through the misty blur of the sun. She pauses and lifts her hand to shield her eyes in an effort to focus more clearly on them. She wavers and considers turning back. What if the other man is the Rector? There is no conceivable way she can face him. Then she sharply reprimands herself for being so silly. It is probably the owner of the house and most unlikely to be the Reverend of the parish, even so as she edges closer she cannot help but strain to see if he is wearing a dog collar, or any other such garb, that would expose him as the man she fears. It is quite obvious that they are totally immersed in what they are doing and she feels a deep calm when her unrealistic dread is revealed as being exactly that. The man in the greenhouse she

knows is not Rowena's husband. After the initial shock of her appearance, they both emerge and she sees vigilance in the eyes of Seth Martin and warmth in the other as he extends his hand. Seth stands behind the man as if protected by him.

"Robert Spencer. How can I help you?" he assumes immediately she is another neighbour. He cannot help notice her odd style of dress, a large oversized olive green jumper, far too hot for the weather, coupled with, what Robert would describe later to Virginia, as a hippy sort of skirt.

"All crinkly and colourful"

She wears numerous bangles that rattle irritatingly every time she moves. The large boater hat and sunglasses hide much of her face and he cannot really see if she is attractive, although she has a pleasant smile and amiable nature. She takes his hand with a rattle, and he curiously wonders why she needs to wear so many bracelets when one would have adorned her slim wrist beautifully. There is nervousness about her and he tries not to look at her hands that she clasps tightly together following their handshake. They are devoid of rings and not well cared for which he finds surprising for a woman.

"Hello, again," she says looking beyond him to Seth, and Robert inclines his head curiously at Seth. So she had come to see him.

Seth nods uncomfortably.

"The thing is I am in desperate need of a gardener and I heard that Mr Martin was very good and I was wondering if he would like the work?"

Robert sees Celia gesticulating to him from the house; her hand to her ear indicating there is a phone call for him.

"Would you excuse me, I do believe I am being beckoned."

They all look to Celia. Robert shakes hands with Charley again and quickly walks towards the house.

"I'm sorry, I can't do your garden I have a lot of work at the moment. Sorry." Seth says quickly to the point of being almost incoherent.

Charley senses his discomfort but doesn't understand it. He begins to walk back into the greenhouse.

"Please," she pleads. "I need to ask you something. I don't need a gardener at all, I am afraid I lied and am sorry for that." He looks at her now with suspicion in his eyes. This is about the Rector and his wife, he is certain of that. She was very interested in them in the pub.

"I don't know what you want but you have come to the wrong person. If you wanted information about anyone in the village you should have been more honest." He turns and begins to walk away from her.

"Please," she begs and begins to cry, "I can't tell the truth, no one would understand. I just need to know, please, is Rowena Byrnes well?"

His eyes narrow and he does not look like the Seth everyone knows.

"Why don't you visit and find out for yourself?"

"Because I can't. I dare not go there. Please don't ask more, just trust me. Is she well?"

He doesn't understand. Anyone can go to the rectory. Is this woman the reason for Rowena's illness? Did she cause it in some way?

"I don't know anymore than anyone else in the village. Sometimes she is poorly and cannot get out. People say its hormone problems, I don't know." He hesitates for a moment.

"Are you a friend?"

She nods. "Of course, would an enemy ask after her health?"

He looks thoughtful.

"Then, perhaps you should visit, because between you and me, and this is strictly between you and me because no one else knows, and if they do then they are keeping quiet but I don't believe it, not in this village, people talk you see. If this gets out I'll know it was you. But in my opinion, and it's only that, it would help her a great deal if perhaps the rector disposed of less wine and brandy bottles and she saw one of those counsellors. If you're a real friend talk to him but bearing in mind you have to forget I ever told you that. Some people like to be left in peace with their sufferings Mrs...."

She was subdued and her answer was slow and slurred, while her mind was elsewhere.

"It's Charley," she ignores his surprised look and does not enlarge further.

"I would also appreciate it very much if you did not mention to anyone my name."

He just nods. Seth is not really interested in this woman, or Rowena Byrnes in truth. Seth is a simple man who just gets on with life. He sees all the problems in the village but never makes them his business, no more than he intends to do with this woman.

She nods gratefully and forces a smile that doesn't quite materialise.

"Thank you," she says so softly he barely hears her. He watches as she walks back towards the house and wonders what she will say to Robert. But evidently she didn't stop for Robert comes racing towards Seth with a wide smile on his face.

"They have one more place at the Bridge class tonight, so you are coming my lad."

Seth laughs unbelievably, him playing Bridge, whatever next.

"Strange woman," Robert says putting on his gardening gloves, "she didn't even say goodbye."

He presumes he means the Charley woman and makes no comment.

"Are you taking the work then?" he asks genuinely interested, and quite unaware that in a measured way he had achingly taken possession of Seth as his own son,

"No, too far," Seth answers simply, and Robert asks no questions but simply nods, as men tend to do.

Virginia walks from the house carrying a tray of glasses and a jug of barley water.

"I thought you both might like some refreshments." She says, not with cheerfulness but more matter of fact.

She sets it down on the garden table and Seth looks at the cake, already devouring it in his imagination.

Robert sees this as a perfect opportunity to mention the bridge evening.

"I'm taking Seth to a bridge class this evening. He has never played before and you know how addicted I am. Jessica is keen to go too, I thought it would be nice if we all went this evening, what do you think?"

He knows she will say no, but it saves him explaining his situation with Jessica.

She cuts the cake and hands a piece to Seth.

"Do you mind if I don't Robert? Bridge has never been my thing."

He nods understandingly, and Seth thinks he overdoes it but doesn't understand why.

"No problem. Of course, Bridge has never been your cup of tea. I just thought... but not a problem. As soon as Seth and I have finished here why don't you and I go for a walk? You can show me where you go on your travels."

Her mouth opens and closes but no sound emits from it. She pours tea and with her head down says,

"I had made plans for this afternoon." She tries to sound indifferent, as though it weren't important and the plans could be changed. He would never understand her meeting the rector.

He looks disappointed and she feels guilty.

"Don't change your plans," he says affably.

She reassures him and says she just needs to make a phone call and rearrange things. Quickly she walks into the house.

Seth enjoys the cake and empties his glass in one gulp.

"Back to work," he enthuses and Robert feels warmth for this young man that is beginning to penetrate him more and more, enveloping him in an emotional casing he does not quite understand and he wonders if Seth feels it too.

Virginia rushes into the house, collides with Celia and watches in despair as a crystal vase falls from Celia's hands with a crash.

"It wasn't my fault," protests Celia. "Oh, just look at that."

"It's fine, don't worry. It was my fault. I have an urgent phone call to make. Would you mind clearing it up? I'm sorry."

Appeased, and grateful that she wasn't to be blamed Celia agrees happily.

Virginia closes the lounge door behind her and then takes the telephone as far as she can to the end of the room. Twice she dials and hangs up before it rings. Finally she waits with laboured breath for someone to pick up the phone. A deep sigh escapes her when he answers.

"It's Virginia Spencer" is all she says, her tone emotionless.

There is silence and she waits.

"How are you?" he is stunned to hear her voice, uncertainty immediately settles in. They are meeting in a few hours, why is she phoning now?

"I'm awfully sorry but I can't meet you this afternoon..." She has no time to finish before he interrupts her.

"That's fine. I have lots of work to do today. Please forget it, I was just a bit, well upset yesterday."

He is disappointed and desperate not to let it show. He has been looking forward to seeing her, sharing feelings but realises he has misunderstood and the last thing she needs is to hear his agonies

"I wouldn't want you to waste your afternoon anyway," he says it almost petulantly and he instantly regrets it. She will think him a spoilt child.

Virginia feels her stomach churn. Does he not want to see her now? Is he angry with her?

"I wouldn't have felt it had been wasted," she says softly. "Anyway I am glad you are busy and I haven't put you out. I'll drop by to see your wife sometime soon."

There is an almost imperceptible hesitation before she says "bye".

"Virginia!" it is a plea and he says it before she even moves the receiver from her ear.

"Yes," she holds her breath and looks out of the French windows where bright sunshine dappled the patio.

"I'm sorry, I was abrupt. I would still like to meet and talk if that is acceptable to you?"

She smiles. It is odd to hear a man use such a phrase these days.

“This evening. Would that be convenient? Robert has a bridge class. I could meet you just after six thirty.”

Mentioning Robert in such a way makes her feel as though she is about to embark on a clandestine affair. There really had been no need to mention Robert at all.

Jonathan fleetingly considers the weather and wonders if they may get chilly sitting outside and writes a quick note to remind himself to phone Jessica and ask her to turn on the heating in the church.

Her hand is shaking after replacing the receiver. Her mind goes to Robert and she struggles to remember how many years they will have been married on their next anniversary but she can't. It is over twenty years; she knows that because of Edward's birth. They had tried for two years before she conceived and following Edward's birth she was never able to again. Robert had suggested seeking help but Virginia was content with her only son and had no desire as most women might, to have a daughter. She guesses this year will be their twenty- third anniversary. Is she going slightly mad? Her heart is still racing and she feels the warmth of a blush as blood suffuses her face. She looks at the phone and then the photo next to it of her and Robert taken on holiday two years ago, and shivers when she remembers that the person they are smiling at is Edward. She decides she will not go this evening. There is little point; she has nothing to say to the man and enough of her own problems to handle. Instead she will write a long, overdue letter to Marcus. The decision made, she leaves the study and on hearing Seth's voice in the kitchen instantly replaces her sadness with her mask of happiness, a tool that has become a useful veil in covering her true feelings.

He stands up timidly from where he is sitting at the kitchen table as she enters, although he is not timorous by nature. Seth is not sure how to behave around Mrs. Spencer. Some days she seems Very melancholy and at others her face was so thunderous with anger that he often wondered what had happened but Robert was always cheerful and optimistic at those times. It was a mystery to Seth.

“Please don't get up,” she says and realises it sounds dismissive but isn't meant to.

“We were discussing the fete.” Robert explains, as if he feels an explanation for Seth being in their kitchen is needed.

“So is everyone it seems. Miranda is running a stall for the village nursery. You will be pleased to know I agreed to help, Robert.”

She looks him in the eye, smiles and leaves the room.

Robert says to Seth with a wink. “I think we are slowly getting back, soon life will be a bowl of cherries again.”

Seth has no idea what he means but nods knowingly, and Robert forces a smile while trying to hide the sudden assault that punches him in the chest and clutches at his heart. He does not recognise the assailant but is conscious that his attacks are becoming more frequent. The pain begins to ease as it always does and he wonders what Seth has been talking about in those last few moments.

Jonathan lays down the receiver and looks fleetingly at the time. He debates again whether he should visit Rosemary. She had phoned early that morning, claiming she was unwell, her voice had been hard and unfeeling, but became less hostile after he offered to pay for the lost hours and insisted she rest for several days. He vainly hoped that when she returned all would be forgotten if not forgiven. He

doesn't relish the thought of a visit and he imagines she wouldn't want it either. He refuses to think about Virginia for he knows it will leave him in a turmoil he doesn't understand. He finds Rowena in the lounge reading.

"I have a hospice visit, will you be alright?"

She is still wearing her nightclothes

"If you mean will I be alright today, then yes." Her voice is slurred. Her great intention of struggling though life against all odds has depreciated already. It began well and she would not have touched the drink had it not been for the demons. He begins to walk from the room.

"Jonathan, I am trying. I am living one day at a time the only way I know how. I thought perhaps later I might try and paint." She looks wide-eyed at him for some kind of approval.

He forces a smile.

"I think it would be great if you could. I have a visit this evening, I'll prepare food when I get back this afternoon."

"Rosemary isn't coming is she?" she turns anxiously the book slipping from her hands and she has to grasp the arm of the couch to prevent herself from falling also. He sees her nails are still dirty from the river episode and for the first time in his life feels contempt for her.

"No, she phoned to say she is unwell. I will speak to her in a few days. Why don't you have a bath it will relax you."

She fumbles about on the floor to retrieve the book that she isn't properly reading anyway and before she can reply he has gone. She falls back onto the couch and tries to read again but soon she is asleep.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It has been two years since Rosemary visited Hawskworth and the sight of the bustling town rather alarms her, she fears that the shop she requires may no longer be in existence. A man in a smart pinstriped suit knocks into her and she trips from the pavement into the road.

"Sorry," he mumbles, and she stares bewildered. Her foot is slightly grazed but she has no time to tend to it for people are jostling her from all sides and she realises it was a mistake to come so early. She had hoped by doing so to avoid confronting someone she knew. Instead she had thrown herself headlong into the midst of rush hour, that mysterious time of the day when hundreds of people rush through cities to congregate at stations and stand for the allotted time until their train comes shunting in, where they then sit in the seat that they claim- in their head at least- belongs to them. It is at this moment that a book, newspaper, or even a bulging folder of unfinished work is produced from handbags and briefcases. It is a world unfamiliar to Rosemary who was brought up on a farm and educated by her father, considered by everyone to be a scholar and admired greatly for the distance he travelled daily to educate good Christian boys. There was not a school near enough for Rosemary, so she was taught sewing and cooking by her mother during the day and in the evening her father would tutor her on other subjects. By the time she was seventeen she was ready to court Arnold Peterson, a student of her fathers and within the year they were married. Rosemary never allows herself to dwell on the day he left her for some harlot, nor the day she and her mother discovered her father had left them nothing on his death, except a pile of debts accumulated during the secret years he had led with another woman. Rosemary had no interest in either woman. The only woman she was interested in now was Rowena Byrnes. She had worn a coat too heavy for the time of year and a headscarf in a bid to disguise herself. She knew she looked silly wearing a winter coat and sunglasses. She regrets it now for it is becoming quite hot and she is already perspiring heavily, partly from guilt, which she tries to deny and the fear of being recognised.

The shop is still there and she walks in apprehensively as though entering a witch's cavern. Weird music is playing and a strange smell attacks her nostrils. She has no idea where to look. There are stones and crystals and she cannot help picking one up out of curiosity. She contemplates the oddities about her. Tarot cards, books on performing spells which she removes from the shelf with great fragility and is annoyed to find that they are spells to make someone love you. She replaces the book and turns to find she is facing a shop assistant.

"Are you looking for anything in particular madam?"

The girl is young and wears too much make up. She is chewing gum and Rosemary tries not to show her distaste. She had prepared herself for this and calmly produces a piece of paper from her handbag.

"A gift for my aunt. It's a book on herbal remedies. Now let me see," she looks intently at the paper.

"Yes, here it is, she read somewhere, lord knows where," she laughs, but the girl just smiles and waits.

"Certain natural herbs can help with her chest problems, Hemlock is the one she wants information on. It would be nice to get it for her birthday."

"I'll look for you." Says the over made up assistant indifferently.

As soon as she leaves, Rosemary quickly wipes the sweat from her forehead and wishes desperately she could remove her coat. The shop is very warm and she



is beginning to feel a little light-headed. The girl comes back with several books. She doesn't seem at all alarmed that Rosemary has asked for such a thing

"This one has a large feature on Hemlock, and it is very good on all herbal remedies."

The girl hands it to Rosemary with the page open. Her eyes scan the headings above the herbs,

"History-Description-Medicinal action-Preparations and dosages", it was too much for her to take in.

Rosemary looked up and realised she couldn't see the girl for the perspiration that had run into her eyes.

"Are you alright, you look awfully hot, why don't you remove your coat. I'm so sorry our heating is still on, no one has adjusted it yet."

"I'm fine," she stammers. "How else could my aunt find out how to prepare a herb? I wouldn't want her to do herself any harm."

The girl looks down at her red painted fingernails. She sees a chip in the nail polish and tuts.

She tells Rosemary her aunt could look on the Internet.

"Everything is on there," she says absently trying to repair the damaged nail. Rosemary enquires what is the Internet and the girl looks at her oddly, all interest in her nail forgotten. She sighs, and tells Rosemary to go to the County library and they will help her.

"They will probably print stuff off for you."

"Here in Hawskworth?" Rosemary asks astonished.

"Yeah. Do you want the book then?"

Rosemary knows she has to get out of the shop before she faints.

"Yes and a love spell book too, for..." But she didn't need to explain for the girl doesn't care. They are put into a crisp red bag with the label "Zodiac" printed boldly in black and handed to her. Within seconds she is back in the street where she pulls off her coat and searches for a bench. Her legs are trembling and she feels her breakfast threatening to travel back along her oesophagus, into her throat and spew into the streets of Hawskworth. She forces herself to take deep breaths and lowers her head. It is some time before she feels calm and can introduce a look of repose for onlookers. It is then she begins to look for the library. Similarly to the bookshop, everyone is again terribly helpful. She is calmer now and focused on what she needs. The Internet is very confusing and eventually she asks for help from another borrower.

"Did you want a search engine?" the boy's voice penetrates her. It was so quiet in the library that she could almost hear what other people were whispering about.

She doesn't understand, but nods.

He leans across her and she smells his after-shave, or maybe it isn't after-shave. Do young men wear that now?

"If you tap in what you are looking for you should get some sites, then click like this," he indicates the mouse at her side.

After several tries she finds one site and decides to take all the information from there. Tentatively, not wanting to cause too much attention, she removes a notebook from her handbag and begins to quickly jot down notes.

"Print it, its much easier." The boy says

Before she can stop him he presses a button.

“There are only five pages. You’ll find them up there” He points and she could see the machine printing.

He turns back to his own computer and she realises with rapturous delight that he hadn’t even glanced at the contents. She jumps up, thanks him and walks briskly to the machine to collect her copies. With the same briskness she pays for them at the desk and quickly leaves.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As soon as Robert enters Jessica's familiar home- so familiar in fact it could have been his own- with Seth Martin he feels a sudden protectiveness as if his relationship with her is in some way sacrilegious. He sees it on Jessica's face also and wonders what is going through her mind. However she quickly masks it and becomes quite frivolous.

"So, young Seth, you are joining us for Bridge then? I'm glad to see you are interested, not enough young people are these days."

She is thinking how strange it feels seeing him walk through the door with another man. It is at that moment that she realises how habituated she has become to his visits, almost like a wife expects a husband. In fact the familiarity is exceptionally similar to that of a marriage. At five O clock she will begin to tidy the cottage, although unnecessarily and takes freshly baked scones from a tin which she places neatly onto a plate, by which time it is close to Robert, as she terms it, "arriving". She then sits at the window and waits for the sight of his comforting figure to turn the corner of Pipers Lane. She stands back from the window for she doesn't want him to see her watching but she does want to be aware if anyone else is. Although she has her story ready should anyone ask, it is her greatest dread for she hates to lie.

"Mr. Spencer has very bad dyspepsia and finds by the time he reaches me he really needs a rest. I can't have him sitting on my wall, poor man. I said to him, just pop in for a quick cuppa and you'll feel better to walk home."

Somehow Seth coming this evening has forced the truth upon her and she realises the need for deception can only mean there is something to hide and she now accepts her feelings go far beyond friendship but is content in the knowledge that for Robert her company is highly valued and the fact he can reside with her for a few hours in silent repose and listen to haunting music, or talk endlessly about tiresome problems at the office is a rapturous drinkable fountain for him and she feels she dare not hope for more. But sensing the change in him this evening cannot make her wonder how he does view her. One day, she clearly remembers, concentrating on her tapestry stitching while happily contemplating the strains of Bach. Robert had taken the footstool and full from his scones and tea was reclining with his eyes closed. Her eyes had cautiously lifted from her sewing to consider him resting, only to discover he was studying her intently. Their eyes had met fleetingly and she had quickly turned back to her sewing and no words were exchanged.

"Mind you," says Seth, "I don't think I will understand it Mrs Ridgeway, but it was good of you to ask me"

He notices Robert has already sat down on the couch but feels uncomfortable about doing so himself before being asked, so hovers, his discomfort obvious.

"Oh, do sit down Seth. Of course you will understand it and come to love every minute of it." Jessica assures him and he nods happily. It is how Jessica talks to everyone and he smiles agreeably, not in the least offended. Robert always finds this tone of Jessica's quite uncharacteristic, as it is not one she uses with him.

"How are you Robert?" she asks absently as she checks the contents of her handbag.

"Fine. Thanks for telling us about this." He is sure Seth will detect the stilted conversation they are having, but when he glances at him he realises he is totally unaware. A silence descends upon the three of them and all that can be heard is the soft sound of feminine items being tossed about as Jessica's hand searches through

her bag. Seth looks at Robert, and there is a hint of amusement in his eyes. Silently he is saying, "Women", and all the connotations that one word held for men when said in the usual exasperated way. Robert raises his eyebrows in response.

"Right, I'm ready," Jessica, announces and the men jump from their seats like trained animals. Robert is relieved that the cramping pain in his chest has eased somewhat and determines to enjoy his evening. His thoughts go for a moment to Virginia and he wonders what she will do this evening. Their afternoon walk had not been as refreshing and yielding as he had hoped. She seemed disinclined to take him on her usual jaunt and instead they found a route that took them under Millbridge and along the river. He had hoped they would talk of the future and what her plans may be but she rejected all questions.

"I was thinking the other day that perhaps you could offer piano lessons. It's what you used to do and were terribly good at it. I know you are capable of more, of course..."

"Robert, I don't wish to play the piano, let alone teach it," but there was slight indecisiveness in her tone, so subtle that only a husband would recognise it. Like, finishing her sentences, which he found he often did. Was this then a sign of intimacy, ultimately fulfilling his hope that his was a good marriage, or was it just the normal familiarity that follows a marriage of long standing? He had waited for her to offer some long deliberated decision that she had made regarding her life but none came.

"It's just I feel we have to move on somehow," he ignored her sharp glare and continued walking even though she had stopped.

"Getting involved in the village and the fete has helped me a lot. Also just working three days a week does make a lot of difference. It helps keep my mind occupied. I just feel you should... well... you"

"Should what?" she demanded marching to catch up with him.

"Try and move on. I feel it will help if you did more than just go on solitary walks and write long letters to Marcus, who does after all have a lot of work to get through. You could get involved in lots of things, you always were one for getting involved."

She nodded and seemed sad.

"Always was one for getting involved." She stated.

They walked in silence for sometime before she said softly but firmly.

"Leave me be Robert. I am happy to be as I am. I also am happy for you to be as you are."

There was not much more for him to say. He wanted to take her in his arms but the fear of rejection halted him. In the last six months he had made every effort to resume a physical relationship with her but she had rejected all his advances with the same reply.

"It's too soon."

He often wondered now if perhaps it was too late.

"Turn left here," Jessica plunges into his thoughts and he swerves to the left sending Seth flying across the back seat.

"Sorry old chap," he apologises.

Seth laughs.

Jessica smiles at Robert, and suddenly he feels as if he is part of a family again and Virginia quickly forgotten he throws himself into the mood of the evening

\* \* \*

Rowena hears the front door close, although Jonathan is always careful to shut it with the barest of noise, should she be resting. He had reminded her earlier in the day that he had things to attend to this evening and enquired again if she would be all right? Assuring him that she would be fine she now enters her studio for the first time in nearly a year and looks at everything as though they belong to a stranger and not her. She stares for some time allowing memories, fragmented like broken glass to slice through her brain, along with visions of a beautiful creature, naked and smiling, her skin as fresh and soft as a new born babies. Charley beckons her and she is instantly lying upon her, skin against skin. A fragrance drifts past her nostrils, Charley's perfume. It is so strong and she turns fearfully to the door expecting Charley to be there but of course she isn't. She contemplates the possibility of someone new in Charley's life now but refuses to dwell on this fear and takes down the unfinished painting from her easel. A tingle of excitement sends a tremor through her body and she shivers. She clips a fresh sheet to the easel and decides on her subject. Maybe Jonathan is right, perhaps with her painting she can replace chaos with order. For some time she fiddles with the brushes, looks at them as though for the first time. After a while it seems her habits follow some pattern, for first she toys with the brushes and then studies the blank canvas. Her eyes then move to the assortment of oil paints, which she picks up one by one seemingly to stare in wonder at the brilliance of the colours and it is then she again studies the canvas. This is repeated several times until she nods. It is the woman Virginia that she will paint, but where to start? She struggles to remember the face. She closes her eyes, and yes she can see the clear complexion, but her eyes are the best feature, they reflect her pain so profoundly that it is frightening She will start with the eyes.

\* \* \*

Virginia is close to tears. The struggle to keep them at bay is fading and she feels the battle lost when she falls onto the bed and lets them flow like a waterfall, down her cheeks and chin, dripping onto her loose flowery dress while others creep tenderly into her mouth and she tastes their salt. It is all so silly really, for she is simply frustrated that everything she wears hangs like sackcloth on her and she wanted to look halfway decent this evening. Not because of him. It would have been the same whoever she was meeting, or so she deceived herself. The walk this afternoon had disturbed her for she can feel a distance growing between her and Robert. It is as though the pavement they once stood on together has broken and is now sliding apart, with them each on different sides not quite knowing how to reach the other. She knows he is right; she ought to get more involved with things but not the piano. Does he forget so quickly that it was she who helped Edward with his playing? She searches through the wardrobe again and eventually settles on a pale blue dress that she matches with a cashmere cardigan. She fiddles with her hair, pulling it up, and then brushing it down. Finally deciding to leave it up because the day is still quite warm. A Pair of pearl earrings are attached and she then scrubs her face in the bathroom until her skin is shining. She realises that she is now late and will have to run and curses herself for her stupid tears for now she has no time for a calming cigarette. She deliberates in the porch, should she take her coat. It will be cumbersome to wear and even more so to carry, but it may get chilly later.

"Hurry up mother, are you coming or what?" she sees Edward, his face beaming. His hair needs cutting for it is beginning to wave just above his ears. Everyone had commented on his beautiful curly hair when he was a child. He is eager for his fourth driving lesson and she is undecided about taking her coat. She shakes her head and

he fades into the background and all she can see is the blankness of the front door. It was another place, another time. Oh, lord, will it always be like this? These moments, unexpected, like fragments of a film, shattering and scattering her emotions like ashes? She is very late now but needs a cigarette badly and fumbles in her bag as she rushes across the fields. Briefly she stops to light one and then continues; only now she slows her pace. Surely he will wait, realise there could be a million reasons why she is late but there remains within her a certainty that he will be there and she ceases to rush. He is standing by the bench. She had expected that he would be looking towards her but he is looking at the church and turns instantly when he hears the rustle of her dress in the breeze.

"You don't have a coat," he says alarmed. She sees he is wearing a thick fleecy top over what appears to be a black sweatshirt.

"It is quite warm," she says in way of response.

"We could sit in the church, the heating is on," he offers.

She sits on the large ornate bench that stands just inside the cemetery.

"I like it here," she says simply. He sits beside her, both silent, each wondering in different ways why they are there at all. Virginia feels she should ask about his wife but doesn't. He sees her shiver slightly and wonders if she is cold, although it is still quite warm but here in the open one can easily feel the chill that comes with the end of the day. He does not know what to say, but knows what he wants to say and can't. Virginia wants to explain why she is late but of course she doesn't either. She feels the heat from his body for he sits quite close and she is grateful for it. She should have brought her coat and if it hadn't been for Edward, perhaps she would have done. No, she must not blame him but she does of course, she blames him for everything, for ruining her life, for imprinting a memory that haunts her with horrific clarity every day. For wasting all that food, all those flowers and presents. She blames him for spoiling her party. She hates him for dying when it wasn't time. It should be her that is dead, struck down with some terminal illness. Robert would have coped, found solace in his mute plants and Edward would have studied. Each night they would look at her photo and wish she could be here for this ceremony, that wedding, that anniversary. She could have borne that, everything going on without her but not this, everything just stopping, no future, no grandchildren, and no pretty daughter in law. As though alone she takes a cigarette from the packet and inhales deeply.

"You're a bad influence on a non smoker. Would you mind," he asks, breaking the silence and she visibly jumps and he is shocked at the state of her nerves.

She hands him the packet and lighter for she doesn't want to repeat the intimacy they shared last time when his hand had touched hers like a whisper. He coughs as he inhales and she smiles.

"Maybe you shouldn't allow yourself to be so easily influenced."

He continues, evidently to enjoy the cigarette until finally she can't stand the silence any longer.

"Why did your wife try to kill herself?" she asks simply, presuming that is why he wants to speak with her, while at the same time needing to know.

"Because her faith is deeply ingrained, her parents are very religious." He was quiet for a moment. "Her greatest achievement, in their eyes was marrying me." He laughs then as though it is some kind of joke but she doesn't understand it. "Rowena is a lesbian," he shrugs, saying it so acceptingly as if he were saying, "Rowena is a

vegetarian.” He doesn’t look at her. He knows instinctively, as one knows of a mother, that there will be no judgement or shock on her face.

“Of course it goes against all the rules. There is this woman Charley. Rowena loves her. She gave her up for me, the church, but mostly for God. Rowena is now an alcoholic who is constantly beset by demons that taunt her with religious facts, one being that she will not be allowed into the kingdom of heaven. That day you rescued her she panicked because I wasn’t there to calm her fears.” He had kept his head down the entire time and now took a deep drag on the cigarette and released the smoke as though something insanely saintly left his soul with it.

Virginia is not shocked by the lesbian revelation. Surprised, perhaps because it is not what she expected to hear. A tremor sweeps through her. So they do not have a sexual relationship. What does he do she wonders? How does he cope? Then her thoughts go to Robert. It has been nearly two years and she cannot stand him to touch her. It seems indecent after Edward. She blames him for his death and she knows, even if subconsciously that he also blames her. She looks at Jonathan’s hand holding the cigarette and see it is trembling slightly and she wants to cover it with her own, to comfort him but she doesn’t. She begins to shake her head as though madness has possessed her.

“Not for him, she should not give up love, whatever kind of love, not for God. Not for someone you can’t be sure exists.” She turns to look at him. “I’m sorry for you, but you can’t force her to stay, you must see that?”

He smiles at her as a father might to his child. She has misunderstood as of course she would.

“Sweet Virginia. I don’t want her to stay. I want her to be free. Don’t you see? I suffer from the greatest dilemma. I believe less in this unseen God than probably you do and I know that Rowena is not a sinner. I cannot release her without abandoning a whole community. If I am to be true to Rowena then I have to be true to myself and that means I must leave the church. What effect will all this have on this community? My wife a lesbian and an alcoholic, and all the time her husband, the rector a total disbeliever, what devastation will that cause? Where should my loyalties lay Virginia, you tell me, because I don’t know. These people trust and respect me.”

She does not hesitate.

“With your wife. You should free her,” but she deliberates on the devastation he spoke of, like some war-ravaged town. How many had confided in him, told him their darkest secrets, their shames even? His dilemma is one she does not envy.

Her cigarette has burnt down to the tip and she desperately drags onto the last bit. As she watches the smoke billow out into infinity something hits at a dark corner of her mind.

“Your housekeeper knows,” she says, like a conspirator. “I remember her words to me now but of course they didn’t make sense, ““Do not be deceived, homosexual offenders will never enter the kingdom of God.” I thought she was mad because she did nothing to help.”

He sighs heavily.

“Rowena told me and is convinced that Rosemary read my journal.”

“You must sack her,” there was no thought behind her words.

“Then the whole village will know everything in minutes. She is another dilemma.” He looks at her and suddenly for no reason they both begin to laugh.

“You are a man with dilemma’s,” she offers him the cigarette pack but he declines.

She lights another for herself, and hands it to him. It is all she has to offer and he accepts enjoying the intoxicating effect it gives and then hands it back.

"I don't believe in him," her eyes look to the sky as though some mysterious being sits there. "I wouldn't have any dilemma. But how can you, a vicar, not have faith?" her voice disbelieving.

He thinks hard and retrieves the cigarette again. It has calmed him, as has she.

"I think my faith was always a bit shaky and my views defiantly radical so it was a slow dissolution. When Rowena first told me about Charley, I was stunned, devastated obviously. I did love her very much and I still do but differently. I tried to get help from the Church, mostly for her. They didn't want to know. It was a sweep under the carpet mess; they didn't want involvement with that. Then Things just declined. I lost my faith more and more as I saw her suffer. I didn't have a soul to talk to until you came. That day we met, with the bird? I sensed immediately an affinity"

She nods and fiddles with her wedding rings. He notes the exquisite style of them and presumes them to have been specifically designed. It was a well-known fact in the village, it seemed, that those folks at Starkfield had plenty of money.

At the exact moment Lady Fisher was thinking the same thing when she saw Robert Spencer. Lily had rather nagged Jessica to invite the Spencer's. He was perfectly dressed, immaculate. He was comfortable with himself too. She had heard Seth had been spending some time with him and was pleased, the young lad needed a sensible mans viewpoint on life. Lily, observant as ever cannot help noticing Jessica's easy knack of helping Robert with his coat.

"Mrs Spencer couldn't make it then?" she says smiling to relieve any discomfort, for there was much talk about her in the village.

"Bridge isn't her thing I'm afraid, but we have young Seth instead. A new prodigy to bridge I am certain."

I like him Lily thought and pitied him. Why was his wife so odd?

Jonathan looking at Roberts wife now, at this moment, like all others, thought her the most beautiful creature to ever stand in front of his eyes.

"Come on," he says suddenly and stands up. To her amazement he pulls off the fleecy jumper to reveal a black woollen top. He hands her the fleece.

"This will keep you warm."

She quickly jumps up and begins to follow him.

"Where are we going?" she is bewildered but exhilarated at the same time.

They begin to cross the field she has just walked from and what seemed like a mild breeze in the cemetery is now a sharp wind and she quickly pulls on the fleece and is instantly assailed by his after shave, a soft yet manly fragrance. It again feels like an embrace, like the time before when he wrapped his jumper about her, she feels close to him yet at the same time so far away. She begins to wonder if they are going to the rectory when he takes the river path. Memories grip her, as they seem to often these days, but this time it is of Rowena she remembers and wonders if he is taking her to visit. But they pass the gate that directs them to the rectory and continue on. She is grateful for his jumper; the overhanging branches hide the last of the sun, although occasionally droplets of heat break through a gap in the tunnel she finds here she is now quite chilly.



"We have to climb a sty, I'll help you." He says his tone matter of fact. She watches him climb the sty and then stares for a second, uncertain at his open hand. She takes it and lets him guide her over. They now seem to be in yet another wooded tunnel. He dips his head under a low tree and she follows. She lets out a gasp as sunshine hits her and then for the first time she sees clearly a beautiful, although seemingly hidden, well-kept orchard secured behind tall dark heavy padlocked gates. She watches in fascination as he removes a penknife from his pocket and begins to fiddle at the lock

"Hey presto," he says proudly.

She protests that they cannot enter private property but he assures her he goes there often to escape.

"It's beautiful and no one is ever here. Anyway I don't think, as rector of the parish, I shall get into trouble. I'll say the gate was open."

Her mouth widened.

"That's lying."

He laughed. "So it is."

Rowena was labouring over what had now become an obsession, Virginia's portrait. As Virginia's eyes absorbed the beauty of the Orchard, Rowena with the stroke of a brush had deftly shadowed one cheekbone and was struggling to recall the shape of her lips, which now were open in wondrous laughter as Jonathan stomped around. He stops to touch a tree here and then another further along.

"I've spoken to them all. They all know my secrets, that's why I call this 'the secret Orchard' and I dare anyone to throw me out." He fell to the floor and leant against the bark of a tree. For a second she seems undecided and then sits besides him. It is warmer here but she keeps the jumper on for the smell of him calms her.

Jessica a few seconds earlier chooses to sit opposite Robert at the bridge table so she can look at him occasionally, hopefully without him noticing. Stupidly, which she normally isn't she forgets the eyes of Lily fisher, but a woman on the verge of love is unaware of others.

"So, are you going to share your secret?" Jonathan asks softly.

Her lips quiver, unlike those in Rowena's painting which are now rosy red and smiling. The hair, Rowena is certain was dark and long, and shudders when she remembers the weeds tangled in it.

"I don't have secrets," she immediately takes the cigarettes from her bag.

"Everyone has secrets," he insists. "Besides, you know mine, isn't it only fair?" She jumps up. How infuriating of him.

"How dare you bargain with me, I didn't want to hear your bloody secret anyway."

She marches to the gate and then looks lost. Anger wells up in her as she feels the beginning of tears.

"How the hell do I get back?" she demands.

He is already on his feet and by her side. His hand touches her arm and she pulls away sharply as though receiving an electric shock.

"Virginia, I didn't mean... there is no bargaining here."

She looks frantically about her.

"How do I get back?"

He feels sad but tries not to show it.

"I'll take you. I'm sorry." He begins to walk ahead of her and suddenly realises she isn't with him. She stands at the entrance to the gate, tears pour like rain and her whole body is shaking with the intensity of her sobs.

"Oh God," she cries as the pain is visibly pulled from her. He runs back and takes her into his arms without a seconds thought and leads her away from the gate and back into the orchard where they cannot be seen. She is clutching onto him like a life raft and as they reach a tree she falls like a rag doll taking him with her, still wrapped in his arms. Edward is running between the trees, in and out of the shade, his shadows dancing around the orchard like butterflies. Why would he not stay still?

"Oh Edward, Edward. Please come back, please someone let him come back," Jonathan feels his tears mix with hers as they rock together in her grief and again he inhales the intoxicating smell that is uniquely her. He holds her tight, almost afraid to release her. He feels, just for an instant, a warm heat as though hit by a ray of sunshine and a penetrable sadness enters him and it is as though she has passed her grief, like some magical being, into him, thus freeing herself. Her fragile body lays lifeless against his and his lips pulled it seems by gravity rest on her neck, his nostrils smelling her nectar until he felt sure he would fly with the dizziness of it.

"My son, why did they take my son?" it is a heart-wrenching sob.

"Just let it go Virginia," is all he can whisper.

There are no tears in the painting, Rowena has decided that laughter lines suit her well and begins to shadow her sketch. Such an appealing woman, she thinks, the sort men would like. There is vulnerability about her. Was she always that way? Rowena wants to bring alive the woman that existed before the sons death but how would she have looked? There would have been a sparkle in her eyes, and a contagious smile on her lips.

Oh, Rowena thinks sadly, what a terrible tragedy to have befallen her. She is unaware this is the first time in years that she has felt pity for anyone other than herself.

Virginia looks up into his face, his kind warm face, and she sees it is streaked with tears and is visibly moved. Her hand reaches to his cheek and wipes a tear. He covers it with his own, his hand large, strong and comforting and lowers it into his lap.

"My son hanged himself. I found him. I cut down my son and I couldn't save him. What kind of monster am I? I thought of nothing else all day except this party, this stupid eighteenth birthday party while he was suffering and now I will never know what he was struggling with. I don't believe in God, maybe it would be better if I did, I know Robert gains comfort from it." Just saying his name suddenly fills her with immeasurable guilt. She should not be here. But where should she be? There seems no place where she belongs anymore.

"Robert has found his own way of dealing with it." He comforts.

She forces a smile and he realises he is sounding like a typical rector and blushes slightly. He is conscious that her hand still rests loosely within his and she makes no effort to move it.

"Robert finds solace in his plants. He talks to them. I expect it helps, he probably tells them more than he ever does me. I hate him, Edward that is. I hate God, or maybe I am indifferent to your God. If he were so wonderful, so good, he wouldn't punish people like this. He wouldn't torture me, or test your wife and then give her unending punishment. I thought God sacrificed his only son for us. Well, I

sacrificed mine too and god isn't rewarding me. Isn't love all that matters? I loved Edward and we gave him everything. Maybe we were too privileged, we had too charmed a life perhaps that was our punishment." There is silence. He doesn't speak, sensing she has a need to talk.

"I don't miss it you know, our life style. I'd live like a pauper if it meant Edward could come back. He isn't coming back is he?" it is said with a resigned sadness that needs confirmation.

He squeezes her hand and she desires to have him hold her, to feel herself fully embraced deeply within his arms.

As Robert's eyes meet Jessica's across the table she thinks the same thing. "Oh, if only just once, he could hold me." Then Lily breaks into her thoughts. "Well Jessica, we are awaiting, what do you have?"

Jonathan strokes her hair gently.

"No, Virginia Edward will never come back." He replies softly. She looks into his warm brown eyes and sees herself reflected in them, a sad grieving woman who would be stunned to see herself portrayed as she was in Rowena's painting.

It was as though Rowena had captured the old Virginia, and was miraculously recreating Gina. There is a lot more to do, she thinks critically but never the less is proud of her efforts. She lays down her paintbrush and leaves the room dramatically. She remembers some new paints; they will be perfect and heads for the garden shed where she rummages through numerous unwanted items, an old iron, and numerous pots of paint, odd pieces of wallpaper and old rugs, now damp from the winter, all homeless things that no one wants but can't seem to forsake.

How does one recognise love? Virginia wonders as she sits, her tears spent and her pent up emotions released with her hand still in his. She had told him it was Robert who thought moving was a good idea. How melancholy she had become and how often she had sat outside Edwards's room for hours at a time in the hope he would be resurrected. Why is she confiding so much. Why does this man make her heart flutter? It is madness. In the whole of her married life she had never looked at another man. Then Jonathan was admitting he had considered suicide. It often had occurred to him but the day he met her in the cemetery for the first time had been the day of his strongest desire and it was only because of her he had resisted.

"Why?" she asks curiously.

He shrugs

"I sensed in you a similar pain and thought maybe I had found a kindred soul, someone I could talk to, confide in."

She releases her hand and stands up.

"It seems we have both lost something. I a son and you all that ever mattered, your faith and your wife."

"You smell like my mother. You must wear a similar perfume." He says suddenly. She is getting ready to leave him and he cannot let her go yet.

She lifts her wrist for him to smell and he takes her hand gently and sniffs at the perfume. Then before she can remove her hand his lips are on her wrist and she shivers with arousal as he moves slowly up her arm until when he can go no further he attempts to remove the fleece. Her brain is screaming no, but she sees Edward

smiling from behind the tree. Is this right? Oh how she wants this to be right. She looks again and Edward has gone. For a second she hesitates and then removes his shaking hands and pulls the fleece off herself. She gasps as he unbuttons her cardigan, fingers against skin and she shudders. She knows this is madness and that they should stop but she doesn't want him to. She allows herself to be led towards the tree and leans back her head as his lips reach her neck. He is overcome with desire and feels insane with passion, all control is gone, and he is lost forever and always. When his lips finally touch hers and she meets them with a crushing almost painful kiss he abandons all caution and frantically lifts her dress. He hears her panting and feels her hands grasp his buttocks. They are frozen in time, a memory forever crystallised. In years to come, whether they are together or apart, she will always associate warm spring evenings and the gentle rustle of leaves, with his caresses. The tree seems to bend as though to shield them and she feels the soft breeze embrace her skin as gently he slides a hand inside her half unbuttoned cardigan and an erect nipple eagerly arches towards him. The leaves that hover above them like guardian angels seem, to her, an almost vibrant green. The bark of the tree that should feel hard and unyielding seems as soft as a pillow. The touch of the silkiness of her skin and the warmth of the pulsating breast sets him aflame. He wants to stroke every inch of her but cannot and detests the restrictions that they face. The tree and the Orchard has a different significance for him It is agonising not to be able to lay her somewhere soft and fondle her beautiful body for hours, to kiss those adorable lips until they are painfully bruised. Not for a single moment does a twinge of guilt stab him and he finds that odd. Virginia hears only the haunting sounds of the leaves rustling and the soft chanting of the birds. She moves carefully to aid him in removing her knickers and it is she that unbuckles his belt and frees the pulsation beneath. She gasps when he enters her, the pain almost unbearable and exquisite at the same time and she bites into his shoulder. He lifts her leg and slides his hand along her thigh and she begins to tremble with the pleasure as he hand reaches higher until he reaches infinity and she closes her eyes and sways with the leaves. How beautiful they are, so fresh and young, she thinks. Her hand clasps that which is caressing her breast and moves it up towards her lips where she gently sucks his finger as a baby might his mother's breast.

Rowena stares in astonishment. So many colours, she had forgotten about these. She rushes back to the house and to her studio. She is frantic with the desire to recreate Virginia and paints with indescribable passion. If she can give this woman something, her own self, an identity intact she will have achieved her aim. With intense admiration she continues to produce flowing strokes of colour. Not once does she hesitate with her paintbrush. She decides this will be true artistic freedom.

"Always paint without thought but more with feeling and that will be your best work," Charley's words echo around the room, her voice soft, rhythmic, a gentle sonata to sooth Rowena's shattered spirit. Like a broken bird healed, her wings free to flutter, she paints with an ease she had never dreamt possible.

Virginia claws at the bark of the tree as she moves rhythmically with his almost brutal frantic thrusting, her other hand gently caressing Jonathans neck. Within seconds she feels herself on the brink of something she had quite forgotten, it begins to build with such force that she struggles to breath, her legs tighten around him and the intensity of it causes her to cry out. Gently he covers her mouth and groans into

her breast as he releases himself. Her legs are trembling and she crumples to the floor. Immediately she is fumbling to pull up her knickers. She begins to cry and he attempts to comfort her.

“Robert, I’ve never once been unfaithful. What have we done?”

He is speechless. He is overcome. His need for her was far greater than he had dreamt. His head is still whirring and his emotions uncontrolled. He is uncertain, afraid, and suddenly ill at ease with her. He did not once think of anyone except her. He is close to tears and she hears it in his voice.

“Virginia, I’m sorry. It’s my fault.”

No, she wants to scream. Over and over, no it wasn’t. I wanted it too. I did, I did. Instead she looks at her watch.

“Please show me how to get home. I will be late.”

He knows he dare not leave things like this.

“I was a fool. I’m sorry. Please please forgive me.” But he isn’t sorry, so why is he saying this? Because I don’t want to lose her, he thinks. I cannot lose her, not when I have only just found her.

Poor Jonathan. Always so tortured, she thinks sadly and wonders if Edward had felt like that.

Gently she raises his hand to her cheek and then kisses it tenderly. He closes his eyes and breathes in her scent again.

“You were not a fool. I would be lying if I said I hadn’t wanted you. I spent over an hour trying to find the right dress for God’s sake. It just feels so right, yet so wrong. Do you understand? I know it’s over with Robert”

She pulls on a shoe that had slipped from her foot and he takes her hand so she can steady herself.

“I think he rather likes this Jessica woman,” she smiles, her lips look bruised and her skin is flushed.

He tries to picture Robert and Jessica but can’t, he just sees Virginia, flushed and bright eyed, intoxicated after love.

“What will we do?” she asks him standing straight and looks into his eyes.

“Find somewhere more comfortable,”

She stares aghast for a second and then falls into peals of giggles like she once did, and for a second she reflects Rowena’s painting perfectly.

“I’m sorry. I’m embarrassed.” He answers honestly,

“Let’s get back,” she takes his hand and without another word they begin to walk. At the entrance to the cemetery she leaves him.

“I need time to understand. I need to know what you are feeling. Give me a few days. I will phone you.”

It was a request he could not deny her and he knew he could only nod and watch her leave. Before she had gone very far he found himself calling her name softly

“Virginia. I need you to tell me it won’t end here?”

She turned and it seemed as though he saw a vision of an angel, so beautiful and pure did she look in the haze of the late sun, tombstones surrounding her like adoring gods.

“No,” she whispers as though to a child. “It will be alright. It won’t end here.”

Reassured by her words, again, like a little boy, totally believing, he walks back towards the rectory.

Rowena covers the painting, it is still unfinished but in a few days she hoped it would be complete for Virginia to see. Perhaps she would phone her in the morning, invite her to visit. It was strange how much better she was feeling. But, now she felt very tired and without tidying her paints or cleaning the brushes she went straight to her bedroom. When Jonathan arrived home she was already asleep. He went straight to his study and poured a large glass of whisky. He reflects for a time and then removes the journal from his desk drawer.

“Well, Robert you have surpassed us all with your enviable skill.” Lady Fisher says rising from her chair at the table. Seth quickly stands up and moves it back for her. Instantly she lays a thin, veined bony hand upon his arm. He stares in awe at the sparkling rings on her fingers.

Jessica is proud and smiles at Robert and thinks if only he were her husband. How envious they all would be.

“Just luck,” Robert smiles modestly.

“No such thing as luck in bridge as well you know.” She then turns to Seth. “How did you enjoy it?”

“I think Mr. Spen... Robert has a lot to teach me.” He finds it difficult to remember to call Mr Spencer by his first name.

“Teaching the boy new tricks are you?” she asks pouring tea from a china pot that the woman Minnie had brought in a few moments before. Robert found the whole evening intriguing and was looking forward to relaying it all to Virginia later. He accepted the small china cup and plate of biscuits. Throughout the house was an extraordinary smell of mothballs, reminding him of his grandparent’s home. He smiles at Seth and wonders how aware he is of the absurdity of it all. Still it had been an interesting evening and part of him had wished Virginia could have been there while there was the odd sensation that things would have been different had she been and he would not have enjoyed it so much.

They drive home in silence apart from the sporadic remarks that pass between him and Seth. Jessica is silent until Robert has safely deposited Seth at his home.

“Would you like to come back for tea?” she asks hesitantly, for she knows it is late.

He keeps his eyes ahead and declines politely, explaining that he still has a slight pain in his chest and feels that bed would be the best thing. She nods understandingly and suggests kindly that perhaps he should see his Doctor if it continues. They part at the gate to her cottage where he kisses her softly on the cheek. She closes the front door and leans her body against it as if she cannot walk any further. Why now? All these years she had been quite content without a man and now this. It is like she has agreed to go on the big dipper at the funfair and now she is off, her mind and body is still spinning. That’s what he has done; put her whole being in a spin. With a deep sigh she turns off the hall light and ascends the stairs.

### **Spring 2001**

*.Journal Entry:*

*So I am not ashamed. You may sit in heaven and watch me but I am not ashamed. What have you ever done for me? So punish me, I have sinned, but I don't feel remorse, why should I? You have tormented me enough and put temptation in my path. How can I bear it? Here I am again still talking to you like you exist, will I ever be released from you?*

*I feel odd. I cannot help wonder what she is feeling. Does she have regrets already? I cannot recall it all just yet it is too soon. I know so little about her and yet I feel I have known her my entire life. I don't know what she likes, or dislikes. I do not know her taste in music or what books she reads. I only know that I am in love with her and have been from the first day I saw her. It is a love different to any other. I am in love with Virginia Spencer. I do not think of her husband and I gave no thought to Rowena. It is the beginning of the end. How it will end is what sends chills of fear through me. I cannot forget the feel of her skin, and the wonderful smell of Jasmine and Vanilla that pervaded her whole being. I meant to comfort her, ease her pain. To feel her compliance, have at last my love embraced and returned was like receiving the best gift possible known to man. Oh, if I close my eyes I can again feel her lips on my neck and the silkiness of her thigh. There, in the orchard, a beautiful delicate flower opened for me. So where were you then God? This ultimate being I supposedly revere. When are you there? Where were you when Edward hanged himself and Rowena tried to escape in the river? You are non-existent; a figment of our imaginations, a crutch for us all to lean heavily upon because we are too cowardly to go on and face life without you. Now my dilemma is thousand fold, for all this cannot be allowed to continue. I will wait and see what she intends. If she is right and Robert is becoming infatuated with Jessica one can feel somewhat relieved. What future is there for anyone? If I am to be truly realistic, I know this can go no further. But, nor can I continue to deceive, Rowena, the church, my congregation or myself. I will see things through until after the fete. It will be then that all is decided for us all. I now cannot help but force myself to speculate on that union that has driven Rowena into a deep dark sadness and the dank hovel in which she envelopes herself. I want her to gush with love like a fountain, embrace it heartily, immoral or otherwise. Who decides the wisdom of our choices? Who are these faceless people that look with grim distrustful eyes upon those that love differently. Shouldn't we espouse all kinds of love? I despise my faith for its intolerance. It has made me the man I am today. God made my wife a prisoner, and me an adulterer. I had a weakness. I, like Rowena needed love. I no longer will allow her to be entombed in this misery. I will be desolate if Virginia rejects me. I am, however, resolved to leave the church...*

The pen is dropped from his hands as if the weight of it has become unbearable. He hears a faint cough from Rowena's room and looks at the clock. It is almost midnight and he has not touched a drop of the whiskey that sits on the desk. The thought of Rosemary enters his head when he thinks of the morning and a quick glance at the answer phone tells him there have been no messages while he was out this evening. He takes the whiskey with him and walks slowly to his bedroom. It is when he turns on the light that he sees the door of the studio is ajar. For a second he hesitates and then turns towards his own room, but within minutes he is in the hall again, drawn to her studio like a moth to light. It is with rapturous delight that he sees the scattering of paints. A new canvas is upon the easel and he respects the privacy of the artist and does not unveil it. Encouraged by the sight of this new creation that feels like the beginning of life, he returns to his own room where he lays alone, sleepless with visions only of Virginia.

Robert arrives home much earlier than Jonathan retires but Virginia is already in bed and seemingly asleep.

He creeps stealthily into the bathroom and sits for a time on the edge of the bath taking deep breaths. A weight heavier than a man seemed to lie on his chest and either the pain or fear draws perspiration from him so it runs down his face and neck. He endeavours to remain calm. He does not want to wake Virginia and wishes he had stayed at Jessica's for she would have been comforting. He doesn't dwell of thoughts of Jessica. Robert isn't a man for deep thinking. He fumbles in the bathroom cabinet and swallows half a bottle of antacid. It is sometime later he feels able to lie down and climbs in gently beside his wife. He smells her perfume and knows immediately that she had not been wearing it earlier in the day. He gives it no further thought, however, but takes comfort from the familiar smell and soon he drifts off to sleep. His decision not to indulge lingering thoughts of Jessica does not, however, prevent him from dreaming of her.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Seth spends the morning cutting all the flowers he has grown on the allotment. He intends to take a bunch to Lily Fisher to thank her for an enjoyable evening. By the time he has finished he has filled four large buckets. It is still early and he returns home where he wraps them all into bunches. He will charge a £1 a bunch as always and knows he will have no problems selling them. He has the day off and decides to deliver his flowers. He arrives first at Jessica's and hands her the flowers, apologising that he cannot stop, without asking she pays him more than he expects. He is about to speak but she shakes her head to silence him. She wants to say, "Be a son to Robert." But she dare not. He walks to Lily Fisher's and Minnie opens the door warmly inviting him in.

Lady Fisher reclines on a soft couch in her nightclothes, a tea tray on a table beside her.

"So lovely and you grew them yourself?" she sniffs at the flowers and sighs. "How clever of you."

Seth shifts uncomfortably under her stare. It seems strange standing in the same room. It looks different in the daylight and he notices a birdcage in the far corner.

"Love birds," she says looking at him closely. "I covered them last night. Love is a strange emotion you know, Seth? One to be avoided at all costs, I would say."

Seth nods and watches as she pours tea, the teapot wobbling in her trembling hand.

"Although, of course, one can not always help falling in love. Look at Robert and Jessica for instance. They would make a perfect couple don't you think?"

Seth's mouth widens.

"Tea?" she asks, before he can speak.

He shakes his head.

"I have more flowers to deliver. Thank you for the offer."

He reaches the door and collides with Minnie whom he follows to the kitchen; she turns and stares at him.

He lays a bunch of flowers onto the large oak table that separates them.

"For you," he says simply and walks out.

On his way to Rosemary's he pops into the post office.

"Some woman was looking for you, did you get see her?" James asks taking the flowers but stares straight into Seth eyes, which Seth had immediately lowered at the mention of the woman.

"Oh," he nods. "Yes, she wanted me to do some gardening for her but it was too far out of the village." He sees James is about to speak again. Seth doesn't want to discuss his meeting with the woman. He excuses himself with further deliveries to make.

He reaches Rosemary's house and he is baffled to see her walking ahead of him. She has on Wellington boots over a pair of worn trousers and he tries to think what she can have been doing so early in the day. The boots are covered in mud and it looks like she is carrying Lucy in a cardboard box. He waits a few moments for her to get inside the house before he knocks on her door.

Rosemary jumps and stares at the back door in alarm then stares at the plants she has freshly picked from the bank. She cannot possibly do the whole thing again. She would have ignored the caller had Seth not pushed his face against her window and tapped gently with his hand.

"Rosemary, it's Seth."

She breathes a sigh of relief. Seth is safe; she assures herself and opens the door. It is a misjudgement of Seth that most people make. It is because of the limp, and only this, that strange judgements regarding Seth's brain are made. A simple deformity makes Rosemary feel safer with Seth than with anyone else. Rosemary was disagreeably underestimating Seth at that moment.

"I've brought your flowers." He says handing them to her. "You look like you've been doing some digging yourself this morning." She takes the flowers and in a bid to avert his eyes from her windowsill she insists on two bunches and reaches into her purse to pay him.

There are patches of dirt on her trousers and her Wellington boots are caked with mud.

"I..." she begins in an attempt to answer but looking up she sees his eyes are staring past her, a look of concern on them.

"Have you been cutting wild flowers Rosemary? That looks like Hemlock you have there, can I see?"

Before she can reply he has walked in and now stands by her precious specimen.

"Where did you find this? It's very dangerous. Whatever happens don't let Lucy get close, it's poisonous you know?"

Quickly she regains her composure and feigns a look of horror.

"Goodness is it? I love those white flowers you see. I went bird watching this morning and saw this plant that I love so much. Goodness I have had it in the house every year and not known that. Thank you Seth."

Seth was puzzled but tried not to let it show. He cannot see anything pretty about a hemlock plant.

"Well, just watch Lucy, you know what cats are like with plants."

She purposely looks at her watch, tells him she will be late for the Rectory. Thanks him again and promises to watch Lucy with the plant.

By the time he has delivered all the flowers he feels uneasy in a number of ways. He hadn't liked Lady Fisher's insinuation about Robert and Jessica. He thinks then about Robert and decides to ask if he would like to come to the next horticultural fair with him. He likes his time with Robert and wonders why he and Mrs Spencer had not had children, or at least if they had he never mentions them. He clearly sees Robert as a gentle father, unlike his own, who at times had been ruthlessly hard. There had been those uncomfortable moments when he had looked at Seth with a wistful glaze in his eyes and it was then Seth felt a disappointment to him. At the very end when he lay helpless and tears gushed agonisingly from his mother's eyes, he and Seth had looked at each other and it was as though a sword had sliced through the barrier. In those few brief seconds their eyes met in mutual acknowledgement. Now, he feels a whole new world has opened up to him, thanks to Robert and he wants to say thank you. He decides he will get two tickets for the show and invite Robert as his guest.

Rosemary silently curses. What a fool she was, of course he would have recognised it. She will have to hide it now. Damn the man! She had risen at four this morning to seek out the precious plant. It had been a slow and painstaking process. All the time she had felt frozen with fear and had crept through undergrowth like a lion on the prowl. On reaching the riverbank she had slipped and had yelped as pain shot through her knee. She had searched slowly and methodically for what she needed and several times her heart fluttered like that of someone meeting a lover when she

felt she had discovered it but each time it was wrong, it didn't have the right markings. After almost two hours she found a whole clump and almost cried with happiness. Carefully she laid it in the old cardboard cat box she still had and carried it home. Now her mind raced. The bathroom was the only place where it would not be seen. Quickly she tidied all signs of her expedition and placed Seth's flowers where the Hemlock plant had been. Then straightening her hair as if he would see her she phoned the Rectory. In a calm voice she explained to Jonathan that she had thought things through and God had helped her to understand Mrs. Byrnes disposition. If it suited them she would return tomorrow and all would be forgotten. Tears of anger fill her eyes when he tells her he will speak with his wife but feels sure that will be fine. Rowena torments the poor man, she thinks bitterly.

Virginia sees the flowers in the lounge and for one terrifying moment has an image of them being delivered with a handwritten card from Jonathan.

"From Seth," Celia says making Virginia jump.

"Ah," is all she can say and realises she looks stupid.

"I'll change the beds now your up shall I?" Celia asked innocently.

I want you to unravel this mess I am in, Virginia wants to scream; I want you to tell me what to do. Do I tell Robert? What a stupid question, of course I don't. Yes, change the stupid beds; at least something will seem fresh and clean and not dirty and tangled. Virginia nods.

She makes coffee and sits quietly at the kitchen table. She endeavours to ignore the memories but they push and shove, probe and dig like curious children with a new pet until she has to give in. Her heart beats rapidly and she fights the desire to phone Jonathan, to ask how he feels? Does he regret it? Oh, what will happen? Was it lust? No, she dismisses it instantly. Never has she desired anyone outside love. Last night she had lain awake for hours. There was a moment when she almost went into the bathroom to see if Robert was all right, for he seemed so long but she didn't want him to know she was awake. Then, when she had heard the gentle, knowing, sounds of sleep she had indulged in reflection. Robert had tried to make love to her after Edwards's death, but she couldn't. How could she explain to him, that it felt like they were two murderers? Unintended ones, she admits but never the less that is how she feels. How can they ever make love again? She now feels a calm exhaustion. Every day since Edward had died she had carried his loss almost as an embellishment. It adorned her face like a mask; tight and unsmiling she would travel through life. Her eyes were sad, and with lips tightly drawn and hollowed cheeks, she stared about her at happy people and envied them. There was, forever, a presentiment that hung around her like a shroud. Finally it had come to pass. Perhaps her thirst for love, physical love had been parched and from the drinkable fountain she had drunk. This was the only morning she had awoken and not thought of Edward first and knows that at last her healing is beginning. A decision has to be made. She glances at the letters on the table and then sees a note from Robert. But the note is not for her and she looks bewildered at the words.

*"I cannot come this evening, I have a late meeting.*

*I enjoyed last night very much. Sorry we spoke so little.*

*I hope you have a good evening and look forward to Friday."*

It was simply signed 'Robert.'

A swift breeze slides across her and flapping white sheets, like ghosts in the early morning light, suddenly surround her.

"I'll put the washing machine on now," Celia says, almost shyly. She is not used to Virginia being around. Normally she moves to another room or goes for one of her long walks.

Virginia watches as she shoves the sheets ruthlessly into the washing machine and hears the grainy sound of the washing powder as it hits the container. Everything seems louder, more distinct. Then she realises, and is filled with exuberance. Today is the first time in over two years that she has felt truly alive, been really aware.

She looks again at the letter. Her head inclines and she thinks of Robert and his parsimony. Always with the greenhouse and his plants he had shut her out. Obviously he now had a friendship with Jessica Ridgeway that he did not wish to share, even though he knew perfectly well she would understand. He liked to hold things back, have secrets. At the beginning of their marriage he always told her his earnings were lower than they were. It was something she couldn't fathom. He would spend a fortune on plants but be so miserly about what they paid their daily help.

"Oh," Celia says with guilt. "I found that on the floor. I think Mr. Spencer meant to leave it out for you. I didn't read it." She nods to the letter.

"What do we pay you? By the hour I mean?" Virginia asks. She is not interested in the letter anymore, only grateful to have seen it.

Celia feels discomfort. Are they displeased with her?

"Six pounds. I'm happy with that."

Virginia shakes her head and stands up. She looks angry and Celia takes a step back.

"Really, that is ridiculous. You do almost everything. From this week it will be eight pounds. Do we pay you weekly?"

Celia is stunned into silence and Virginia waits. I've surprised her, she thinks amused.

"Every Friday. Mr. Spencer and I agreed the six pounds..."

"Well I didn't and I think it should be eight and on Friday it will be."

She stands thoughtful and then heads for the door.

"I had a son, his name was Edward. He killed himself two years ago. I shall be putting his photo back on show. I thought I should say as you may wonder."

She walks from the room and Celia stands and thinks "Oh my God" surprised she falls into a chair where she sits in stunned silence.

\* \* \*

Rosemary stares at the plant that sits upon her bathroom windowsill. To her eyes it is heavenly to behold. A thrill runs through her whenever she sees it. So, it was this that Socrates was condemned to drink. She feels sad about cutting it into pieces and then thinks again of Seth. What if he told someone in the village? Her heart beat faster at the thought. Then she reassures herself. By the time he has finished work today he will have forgotten about her. She stares at the plant. She runs her hand gently down its smooth green stem, and marvels at its distinct port coloured spots. She knows she cannot waste too much time because the unusual mousy odour that oozes from it may get stronger. She is a little disappointed that she could not find some with fruit on them because the book said they possess the greatest medicinal activity. She shrugs and decides the leaves are just as good. She takes the plant into the kitchen and lays it carefully onto the table, then quickly draws the blind. She has learnt that the alkaloid coniine is the most important constituent and that the leaves

when picked at the proper time may contain as much as 2.77 per cent. Her main concern is that she has not picked at the right time, which according to her book means that she may only get the average of 1.65. She stares at the book avidly as if reading a gripping novel and then slowly begins to break off the leaves one by one and which she then lays onto newspaper and places them into the bathroom to dry. The debris of the plant she wraps in the remaining newspaper and discards it to the dustbin. Now, she has to wait. It occurs to her that she should test it first but on what? She watches Lucy chase butterflies like a playful child and stares at the window fascinated as she darts about like a moth fluttering around a light shade. She is about to turn away from the window when she sees the squirrel. Its eyes flit from side to side and lands on Lucy. Lucy sensing it immediately rushes into the house through the cat flap. God has sent Rosemary her answer. Lucy is terrified of squirrels. Tomorrow she will keep Lucy in and put down some specially prepared food for the squirrel. She looks up as if God is staring down on her.

"Thank you, Lord," she whispers. "Thank you for choosing me to save our Rector."

\* \* \*

*Journal Entry:*

*I had lain awake all night. After several hours I had walked softly across the carpet and stared out longingly into the darkness. The moon cast stark shadows in corners and sometimes I thought I saw a figure move. I was impatient. I wanted my punishment. Somewhere in the deep recesses of my soul I was waiting. But I knew God could not punish me.*

*If, I, a Rector, was free to commit adultery with the wife of one of his congregants, abuse the trust of his community and indulge his wife in alcoholism then what kind of God was I advocating? "Come on," I yelled silently at the window "prove yourself. Haven't I let you down? Are you not disgraced? Am I not Satan incarnate? I copulated with another man's wife and I shall do it again if she consents. I want to be touching her now, stroking her body, hear her whimper. I want to feel that warmth and wetness enfolding and contracting as it joins with me. I want to sing the song of love with the lark and the owl at night. I shed tears of release. You have gone from me at last. I am no longer a broken man. I snarl like a wild animal and snap at your hypocrisy. I am gloriously alive, enthralled and enchanted by the truth. I have shattered the mirror of Rector Jonathan Byrnes. I am doomed to perdition and I greet it with rejoicing in my heart. I perceive only beauty and love without the confines of religion. I knew the moment I penetrated her I released you. You have gushed from my body a pernicious poison that I have spread like a forest fire. I need not know God to know the truth. I have lingered too long in this desert of fear. I hovered on the brink for too long but sympathetically I will consider those I have empathised with and with whom I have encouraged to swallow the poison I so readily handed out. But you and the establishment that condemns the innocent in your name I will oust in the most public and humiliating way for my instinct is to destroy you totally as you once destroyed me."*

It was the last conversation he was to have with the God that had dominated his life.

He hears movement in Rowena's studio. She has been up for hours. It is odd behaviour for Rowena and he isn't sure what to think.

Now, dressed in a casual shirt and jeans he enters the studio. He stands at the entrance to the room and stares as she paints animatedly. He cannot see the painting. Her hair is tied back into a slide and her head is on the side as she studies her work intently. He is surprisingly uncomfortable in her presence. A thought sweeps through his mind like a gentle feather and lingers for a second, poised between thought and word, 'Should I tell her'? He stands and wavers. The walls seem to close in upon him as he fights the desire to tell her everything. She turns suddenly and he sees she is wearing a different dress. It is velvet; a maroon colour with a matching scarf that adorns her throat, beyond that he sees the easel, which his eyes feast upon.

Her face is alive. Her cheeks flush with excitement as she looks at the painting. Her hands are covered with paint smudges.

"What do you think? I started last night and I couldn't stop. I phoned her about an hour ago. I can't wait for her to see it."

He looks silently at the painting. The warm eyes sparkle at him. The lips smile cynically at him while he hears the moans that emanate from them. One hand lies loosely in her lap and he shudders at the memory of the touch of it caressing him.

"It's Virginia!" says Rowena. "I just couldn't stop thinking about her. I started last night and couldn't stop. I finished it this morning. It still needs some work, but I think she will like it. She has revived me Jonathan."

She sinks into a chair in front of the easel, feeling totally spent. It had been an agonising pleasure and she wanted to cry with the relief.

"Why Virginia?" he asks quietly.

"Why not," she laughs. "She has such a lovely face. So much expression, she is perfect."

He walks angrily towards the door.

"Perfect is she? Have you forgotten Charley so soon?" he thundered. "You've tortured me for years with this business. I hate you for what you've done to us. So, now you have someone new to conquest. Well, leave her alone, she has been through too much and she isn't that way inclined."

She rushes towards him, shock and horror evident on her face.

"Jonathan... I thought you would be pleased... I don't understand..." she grabs his arm but he snatches it away almost sending her fragile body to the floor.

"I lost everything because of you. Everything and now you want Virginia. Isn't it enough I have lost you and my faith. How far will you push me?"

She slid down to the floor. The realisation stings her like a slap. His anger, more thunderous than Gods, is not because she is painting again. She looks at the portrait; its smiling image seems to mock her. He is angry because she painted Virginia. She knows there is only one reason for him to see the painting as a threat. A multitude of emotions seem to float effortlessly through her body, anger, shock, surprise, and relief, until eventually she is left in calm repose.

"My God, you're actually interested in another woman?" it is said with the knowledge of certainty.

He halts, frozen. He feels his legs are strapped together. He cannot even slide to the floor as she has done. He has to stay in this room that seems overwhelmingly hot and claustrophobic. The brilliant sunshine is now covering all the paints and the room is suddenly a rainbow of colours each shooting across the room and he feels himself punched in the stomach by a blood red ball that bounced in through the window. He

feels the threats of tears hover but are not shed. She shakes her head as if trying to dismiss a sinful thought.

"You've lost your faith?" She is incredulous. "Because of me?" She fiddles with her wedding ring.

His legs freed, he walks towards her and kneels at her side.

"I don't mind about Virginia. You are wrong Jonathan, I don't want anyone except Charley." She holds out her hand and appeals to him with her eyes.

He takes it and sits beside her. His throat is dry and his eyes ache. If only he could sleep for a short time.

"But you've lost your faith?" she repeats.

He lowers his head.

"It was before you and Charley. I think that just accelerated everything. There isn't a God Rowena. There is only love. All kinds of love..."

"No, no. You are wrong." She breaks in quickly. "I must get ready for Virginia. We can talk later about this, not now."

She stops at the doorway.

"You must not do this Jonathan, you will lose everything. You must regain your faith, please?" It is a plea but he cannot give her a comforting answer.

He sighs.

"Rowena we *have* lost everything."

But she has already closed the door.

He stares at the painting. How ironic, after all this time, that when she does paint it is a portrait of Virginia. Is she to heal them all? This fragile bird that is incapable of helping herself.

Rowena sits on the bed. Her earlier excitement has evaporated, like a fierce fire having been doused with water it now smoulders. Anxiety is wielding its tight grip, squeezing the breath from her. Her body is trembling and she clasps her hands together to stop them shaking. Jonathan has lost his faith. It repeats in her mind like a mantra. She wants to cry but is powerless to do so. Virginia will be here soon and she must never know. The morning is bright, fresh and clear and the heat from the sun can already be felt in the room. It was a day to be out. A perfect day for the fete in fact and she forces herself to think of it allowing the luxury of contemplating getting involved. It wouldn't be difficult to have some prints made of her village landscape paintings and it would help to get her mind off things. Oh, but she cannot avoid the truth, the awful devastating truth. Jonathan no longer believed in their Father. She takes deep breaths to control the impending panic. Without his faith she would decline. She stood up suddenly and walked to the window. The Church spire could be seen standing majestically, like a king appraising his subjects.

She falls to her knees and bends her head until it is touching her chest. The sun shines upon her head like a halo as she prays zealously for Jonathan to rediscover his faith. She is deep in prayer, her hands clasped so tightly together that the knuckles are white, when she hears the click of the front door. Looking up she sees Jonathan walking out of the gate. So, she is to face Virginia alone and reluctantly concedes, with a pang of fear all her uncertainties also. Slowly she changes her clothes, choosing a blue baggy blouse and long skirt. She then sits quietly in the kitchen and awaits Virginia. It does not occur to her that she may not come. Virginia is the person that will make Jonathan see sense.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It should only take her a short time to prepare the potion. But before she even begins she takes the necessary precautions to protect her privacy. The large key that locks the back door is turned with firm deliberation and the kitchen blind pulled down and then, after some thought she quickly walks to the front door and locks that too. Lucy sits on the kitchen floor staring at Rosemary expectantly. Rosemary opens the cupboard under the stairs and retrieves the litter tray and a small bag of litter that sits beside it. The litter tray is placed in the small utility room along with Lucy, who after given some treats settles down comfortably. Rosemary now feels secure enough to pull on the transparent plastic gloves and remove the dried leaves from the bathroom. There is a buzzing in her head that has been there since she had awoke and she has been unable to shift it. It seems to her that she can hear the blood rushing through her brain, like the crashing of sea waves, she deliberately ignores it reminding herself that she has more important things to do, things for her Lord and he will watch over her as she does his work, protecting her from the evil forces that have been designed to destroy her.

She places the leaves upon some old newspaper with such grandness as if to her they represented the Crown jewels and for a time stares at them. Her plan is to blend all the leaves to a pulp and then make a walnut cake using almost all of the hemlock, except a tiny piece to test on the squirrel. But what shall she do if it has no effect? She shakes her head; she must not think negative thoughts, it shows lack of faith in her heavenly father. She truly feels a servant of God, as Joan of Ark must have once felt. Rosemary will be the one who saves Jonathan, saves him from hell and damnation. Everyone will thank her and finally see what true asceticism she beheld and how much she would consider sacrificing herself in a bid to save the Rector. They will thank her, just wait and see and she will accept it gratefully for one must not bear grudges against those who know not what they do.

She carefully places the leaves with a very small drop of Vanilla essence that she hopes might cover the bitterness, into the blender. The smell is now quite overpowering, and it's musty almost mousy smell makes her feel quite heady. She turns on the blender it's loud whirring makes her headache and she is relieved when it is finished. There is a lot, and she quickly rushes to get a larger jug. Her nerves are continually on end, she expects someone to ring the doorbell any time and is suspicious of Seth. He would come to the back door if he got no reply from the front and then he would hear her moving around and become more suspicious when he sees the drawn blinds. In a crazed panic she spoons the mixture into the jug and hurriedly washes everything, but in her haste it is done sloppily and the strong musky smell still clings to her utensils. She washes them again more thoroughly this time and puts them all away. She feels quite dizzy and sits at the table where she stares at the jug. She feels beads of perspiration roll down her face, across her cheeks, over her chin and down her neck. She wipes her face with a tissue and forces herself to carry on. From a cupboard she takes down a jar of peanut butter and spoons out a liberal amount, which she puts into a dish along with a small amount of hemlock. She lifts it to her nose and grimaces. Her forehead wrinkles as she thinks deeply and lines are left etched just above her eyebrows. Again she goes back to the cupboard and begins to search frantically until with a sigh she removes a packet of ground almonds.

It is a strange concoction and she now worries that all the peanut butter and almonds might dilute the hemlock and adds some more in case. Now, it is ready. All she has to do is hide the hemlock in the cupboard and she can make her cake. It is



best if the blind is not down too long and she snaps it up with the barest touch of her hand. She then unlocks and opens the back door.

Sunlight filters into the kitchen and she looks up at the cloudless sky. Then she begins to look for a place to put the dish but the sun has affected her vision and she cannot see beyond the little black floating ants that dart in front of her eyes. After a time she spots a place near the dustbin. Her head is now throbbing, partly from tension and her constant apprehension that someone would come and disturb her. If she could only go to bed and rest but she knows that she cannot. The cake has to be made and frozen. It is out of the question for her to have the hemlock there any longer.

She begins to relax as she mixes the ingredients together and even turns on the radio. It is becoming quite hot and when she turns the oven on to preheat she has to open the back door. Everything is mixed in apart from the walnuts and the hemlock. Sharply she turns to look behind her as if expecting to see someone but no one is there. The hemlock is gingerly removed from the cupboard and speedily transferred to the mixture, which she beats rapidly and then covers the bowl while she washes out the jug. It is imperative that all evidence of the poison is removed. The walnuts are then added along with some almond essence and she stares at the mixture for a few seconds before finally dipping her finger into it. It is with trepidation that she licks her finger and after half a second she spits it into a tissue. There is no bitter taste in her mouth, just the strong flavour of walnuts. The cake is placed lovingly into the oven. Rosemary then takes some aspirin and tidies the kitchen, spraying it with fresh air spray as she does so. It is as she is washing up the mixing bowl that she sees the squirrel enter the garden. She moves carefully back from the sink so he cannot see her but she can just about see him. He is looking at the dustbin and she knows that he can smell the almonds. Then suddenly he disappears. She feels her heart beating rapidly like a drum and stands, eyes vacant at the kitchen window for almost ten minutes. The squirrel is suddenly there and stares at her. She stares back, watches as the animal washes itself and feels a desperation so strong to go out and check the bowl that she has to cling onto the sink to prevent herself. The squirrel has a hold over her now and there is somehow a shared solidarity between them. She feels she hears him agreeing to be the alter sacrifice for Jonathan Byrnes. He gives her a last stare and jumps into the apple tree. Dare she now go out and check the dish? Without glancing at the tree she walks to the dustbin and gasps when she sees the dish is completely empty. She looks up at the tree to see the squirrel still cleaning himself and feels her heart drop when she realises it hasn't worked. She walks desolately back to the kitchen. It is stifling hot in there now and she leaves the door open for she has nothing to hide anymore. She picks up the bowl to wash it when she sees from the corner of her eye something fall from the air. She shields her eyes from the sun and sees the squirrel is on the ground. She rushes out and stops in front of him. The animal is still alive but cannot move, his eyes stare at her helplessly and she is immobile. She lets out a stifled scream as he begins to foam at the mouth and struggles to get his last breath.

She stands there for what seems like hours and would have continued to stay there had the faint smell of burning not distracted her. She flew into the kitchen and rescued the cake.

It was an hour later when she went back out and buried the squirrel. It had taken her that time to get over its death. After that she let Lucy out and cleaned the bowl. A

final spray of air freshener and it seemed as though nothing odd had happened at Rosemary Petersons house.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He deliberates, the mobile phone poised in his hand, finally it is Jessica he phones.

The train jerks and then he is rolling past the countryside, the gentle movements of the train soothing him but not easing his pain. The small compartment seems stifling and he removes his jacket and opens the window. Normally he would have gloried at the beauty of an early summers day, but sweat was running down his face, partly from the pain but also from his fear. It had begun again early that morning but optimistic it would pass as it always had, he continued with his normal routine. By the time he reached the office he felt dreadful, and his secretary's concerned face confirmed he looked it. Something was defiantly wrong, previously it had been a dull nagging pain but today it feels like hot irons searing his insides. He is terrified. What if he does not make it home? Has a massive heart attack on the train? It is reassuring that it is not a long journey and that Jessica will meet him at the Station. He knows he should call Virginia but feels it will stress him more. Jessica will tell him what to do. He likes her strength and wishes Virginia were more that way. It had been irresponsible of him to neglect the pain. The sun dappled the seat opposite him with strange shapes, the swaying of a tree possibly or perhaps a solitary bird looking for its mate, then he was thrown into cold darkness to suddenly emerge yet again into fragmented sunshine which broke through the gaps of the high rise buildings in the centre of town. His hair is now soaked with perspiration and he does not rise from his seat when the train stops.

"Robert?"

Jessica is leading him from the train. It is she who takes him to the hospital, anxiety fluttering in her chest the whole time. She tells Robert she will phone Virginia from the hospital and he wonders what she will say.

\* \* \*

Virginia walks in the garden. Her hair is freshly washed and hangs loose. Her hands are pushed deep into the pockets of her jeans. She had changed twice already, unsure what to wear, finally choosing a simple beige silk blouse and jeans. She runs her hand through her hair and looks around the garden. It is an overflowing fountain of colours contrasting beautifully together like a painting and she sniffs at the white roses. Beyond she sees an apple tree and is instantly reminded of the orchard. She ignores it and continues to walk until she is standing outside Robert's new greenhouse. She turns and looks back. The garden truly was distinctively Roberts. He had had it planned almost identical to their last one, including a small bench beneath the apple tree. She smiles indulgently and curiously opens the door and steps inside. The heat is oppressive and she gasps. It is full of germinating pots and trays. There are shelves of plants labelled "Fete" and she remembers that there is a meeting this evening and wonders if Robert will go. Idly she walks about, mostly to stop herself thinking about the phone call from Rowena and to forestall a decision she has to make. Before the day is over she must decide whether to continue seeing Jonathan.

She stares amazed at a desk Robert has in the corner. She rifles through the gardening magazines that cover the top like a tablecloth and then finds her fingers itching to open the single drawer. Would there be letters from Jessica? She hesitates for only a second. There are numerous tools that she carefully moves, and yes!

Pushed right to the back is a white envelope. She looks behind her; confident the coast is clear she retrieves it carefully. She sees now that the envelope is quite tatty and realises it is old letter and probably not from Jessica at all, but seeing as she has gone this far... The single sheet of paper slides easily from the envelope and she unfolds it. Her tears instantly blur the words and she can barely read it for the trembling of her hands

*“When I am dead, my dearest,  
Sing no sad songs for me:  
Plant thou no roses at my head,  
Nor shady cypress tree:  
Be the green grass above me  
With showers and dewdrops wet;  
And if thou wilt, remember,  
And if thou wilt, forget”  
I know you both love this poem and it seemed apt.  
Forgive me.  
Edward.*

Her grip slackens and she watches it drift to the floor leisurely like a leaf falling from a tree on a warm spring day. She stands and stares at it for what seems an eternity until finally she picks it up. She rereads it several times before placing inside the pocket of her jeans. She sits on the small stool in front of the desk and stares ahead, her eyes a pool of sadness, her jaw tight. A deep quiet anger is simmering behind the calm façade and she feels her face ache from muscle tension. Heat enters her body as though she has been immersed into a fire. No thoughts enter her head; it is as though she is incapable of thought or speech. After, what seems like hours, she stands up slowly and leaves the greenhouse. Her body feels heavy, like lead and the muscles in her neck and face throb. Celia notices her from the kitchen window and thinks again what a generous woman she is. She is about to turn from the window when she sees Virginia enter the shed and come out with what seems to be a large axe. Celia’s heart churns for Mrs. Spencer is now sobbing uncontrollably. Her shoulders are shaking and her head is bobbing about like a puppet on a string, except no one was pulling Virginia’s strings. She is about to call her name from the open window but a scream leaves her lips instead as Virginia wields the axe and brings it down with a thud, smashing one side of the greenhouse. The sound of the shattering glass silences Celia who stands in a threefold state of panic, fear and helplessness. Virginia calmly steps on the shards of glass enjoying the crunching sound beneath her feet. Her tear filled eyes fleetingly glimpse Celia at the window.

“Stay away,” she shouts and Celia hears the suppressed anger in her voice.

She walks back into the Greenhouse and after feasting her eyes on everything stored there for one last time, she lifts the axe. It is incredibly heavy and she uses both hands to bring it down with the force she needs. Her simmering anger has boiled over into a raging storm, dark and threatening, it’s full reign to be leased before there can be any respite. The axe comes down again and again, chopping through healthy geraniums, leaving bright red bloodstains on the floor. It attacks newly grown petunias with the frenzy of a murderer sending petals and leaves to fly free in the gentle breeze. Nothing is spared, seed packets are torn to pieces and scattered about the floor like chicken feed. Compost splatters the windows and couples itself

with strewn peat. The table is battered to a pulp and the effort of its destruction exhausts her. The magazines are torn to shreds and flung amongst, the now dead, plants. It is as though a fierce wind has gusted through Millbridge, leaving devastation in its wake. There is a voice in her head, an avenging angel, giving permission for her acts of destruction. She lifts the trays and pots and spills them upside down and then hacks at them. Celia watches horrified, unable to move as Virginia shields her eyes and whacks the axe at the rest of the buildings exterior. Glass sprays everywhere like rain and Virginia feels a sharp stab of pain in both her hand and face. She begins to kick at the debris in front of her, screaming obscenities as she does so. Her breathing is laboured and she feels her legs buckle. Celia watches her fall to the ground and rushes out to her. She stops within a few feet and stares. Virginia sits sobbing, her hair a mass of tangles and her face and hands bleeding. Her blouse is splattered with dirt and blood. The axe is still held tightly in her hand and Celia maintains a distance.

“Mrs. Spencer, I think we should clean your cuts. Do you want me to help you?”

Virginia looks at her like a child; her face is streaked with tears and dried blood. She puts a hand into her pocket and hands an envelope to Celia.

“He kept this from me. All this time.” She shakes her head and repeats “All this time. Did I deserve that?” she asks of a woman she barely knows.

Celia bit her lower lip. She isn’t sure if she should read the letter. What would Mr. Spencer say?

She takes the envelope and reluctantly removes the letter. Virginia’s eyes are glued to Celia’s face as she reads then slowly replaces the letter wiping unexpected tears from her eyes.

“Edward was your son?” It was a statement rather than a question.

Virginia barely nods.

Celia takes her by the hand.

“We should get you cleaned up.”

Celia was a simple woman. During her time working for Virginia she had found it difficult to understand her but knew something had gone wrong for she acted in a similar way to Celia when her husband Bob had began having his funny turns and they finally told her it was Alzheimer’s. Then, this morning the disclosure of her son’s death although harrowing had shed some light and Celia didn’t think she would get much sleep tonight. It was inconceivable that Mr. Spencer should hide such an important letter. She didn’t know much about how these people lived; perhaps they didn’t talk as much as she and Bob had, but she knew Bob would never have done that to her.

Virginia stares in shock at the greenhouse.

“Oh God,” she moans. “Everyone has secrets but that was not his to keep.” Her eyes stare horror stricken at the devastation.

“Bastard deserved it. Come along let me make you a drink,” her voice soothes Virginia and she meekly follows like a child. Poor thing, thinks Celia, she is just a frail minded woman driven to despair. Mr. Spencer was wrong to intimate that his wife was in some way deranged. Of course, after today’s incident, people in the village will certainly consider her crazy.

Once in the kitchen where all seem far removed from the chaos and obliteration of the greenhouse, the kettle whistled musically and Celia bustles gently around Virginia. Carefully she places a hot water bottle in her lap and Virginia smiles gratefully but is unsure what to do with it.

"It will comfort you. Now drink your tea." Celia ordered placing a steaming mug in front of her.

Virginia is amazed at how calm she feels. Her body feels light and peaceful, as though she has undergone a transition. She takes a small sip of the hot tea and then places the mug onto the table and watches thin trails of steam drift to the ceiling. The letter lies loosely in her hand and she runs her fingers across the paper. She looks at the crisp whiteness of it as though it had been written only yesterday. It had been taken from her writing set that she had kept in the lounge bureau and it is only now that she sees her printed initials at the top of the page. She lifts it to her lips and kisses it tenderly as though it were sacred parchment. Instantly an obscure but distinct smell passes her nostrils. It is a trick of the mind, a cruel illusion that often accompanies grief, but in that moment she smells the soft, warm, enticing fragrance of her only son. The hot water bottle is soothing and she lays her hand upon it. The envelope sits lonely and abandoned on the table. It is shabbier than the letter, its close proximity to seeds and bulbs have left murky marks upon it. Carefully she replaces the precious letter back into its grubby case. It is then that she senses something she cannot explain and Quickly races upstairs. Within minutes, several photos clutched in her hand, she stands again in front of Celia.

"This is my son, Edward. He was a lovely boy. Would you display them on the piano for me? I have to go out, I forgot my appointment this morning. I would appreciate it very much."

Celia carefully takes the photographs.

"It will be my pleasure." She smiles.

Virginia grabs the mug of tea and walks to the study. She writes a quick note and places it in an envelope. On the front she addresses it, simply "For the attention of Rector Byrnes". She then grabs her bag snatches her lipstick, which she applies lightly, changes into a fresh blouse, runs a brush through her hair and then rushes from the house via the back door. She does not think of her forthcoming meeting with Rowena, or of Robert but forces her mind to be still for the duration of her brisk walk to the Rectory.

\* \* \*

Robert decides to await the outcome of the tests before he phones Virginia. Both he and Jessica are shocked when he is immediately taken to the Coronary unit. Four hours after he arrived at the train station, he discovers the root of his pain.

"You have an ulcer and you have treated it abysmally. It has obviously been giving you problems for weeks. You are very lucky it could have perforated. You need to change your diet, keep your stress down and take the tablets I am prescribing. Your blood pressure is too high also. I shall write to your GP, Make an appointment to see him so he can monitor you. Rest here for a while, I will send in your wife" The Doctor was cold and aloof.

Robert ignores him. It is rather nice to hear Jessica referred to as his wife.

Jessica also doesn't correct the Doctor. She is relieved to finally see Robert.

She had sat there for hours staring at the pay phone on the wall, knowing of course all the time she should phone Virginia, she was the woman who ought to be sitting in this waiting room but Jessica didn't phone. It was warm and comfortable, special even, to be the only person who knew of Robert's illness. At last she is allowed to see Robert and cautiously she steps into the clean white sterile ward where Robert sits relaxed on the bed. Like bright sunshine the whiteness of the room,

is almost dazzling. Everything is white, the walls, the sheets the blankets and surprisingly the bed and curtains. All of it enhanced by the brilliant white fluorescent light that seems to almost blind her and make her head throb. There is a heavy silence until Robert breaks it. He looks pale and weary but there is a sparkle in his eyes. A burden has been lifted from him.

“At least I can go home, it’s an ulcer but they can treat it. The Doctor said I was lucky. It was close to perforating. I have you to thank for that Jessica. In fact I should have listened to you weeks go.”

She sits in the heavy armchair that has been strategically placed for visitors. Beyond Roberts’s bed are numerous others filled with scantily clad men. Some are coughing, others moaning and the rest seem to be reading. It stirs chilling memories of her husband’s death and suddenly she needs to leave as quickly as possible. Robert senses her discomfort and rolls his neck.

“I should phone Virginia.” He says simply.

The implication is immediately apparent to both of them. If this friendship is so innocent why were they afraid?

Jessica stands up. She should leave now.

“Yes. I think it best if she collects you.”

She walks to the door and he stares, bewildered and afraid.

Light heartedly he suggests dropping by to see her in a few days and she looks at him, her head to one side, a pool of sadness evident in her eyes. He sees it and tries to think of something insignificant so he can quickly stop the words he doesn’t wish to hear.

“Perhaps it would be best if you didn’t come anymore. It isn’t that I don’t want you to but I am confused about us.”

He bows his head. I think I love you, is what he wants to say. But how can he? Has he stopped loving Virginia? Is he simply needy and Jessica fills that need?

“The truth is I’m confused too. I only know I enjoy being with you more than I do Virginia. I don’t want to stop seeing you, please don’t ask me to. I promise I will try and sort out my feelings but I would never use you Jessica.”

She stands still for a moment longer and then moves towards him. He feels the softness of her lips on his cheek like the stroke of a butterfly and then she is gone. It is the only answer he needs.

He sits quietly for a while and then finally asks a nurse for a telephone.

\* \* \*

Rowena seems a different woman to the scruffy lank haired one that Virginia had rescued from the river. She welcomes Virginia warmly and without preamble relates how she felt impelled to paint the previous evening. Her cheeks are deeply flushed and she seems quite animated. Virginia struggles desperately to hear what the woman is saying, but her ears are half pricked for any other sound that would indicate Jonathan was home. Does he know she is here? As though reading Virginia’s mind, she pulls a white sheet from the canvas and says.

“Jonathan had to go out, he apologies for missing you.”

Virginia’s shoulders slump and her mouth gapes as she stares in contemplative silence at the painting. Silent tears roll down her cheeks and her body begins to tremble.

“That isn’t me,” she gratefully accepts a tissue from Rowena.

Her hand touches the canvas and gently traces the features like a blind person. This is Gina, she thinks. A woman who was happy, free and untarnished. A woman

who always knew she lived with a man that kept secrets, but always she knew they had been harmless secrets, until now. Or had they? Had there been other not so harmless ones before? How strange to have been married for twenty years and only now discover that your husband is not at all the man you imagined him to be. Her attention is brutally forced back to the present by Rowena's voice. It has a soft Irish lilt to it and Virginia finds it soothes her, or perhaps she is susceptible to anything that may soothe at the moment.

"I want you to have it." Rowena begins to remove it from the easel

Virginia forces a smile, but it is weak. There is an odd change about the woman in front of her. She is excitable and happy, a stark contrast to the depressed woman she had rescued from the river. Yet, still, there was strangeness about her, an uneasy shyness that had not been there previously. There are no words spoken. She watches as Rowena carefully wraps the painting and attaches string to make it easy for Virginia to carry and sees she is blushing. It is then Virginia knows.

"Jonathan told you about me didn't he?" she says suddenly as she knots the string.

Virginia gasps and Rowena laughs.

"It's alright, after what Rosemary said to you I am surprised you didn't guess for yourself."

"It's not my business." She takes the painting. "Thank you for this."

Rowena hangs onto the string and Virginia looks into her eyes.

"You saved my life but can you give me a reason to live? Do you have any concept of the sin I have committed? Because of me, although he denies that is the reason, Jonathan has lost his faith. I... we, have to help him. It's a terrible thing for someone in his position to fall away from God, do you not realise there will be no forgiveness for him." The agony in her voice is pitiful to Virginia who releases the painting and turns to look out of the window. Ahead of her she sees people walking slowly through the village. Her vision is partially blocked by trees and again unbidden memories of the orchard attack her. A man is entering the front gate and she realises it is him and her hand automatically reaches into her pocket where it lightly touches her letter as Edward had once fondled his two years previous.

She turns back to Rowena who is awaiting her reply.

She takes a deep breath.

"God sacrificed his only son to save us. But we have not been released. I sacrificed my only son too and for what? If having too much money is a sin then that was mine. If your God were good he wouldn't have taken my son, because I did nothing to deserve it. You can destroy your life if you want to but at least destroy it for a reason. If you believe in this God and his powers then you are telling me I deserved to lose my son. Then give me a reason to live? Do you as a deeply religious woman have any concept of the sin I have committed? Because I don't know of any sin big enough that deserved the punishment of taking my only child from me, can you? We punish only ourselves Rowena. Tell me, tell me now, why did your precious God steal my son? I went to church most weeks. Where is God Rowena? I hate him more than I hate anyone and if you let him ruin your life you may have to one day accept that the only person who wasted your life was you. Love comes in many forms. Do you really believe you cannot be a lesbian and have faith? You see I believe love and goodness are the things that matter. You are a good person, a good Christian but somehow your God has failed you, why? I think that is the only question to ask. I asked it and



decided the only answer had to be that there isn't a God. Life is just good and bad luck. I don't believe we even have free will."

The faint click of the front door stops her and she stares at the other woman. Rowena's imprisoned mind struggles helplessly with Virginia's blasphemous statement and she stands helpless the painting dangling from her hand. Virginia gently eases it from her fingers.

"I cannot help release your husband because I believe he is released. Thank you for the painting, you have brought me back to life, I only wish I could do the same for you."

Without another word she walks to the door and lets herself out onto the landing. She descends the stairs slowly. For just a few seconds she stands uncertainly by the hall table before she removes the letter and places it beside other unopened ones. Silently she lets herself out of the house and begins the slow walk home.

The phone rings and Rowena jumps, pulling her eyes away from the window where she had been watching Virginia she picks up the extension and hears Jonathan's voice. He is talking to Rosemary. She knows she should hang up but can't.

Rosemary seems breathless and Rowena wonders why.

"Oh that's a relief. I will see you both tomorrow then. Do ask Mrs Byrnes to leave a list of things that she needs doing."

"I will, thanks Rosemary."

She waits until the line goes dead and then marches into his study. The door crashes against the wall as she slams it open.

"How dare you. I do not want that woman here, I told you."

He massages his temples. How much more?

"What the hell do you want then? For the whole village to know that you are a lesbian and a drunk if we fire her that is what will happen?" He hurls at her and it hits like an arrow to her heart.

She swallows and her eyes dart about the room.

"What are we to do?" she asks like a lost girl.

He puts his arm about her.

"It's okay everything will be okay," although he feels certain that it won't be for much longer.

She nods and leaves. He waits until he hears her door close before he retrieves the letter that he saw Virginia lay on the table. He softly enters the kitchen and carefully opens it.

*Jonathan,*

*I learnt today that Robert hid Edward's suicide note.*

*I have done something very drastic and silly,*

*But I now know that last night was not drastic but*

*Meaningful. I want and need to see you again.*

*Can you meet me tonight? Phone my mobile.*

*Love*

*V.*

She answers as soon as it rings. He tells her there is a meeting about the fete but that he will meet her straight after. She agrees without hesitation and he replaces the receiver with a sigh. The phone rings and he grabs it. It is Elizabeth; she checks the time of the meeting. Quickly he regains his composure and throws himself into the role of Rector once again.

Rowena stares at the tear-streaked face in the mirror. It is pale and drawn and deep despair is reflected back like a thorn into her heart. On the dressing table is her bible and she picks it up and holds it and stares again into the mirror.

“If I am a terrible sinner why did you not let me drown? I wanted to. Why do you punish me and not Charley? “Why do you hate me?” Is it God she speaks to or herself?

Suddenly the room seems darker as though a huge black cloud has descended and obliterated the sun. The mirror resembles one similar to that seen in theatre dressing rooms with a glow of light encircling it. An illusory scene is taking place in front of her own eyes and she feels like weights are trapping her body in the chair. She cannot see any other objects in the room, only the mirror that dazzles at her like a flashing amusement game at a funfair. Her eyes seem brighter and she seems to be smiling. Then she watches as her own image speaks. The voice is hers but she does not feel her mouth open.

“Why do you hate me Rowena?”

She stares transfixed. Her mouth opens and closes but nothing comes from them while the smiling mirror image patiently awaits her reply. Then suddenly the room is bright again and she looks around bewildered. The image in the mirror reflects her confusion. Did she imagine it? She wonders. Then, as if hit by a bolt of lightning she seems to throw herself off the chair and dashes across to the bed where she lays flat on her stomach. Is she truly the only one who hates Rowena? Jonathan doesn't and obviously neither does Virginia. If she can accept that she is different but control it, then God would forgive her. Again she asks God to please give her strength, but for the first time in her life she feels her prayer is not being heard and cannot decide if it means God hates her or just does not exist. But a non-existent God is a difficult concept for her to consider.

\* \*

Celia is about to leave when she hears the taxi come to a halt in the driveway. The loud purr of the engine tells her right away that it is a cab and she rushes to the window.

"Oh God," she mutters at the sight of Robert Spencer alighting from the hired car. Virginia has still not returned and Celia does not want to explain about the greenhouse. Even from this distance she can see that he is not well. Against her better judgement she opens the door for him.

"Celia, thank you," he nods gratefully.

"Is everything alright Mr. Spencer? It's rather early for you to be home, if you don't mind my saying."

She watches as he makes his way carefully to the lounge, using items of furniture as support. He looks terribly pale and she feels sorry for him.

"Let me help you," she says and takes his arm. With her aid he gently eases himself into an armchair. Celia winces, for she had tried to steer him towards one that didn't overlook a window.

She offers to make tea, which he declines because he does not wish her to stay longer than her allotted time. She assures him it is fine, explains that Mrs. Spencer has gone for one of her walks and hastily retreats to the kitchen where she collides with Virginia.

"Did someone arrive in a cab Celia?" she asks placing her mobile into her handbag and the painting on the table.

Celia's mouth gapes. Oh Lord, she thinks, there will be murder.

"Mr. Spencer. I think he was taken ill and had to come home early."

"What the hell..."

Celia turns fearful eyes towards Virginia at the sound of Robert's outburst.

"Celia," he shouts, "What the hell happened here today?"

Virginia lifts a hand to Celia and shakes her head.

"We'll see you in the morning," she says calmly pointing to the back door.

Celia smiles gratefully and grabs her coat. Celia is gone before Virginia reaches the lounge.

Robert stands at the window, a shattered man. He does not hear Virginia who now stands behind him an essence of calm repose. Robert seems to waver and a whimpering sound leaves his lips.

"Celia," he shouts again and turns to see Virginia.

"Who the hell did that?" he thundered. "Did you call the police? I need to sit down. I had to go to the hospital. I have an ulcer and high blood pressure, I mean for Christ sake we're supposed to be living in a safe village." He shouts as his anger reaches intensity unknown to them both and for a second Virginia covers her ears.

"Robert!" her tone is calm "Please do not shout"

He falls back into his chair and forces himself to take deep breaths.

Virginia sighs.

"I've had a frightful day, but so have you it seems. Why didn't you phone me from the station I would have collected you and taken you the Hospital, "

Robert begins to open his mouth to reply when she abruptly stops him. There is an odious note in the tone of her voice and yet, to him, she seems calm and composed.

"Or did the wonderful Jessica save me the trouble? I really ought to thank her I suppose. So, you have an Ulcer and high blood pressure."

She sits opposite him and lights a cigarette.

"This is my first one today. I think I have done exceptionally well considering the awful day I've had."

Robert is bemused. She isn't mentioning the greenhouse and she must surely have seen it. He begins to wonder if she has finally tipped the edge. It had always worried him this may happen. Or, my God was her jealousy of Jessica so strong, her feelings for him so powerful that she could not see past that.

"Virginia," he says patiently, "Have you seen the greenhouse? Someone has smashed it to bits." He tries to remain calm because if it is because of Jessica the last thing he wants is for her to have a breakdown. Keep calm, he tells himself gently as though speaking to his inner child.

She looks beyond him to the garden and smiles but it fails to reach her eyes. The debris sits there, lonely and abandoned. Murdered plants scattered about the garden amidst broken glass. A vague memory filters through her muddled brain "Night of the broken glass". Who had told her that? Ah, yes, it was Marcus. He was explaining about the Holocaust. There had been this night of total destruction.

"Shops were destroyed and Synagogues, Jews murdered. There was so much shattered glass that it was named Kristallnacht- night of broken glass"

"Night of broken glass," the words leave her lips before she can stop them.

The hand that holds the cigarette is shaking so much that ash drips like candle wax onto the new carpet.

Robert leaps from his chair and grabs the ashtray that sits innocently on the table.

Celia," he cries as he feels his legs buckle.

"I sent her home. You really don't pay her enough. I increased her hourly rate today; we now pay her eight pounds an hour. She put Edwards photographs on the piano for me, don't you think she has arranged them well?"

His eyes bulged.

"What! Have you told her that? My God, Virginia this is a village, we are not in London now. People do not expect that kind of ..."

"Decent salary," she interrupts as she stubs out the cigarette that she finds holds little taste for her.

They are both suspended into silence at the sound of the front door bell. It rings and rings until Virginia stands up angrily.

It is Seth. His eyes are glazed and his mouth opens and closes but nothing emits from them. Finally he points to the back of the house but Virginia stands and stares like a stuffed dummy. Seth gently pushes past her and finds Robert. He stands at the entrance to the lounge and they stare at each other.

Virginia walks past him.

"Do come in Seth," she says sarcastically.

He looks past her and again at Robert.

"I know Seth." Robert says.

Seth fidgets uncomfortably, his hands deep in the pockets of his jeans.

"I..." he swallows deeply. "I dropped by to see if you were going to the meeting tonight, you know, for the fete? Then I saw the.... Who would do that?"

Virginia walks to the window and stares at the greenhouse.

“Robert is ill. I don’t think he will be well enough for the meeting tonight,” she speaks without looking at either of them. Go, you bastard, she thinks angrily. She hovers of the brink of hysteria and wants this man out of her house before she erupts. Seth looks from one to the other and backs slowly towards the door.

“Why don’t you phone me if you want to go. I’ll drop by tomorrow to see how you are feeling.” Seth says softly to Robert. There is something about Virginia that makes him uncomfortable.

He lifts a hand to her but she ignores him. Robert smiles gently at him. Poor boy doesn’t understand what is happening and then instantly thinks, neither do I. He thanks him with promises to phone the next day.

Virginia continues to stare out of the window long after Seth has left. Robert tries to contemplate calmly for he is intensely aware that things are far from right and although he is desperate to lay down he forces himself to sit up straight and look at Virginia’s back.

“I’m sorry. I...” he fumbles. Everything was dandy wasn’t it? She had started to make friends. Life wouldn’t be a bowl of cherries, not yet, he knew that, but...

“Jessica is a good friend.” He shrugs. “She was nearby. It saved you a journey.” Oh God, what was he saying? What man asks a good friend instead of his wife? She gives him a cold look and he is grateful for that, for at least she is now facing him. She seems to be considering him. A heavy stone lies where her heart once lived and she feels the weight of it imprisoning her soul. Where once there were feelings is now only a deep emptiness. She feels a weird sensation, as if she is hovering on the edge of a well looking into its bottomless abyss. The words that fall from her lips in the next second will be her plunge into the icy depths but she knows she cannot go back. It is over. Even if Robert forgives her, she can never ever do likewise. His hair is greyer, she notes, or maybe it has been that way for some time. She wonders idly as she looks at him, how many secrets there have been. There had been many harmless ones in the past. He liked to have his private things; at least that was his explanation. He looks old, she thought and I suppose I do too. Edward’s death nearly finished us both.

“I can forgive Jessica. I know we haven’t had much time together and maybe I was selfish Robert. I needed to grieve alone. I understand your loss too but I gave birth to him, he came from my body, he was part of me.”

Oh, she thinks, how a letter can change so much.

She looks to the window and the greenhouse, there is a sparkle in her eyes and it is then he knows. She turns back to him and is angered that his head is still held high.

“It was all I had of him. It didn’t explain why, so I didn’t show it to you...” was all he said.

Her face contorts with rage.

“How dare you...”

He stands up abruptly and sways slightly.

“You always took everything Gina, everything! You made him your son! You blamed his death on me. You never gave me anything without making me pay...”

His face grimaces with the sudden pain that punches him in the chest and pale faced he gently eases himself back into the chair. Virginia stares stunned. Her nostrils flare and the muscles below her right eye begin to twitch.

"That gives you the right to hide the last letter our son ever wrote us?"

He scoffs.

"You would have mourned over that for another four years." It is a heartless comment and he knows it but does not care. He begins to search through his pocket for his pipe and then to her indignation begins to calmly fill it with tobacco in his normal slow way.

There is a deafening silence. She gives him one last look and walks towards the door.

"I smashed your greenhouse and I would do it again. I want you to leave. I don't care where you go. Go to her if you want. Take whatever you like, I don't care. I have the letter and I will get a copy for you. I am going to Celia's for a cup of tea. I will give you just over an hour."

He attempts to go to her but she holds her hand up.

"Please don't be here when I get back. I realise we have things to sort out but I need time. You have the money to go wherever you want. Just get out!"

She storms from the room without a backward glance. He stands like a statue, one arm outstretched towards her that halts in its tracks at her words, the other holds his pipe poised ready for his lips. He stands like that for some time after she has left, until finally he lights the pipe and sits down puffing at it contemplatively.

\* \* \*

*Journal Entry:*

*It will soon be June. How beautiful everything will look. It is the second meeting for the fete this evening and I feel so tired. I know how panicked Rowena must be feeling. I saw her struggling to hide it from me, maintaining a solemn expression like a mask when I know she just wanted to allow all her features to crumble in her devastation. Why? Why did she have to paint Virginia? Why did she strike an arrow into my Achilles heel? Always, I have tried and succeeded to be, understanding, even in the face of my own doubt. I should have shown more self-control. How ridiculous to think she would ever want Virginia. I should have realised. The torture she has suffered for loving Charley these past years. How childish one seems when feeling love. Now, my secret finally belongs to us both. Even her feeble hope that Virginia would help us has been destroyed.*

*I sit looking at Virginia's letter and smile at the way she has signed it V. It feels very intimate. I like to pretend she signs letters that way only for me. It is true; one is so very childish when in love. Is that what I am? Am I truly in love? I know I would cancel the meeting tonight just to rest in her arms again but I cannot be so reckless. I think all the time of her body, stroking it, kissing it. I shudder at the memory of her softness pressed against the roughness that is nature. I stupidly thought of carving our initials in the trunk of that tree. Did I disappoint her? My eagerness and desperation made me far too quick. I feel great earnest to tell her that it can be better. Oh, how I hope the fete meeting will be swift but I know I fool myself. Have I always? Contemplation and reflection are wonderful things but to linger on them now would be foolhardy. Oh, but how I long to be twenty years younger, armed with the wisdom I once so cautiously doubted when presented to me. I would gratefully plunge into life as one might a clear blue sea and indulge in its wide expanse. But, now one cannot be so frivolous. It is so easy after being imprisoned for so long, living a lie that one trusted so much to be the truth, to grab life with sweet rapture, but I must be careful. I have already erred with Virginia and tonight I must speak with her. I know that I can*

*no longer live this mendacious life and survive. I am embellished with guilt, fear and shame. I am so obviously transparent yet it is like a shield hides me, for no one sees the real Jonathan Byrnes except I. I do not fear the wrath of God bearing down upon me like that very cross that Christ carried. But I know that my release of the one I have so truly loved does not give me total abandoned freedom to desecrate and destroy others. I must withhold deep within me my own teachings of goodness and remember that virtue is something one struggles with but must uphold. I cannot now let my egoism escape like a demon and run forth-leaving desolation and destruction in its wake. What is there for me now? Who am I? For so long I have been Rector Byrnes and only to Rowena have I ever been Jonathan. Who is Jonathan? Will Virginia help me find him? Can she release us from our chains of faith; liberate us to a life of freedom? Oh Virginia, my love, I do truly believe I love you as I have loved no other*

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

He stands on her doorstep like a lost boy. He wears the same suit he had worn that morning. His face is grim, his jaw tight. His usual jovial countenance is sadly missing. He holds a smart suitcase in one hand and a briefcase in the other. The suitcase, although small in size is clearly an expensive one. A broken man stands in front of her but appears to have no idea why.

"I'm sorry. I should go to a hotel. I can afford it but I didn't want to be alone."

Jessica experienced a presentiment shortly after departing the hospital so she looks unsurprised to see Robert standing at the doorway to her home. The question she asks herself is should I let him in? It is quite true, she concedes, he could go to a hotel and a good one at that, far superior to her tiny cottage. She had earlier showered and spent some time drying her hair into shape. She was wearing what Walter had titled 'her posh frock'.

It wasn't posh at all, just not her usual style. She knew it made her look younger though.

"What happened?" she asks, still she does not invite him in. If it is because of her, then she cannot.

He lowers his head and she raises her eyebrows questioningly.

"Virginia found a letter that Edward left after his death. I had it in my desk in the greenhouse."

She gasps.

He looks up, his eyes plead with her.

"It didn't explain why. At first I thought it would make things worse for her and then..."

Again he bows his head.

"I wanted it to be my secret, the one thing I shared alone with Edward. I felt she always took over you see. I know I sound childish and perhaps it was cruel but I needed it, so in the end I didn't tell her at all."

"You'd better come in before the whole village sees you."

But Lily Fisher, on her way to the rectory, already had, although of course she was careful to make certain they didn't see her.

The astonishment at being greeted by Mrs. Byrnes for the fete gathering leaves them all almost speechless. It is Lily who finally finds her voice.

"Rowena, what a delight. You look so robust. Are you joining us this evening?"

Rowena blushes slightly and her cheeks now look decidedly red.

She politely thanks Lily and escorts them into the lounge where the table was set for the meeting. As time goes on people arrive, while others send apologies and the whole time Jonathan looks nervous

"We'll wait a little longer for Jessica. I haven't heard she isn't coming," he says handing out the agenda.

"I think Robert Spencer wanted to come too, but someone smashed his greenhouse today, totally destroyed it. I saw it myself. Robert was devastated." Seth suddenly announced dramatically.

Lily Fisher frowns. How odd. A man turns up at another woman's home with a suitcase in his hand the same day someone has vandalised his garden. What kind of man leaves his wife alone after something like that? A man who isn't a man, she decides. At that instant both Robert and Jessica walk in.



Jessica had not wanted to leave Robert alone. Robert decided he would go too, considering, perhaps after the meeting he could talk to the rector about this whole business with Virginia. He shakes Lady Fisher's hand and almost without conscious thought says how lovely it is to see her again.

"Your wife couldn't make it then?" she asks, an innocent look framing her wrinkled walnut face.

How stupid of Virginia, he thinks, and nods confirmation of Lily's observation, how ridiculously stupid to ask him to leave over such a simple thing as a letter. The absurd thing was that he had actually forgotten about it. Seth smiles kindly at him. What must he have thought today? He glances at Jessica who sits beside him and decides he ought to find a hotel. It would not be right to damage her reputation in the village. Damn Virginia! She always overreacts

Jonathan opens the meeting and the usual arguments begin, Should the Open Gardens stop this year as many find it too intrusive, then, would a Gypsy reading stall be a good idea? Robert is amazed at how long is spent on each subject and how heated the discussions get. Then everyone decides on their tasks for the day, someone agrees to arrange for delivery of tables, someone mentions bunting and a long discussion ensues as to who had it last year. Robert feels himself wanting to cry. He had not felt such a part of anything or anyone since Edward died as he does now. The plant stall is discussed, and Robert wonders if Seth has mentioned the greenhouse because no one asks him about his contribution. However, he is grateful that no one questions him.

Rowena speaks for the first time and everyone is immediately silent.

"Do you think Virginia would run a stall on her own, Robert? Miranda is really geared up for the playschool and I am sure another parent could help. I know Rosemary will want to take charge of the cake stall so we will need someone for the tom-bolo. Jonathan!" The last word reverberated around the room. Its clearness and clarity equalled that of Lily Fishers crystal.

Jonathan's head snaps up and he seems only half conscious of the present proceedings. He shakes his head as though something was irritating it and looks down at the agenda in front of him.

"Right," he says with authority. "That seems to be everything for this meeting, although I thought it would be nice if someone could perhaps organise face painting this year," he wasn't really interested if anyone did face painting at all but he could see by their expressions that his forceful tone had restored their faith in the fete once again.

Then it starts again, much to Robert's merriment who never thought he could feel like this after today. The face painting is organised, as are the balloons and coconut shy. He looks at Jessica with admiration as she talks of refreshments. Lily looks at the rector, well well, she thinks he is in another world it seems, and to add cream to the proceedings Rowena actually shows her face after all these years. Jonathan senses her looking at him.

"I think we are done. Lets have tea. Meanwhile Lily tell me about the fortune telling and how you think you will do it?"

He looks at his watch again. He wonders how soon he can bring the proceedings to an end, worse still how can he hurry them through tea. He visualises Virginia pacing the cemetery and tries to picture what she is wearing and knows then that he has to go. That moment in the orchard was the first time he had felt significant in years. For a moment, maybe it had been purely a second he had felt towards Virginia

a love that he can only describe as altruistic. It was more spiritual than the love he had ever offered to God. Even now he wants to leave this commitment as Rector and go to her. It has always been this way from the first day he met her. With each day since she had come there had been a transition and irrefutable change in him that was quite evident he was certain. Even now, he can sit here opposite Robert and feel no remorse. He looks at the cross on the wall that hangs above the fireplace and knows it is over.

He has grown up.

Rowena finds Seth looking out of the kitchen window. He turns with a start as Rowena enters and goes to walk past back into the other room.

"You should perhaps visit Minnie sometimes. I don't think she has many friends," she says softly switching on the kettle. Cups and saucers sit ready on the table and she fills a jug with milk. For some reason tonight he hates them all. Despises their condescending attitudes. Always they have treated both he and his mother like the paupers of the village. Jessica, always thinking she can tell him what to do and James, looking at him with pity in his eyes, then Celia thinking him above himself because of his friendship with Robert. Robert is the only one worth giving his time to. To hell with the rest of them, especially this one who thinks she is so virtuous because she is a Rector's wife and has the gall to tell him he ought to visit someone. When did she ever visit anyone in the last two years?

"Don't see you visiting folk. Don't see how you could even know if she had friends. Talking of which I met one of yours, she seemed to want to keep it very secret though."

He does not understand why he is being this way. It can't be because Robert came with Jessica. Does Jessica know what happened with the greenhouse? Is it the greenhouse? Is it that why he feels so upset? Or was it the way Virginia also treated him like an imbecile? He finds himself heading off into the private odyssey of his mind when a shattering crash pulls him back sharply into the present. The jug smashed to pieces lies on the floor and milk is dribbling slowly across his shoe. He looks up at her. Her face is so white and her body so still that if he hadn't heard her rasping breath he may have imagined she had died on her feet. Her mind keeps repeating Charley's name. Oh God, she has come to find her, after all this time, and she remembers again their conversation when Charley had joked she would find her at one of her infamous fetes.

Her mouth opens but she can only seem to breathe. He anticipates her question and bending down he begins to collect up the pieces.

"She went to the pub with some man, and then later she found me at the Spencer's and said she wanted a gardener. What she really wanted, was to know about you and if you were well. I said you could be if you drank less."

She lifts her hand to slap him but he catches it in his.

"You think people like me don't have feelings?" He snaps squeezing her hand.

She fights to release it, she is conscious that at any moment someone may walk into the kitchen. Seth frees her hand and turns away from her. She watches as he limps towards the door.

"Seth," the urgency in her voice is emphasised in the soft tone. It is all she can do not to shout at him. Instead she stares at his back and waits breathlessly for him to turn around and face her. Instead he puts his hand out to open the door.

"I don't know who she is and I don't care. I didn't tell her where you lived. I said what I believe," he turns around. She stands by the table one hand leans on it for

support and strange sounds come from her lips as she attempts to breathe. He feels pity for her and helps her into a chair.

"I... I never think of you as someone that doesn't have feelings Seth," she struggles to speak and begins to take deep breaths.

Rowena wants to cry but knows she cannot. Mostly she wants to cry for Seth. Have they always treated him with such disregard? A terrible premonition covers her like a black shroud. It will all end in tragedy; she feels it so strongly that she shivers violently. Seth is lost, he has buried these feelings of deep resentment for years but why is he doing this to Rowena? Is it because she mentioned Minnie? Sometimes he feels more protective towards Minnie than himself.

He begins making the tea.

"Lily Fisher will come in if we don't get this done soon," he remarks and after a moments silence she begins to help him. They prepare everything without a word passing between them and it is not until they are about to take the trays in that Seth speaks.

"It's true, what I said before. I think you do drink too much. I don't know why and I don't know who she was, but she is concerned for you. As for Minnie, if I want to visit and be her friend I will."

She wants to lay a hand on his arm but she cannot because of the tray.

"Seth, whatever you think, the truth is I never think of you any differently than I think of anyone else. Tonight is difficult for me. I wanted to say the right things, and to you maybe I said the wrong thing. I'm sorry."

He nods shyly and walks in with the tray and after taking a deep breath she follows.

Jessica notes that Jonathan looks at his watch again and hopes that he will hurry the meeting to its conclusion so she and Robert can go back and talk. There is a little more talk about the fete during tea then suddenly while drinking their tea Jonathan resumes the meeting with a brief summing up, which Miriam immediately interrupts.

"Surely there is much more to discuss Rector?" she says a look of clear puzzlement on her face.

Jonathan can feel his pulse racing and his head feels fit to burst.

"Yes, I'm sure there is and if you can manage to continue without me that would be wonderful. I sadly have to attend a parishioner this evening," he shrugs, " you are free to carry on without me, Jessica can give me the minutes."

He stands up, fully aware that he has blatantly lied to the leading members of his community and doesn't care.

Rowena watches him leave the room and is unsure what to do. Robert at once senses a need for a leader and steps in without hesitation.

"Shall we continue with the agenda?" he suggests and sees Jessica smile at him. He feels so much better now. The knowledge that his chest pain had not been anything sinister had strangely almost removed it. Most of the evening he has managed to dismiss both Virginia and the greenhouse from his mind but the fact still remains that he would need to go back to Starkfield house and speak frankly with her. A vision of those last minutes with Virginia ran through his mind like a fast train. There had been a change in her these past weeks and he had hoped that at last they were coming though the bad times. He knows he should have shown her the letter but he had wanted it for himself. He had meant it when he had said it was all he had of him. He hates her now for being in the position to share the one thing he held dear,

the letter had always felt like his and his alone. Now, he has to wait for her to get him a copy.

"Would you like to continue, Robert," Rowena asks softly.

Robert lifts his head and with Jessica's admiring glance he takes control of the meeting.

\* \* \*

It is a bright moonlit night and a mild breeze rustles the trees. Jonathan shivers and is grateful he decided to bring his thick fleecy top. He pulls it over his sweater, ruffling his already unkempt hair. He runs his hands through it conscious of how he will appear to her. The Church clock chimes and he stops. He must go back and continue with the meeting. This was foolhardy, where could it lead? Rowena needs him now and so does the community. He is Rector of this village and the servant of God. God represents everything that was solid in his life. He must turn back now but still he continues walking towards her. Once he had believed that Jesus was all pure, perfect, the ultimate of what truth and goodness really was and now Virginia embodies all that, she was pure, as pure as the snow and as innocent as an angel, hypocrisy did not exist within her but goodness shone from her like a lighthouse beacon guiding him to that place that was more pure than anything he had ever experienced, a place called love. Virginia was goodness and purity incarnate and he could no longer follow the path of lies. He can see her small fragile body sitting still and stiff on the bench smoke curls in spirals above her and for a moment he believes he sees a halo. She is wearing jeans and a thick jumper that hangs baggily.

She sees him and begins to run towards him. He sees a piece of paper in her hand and she seems to be waving it at him. She falls into his arms and he feels the warmth of her body through the jumper as he makes a sudden transition. He feels himself plunge into the depth of her being and watches as his own self leaves him like an abandoned child. I am free he thinks, at last I am free.

"He hid this from me. All this time he had this letter and never once mentioned it."

He leads her towards the church,

"It will be a little warmer there and I can turn on the heating."

"You can come back to the house. I asked him to leave. I think he is staying with Jessica." She almost whispers the words.

He takes her hand and can feel the hardness of her wedding ring and unconsciously fiddles with his own.

"He may come back. It will not look good if I am there."

They sit in the Church. It is not as warm as he had hoped and he holds her tight against him.

"I smashed his greenhouse," she laughs but without mirth. "So stupid. I just wanted to hurt him."

He strokes her hand.

"He doesn't even care what this has done to me." She says sorrowfully.

"I care," he whispers, and becomes aware that he is stroking her thigh.

She turns, takes his other hand and places it beneath her jumper. He feels the firmness of her nipple and sighs.

"I want you to take me again like you did in the orchard. Not here, outside." She whispers huskily.

He moves his hand and looks into her face.

"Everything I ever believed left me tonight. The only goodness I have and can hold onto is that that belongs to you."

Wells of tears blur her eyes and she remembers the first day she had seen him. Again she takes his hand and places it on her breast.

*"The life that I have, Is all that I have and the life that I have is yours. The love that I have, of the life that I have*

*Is yours and yours and yours. A..."*

He puts a finger to her to her lips.

*"A sleep I shall have, a rest I shall have, yet death will be but a pause for the peace of my years in the long green grass will be yours and yours and yours."* He finishes and smiles emotionally.

Gently he leads her from the interior of the church to the cemetery outside. She sighs as he lays her back onto the hard tombstone and gasps when he pulls her jeans down roughly. Within seconds he is within her, one hand caresses her breast while the other covers her lips. She bites his hand to stop her moans of pleasure. The hard stone presses into her back and she welcomes the added pain. His lips press firm against hers and she feels the warmth of his tongue as it explores her mouth and she devours his kisses with a passion she never imagined herself capable. One hand slides down to touch his hardness and he groans.

"Oh God," her other hand squeezes his and he holds it tight.

The breeze tingles her thighs like a caress and she gasps as their passion swells over her like a savage wave.

Jonathan feels he has at last come home and lets go with a cry that Virginia tries to suppress with her hand but Seth hears it. They are oblivious to everyone and Virginia begins to sob as Jonathan covers her face with kisses.

"Don't leave me," she whispers carefully pulling her jeans over her thighs.

They sit huddled on the tombstone, hand in hand, peaceful in the solidarity of their love which had for both of them been ignited on their first meeting when his hand had touched hers to take the bird.

Seth stares mute. He wants to run but knows he can't. At first he had thought it was a wounded animal he had heard, then, he sees them and has to suppress a gasp. He feels bile rising into his throat and runs softly behind a bush where he vomits uncontrollably. All he can think of is Robert and the memory of Virginia lying beneath Jonathan. He gags again when he remembers it was her moans that brought him closer to the cemetery; thinking an animal had been hurt. It wasn't uncommon to find a wounded fox. He walks back the way he had come, grateful that he was walking alone. She was evil, that's what she was, evil, and Jonathan, him a rector and everything. She had bewitched him. Everything had been fine until they came. Virginia Spencer was mad, to wreck Robert's greenhouse like that, and it was her of that he was certain and to have Jonathan under her spell like this. What should he do? It would kill Robert if he told him. He has to get home and think things through.

Odd things were going on here. First there is this strange woman looking for Rowena, who turned white as a sheet when he told her and then Virginia smashing the greenhouse for no apparent reason that Robert seemed to know and now Jonathan. He needs to talk to someone, but whom. Then he decides. He will take flowers to Minnie tomorrow and invite her for afternoon tea and let Lily Fisher say what she pleases.

Neither Jonathan nor Virginia see or hear Seth. Virginia is now shivering, partly from the cold but also from her high emotional state. The letter lies in her lap, her

hand gently protecting it. Jonathan sits and stares at her unable to believe that he has taken her for a second time. He feels jubilant when he should feel disgrace. His hand rests on her leg with easy familiarity. He feels her shaking and wraps her in his arms.

“You should go home and try to sleep” he says gently, not wanting her to go but knowing she must,

It was growing dark and he could barely discern her face. She grasps his hand tightly.

“Come back with me,” she pleads.

He shakes his head. She can see his eyes clearly, shining like stars in the darkness.

He strokes her hand.

“I can’t. It is too soon.

“Do you not want me?” she whispers, almost hoping he won’t hear her and then she will not have to hear the answer.

He strokes her back gently sliding his hand beneath her jumper and she feels herself becoming aroused again.

“You are all I want. You are who I have been waiting for, I just didn’t know it.”

She leans across and kisses him softly on the lips and feels his arms tighten about her.

“After the fete everything will be sorted. I feel it and you will leave Rowena and she will be alright wont she?”

He nods but he is uncertain if Rowena would be all right if he left her.

The only sounds around them are the cries of wild animals, something unknown to Virginia, and the crackling of the letter she holds in her hand.

A deep quiet suddenly surrounds them. He feels strangely weary. It is becoming too much. The long lingering agony of Rowena, his now constant lies, and stupidly even the fete seemed a tremendous burden, and now this union with Virginia. Was their perception all-wrong? Was it love? Or were they simply clinging to each other like life rafts because there was nothing else to hang onto. No, if he let her go now he knew he would become demonic with loss. When she was not with him he thought of nothing else and when she was he could not bear to release her. His thirst for her seemed to be unquenchable. It was pure rapture to be in her arms and drink of the fountain that was Virginia Spencer.

He walks almost to the house with her and stops when they get close. He kisses her tenderly on the lips and she holds his face in her hands. She then turns and walks away from him. Ahead of her she can see the lights are on and timidly approaches the front door.

Robert waits in the lounge. He has packed another suitcase. Jessica has asked him to stay with her and seems not to care about village gossip. He feels he must speak with Virginia. How can two years pass without any change in their feelings regarding the loss of Edward? Have they not moved on at all? He cannot fully comprehend what is happening and thinks again of the desecrated greenhouse that thankfully it is too dark for him to now see. The accusations and bitterness had evaporated with time and he had anticipated their life continuing as it once had. Now, he feels he no longer knows this woman that insists on calling herself Virginia. He misses the made up, well-dressed and jewelled Gina. He looks at the small clock sitting on the mantle. His heart lurches when he remembers the day Edward had

given it to them, it had been on their wedding anniversary five years ago. Would Edward have expected this? Had he had any conception of his actions? Had he not realised that everything would fall apart after his death? Surely these things should bring people closer together, not further apart, or was he being idealistic, He looks about the room for what he imagines may be the last time and his eyes linger on the photographs of Edward on the piano. He is uplifted at the sight of them; maybe this means that she is finally on the road to recovery even if their relationship is over.

He hears a key turn in the lock, the door slams shut and she strides into the lounge and looks disdainfully at him.

"What are you doing here?" she asks as she walks past him, although secretly she had expected him, and sits in an armchair. She fumbles for her cigarettes and lights one with urgency.

"I came for more clothes. How long do you intend this to go on for Gina?"

She jumps up and he steps back.

"Don't call me that, how many times do I have to tell you?"

He sighs.

"I don't understand what's going on here Virginia." He fumbles with the name.

She inhales deeply from her cigarette.

"I want a divorce," she says bluntly after releasing a mist of smoke that drifts around the room and into his nostrils. He grimaces; he has always disliked her smoking. She is amazed that he does not seem shocked by her statement.

He simply nods. It was not what he had expected to hear but somehow it did not surprise him. Deep in his heart he knows they can never make it work again. He feels she is determined to destroy everything that was ever connected to Edward.

"Well, I didn't expect you to be quite so blunt." He swallows loudly.

"I know I've always been a bit dull," he laughs, without mirth.

She stares at him with dead eyes and thinks, yes; you have always been a bit dull. She sits back down.

"You know Edward would never have wanted this?" It was an appeal without any real feeling. After almost twenty years of marriage he had to at least seem to struggle to hold onto things but he knows even he doesn't want to. The woman he was looking at now was not his wife anymore and any marriage they continued with now would be a total sham. She stubs out the cigarette and rises from the chair.

"He would never have wanted you to hide that letter either. I didn't want my son to kill himself but he didn't think of me when he climbed on that table. If we always got what we wanted, what a happy lot we would all be." She lit another cigarette, vowing in her mind that she would stop, soon.

He feels the nagging pain in his stomach.

"The letter isn't that important... it didn't explain anything..." Her expression halts him instantly.

"It explained that he thought of us, us Robert, not just you. I hated him for two years because I couldn't believe he did that to me. I knew my son, I knew he would have left something for us but you kept it for yourself."

"You were in a state, I didn't think it would help you and..." he was trying to excuse himself and felt ashamed.

"How dare you. I always thought you were weak but you have really excelled yourself. I'll leave you to handle everything; you're the solicitor after all. If you need to collect anything let me know and I'll make sure I'm out"

There was silence. Robert took one last look at the photographs then with a nod towards them he asks,

“I’d like to take one if that’s okay.”

The tobacco tastes bitter in her mouth and she stubs out the cigarette half finished.

“He was your son too.” She replies and watches him remove one of her favourites but she makes no comment, instead she walks past him without a backward glance and shuts the door behind her. He stands for a moment and stares at the photos of his son. He places the one he holds into the suitcase and without another glance he leaves Starkfield House.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Virginia wakes in the early hours. Her mind calmly turns to Robert and she wonders if he really is with Jessica. Who would have thought their lives would have come to this. How could Robert not have realised the devastating damage hiding that letter would have caused? A letter, a single solitary letter had changed their lives forever. A fox howls and she jumps. A vision of the fox she had seen earlier with Jonathan flashes through her mind. Barefoot and naked she goes downstairs and opens the kitchen blind. The moon is so bright and she can discern a bat as it swoops down. I love it here, she thinks feeling weary but calm. Across the fields she can see several other lights burning and wonders who else would stay up so late.

Rosemary looks at the clock and sighs, it is well past her bedtime but she must finish putting the final touches to her cake. She has been so afraid all day that someone may call and detect the smell, although she tries to convince herself it is in her mind and that the odour is somehow embedded in her nostrils. All the same, she decides to finish the whole thing that day. Because the weather was so hot it had taken the cake some time to cool down and now she labours over the spreading of the marzipan and icing. Finally spraying the house again with air freshener. Her shoulders ache from the effort and she is desperate for the comfort of her warm bed. She feels wildly excited when she realises that she has actually achieved her aim and baked a cake with hemlock in it and tries to visualise Rowena eating a piece. In her imagined scenario, Rowena then suddenly collapses to the floor in a fit of convulsions. Rosemary sees herself rush to Rowena's aid making sympathetic noises and suggesting possible causes for the fainting attack, because that it was everyone would presume it to be, especially as the day is bound to be so hot. She constantly tells herself that she must remain calm, or they will guess. Her stomach churns at the thought of seeing Rowena tomorrow and vaguely wonders what happened at the Fete meeting. Lucy meows and looks at Rosemary longingly.

She looks again at the clock and gasps. It is almost two thirty, at this rate she will never wake up in the morning. She checks the cake is cool enough for the freezer and gently slides it in.

Rowena sits and looks at herself in the dressing table mirror. She brushes her hair away from her eyes and studies them. There is a brightness to them that has not been there for sometime. She has refrained all evening from recalling her short conversation with Seth, but now she has to frantically fight the overpowering impulse to rush to his house right now and drag him from it like a dog, and demand to know what he was insinuating. Had it been Charley? But, oh what a stupid question, who else could it have been? So, she intends to come to the fete that has to be her plan. Rowena lifts her hair up and clips it with a slide and stares long and hard at her face. So much has happened, can it be possible that God is leading Charley to her? But why would he do that? Was he testing her more? Can he not see that everything is going wrong and all because of this? Jonathan has lost his faith and she is too afraid to even imagine what his fate may now be. Charley has found her, even though she did everything possible to prevent that from happening. She thinks of Virginia Spencer, and realises she knows very little about her, in fact Jonathan seems to be the only real acquaintance that she has. Something odd has happened to her husband too but Rowena cannot discern what it is. All this thinking was beginning to give her a headache and she gets up from the mirror and walks to the bed. It had

been two days now since she had taken a drink and again ignoring the wine bottle she reaches for the jug of water and washes down two aspirin. The bedside clock told her it was nearly two in the morning. She ought to sleep, but she is afraid she will dream of Charley again. Tomorrow she would shower and wash her hair. Strangely, she feels calmer than she has in two years. Jonathan's tranquil denial of God had somehow given her courage. Stupidly she had expected something appalling to happen but it hadn't and she was beginning to realise that if there is a God he does not tempt you beyond what you can bear.

It is only as she is drifting off to sleep she sadly reflects on the fact that her last thought had been *if there is a God*. It has never occurred to her to question that reality before.

Jonathan sits and stares at the empty page of his Journal, a pen poised and ready. Virginia sits at the kitchen table and begins to write carefully on the blank piece of paper that now sits beside Edwards letter. She begins simply with,

*The life I have...*

\* \* \*

*Journal Entry:*

*It is almost the height of Summer and how beautiful Millbridge looks this time of year, but then I often think that in the winter too. It is wonderful to hear the bird's chorus in the morning and be able to stroll until late. Rosemary returns tomorrow. I hope she is well recovered, although from what I am not entirely sure. I must help Rowena. I know how difficult it is for her. I am so proud of the way she coped with the meeting this evening.*

*I should speak to Seth, there is something worrying the boy, he was certainly not himself. It is so very late but I do not feel as weary as I did earlier. I cannot help wonder what Virginia is feeling right now and if it were not so late I would phone her.*

*I am no longer a Rector and it occurs to me that I should disrobe. I do not act in the manner expected of someone in my position. I should not have left the meeting this evening; it was evident that everyone was quite stunned. It is only now that I am so grateful to be free of that Establishment known as the church. I am liberated for even Rowena knows and after her initial panic and astonishment she seems also to be wistful and I wonder if she is considering. How happy I would be for her if she found happiness with Charley. Is she amazed that there has been no thundering from her God since I made my fateful admission?*

*My union with Virginia tonight was unbearably emotional. The delicious smell of her was overpowering. When I first caught sight of her I felt sure I was seeing an angel, so enchanting did she look with the sun behind her shining like a halo around her head. But she was shattered and scarred with pain. Did Robert never feel encumbered hiding the letter from her? Did he truly believe she would never find it? She enthralled me, and the more I see her the more I know I cannot be without her. What is to happen? I was stunned while intriguingly delighted to hear that Robert had moved out. It changes so much. I am cautious in believing that Jessica is serious about Robert, although one could not help notice this evening how she admires him. I am drifting so, as I always tend to do, afraid to write what is really in my head. I cannot believe how all consuming my passion is for her. I feel certain of her love for me, it is as clear as this moonlit night that she will forgive me anything and I her.*

*I know that I love totally and with complete abandonment, but I am not innocent and I know our love will have an intricate path to follow. My decision is made. I do not*

*belong here anymore as soon as the fete is over I will leave and hope Virginia agrees to come with me for without her I think I will die. I shall tell Rowena of my plans tomorrow and she must make her own decisions regarding her future, I cannot be responsible for her any longer if I am to survive and if I continue to be responsible for her, will she survive?*

The pen slips from Jonathan's weary hand and he closes the journal softly while Virginia almost sensually licks the envelope addressed to him.

Seth lies awake and stares at the ceiling of his bedroom. He can hear his mother's snoring from the room opposite. It is not an uncommon sound and in a strange way it soothes him. His head feels like a mass of tangled wool. He is at a loss at what to do. He has no idea whom he should speak to about the rector. He knows he could speak to Jessica but what reason could he give her other than the truth? His worse predicament was how to tell Robert. He was betraying him without doubt if he kept quiet about everything, although the truth was he would prefer to keep quiet. He throws the covers back and wipes the perspiration from his forehead. It is a hot night and he feels he will never sleep if his mind continues to churn like this. He wants to erase the vision of Virginia and Jonathan but it just keeps intruding into his mind like a petulant irritating child. He feels a declining trust in everyone he once so admired. He was distressed to admit that he was ashamed of Robert, heartily throwing himself into the limelight at the meeting, frivolously forgetting his greenhouse had just been smashed and being embarrassingly flirtatious with Jessica. He cannot help wonder if Virginia smashed the greenhouse because she had discovered Robert's affair with Jessica. He shakes his head violently on the pillow. No, that was rubbish, Robert would never do such a thing, Seth knew him, just instinctively knew him. Robert, he suddenly realises, tears prickling his eyes, has become a father figure to him and to even consider he was having an affair was a disgraceful immoral judgement to make. But, even harder was to make sense of Virginia and Jonathan, and also this strange business of that woman who came searching for Rowena. He begins to feel frustrated and tired of contemplating this bizarre puzzle and wonders if he has any role to play at all. Perhaps it will unravel itself as it supposed to, he consoles himself and feels less impelled to take action. He turns onto his side and stares at his father's photograph that sits beside the bed and hears his voice, sensible and firm.

"Always wait about ten days before taking action, often by then all problems have a way of solving themselves."

Yes, he would give them time; let them make the right decision. After all it was only right that Jonathan should resign. He could only talk to them.

He then thinks of Minnie and feels his heart beats that little bit faster. The moon is so bright that it seems like daylight already. A gentle breeze sways the branches of the trees and the shadows dance on his walls like ghosts while their rustling whistles through his open window like whispers. As though answering a question he nods and says aloud.

"I will give them two weeks to do the right thing" But alas little did he know that Minnie was to sidetrack him and instead he gave them four weeks and by then it was too late.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Jonathan receives Virginia's letter hand delivered the following day. Rosemary places it neatly on his desk amongst a pile of others. He takes it into the garden to read and Rosemary who watches from the window sees his mouth break into a wide smile. Rowena has been in her studio the whole morning and it has suited them both to avoid each other. Later in the morning the letter is placed with loving care into his Journal and he then phones and makes arrangements to meet her. He has to go to Hawksworth and has a funeral at three but tells her he should be free by five. He replaces the receiver and instantly it rings. It is James Truman.

"We need to have an emergency fete meeting," There is panic in his voice and Jonathan hears the struggle to contain it. Before he can ask why James blurts out.

"Hawksworth are having their Fete on the same day. The buggers, sorry Rector, have done it on purpose. They know when we have ours."

Jonathan was silent. He could not find an ounce of energy in him to get excited about this. He strokes his beard thoughtfully.

'Does it matter too much. I mean locals will come here and the townies will go there wont they?' He knows it is the wrong reply as soon as James barks at him.

'They have everything but bloody,' he sighs "Sorry Rector..."

"Please stop apologising James," Jonathan butts in.

"Everything but the queen herself. It's the best fete they've planned in years, so you can see they don't want our little popular one to get in their way? We just have to have ours earlier.'

"Earlier?" repeats Jonathan, all the fete plans run rapidly through his head as one's life might at the time of death.

A deep sigh was released down the receiver.

"Little point having ours after that one. May as well forget it altogether."

"Forget it!"

"Why do you keep repeating what I say? Can't you say anything positive?"

Jonathan sighs.. He wants to say damn your fete.

"But there is still so much to organise"

"That's why we need a meeting and very soon." James looks at his wife and raises his eyebrows.

Jonathan grabs his diary, drops it and quickly grasps it again.

"The earliest I can do is tomorrow. But I don't know about everyone else."

"Leave that to me," the phone went dead.

'I'm off then.' He turns with a jump at Rosemary's voice.

"Right, excellent, thanks Rosemary."

"You wont forget to give me the minutes of the meeting from last night?"

He begins to pack his briefcase, conscious her eyes watch his every move.

"Looks like we have a problem. I think we may have to bring it forward. James is organising a meeting for tomorrow why don't you give him a ring. I have to dash. Thanks for everything today Rosemary."

He rushes past her and she hovers uncertainly. The front door closes and she stares at the journal feeling its pull like a magic spell. Her eyes shine brilliantly clear as though smeared with glycerine. Everything she needs to know about *her* is in that book, and the thought provokes saliva into her mouth as though she were contemplating a delicious well-cooked meal.

Rowena is in her studio and searches through boxes and cupboards in an endeavour to find the numerous oil paintings of the village and surrounding countryside that she had worked on some years back. There had been many and she hopes to use them as her contribution to the fete. The sky is darkening outside and she turns on the light. The early morning sun has disappeared and black clouds threaten rain. She hears the front door close and rushes to the window in the vain hope that it is Rosemary. But it is Jonathan and instantly she feels afraid for Rosemary is still in the house and she does not wish to be alone with her and her recriminating thoughts. She takes a deep breath and walks from the studio with her head held high. She looks first in the bedrooms and realises that Rosemary is in Jonathan's study. The door is slightly ajar and Rosemary is bending over the desk. Rowena can just perceive her pink lacy slip that hangs untidily beneath a thick tweed skirt. There is suddenly a loud clap of thunder and Rosemary jumps turning to look behind her suspiciously. Unrelenting rain begins to slap against the windowpanes and the calm morning is suddenly shaken by fierce winds as though God himself was demonstrating his anger. Jonathan's journal falls from Rosemary's shaking hand and lands heavily on the floor but the impact is overshadowed by another clap of thunder. The ever increasing darkening sky is making it difficult for them to see each other and Rowena walks backwards, her fiery eyes remain locked to Rosemary's now vacant ones. She snaps the light on and it is only then that she realises how inane Rosemary seems, and she thinks how silly she is to be so fearful of the woman as if she were a wolf in sheep's clothing. She watches her closely as she leans down and retrieves the journal. With an unnecessary gentleness she replaces it on the desk. With eyes lowered and a monotonous drone to her voice she says simply.

"Sorry Mrs Byrnes, you made me jump and I dropped it. I was cleaning the desk you see."

They both know it is a lie.

Rowena notices that Rosemary's eyes have a strange glazed look. She looks dishevelled and her lips are cracked and sore and her complexion blotchy.

"I'm sure you have done enough for today and the weather is atrocious, better you get home before it gets worse."

Rosemary just nods. She is grateful to leave. She is tired and the stress of yesterday has taken its toll on her.

After she has left the room Rowena lifts up the Journal and curiously turns it over and over in her hand. She reminds herself to speak to Jonathan about locking it away and is about to leave the room herself when she sees what seems to be a torn sheet on the floor. She reads Virginia's poem once, notes the original V signature at the end and then carefully slides it back inside the Journal. The rain pounds heavily on the roof and the sky is intermittently lit up by lightening and Rowena briefly wonders if Rosemary will be all right. She does not give another thought to the poem or the Journal but tries to remember what she was doing moments before. She leaves the study and locks the door and makes her way back to her studio, unbothered by the loud clapping of thunder and bright flashes of lightening.

Rosemary makes her way straight to her bedroom and lies wearily on the bed. She entices her brain to encourage dreams of Rowena eating the cake and within minutes is asleep.

Seth a few moments earlier watches as she draws the upstairs curtains and he wonders if he should knock and check that she is well but decides she is probably

nervous of the storm which has now become quite severe. He pulls the hood of his jacket further over his head and fights against the strong winds. He is used to working in worse conditions than this so it does not worry him too much. The wind bites through him like a sharp blade but he continues on. He curses his foot for it slows him down and the wind is such a vengeful enemy. He pushes his hands deep into his pockets and tightens his scarf. It never ceases to amaze him how quickly the weather can change. He glimpses a deer running wildly across the fields and then just beyond he can see Lily Fisher's house. James' voice still echoes in his head and he laughs at the memory. Poor James to be ticked off like that would not have pleased him at all.

"I had to phone those buggers we ordered the tables from and did they give me a hard time. Cheek to call me disorganised, me, can you even believe they said that?"

So, the fete would be two weeks earlier this year and not even enough time to get the new date in the "Millbridge News".

"We need everyone at the meeting tonight. Do you think that Robert chap would be good at preparing the flyers? You know him? He looks a computer type."

Seth had then again thought of Virginia and his heart had lurched.

"I guess you could ask him. I imagine he would enjoy doing it." Seth had replied.

Seth reaches Lily Fisher's gate and it creaks loudly as he opens it and he wonders if she deliberately makes it do so. It would please her to know when someone calls. He sees a face at the window and knows it is she. He smiles, she does not smile back.

\* \* \*

The once precious scattered plants, trays of seedlings and half empty plant pots of the greenhouse are violently swept across the garden by the blustering wind. Virginia watches from the French windows as some land in Robert's prize rose bushes. She must clear up the mess of the greenhouse, but not today. The window rattles angrily and she stretches up to close the top lock. They have rarely ever locked the windows but this morning she needed to lock them all. There is a loud crash as the last remaining upright piece of the greenhouse collapses. She struggles to see beyond the fields but it is impossible, all that lies in her vision is a vast veil of mist caused by the relentless heavy downpour. Celia had phoned to say she would not be coming and had Virginia heard about the changes to the Fete. She wonders if she will see Jonathan now and hopes desperately that the weather will ease slightly. She sits at the piano for there seems little else to do on a day like this. She lifts the top with such apprehension that it could be a funeral lid she was opening. The keys jump out at her and she caresses them gently as one may a cat. She looks at the music score that sits on the top and instantly sees Edward watching her. She tries to remember his favourite tune and then begins to play the theme to the film 'Titanic'. Within seconds she is lost to another world and Edward is standing by the piano listening to her and smiling as he always did. She no longer hears the loud claps of thunder and is undisturbed by the flashes of sheet lightning that brighten up the room at intervals like fireworks. The room is very dark but she does not need to see the keys. She continues with Greig's piano concerto, another of Edward's favourites and one she taught him to play. It is the incessant ringing of the phone, however, that finally halts her playing and for a second she looks around lost, unsure where she is.

She picks up the receiver. Robert speaks before she has a chance to say hello.

"I thought I should phone, check you are alright, the weather is frightful."

"It's just wind and rain. It isn't doing your plants much good though."

Robert somehow felt she took pleasure in telling him this.

She hears the clattering sound of crockery in the background as though someone is stacking things in a cupboard and her heart lurches. So familiar a sound, and Robert sits there chatting amiably to her while that woman is there, like it is his home. Maybe it is now, she reflects sadly.

“Are you alright?” he asks and she immediately feels patronised.

“Of course I am. Why shouldn’t I be?”

He looks at Jessica and wishes she would stop drying up and putting dishes away. He really doesn’t want Virginia to think that things are too cosy with Jessica. Jessica, however, is determined to have Virginia think exactly that.

“The weather is atrocious. Jess... I heard some trees had blown down at the back of the church.”

How dare he mention her name, she thinks angrily.

“Well, I don’t live at the back of the church do I? And no trees have fallen down here.”

“Virginia we need to talk, talk properly.” He says it bluntly; he is tired of playing games.

So he wants to be with her then, she thinks, without reason or forethought. A sudden thought that Starkfield house might be sold makes her shudder.

“Yes,” she replies softly. “I am here most days. Tomorrow? But I expect you are working. Thursday then?”

“Good, good. I’ll come about eleven if that suits you?”

“Fine,” she says and thinks what strangers they have become.

She replaces the receiver and stares stunned at the French windows where she sees a man approaching across the fields and seems to be aiming for the house. She feels stupidly anxious and dismisses it as foolish. But who would visit on a day like today? Jonathan? Could it be him?

Seth’s decision to visit Virginia was impulsive. It was at least a mile off his track but he feels commanded to go. At least he knows she is certain to be home. He has decided he will say nothing to the Rector but he needs to know why Robert has been so badly deceived.

The visit to Lily Fisher had been entirely successful in his eyes and although he now feels very weary it is a weariness coupled with a strange happiness. Lily had surprised him by opening the door herself and her cruel sneer had shown him the pleasure her shock had given him.

“Sorry you have travelled all this way Seth but I really am not up to accepting visitors today, the weather has quite upset me.”

Her cheeks were tinged bright red and her dull eyes had been painted with green eye shadow. Her long hair was pulled back into its normal neat bun and large hooped earrings fell from her pierced ears. She sneered at him through bright red painted lips and somehow she reminded him of a circus character.

He smiled.

“That’s excellent news, because it isn’t you I have come to see.”

He watched her jaw drop, and dismay was clear in her watery eyes.

“Although James asked me to inform you there is a fete meeting tomorrow evening. It’s urgent. But you can phone him about that can’t you? I have come to see Minnie.”

Her face contorted with her anger and he saw how ugly she actually was.

"Then you shall go to the back door young man, not the front."

"I shall stand here all day and continue ringing your bell until Minnie comes to this door. I have no intention of seeking her out via the back. The weather doesn't bother me, I can stand here for hours."

Her cheeks sunk in as she drew in a deep breath.

"I shall call the police."

He laughed.

"They will take it very seriously I agree. A young man visiting his lady friend is surely entitled to see her at the front door.'

For a moment she stared at him, and then hissed,

"Damn you." And called Minnie who seemed unsurprised and pleasantly pleased to see him and he instantly felt the whole trip had not been a waste of time. They smiled in silence at each other before he musters up the courage to speak.

"Minnie I was wondering when you had your day off and if you might consider coming to the cinema with me?"

She nods shyly. She had been with Lily Fisher for three years and had not made any real friends for she was shy by nature but she liked Seth very much and thought him incredibly kind.

"It's Friday, this week and I should like that. I haven't seen a film since I have been here."

They made arrangements for the coming Friday and she watched from the door as he walked to the gate. He turned to wave and saw a glaring Lily Fisher at the window. He waved to Minnie and smiled at Lily. He was still carrying this feeling of elation when he decided to visit Virginia. Perhaps it was time to get everything clarified.

The door opens before he can knock. He imagines the sight he must look but she seems not to notice. She is wearing a thick baggy grey jumper and black leggings. Her face is very pale and she looks tired. He notices she is barefoot and stares at her toenails for what seems an interminable time.

"You are drenched Seth. Take off your boots and come in, I'll make you some tea." She hides her disappointment that it is not Jonathan.

He pulls off his Wellingtons; he is pleased to relieve his aching foot of them for a time.

"Robert isn't here I'm afraid," she calls from the kitchen and he hears the sound of the kettle being filled.

"I came to see you," he stands at the entrance to the kitchen, and she notes his socks are also wet.

"Your boots must leak, your socks are wet. Take them off and I'll dry them in the tumble dryer."

He does as he is told. He then watches as she prepares the tea and sits at the table when she signals him to do so.

"What size shoe do you take? Robert has at least five pairs of Wellingtons, you can have a pair if they fit," she says pleasantly as she pours the tea.

He shakes his head.

"Can't say I know. Had my shoes and Wellingtons for years."

She leaves the kitchen and he waits expectantly. He listens for any sound that would indicate that Celia was there but feels certain Virginia is alone. She returns with clean socks and two pairs of boots.

"Try them," she insists.



He pulls on the socks while she watches and then tries the boots. They are more comfortable than his old ones and his relieved look must have shown.

"There, good. Have them; you can't walk in this weather with useless boots. Why are you out Seth? You can't possibly do any work in this wind"

"I've been to Lily Fisher's, there has been a change about the fete. Did you know that they want you to run a different stall?"

She shrugs.

"I don't mind what I do. You've come quite a way off your route Seth?" There was suspicion in her tone.

He lowers his head. He does not want to ask her now, not after she has given him the boots.

"Your tea will get cold, best to drink it while it is hot it will help you on your journey " she says.

He sips at the tea like an obedient child.

"So, you came to see me to tell me about the fete? You could have phoned."

He put the cup down.

"I came to ask you what is going on between you and Rector Byrnes." He holds his hand up when he sees her mouth open to speak and her eyes widen in disbelief.

"I know you'll think it's not my business and it probably isn't, but I like Robert you see and I don't understand what's going on. A rector shouldn't do things like that, I know that much. What if someone else had seen you? I haven't told anyone but anyone else may have told the whole village." He clenches his fist. "All that business with the greenhouse, why would you do that?"

He stands up and the teapot topples over. She quickly stands up too, unsure what to say.

"Please, Seth, don't upset yourself. I realise you and Robert are very close."

Seth stares aghast at the large tea stain that is forming on the white tablecloth and clumsily tries to dab at it with the sleeve of his jumper. Virginia watches in silence screaming inside for him to stop until suddenly she grabs his hand. He halts and goes stiff like a statue at her touch,

"Leave it. Seth I'm sorry...the greenhouse it was, it was," tears begin to stream down her face and she stumbles back into her chair.

"It was an act of revenge," she finishes softly.

Seth begins to pull on his Wellingtons. He had done something his mother had always warned him never to do, he had imposed too much and opened Pandora's box where probably all kinds of trouble lay.

"Our son killed himself, did you know that?" She looks wide-eyed at him like a demented woman.

He remembers the photographs of a young lad on the piano the day he came to see Robert and discovered the greenhouse but had never asked who he was. Why would Robert's son want to kill himself?

"I'm sorry," he doesn't know what else to say but feels there should be more.

"That's why we came here, it was to escape the memories. Edward, my son, didn't leave a note, or at least that was what I thought, but he had and Robert kept it from me. He hid it in the greenhouse and I found it. I didn't respond very well."

Seth looks at her thoughtfully and she meets his eyes. Hers were dry now, but an occasional tear rolled onto her cheek.

“It’s terrible about your son. I’ve lived here all my life and there has never been any scandal, do you understand? Except for when Rosemary’s husband left but well... we all knew she wasn’t right. But how can you justify what you did with Rector Byrnes? He is so well respected in this village.”

Virginia jumps up and slams her hand hard on the table.

“How dare you come here and lecture me about what is right. Do you know his wife is a lesbian? Do you know how miserable and almost suicidal he has been? Is that what your community want for him? Are you remotely aware of how ill his wife is because she gave up her lover? In fact do you have any concept of the real world?”

He grabs his jacket from the back of the chair. A loud clap of thunder made them both jump and she becomes aware that she is trembling. She watches as he prepares himself to face the harsh climate again.

“It seems not. My concept is that even if my wife was a lesbian and I was unhappy, I don’t think I would be helping things making love to another mans wife on someone’s tombstone but you obviously feel very differently and for that I pity you both. If it helps, I think Robert was wrong. I also think you should let go of your son and let him rest. Thank you for the tea.”

Before she has time to retort he opens the door and lets himself out without a backward glance. Tears were an issue for him now and he did not want her to see them. He had heard too much and now his feelings towards Robert, whom he had looked upon almost as a father had now changed. He felt deep pity for Virginia but his feelings for Rector Byrnes were utterly confusing. He now knows who the woman is that had come looking for Rowena and shudders. He knows he can tell no one of this; it would be the end of Jonathan and Rowena. The village would turn against Virginia and Robert and he would be to blame. He stands facing the green rolling fields that are covered in a mist of rain and tears. There is not another soul in sight, it is desolate and he welcomes the lonely walk back and grieves for the euphoria he had felt only a short time ago. He knows he will not be the one to expose them. In time he will talk to Robert, but not now. He has never felt so alone in his life and as he walks against the wind he lowers his head and allows the tears that have been held back for so long to flow freely with the rain. He cries against the injustice of losing his father so young, and Robert losing his only son and for the constant burden of his wretched foot.

Virginia stands at the open front door and clings to it for support against the bitter onslaught of the icy winds.

Seth walks, his head lowered like a broken man and she fights the urge to call him back. She cannot bear to think with pleasure of any moments with Jonathan any longer. She clenches her fists with anger and slaps her thighs. Poor Seth, she should not have burdened him with everything. He will think so badly of her and Jonathan and why oh why did she fail to tell him that she loved Jonathan more than life itself. If she had not been certain of that before, she was now. She stands at the door for what seems an endless time until someone walks her back inside. It is Miranda.

“What are you doing? You are soaked through, how long have you been here?”

Virginia shakes her head.

‘I don’t know.’

Miranda fills the kettle.

“Do you know your greenhouse is down? I wouldn’t have noticed you know me; I fly in and out and barely see anyone or anything. The school closed early because of the weather and Vanessa always climbs along your wall, she’s frightfully naughty.

Anyway she saw it, so I thought I ought to let you know and of course I've lost your phone number. I should have called round and asked about Robert, it's unforgivably bad of me. Is he alright as we haven't seen him for a bit?"

Virginia slumps her head onto the kitchen table and begins to sob. Miranda feels panic and looks around her.

"Celia," she calls.

Is that Vanessa she hears calling? Oh dear, she thinks, and looks worriedly at Virginia.

"Do you want me to get someone for you," she moves a little closer to Virginia but not too close.

Virginia continues to sob. A child's shout is heard clearly from outside.

"Nessa?" Miranda runs to the front door to see her daughter running towards her.

'Darling please go home for mummy, its frightful weather and Mrs. Spencer is unwell. I have to stay here until the Doctor comes.'

"The weather isn't frightful mother, it's fun. I could go and fetch the Doctor."

Miranda looks again at Virginia who is sobbing hysterically now and seems to be saying strange things. Doctor Marshall's isn't far, she supposed.

"Take Georgi with you..."

"Oh, mama," Vanessa protests.

"Take Georgi with you or you don't go at all."

Vanessa stamps her foot.

"Oh, alright,"

Miranda closes the door and fumbles in the cupboard for tea. Finally she places a mug in front of Virginia.

Slowly she lifts her head and displays a blotchy tear streaked face to Miranda who stares horrified.

"Would you phone someone for me?"

Miranda nods. She hates this kind of thing and will do anything to stop Virginia crying. As to why Virginia is crying she really does not have the time to think about.

The phone call is made and immediately following it the Doctor arrives.

"There you'll feel better now. I'll phone tomorrow and see how you are doing?" a relieved Miranda makes her exit, hugs Vanessa and rushes her children home.

"So young lady what is this all about then?" asks Doctor Marshall.

\* \* \*

The phone call was a shock. He is just about to leave the hospice. For a minute he cannot think who Miranda Richardson is.

"I'm sorry to phone your mobile Rector but she was very insistent that I made contact with you and only via this number, I am awfully sorry if it is a bad time. I just feel terribly upset for her."

"Who? You feel sorry for whom? I don't recognise your name, I'm so sorry."

"Gosh, sorry, Miranda Richardson, I help with the playgroup."

He remembers her then and a noise of acknowledgement is made.

"Mrs. Spencer seems to have had some upset. I found her on her doorstep in the pouring rain. She just wont stop crying and insisted I phone you to say that she cannot make it this evening and possibly never. She said you would understand. I thought it a bit cryptic you see. Anyway I have delivered it."

There is a deafening silence and after a short time she checks he is still there.

'Can I speak to her?' he asks almost desperately.

"The Doctor is here, do excuse me Rector, and sorry for disturbing you."

The line goes dead and he stands rigid, the phone to his ear, his whole body stiff and tense like an artists model afraid to move. The phone then rings again and he hurriedly answers it, he expects without doubt for it to be Virginia. It is James.

“Everyone can do tonight. I phoned Robert Spencer and he is prepared to do the flyers. We can get those put everywhere. I will put one in the dailies and take one to the post office and library in Hawksworth”

Jonathan is silent; he does not know what James is talking about.

“Is tonight inconvenient for you Rector? I can have the meeting here and fill you in tomorrow.”

Jonathan then remembers the fete.

His voice shakes as he replies.

“I have a parishioner to visit tonight, she is very sick. Go ahead without me. I am sure things will be fine.”

James is too animated for Jonathan’s frayed nerves to cope with and he just wants him to go.

“Fine, fine. I will re-check your wife can still make it, she did suggest we have it at the Rectory”

Jonathan shakes his head in irritation.

“Have it there then. It doesn’t matter if I am not present. I have Parish duties that must come first.” He says it far too sharply.

“It would save changing arrangements. Sorry if I bothered you Rector.”

The phone went dead again and Jonathan silently cursed. The damn fete was becoming the bane of his life. A nurse stationed at the entrance to the Hospice gives him an odd look and he tried to smile wearily as if to say a Rectors life is not an easy one. She smiles back shyly and watches him leave.

He stands a lonely figure at the entrance to St Marks Hospice. He begins to dial Virginia’s home number and stops. Robert may be there; perhaps that is why she said she could not meet him tonight or ever. But it was all so sudden. He tries to think what may have happened, but knows it is futile. He dials her mobile but receives her voice mail. He then sends her a text, which he rewrites three times. He reads it over and over before he hits the send button.

“Virginia, I am a lost man. Help me. What has happened? Don’t abandon me without explanation I beg you.”

What does he do now? He has a sermon to write and should go home. The weather is appalling and it would be a relief to be in the warm again. It occurs to him that Robert will be at the meeting, which gives him the opportunity to visit Virginia. His fear is that perhaps her plan is to leave and when he visits she will not be there and how will he ever find her again? Is this to be his final punishment, to finally find the woman he truly loves only to lose her when it matters most? He wants to tell her what a difference she has made to Rowena and now he may never be able to do so. He almost doesn’t recognise Rowena now. She arises early, works in her studio or outside if the weather is good. Only yesterday he noted the cashmere jumper she had always kept hidden was now laying on the pillow of her bed. If only Charley would look for her, for he knows Rowena will never search her out. He waits but a return text does not come. He lays the phone in his lap and begins the drive home, begging it to bleep but he has received nothing by the time he arrives and the knowledge that she had received his causes him unbearable pain. Why would she want to hurt him like this?

Had she decided to give Robert another chance? As Rector he could not condemn that. He jumps out of the car and slams the door. Once the fete is over, he is leaving Millbridge forever and he shall tell Rowena today. He is tired of lying. If Virginia does not want him then it will be even more impossible to stay here. Besides the strain is now too much for him.

Rowena sits at the kitchen table and turns as he walks in.

"What an awful day. What can one do on a day like this?" she asks.

He pulls off his coat and throws it over a chair. The fresh aroma of coffee reaches his nostrils and he pours himself a cup.

"I hear you have the fete meeting here tonight," he comments.

She turns in her chair.

"James said you couldn't make it?"

He shakes his head.

"What are your plans after the fete Rowena?"

She looks into her mug of coffee as if it held the answer.

"I don't know. You are leaving aren't you? Are you going with her?" she seems resigned to the idea.

He shrugs.

"I can't live a lie. I am leaving yes, with her? I have no idea. I don't think she wants me."

"I'm sorry Jonathan. I thought with her you had found what you needed." She took a deep breath.

"I ought to tell you that Charley came here looking for me. It was a few weeks ago. Seth said she went to a lot of trouble to find out how I was."

So, was that was the explanation for her change? But how could it be? In the past it would have been her biggest fear.

"You don't fear her? Are you not afraid for your reputation any longer?"

She stands up and refills her cup. Her hair is freshly washed and her skin seems to bloom and he wonders has it been like that for sometime and he has failed to notice.

"Virginia said she tried to find an answer as to why God would take her only son from her and the only conclusion she came to was that there could be no God. I don't know how near I am to thinking quite like that," she laughs as though they are impossible thoughts for someone like her to even give consideration to.

"But maybe the God I was brought up to understand, is not the God that really exists. I want my God to forgive me as my father would. Why, if what I feel is so terribly terribly bad, does God keep tempting me by almost delivering Charley to me? What kind of God would have watched his servant, you, suffer so much for me? You see I now need answers where once I didn't even need questions. I truly am sorry that Virginia does not want you, because I want your happiness more than my own."

He feels the tears he has controlled for so long unwillingly escape and finds himself thrown helplessly into her open arms where he cries like a child. For an endless time they sit rocking together, he crumples to the floor, and his head gently rests in her lap, she strokes it tenderly with the love of a great friend. He clings to her as a child might to its mother and in those moments he didn't want to let go and face the real world anymore. If there was a heaven, it was here in Rowena's comforting arms.

"Why do you think she no longer wants you?" she asks softly.

He shakes his head. He cannot explain something he does not even understand himself.

He brushes away his tears roughly with the back of his hand and then takes her hands in his.

“You have been everything to me and I have tried to be everything I could for you. I feel there have been times I have let you down and for that I am so sorry. I should have been more assertive in my attempts at helping you.”

She quickly put her hand across his mouth.

“No, you must never blame yourself for this. It is just the way things developed. We did the best we could, both of us.”

He knows she is right and it makes his next words easier to say.

“I will leave after the fete. I will not go before and let everyone down. I hope we can remain friends Rowena, for we have always been good friends haven't we?”

He tugs at his dog collar and the sense of relief he feels whenever he removes it envelopes him now.

“Try and speak to Virginia.”

He shakes his head.

“She has sent a message that she no longer wishes to see me. I will respect that.”

He lies, his only clear thought is that later he will go to her house and try to talk to her. But if she will not see him then he will have to face the truth. Somehow he will have to face a life alone, a life without her. He is afraid to imagine it.

\* \* \*

Virginia lies alone in a darkened bedroom as she once had over two years ago. This time she thinks of another young man, Seth. In an instant she had crushed all his illusions of Robert and the expression on his face when he could bear to look at her, told her what he felt. What is he going through now? He looked so dejected when he left the house this afternoon. Oh God, had Edward felt like that? Had there been something in his life that he could not tell her about? Had he been destroyed by someone or something and had been unable to share it with anyone? She shakes her head from side to side on the pillow. The bedside clock told her it was only six. The rain had finally ceased but the fierce winds were still causing havoc and she could hear the loud rustling of the trees and an occasional crash that she imagines are bits of fragmented glass being blown about the garden. In the corner of the bedroom she spies Robert's slippers that sit lonely and forlorn. Perhaps she should pack some of his things; at least it would keep her busy. The phone rings and her whole body jerks as though she has received an electric shock. It isn't him, she is certain. He would not keep calling. She lifts the receiver and speaks hesitantly into it.

“Hello.”

A loud bubbly voice echoes through her brain.

“Virginia darling, how do you feel? You looked dreadful earlier, did the Doctor help? I expect Robert is home now to tuck you nicely into bed. At least you don't have to face this awful fete meeting tonight. Lawrence should be home soon so I'll get there in time and give your apologies, although I expect Robert will do that”

Before Virginia could answer, there was a loud squeal in the background.

“Nessa stop that, you know georgi hates it. Must go Virginia, havoc here, do phone if you need anything.”

The phone went dead and Virginia smiles when she realises that she hadn't spoken one word to Miranda.

She slowly pulls her body up from the bed and takes a large suitcase from the wardrobe. She stares at the multitude of shirts, ties, trousers and shoes and decides to pack two of everything. It feels as if she is packing for their holiday as she always did in the past and later she will sort through her things and choose what to take. But it isn't a holiday and she keeps reminding herself of that. Once it is done she carries it downstairs and leaves it by the door, ready for Robert when he comes on Thursday.

\* \* \*

Seth had indeed felt quite dismal after departing from Virginia's. After a time he found his walking was a distraction to his thoughts and eventually he found a small haven under a tree about half a mile from home and there he reflected. He wanted to give some thought to Minnie because somehow the whole Virginia business had unwillingly caused him to overlook her. He could not; of course, help wonder if she pitied him and that had been her reason for accepting his offer.. Somehow, she seemed very like him, a loner. It must be even worse for her having no friends in the village and obviously no family, else why did she need to take a live in job. He felt more relaxed now, thinking of Minnie. He would try and forget all that other stuff; else it would be too uncomfortable at the meeting this evening. He had looked at the new boots for a while and then with an effort forced himself to continue on his way. The wind was less violent now and the rain had eased. If only the turbulence in his brain would cease he thought wistfully.

\* \* \*

Virginia had barely moved two steps from the suitcase when the doorbell rang. She felt immediately sick. Oh, no why had she been so silly to think he would not try and see her. She leans towards the peek hole with trepidation and jumps back surprised to see the wrinkled face of Lady Fisher.

"Do open the door my dear, the wind may have ceased but it is still not the best of summer days." Lily calls loudly.

Virginia opens the door as commanded and stares into the woman's over made up face and she feels an overwhelming desire to laugh. Lily walks straight past her.

'Is the lounge through here? I must say this is a spectacular home it would be an awful tragedy to lose it old girl.

Now, if you have Earl grey I would prefer that, otherwise anything would suffice. I parked the car in the driveway, that is alright isn't it?"

Virginia feels quite overtaken and struggles to answer what she considers to be the most important question first.

'The car is fine, and yes the lounge is that way. I shall make the tea?"

Lily turns, eyes wide.

'Where is your woman? Can she not prepare it?"

'My woman?" Then she realises she means Celia "Oh, the weather was so bad she couldn't make it."

Lily slips off what appears to be a thick mink coat and hands it to Virginia.

"If you let them start that, my dear, you may as may well let them take over now. Let's forget the tea, I am not desperate. I should like to sit down, however, I find it difficult to stand too long. Old age is a curse you know."

She sits in the armchair that faces the garden and Virginia still bemused sits on the piano stool.

"The wind was quite unrelenting this morning. England is such a difficult country, don't you think? One never knows where one is. When I lived in Africa you always knew, when the rains came you knew they were there for some time and the sun,

well it was there, almost always.” She looks mournful, and adds wistfully, “Ah, yes Africa.”

Virginia rolls her neck and says hesitantly.

“Forgive me, why are you here?”

Lily laughs.

“Direct. I like that. I imagine in the past you were always that way. Our raging blizzard didn’t smash your greenhouse did it? I also presume those photograph are of your dead son?”

Virginia’s mouth opens and shuts like a ventriloquist’s dummy.

Lily looks interestingly about the room.

“I don’t have much in my life now. I would have stayed in Africa but well... I hear he is doing well there, my husband. I am interested in people, so I make a point of learning about them. You can do a great deal when you have money. How did he do it?”

“What!”

“Your son, was it pills?”

Virginia jumps up and points to the door.

“How dare you. You can leave right now and mind your own business.”

Lily does not move.

“You have grieved deeply for a long time. I lost my son too, differently but never the less he was killed. This is not a normal reaction to a civil question. It is time you learnt to say it without anger”

Virginia sat down again.

“What do you want?” she asks again.

Lily sighs. Most people do not always want to get to the point so soon. She would like to chat a little more. It is so rare these days that she gets to share any gossip.

“Seth came here didn’t he? Does he know your secret too?”

Virginia considers again showing Lily the door. She feels contempt for this ugly old woman who smugly sits and stares at the ruin of their garden as if she takes some pleasure in it.

Lily leans forward and whispers in the tone of a conspirator.

“Of course they would all be scandalised. Poor buggers, they believe their village is so perfect and pure. I mean how naïve can you be?”

She lifts a finger and waves it around the room.

“Don’t be a fool my dear, you make sure you keep this house. Believe me, as nice as you remember him, he will have it out under your feet.”

Virginia rubs her eyes, and thinks how nice it would be to lay down.

“What is it you want to say to me?”

Lily stands up exasperated.

“You really like to rush things don’t you? Where is my coat?”

Virginia rushes to retrieve the heavy furry material and watches as Lily struggles to get her arms into the sleeves.

“Here, let me help.”

“You cannot possibly meet the rector here, someone may see you. I have accommodated many in more important positions than him. My home is there for you to use, but don’t risk losing everything by letting passion rule your head because that is when you do silly things. Contact me when you need to,”

Virginia stands her mouth open and her hands seem to be stuck to Lily’s coat.



“We are not...” she protests and sees Lily’s sly smile and adds, “I’m not seeing him again anyway.”

Lily smiles.

“Don’t be foolish. You won’t have that empty headed man back and she doesn’t want Jonathan, in fact men are not her cup of tea. Here, take this” she pushes a card into Virginia’s hand.

It was her phone number.

“Only I answer that phone so you have no worries. Now darling, will you be at the fete meeting tonight?”

Virginia shakes her head.

“Lucky you. They are such pompous bores. I tell you if that Seth gets too involved with Minnie I shall not be pleased. Girls like that are hard to find.”

Virginia feels the softness of the mink against her arm and the heavy smell of Lily’s perfume as she passes.

“Stop mourning and start living.” She advises like a mother.

Virginia is unable to speak and watches in amazement as Lily waits while her chauffeur opens the door of her large Rolls Royce. She cannot help smile at the flamboyance of the Mink coat, which had not been needed.

She stands and watches as the car pulls out of the wide driveway and Lily’s voice echoes in her head.

“You make sure you keep this house.”

It was true that her thoughts had been that she may have to leave Starkfield House but her main worry was Robert’s parsimony. She doesn’t for one minute imagine that she will be homeless but she could clearly see the disagreements they would have over the most insignificant things. Oh, Edward, my darling baby, she thinks with the greatest remorse, did you not realise we would be destroyed? Was your suffering so awful, so consuming that you forgot us totally?

She watches the tail end of Lily’s car disappear from sight and struggles to recall their conversation and acknowledges that they hadn’t really had one. She shudders when she remembers Lily’s slight but disturbing statement about her own son and finds she begins to wonder also how he had been killed in the same way Lily had been curious about Edward. Was she right? Had she become over sensitive to Edward’s death? Was she, in fact, ashamed? She shivers, the day is dull and she is surprised that although the wind has dropped it is quite cold. She walks into the house and sits back on the piano stool where she thinks of the three men in her life.

Lily smiles and says aloud.

“Well, that went very well apart from the shortness of time.”

The driver does not speak and nor does she expect him to. Virginia will take her up on her generous offer, she is certain. She cannot help, however enviously it may be, admire Virginia’s natural beauty. How marvellous to have such flawless skin and smouldering eyes and not even a whisper of mascara. Still, Lily cannot help feeling that a touch of blusher would really enhance. Oh, what splendid fun all this was and how wonderful to bring people together, especially when it was so scandalous.

Now she simply has to wait for them to contact her.

\* \* \*

He has walked over fields and through the orchard, and his constant watch checks seem not to help, it is as if time is standing still. He chooses to walk back, and take his place at the meeting. He is only part way there when he turns around again. He has to see her; he has no choice, even if it is just for her to reject him.

She is laying on the bed her thoughts very much about him. She has shed no more tears and when the doorbell goes she knows it can only be him now. She leaves the bed wearily and passes the mirror on the bedside cabinet without a glance. Her hair is dishevelled and her blouse crinkled. There are dark rings beneath her eyes and it is like this she opens the door to him. Gently he pushes her back inside and closes it.

“Robert is at the meeting isn’t he?” he asks.

She shrugs.

“I don’t know where he is.”

She stands forlornly in front of him and he does not touch her until her hand reaches out slowly and grasps his.

“I was not going to see you again.” She smiles as though it is a private joke only they share.

He wants to tell her he adores her, needs her, can not live without her and that he cannot forget her delicious fragrance and that it will stay with him till the end of his days. Instead with struggled control, he says.

“Why have you?”

Her eyes sad and sultry meet his.

“Because I already miss you.”

He pulls her roughly into his arms and smells her hair as it brushes against his face. Her tears drip from her cheek onto his.

“I love you Virginia. I cannot be without you. If I have to, then that is a burden I will carry. Remember always that the life I have is yours. After the fete I am leaving, it is a matter of weeks.”

She pulls him closer.

“You must not come here in that time.” She looks at him.

Before he can respond she relates her visit from Lily fisher, which he receives by laughing raucously.

“Dear old Lily, who would have thought it of a lady.”

“But she also seemed to know about Rowena. I thought you said apart from Seth no one did and he wouldn’t tell Lily.”

Jonathan was perplexed. Lily was a strange one, harmless but extraordinary in her perceptions. Can someone really be that intuitive? He shrugs thoughts of her aside. He sees the suitcase and looks at Virginia questioningly.

“It’s some of Robert’s things, he is coming on Thursday, he wants to talk, about divorce I presume” she says dully and stares at the case also.

He lifts her head gently by the chin.

“Virginia, do you love me?”

She strokes his cheek.

“Of course,” she answers, bewildered that he needs to ask.

“You will come away with me?” He feels euphoric.

She nods.

“But we must meet only at Lily’s until after the fete. You must do this for the villagers because they respect you. They never need to know we left together.”

And so it was arranged

Love is a wonderful thing, Lily fisher thinks, when it is happening to somebody else.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### *Journal Entry:*

*I am sitting calmly at my desk, watching Rowena as she paints in the glorious sunshine. There is a faint humming that comes from the vacuum cleaner as Rosemary completes her usual routine. Can it be only a few short months since that evening when Rosemary had witnessed one of Rowena's terrible rages? How discreet she has been and how I underestimated her. These past weeks have felt like a dream. To be able to watch Rowena sitting at her easel, calm and peaceful is a sight I had never imagined to see. Her hair shines as brilliantly as the sun and her skin is soft and flawless. I know she has not seen Charley and I cannot help be curious if she feels some premonition about her, for what else is the origin for this contentment? There is still some unease between her and Rosemary and I cannot help but admire them both for their obvious joint endeavour to at least tolerate each other.*

*It is another beautiful day and one hopes that it will stay this way for the Fete in two days time. Rowena has not stopped painting and she will have quite a large stall I imagine.*

*I feel, as always that I am rambling again but it has been many many weeks since I wrote in here. I have felt quite desperate to do so at times but I felt so tired that the effort has been too much. Today, a day that seems so perfect seems to be the wrong day to confess one's sins in a journal, but is there ever a right day?*

*The night of the urgently called fete meeting I went to see Virginia at her home. I was terrified and my body was drenched in perspiration when I arrived. I felt certain if she rejected me I would sob like a baby. I felt helpless, I had already released God from my soul and in doing so I had lost my closest friend. I love her, in a way that I have never loved Rowena. Rowena and I had loved as two young people do love; it had been an innocent, adolescent naive coupling. When I first saw Virginia, I knew I was in love. I realise if anyone ever reads this they will think **that** sounds naïve but it is absolutely true. Thankfully, she did not reject me, but our love has had to face one enemy, albeit a silent one, and for that silence I am grateful.*

*Poor Seth, I had hoped as his own romance with Minnie developed he would understand our situation more, but it seems it is not to be. I know he came to me with great courage for it was evident in his face, but the pain in his eyes was more so. I think his words will haunt me forever. My guilt can never be assuaged but if there had been a chance, Seth stole it with just a few words. A man that is dismissed by most of the villagers as a simpleton had the skill to silence me. My admiration for him will stay with me till the end of my days.*

*"There is only one lesson worth learning Rector and perhaps you should have preached it. Always be true to yourself, because how can you ever be true to anyone else. I will never forgive you for living a lie for all of us, you did not have that right I cannot condone your continuing on here as Rector. I implore you to resign your post or I will have to address the matter"*

*Of course, he was absolutely correct and I could not disagree. When I explained that I would be leaving Millbridge after the fete, his face revealed nothing to me.*

*"You know what you have to live with. I just witnessed it."*

*I had waited for the inevitable but it did not happen. Has he forgiven me? Or is the truth more that I am far from his thoughts these days. Everyone in the village has become acutely aware of his growing relationship with Minnie. Still, I await the knock on the door. Or has Seth decided to allow me the last pleasure of the fete?*

*I am saddened that Seth has such negative feelings towards me. I know he has never been a man of God but obviously feels I have betrayed his mother and others in the village whose faith runs very deep within them.*

*I am a flawed man and I can excuse it using Rowena as the tool to justify myself, but the truth is I was not strong enough.*

*How I wish I could describe my feelings for Virginia but words are a useless tool. I am not a poet, but if I were I would describe my love for her as peaceful as walking barefoot upon hot sand while the sound of gentle rhythmic waves wash over me. It is a love as comforting as a mother's nipple is to a child. She is the other half of my soul; we are one heart beating together. The passion I feel for her is all consuming and sometimes I feel like I am floating in a deep pool of love. Last night I dreamt we were both in this beautiful river completely covered by floating rose petals and it felt how heaven were to feel if it existed but of course I know it doesn't.*

*I see Robert occasionally, we may meet in the village and it is always very embarrassing for both of us. He also is in agreement with Virginia that we do not cause more unrest than is necessary. It is quite an aberration in a situation such as this that our prime consideration is a fete, but woefully I have to admit that "The fete" is a large part of the villager's life and the fact that their Rector and his wife have suffered unmentionable hell would be a secondary factor to them. Do I disrespect them? No, I think they are merely human. However, it distresses me terribly how circumspect Seth is whenever encountering me and saddens me even more when I see he is the same with Robert with whom he was once so close. I hope that time will heal this wound and Seth will one day be the replacement son that Robert wishes him to be. Virginia I talk candidly about Robert and Jessica but not in a loquacious way for it is a subject too sensitive in the same way as is our feelings regarding Rowena.*

*I cannot thank her enough for her understanding and compassion at this time, but her exceptional acceptance of Virginia is beyond comprehension. I can only admit privately in this journal, that I have tried to contact Charley, but I am in receipt of such little information regarding her real name. I thought of looking though Rowena's private letters but the shame was too great and I could not. I feel I should offer her something in exchange for what she has given me. I have been allowed love and Rowena seems to have just her painting, but how radiant she seems these days. Does she know something I do not? As for Robert and Jessica, well they live without a blemish on their characters, which, I find, for this village, quite remarkable. The story that seems to buzz around Millbridge like a bee is that Virginia and Robert have been through a terrible crisis, so horrendous that neither can speak of it, but sadly their marriage could not survive the strain. I overheard Julia Truman gossiping to Matt Fisher.*

*"It's just the sort of thing Jessica would do. One cannot think badly of her for looking after a sick man. After all, everyone knows it's all very innocent. In fact Matt I could cry when I imagine what that couple have been through"*

*I found it puzzling that she could cry over an incident she knew nothing about, but maybe I do not know women very well.*

*My love for both Rowena and Virginia has grown immeasurably in the past weeks and I owe most of that to Rowena. Who would ever be able to understand our situation? The unity the three of us share almost like the three musketeers. Rowena is protective of Virginia, and fears any scandalising would annihilate her totally following Edwards death. Virginia also is almost adoringly indulgent of Rowena and*

*the two seem, to everyone, to be the closest of friends and often I believe they are for they share something intimately private and although they both love me in different ways, I feel humble that even one of them does. I know they talk of me often, but Virginia laughs when I ask what about and I comply happily. I think they talk often of Edward, for Virginia mentions him less and less and when she does his name is also coupled with Rowena's.*

*"Rowena believes I should practice the piano more, she said Edward would be so sad that I have stopped doing something we shared together."*

*If anyone ever reads this, but that is silly for they shan't. But if they did, how odd they would think this, or would they? Maybe it would be a good explanation, for I fear for certain we shall be damned when this is over. I hope Lily will safely keep her name out of all this but I cannot feel that she would gleefully tell all had she not been so discreet. It would be her greatest satisfaction to delight in everyone's shock. I can almost see the amusement in her eyes now..*

*I only hope Rosemary will be all right and if I could pray for her I would. I know her faith is deeply ingrained and it disturbs me. These days she seems very faint-hearted and quite preoccupied. She no longer asks me for my sermons but accepts them gratefully when I offer. I think perhaps the change in Rowena has shocked her.*

*I watch now from the window as the trees move now every so slightly as though someone had just breathed on them. Butterflies swarm about the rose bushes and I marvel at the different species and think how wonderful life is. I hope the weather stays like this for the fete as so much has been organised this year.*

*I should stop; I must soon leave for my hospital visit. It is strange to think that in two days time I shall be doing that no longer.*

*Oh, what a future I look forward to and I shall continue to hope daily that Charley may find her way to Rowena.*

*\* \* \**

### ***Present Day***

I closed the journal and looked at Jessica.

"That was the last entry, there is no mention of the fete," I asked bewildered.

"I should have thought that would have been the last thing he would have written about after all it was so important an event wasn't it?"

I looked closely at her and she turned her face away from me desperately trying to hide tears. I felt uncomfortable and pulled the sleeves of my jumper over my hands for the study suddenly seemed to turn cold. I knew I had been pushing and probing in a relentless attempt to understand everything that had gone on during the time that Jonathan Byrnes had been rector in Millbridge. I had been in the village for almost forty-eight hours now, and at hearing the start of his story I had felt a cold chill in my bones, followed by a strange sensation of penetrating his body in an almost incestuous way and I had for a time felt weak and fatigued as though suffering from a bad virus. After a short period, the chill left my bones and like a man recovering from his illness I began to feel the warmth enter me again and strangely even though I knew I should condemn Jonathan Byrnes, I could not. I began to find myself overwhelmingly sympathetic to him but didn't dare say so to Jessica for fear of her response. Her hatred for him is so intense it emanates from her. There were gaps in her story, especially regarding Robert. I had eagerly asked to meet him, wanting desperately to meet the man that was Virginia's husband. Although she made polite excuses, they were quite irrelevant.

"Robert is not up to visitors"

"He is so exhausted in the evening, he would find it too much to have guests."

And so her excuses would go on until eventually I gave up.

After a long pause she picked up the journal and flicked through it and then with a pained look on her face she placed it gently on the table.

"It was going to be our best fete ever. We had organised so much, and eventually had to request Lady Fishers permission to have it in her grounds. To think, all this time, she was a party to that shameful disgrace." Her hand still rested on the journal and for a terrifying moment I thought she might rip it to pieces.

"Of course, we must never tell her that we know." I said softly, "Everyone will then know about the journal."

She looked unconvinced and opened the pages of the book that so far, had been our secret.

"Of course, everyone will then know all the sordid secrets and you have to think of Robert, surely he has suffered enough humiliation."

She slammed the book shut and I jumped.

"He has suffered enough, period what do you know of all this."

We had days like this, when Jessica would lose her temper and make similar comments about Robert. I always tried to get more from her but after a time she would become aware of my probing and withdraw.

I waited, as I always did, until she seemed calmer and offered to make some tea.

"Then, you must tell me about the fete, after all Jonathan has left no record."

I then, similarly to other days made us both some calming green tea, which I discovered Jessica was quite fond of. We drank it in silent and I waited. It was always quite easy to ascertain when she would be responsive. Her features would soften and a look of resignation would follow. A deep sigh left her lips, and then she took in a sharp intake of breath and gasped as though it caused her pain.

"Ah, the fete. Well, like I said it was to be our best ever, we wanted to show Hawksworth what we could do you see. It all became childishly competitive but anyway there you have it. Try to imagine it, an enormous fete in Lily Fisher's grounds..." she looked thoughtful.

"Of course you haven't been there have you? Well imagine acres and acres of land and that is Lily's back garden," she laughed but with little mirth.

"Oh, it was wonderful!" she exclaimed, nostalgia deep in her eyes.

"We had everything, even a beer tent which we had never had before, a bouncy castle, a delicious pig roast. It was packed with all you could imagine. Lily Fisher even dressed up as a gypsy fortune-teller, I think I have a photo of that... she paused. "I haven't looked at any of them. I expect you may find them of interest"

I waited with baited breath, was she going to tell me? Would she be able to explain why Jonathan had not mentioned it in the journal? That book in the last two days had become almost as sacred to me as the Bible itself.

"Seth had his plant stall and Miranda took on the face painting. It looked so colourful, Matt and Seth had hung the bunting and James had organised a drinks stall with punch. We had never had so much before. There was the usual bric-a-brac and tom bolo of course, but this year we even hired loud speakers so we could have some brass band music, you know like they do at all the best fetes. Everyone helped. Robert went back and forth between the plant stall and the home produce. Virginia was on the other side with the bric-a-brac... Anyway I made a heavy fruit cake and you had to guess the weight," she stopped suddenly and bit her lip. "Of course there was the cake stall."

She stood up and walked to the sink where she filled a glass with water.

"It sounds as though it was a great success." I said, unsettled by her sudden silence.

She turned and smiled.

"Oh yes it was, there was an ice cream stand and everything. It was all going wonderfully well until stupid Matt, well I suppose it isn't his fault either really but he suggested a tug of war between the men, the north side against the south. That's when everything started to go wrong. Silly, but I always like to think if Matt hadn't suggested that maybe things would be just as they once were. Childish isn't it?"

I laid my hand on her shoulder. After hours and hours of pushing her for this, I now was not so sure I wanted to hear it.

"I don't think it is childish. Truth is none of us would grow up unless we had to. We all would like the peter pan syndrome I am sure."

"Yes," she agreed wistfully, "However I would be content to just go back several months and see something that was so obviously clearly under my nose."

"Virginia and Jonathan?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, no no, much worse. But you should hear it properly, it is only fair and I will try to be accurate and detached."

I sat back and tried to make myself comfortable like one does when about to hear a story, but somehow I couldn't relax, I felt certain I was not going to enjoy this one.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Miriam sits patiently on the bench outside the post office. The sun shines brightly from the cloudless sky and Miriam knows that on days like this if you sit long enough on the bench someone would soon join you. Elizabeth was inside posting all their competition entries. Miriam had always felt the whole thing was a waste of time. They had been doing this for years now and had not won anything, but Elizabeth always argued what difference did it make if it only cost a stamp? She sees Lady Fisher as she approaches on foot. Miriam looks around for her chauffeur.

"He is waiting by the rectory," Lily says, as though reading her mind.

"Are you practicing your mystic skills for the fete?" Miriam struggles to think of something to say. Lily Fisher she always finds difficult to talk to, mostly because she doesn't ever really gossip in the way everyone else does. Lily roars with laughter displaying pure white even teeth. She could look quite pretty if she didn't wear so much make up, Miriam thought. At that moment the strange pin that held Lily's hair in a neat bun and which Miriam always thought resembled a smaller version of a warriors shield held together by a small knitting needle fell from her head. Miriam endeavoured to heave her aching body from the bench when suddenly Rector Byrnes was there and in an instant he retrieves the pin and hands it to Lily.

"Thank you Rector," she smiles, "It's a very special hair pin, bought in Africa actually."

Miriam smiles. "I was just thinking it looks like a warriors shield that wooden bit, you know..."

She breaks off when they both give her an odd stare. She thinks them both stuck up. In fact she is getting a bit fed up with him. These days he never turns up for meetings, or rushes out in the middle of them. Of course, he was probably supporting the Spencers. Everyone realises it is difficult for Robert and Virginia Spencer having only just moved here and then their marriage crumbling. Elizabeth said she had heard someone had killed their son but Miriam didn't want to think of things like that. She thinks instead of Jessica's kindness to Robert and what a giving person she is. She suggested to Elizabeth that perhaps they ought to pop round to Virginia with a basket of fruit or something just to show their sympathy. Miriam had thought her extremely charming, and exquisite. Elizabeth had scoffed when she had said so.

"Why did he leave her then?"

Miriam had thought that a silly response. If their son had been killed, then it would have put terrible stress on them both. Elizabeth was probably jealous she told herself, for no one had ever said either of them was exquisite.

She sits for a while and talks with Jonathan and Lily about the fete and then suppresses a gasp at Jonathan's words.

"Rowena has so many paintings of the village and surrounding scenery. I think her stall will do very well and it will be extremely good for her image as an artist."

Elizabeth is taking notes from a postcard she has seen in the window and he can see her gesturing to Miriam out of the corner of his eye, while at the same time Lily fisher leans across him.

"Women's institute tonight. We have a good speaker this evening I think, do you agree Miriam?" she asks as she leans back from him.

Miriam tidies her hair.

"I expect so." She then looks animated. "But if Mrs Byrnes is painting again perhaps she could do it instead. Oh it would be so much nicer don't you think Rector?"



Lily heads towards the Post office.

"Mrs. Byrnes must be overwhelmed with work for the fete right now. We are very lucky to have Charlene to speak to us this evening, do be on time ladies" She looks sideways at Jonathan.

Both Miriam and Elizabeth smile at her and wave to Jonathan. They obviously were so busy chatting to each other they had not heard a word Lily had spoken.

"They are like two old mother hens. They never listen and ramble on. Thank God age hasn't affected me like that, old age is a curse... good God," she yelps as Jonathan grabs her arm roughly and pulls her away from the post office and drags her down a short alley behind it. Lily raises her hand to her hair as she feels the pin slip again.

"Rector what on earth... I need to go to the post office and..." His ashen face halts her instantly.

"I'm sorry Lily. I need to know who this woman is that is speaking at the W.I. tonight."

His heart is pounding and he feels a multitude of emotions, fear, elation, doubt, and uncertainty. Supposing he couldn't face her? What if it wasn't her? Supposing she had met someone else? But why would she establish such a high profile for herself in Millbridge? Perspiration ran down his face and he wiped it roughly with the back of his hand. Lily reaches into her handbag and takes from it a neatly ironed white lace handkerchief that she hands to him. He looks at her, gratefulness clearly written on his face.

"I've known you for several years Lily but the truth is I don't think I know you at all. I do know, however, that you know all of us very well and you know about Rowena, although how I'm not sure." He garbles his words and realises he sounds a fool. But he is preoccupied with having to see Charley.

She does not speak but continues to wait for him to finish.

"I think this woman is someone known as Charley and I have to see her."

"Excellent. How wonderful, I always wanted the Rector to welcome one of our guests. Come a little early, about 6.30, then you can have a nice chat and later welcome her to the institute before you rush back to my house. How deliciously scandalous this all is. Must rush darling so much to do," she leans close to his ear.

"Love to Virginia." In a flash she was gone, and he stands with the lace hankie in his hands wondering what he should do with it.

Miriam looks back and sees the odd interchange. She opens her mouth with the intention of sharing with Elizabeth but indecisiveness changes her mind. Miriam has always secretly admired Lily Fisher. Sometimes at the parish Council meetings she had fully agreed with some of things Lily had put forward but as soon as everyone else scoffed Miriam found her confidence ebb away into emptiness and watched it leave her with shame. Once, when Elizabeth had gone to Hawksworth library to collect a book she had ordered, Miriam had walked to Lily's house, but she had not been home. She hadn't any idea what she was going to say; mostly she just wanted to ask her how she could acquire the same self-esteem. There was a tickle in her stomach now and she knows something is going on. The rector and Lily have a secret and she decides it will be her secret too. She will not tell Elizabeth about the exchange between the Rector and Lily, instead she will bide her time and when finally all is exposed she will smugly tell Elizabeth she knew something was going on. Walking towards them, eyes vacant, was Rosemary, she carries the familiar plastic

shopping bag that it seems to Miriam she has had forever. Rosemary sees the two women and immediately she frowns and her lips seem to pout in irritation.

"Looking forward to the fete Rosemary? We are going to have wonderful weather it seems."

"That's good. I must dash, I have shopping to do and then I need to finish making some more cakes."

Before either of the sisters could reply, Rosemary has dashed by them. She was becoming increasingly edgy, as the fete grew closer. Every day she checks the cake compulsively at least three times. After the first study of it she relaxes for a short time and then apprehension attacks her like a wielding axe man. Voices in her head whisper so quietly she fears she may not hear them.

"It may have gone mouldy, you should check," the soft voice echoes in her head and she rushes again to the cake only to find it is fine. Or on her return from the shops they will torment her again.

"Someone may have stolen it, you should check," and again she flies to the cake. Now, she makes a regular habit of checking it every day. The devil is now deeply embedded in Rowena's soul. Rosemary can see it more and more when she visits the house. The effort she is making to pretend all is well will not wash with Rosemary; she knows those bottles are being hidden elsewhere and her sudden warm friendship towards everyone is a clear sign that the devil has indeed entered her fully, for now she can do his works better. She slams her front door and locks it before she rushes to the kitchen to check on the cake.

"She's a funny one, I still think she needs some kind of professional help. Anyway, come on Miriam we also have a lot to do before the fete," Elizabeth orders and Miriam meekly complies.

\* \* \*

It was Jonathan's last visit to the hospice although they hadn't known it. The nurses all smile gratefully at him, he has helped so many in their final moments and his presence encourage the staff he is sure. He pauses at the entrance to the wards and memories flood his brain until he feels he may drown. He feels himself sway.

"Everything alright Rector?"

It was the young blonde nurse; he gauged her to be about twenty-three. He looks at her closely now for the first time.

"Yes, I was just thinking back. It's strange how things change so quickly isn't it? She looks at him strangely and wonders if he feels well.

"Do you need anything Rector? Some water maybe?"

He shakes his head.

"No, I'm fine" he nods in the direction of the entrance.

"Better get on." He exits quickly, aware that he appears to be behaving oddly.

He turns off his mobile and drops it casually into his trouser pocket. The heat in the building is oppressive and he anticipates the usual headache when he leaves. Despite the heat, he shivers at the thought of confronting Charley this evening. How will they both react to seeing each other, he seeing his wife's lesbian lover for the first time was a daunting experience to say the least but for her it will be a totally unexpected meeting and he needs to be prepared for her shock. Virginia had eagerly encouraged him to go. During the short period of her friendship with Rowena she had discovered much of the depth of feelings felt by both women. He had a mental picture of what she would look like, tall, quite slender, with short hair and obviously quite attractive, at least certainly so in Rowena's eyes. A waving hand distracts him and he

sees Sister Marshall strolling towards him. He straightens his back and smiles warmly. He must not let them know they will not see him again. Will he miss all this, he wonders fleetingly and knows that, of course, for a while he will miss everything that has been his life for so many years.

\* \* \*

Robert takes the china teacup from Jessica and reclines back into his chair. Jessica pours tea into another cup for herself and sits opposite him. It still amazes her every day that she gets up and Robert is still there. She looks at him now, clean-shaven and the fragrance of his shaving gel is still fresh on him and she inhales it with delight. He has not mentioned the night, two days ago when she had shyly invited him into her bed. Standing in his bedroom doorway in just her starched white nightdress she had looked coyly at him like a young girl.

"I was thinking, it seems silly you taking up a whole bedroom as well as me. You can share mine, if you want to, of course."

As soon as the words were said she had regretted them. He had been reading and couldn't see her clearly through his reading glasses. He removed them and she thought how ridiculously silly they both looked. A woman her age standing in the doorway of a mans bedroom in her crisp nightdress and he sitting stiff as a poker sitting in bed wearing the most ludicrous striped pyjamas. Some may have said they looked more pitiful than stupid and perhaps they did. She had waited for a short time hoping he would say something, when he didn't she turned to leave.

"Why don't you share mine instead?" he said quickly as she turned. "Do you have a book?"

She nodded and went to fetch it. The next day she moved her things into his bedroom and the second night they had lain close before going to sleep and he had tenderly stroked her hair. During the day they never spoke of the nights and she preferred it that way, as he did.

"It's Women's Institute tonight, do you mind?" she asks now.

He places the cup back onto the tray.

"I should tell you that I am seeing a Solicitor today. I can't use my own firm obviously. I am divorcing Virginia, I see little point in not doing so..."

She gasps.

"But, oh Robert, it seems so soon."

"I thought you would be pleased! Anyway she doesn't want me anymore and we can never reconcile Edward's death, it will always be there between us and I cannot live with her anymore. I believe her behaviour is unreasonable and she did throw me out after all. No! It is over. Tie up loose ends that is my motto."

She lowers her head; she doesn't want him to see that she is obviously pleased.

He takes a biscuit from his plate.

"Women's institute, well that should be fun. Of course I don't mind. I will have a lot of notes to write up once I have seen this chap today. I want you to continue doing the things you have always done. I need to speak to Virginia, do you mind?"

Oh, how wonderful that he should even think to ask if she minded.

"Of course not, I am sure there is much for you both to discuss."

"Well, the Open Gardens for one. I need to be sure she doesn't mind of course and then we have to discuss this wretched divorce."

He looks so small, like a little boy in a grown mans body. So much, he has been through and in such a short time, she thinks compassionately. For Jessica was compassionate, everyone said so. She jumps up and puts her arm around him.

“It will get better Robert, it has to.”

He clasps one hand that is draped around his shoulder.

“It already has,” he smiles.

Jessica feels in that moment that she has been truly blessed and silently thanks her Lord.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Here?” Charley asked pointing to a large table set in the middle of the small hall. “Is that sufficient for you my dear? I really felt this was much too small a function for you.”

Charley gives her a sharp glare but Lily continued

“You are of course, quite an exception for our gathering. In fact I wonder why you would want to waste your time.”

Charley looks about the small hall, which comprises of a large table in the middle and about twenty chairs dotted all over the place. A hot water canister was set up along with cups and saucers, no doubt for the tea break later in the proceedings.

“I’ll move this to the end of the room and if you could line the chairs in rows.” She says to Lily briskly.

Lily looks at her but says nothing. Bossy little thing, she thinks and wonders what Rowena sees in her, although she has to admit her hair was adorable.

“I thought it might encourage some of your members to paint,” Charley says trying to be matter of fact although she was having difficulty.

Lily says nonchalantly, as she arranges chairs.

“Of course we have an artist in the village, she is awfully good,”

The pencils slip from Charley’s hand before she can place them on the table.

“The Rector’s wife,” she adds and bangs down a chair.

Charley takes deep breaths. Keep calm, she tells herself, keep calm.

“Then she is bound to come. This is the sort of thing Rector’s wives do isn’t it?” she laughs, hiding her face as she bends to retrieve the pencils.

“Not ours, I’m afraid you will be let down on that one. But not to worry, there will be the rest of us.”

Charley keeps her face focused on the floor as she picks up the pencils. She does not want Mrs. Fisher to see her look of dismay.

“Between you and me, she has been somewhat fragile this past year or more. One of those irritating women problems probably,” Lily assures that she sounds gossipy and is surprised at how good she is at it.

Jonathan hears her voice as he approaches. It is a beautiful evening and he wants to continue past the old chapel and onwards towards the fields. He runs his hand through his hair, wiping small beads of perspiration as he does so. He wears a thin cotton shirt and corduroy trousers. He has made certain to clip his dog collar on although even now, he is not sure why. He feels his heart flutter and uncertainty begins to enter his confident exterior. What was he supposed to say to her? It was altogether possible, of course, that she had met someone else in the past two years. He imagined her life had been very different to theirs. She had probably been partying, travelling abroad for exhibitions, living life in the fast lane. Surely by now she was with someone new.

He pushes the door open and for both of them time stands still. Charley’s eyes lock on the door as it slowly opens, it creaks sinisterly as though announcing his arrival. To Jonathan it feels as though hours pass before he is actually on the other side of it. Immediately, Charley knows it is him, even without the dog collar she would have sensed it. He looks at her, bemused, and then laughs. It isn’t her, it cannot possibly be. Charley feels a sudden violent urge to rip off his dog collar, which to her, in that moment feels like the ultimate symbolism of evil rather than good. He doesn’t look how she had imagined him. She had always pictured him very puritanical and always dressed very conservatively. This man did not match her image of Rowena’s

husband at all. She was conscious of her own clothes, leggings topped with a long sleeved woollen jumper, a lemon blouse just visible beneath. Lily quickly senses their discomfort and steps in without any change to her tone.

“Rector, how nice of you to drop in and meet our guest speaker. Charlene this is Rector Byrnes, it’s his wife who paints. This is Charlene Spark, a well respected artist, we are fortunate she has agreed to speak for us.” Lily nods emphatically, as if to say, ‘Well say something to her.’

Jonathan is stunned. This woman doesn’t look like at all how he had imagined. In fact she was strangely beautiful. Her long Auburn hair shone like gold and fell in wondrous curls. He notes her hands are paint stained and the nails rough and chipped. He looks into her face and sees she is blushing and it is then he knows it is she.

“Just popping to the village hall for a few more chairs, you never know we may have a full house.” Lily winks at Jonathan as she walks out.

Charley suddenly feels vulnerable as she watches Lily walk away from her and gives Jonathan a shy smile and then turns to continue with her preparations. There isn’t really very much to do but she creates diversions so she doesn’t have to look at him.

“So, Lily says you are well respected. Is that her way of telling me you are famous?”

Charley turns to face him, surprise written on her face.

“Good Lord, no...” she hesitates and wonders should she apologise for the good Lord statement but decides against it.

He smiles, conscious of her discomfort.

She lowers her head and fiddles with paints on the table.

“I make a living, a few exhibitions here and there. So, are you staying for the talk?” she pretends to busy herself signifying his answer was of no great relevance to her.

He sits on one of the chairs and stares at her for a time and she feels her skin getting hotter with embarrassment.

“No, I won’t be here for the talk. If I am wrong please forgive me, but I do need to know if you are the woman my wife knows as Charley and please be honest with me. I am here for her as much as myself.” He is surprised how easy it is to say. The impact of his words has a profound effect on Charley and she leans against the table and begins to cry. Quickly he takes a chair to her and then sits opposite. She is wearing a thick jumper for the time of year and fumbles around inside the sleeve for a tissue; finally she produces some tulip printed stuff, which she uses to blow her nose furiously upon.

“Does she know I am here?” she asks.

He shakes his head.

“I’m sorry to put you on the spot like this but I don’t have much time. Is there someone else in your life now? Do you still.... Well, do you want Rowena?” He fiddles with the dog collar; aware of the disdainful looks it is receiving.

“Are you not hot in that jumper,” he asks and then contemplates does he really care anyway.

Charley is in fact sweating and would rip the thing from her body if she could. How dare he come here like this, how can he do this? It puts her in such a vulnerable position. Why doesn’t he simply tell her to sod off instead of struggling to have a decent conversation?

“Look, just tell me to bugger off and I will. That is why you came after all.” She says voicing her thoughts.

She stands up and begins to pack up some of her things. He jumps up too and grabs her by the arm but she freezes instantly at his touch and at this cold response he rapidly releases it.

“No, you don’t understand. The last thing I want you to do is bugger off.” Her eyes widen at his use of the word bugger but she stays silent,

“If you still want her and I know she wants you, then please try and get her back. You see she has suffered without you and we have had no life and I am ashamed to say no help from the church”

She raises her eyebrows in a “That’s typical” expression.

“As time has moved on she has begun to cope better. After the fete I am leaving the village and giving up my vocation...”

She stares dumbfounded.

“Giving it up? I don’t understand. The faith thing was always the problem.”

He rubs his eyes and she suddenly sees a weary but caring man who loves his wife without recrimination. Charley’s expression changes and her skin and eyes are almost incandescent.

“Rowena still wants me?” she asks.

He nods.

“I accepted this a long time ago. I tried to help her through the religious crisis but it was not possible. But since Virginia...”

Charley’s expression changes and he sees panic in her eyes. Her hands clutch at the sleeves of her jumper, and he watches as they twitch. It is still alien to him, this kind of love but he can now see how intense it is for both of them.

“Virginia is the woman I love. Not your ideal Pastoral leadership is it for a small village? Quite the scandal, as Lily would say. Of course this is our little secret and I would appreciate it stayed that way. I was going to suggest you come along to the fete and approach her yourself. You have nothing to fear from me. Virginia and Rowena spend a lot of time talking about faith. Virginia’s only son hanged himself. I think her experience is helping Rowena. I guess what I am saying is that this is the right time to come back into her life, if you want to. I lost my faith and it is not an easy thing to release, I think you should be aware of that. I think it better if you come to the fete on Sunday afternoon and not the house. As it is this will raise eyebrows as I never visit the W.I. and then if you are seen entering our home, well....”

At that instant they both look towards the door where the deliberate sonorous voice of Lily Fisher can be heard. Its volume is for their benefit and they both smile in mutual acknowledgment of this.

“The rector is chatting with her now, isn’t it exciting? He can’t stay unfortunately, other commitments far superior to our little group. You do look enchanting in that pale blue colour Elizabeth.”

Charley widens her eyes.

“Lily?”

“Knows everything,” he replies with a smile and she sees in that moment what attracted Rowena to him.

The door opens and both Charley and Jonathan find themselves scrutinised by Miriam and Elizabeth.

“This is Miss Charlene Spark, and of course the rector needs no introduction. Miriam start setting up these other chairs would you dear?”

Elizabeth says hello to Charley and smiles at Jonathan.

"I hope you two had a good chat, sorry I was gone for so long," Lily says in a matter of fact tone. "No, put them here Miriam, that's right."

"We did Lily, we had a very good chat. I will leave you ladies to your work now and wish you a good evening."

He holds his hand out to Charley, which she accepts immediately, aware that Elizabeth is watching them.

"It was nice meeting you Miss Spark and I hope you have a good evening," Both conscious now of the stares they were receiving from all three women.

"Likewise, Rector Byrnes and thank you for taking the time to visit."

He smiles and waves to the others. He is relieved when he is outside and begins to walk briskly away. It is done now, he can do nothing more. He marvels again as he walks at the beauty and personality of Charley. It was a detached observation, totally unrelated to feelings he had towards her. In fact, although he thought her very attractive she was very unappealing to him and yet Rowena had obviously found her compelling. The droning sound of a lawn mower can be faintly heard in the distance and he thinks how the days leading to the fete seem to be samey dull days as if everyone is waiting for *the* day when Lily Fisher's garden will be a throng of wondrous splendour, full of noise and smells of hotdogs and candy floss floating across the breeze. Barefoot children giggling as they excitedly pounce onto the bouncy castle and fall upon each other. He tries to picture Seth and Robert smiling and chatting happily together as they sell their plants. He would feel so much better if things were made easier for Seth by the time a new rector came. He is certain his own departure will deeply affect him. He hopes it will be the best fete for a long time. He would like to be remembered as having been a part of that. Virginia seems not in the least saddened to leave Millbridge and he knows she and Rowena have talked of it often. Rowena prays a great deal, asking God to forgive her for a love she can no longer deny and has promised Virginia that she will look for Charley once things have settled. He decided to tell neither of them about his meeting with Charley. He wonders if there is a way he can apologise to everyone. If they all knew the truth would they then not judge him so harshly? Perhaps something of the truth should be told. There is a way and as he mulls this over he is unaware of the scrutiny Miriam is now giving Charley.

As she places the chairs in the order instructed she gives Charley odd stares. It is the first time she can ever recall the minister visiting a meeting, or introducing himself to the speaker. She was certain they both looked guilty when she and Elizabeth had entered. Was this the secret Lily had been discussing with him? It crosses her mind also that it is an odd platform for a young woman to discuss her work. Surely, she is only forty if that and Miriam would never voice her thoughts to anyone else but she had felt the Women's Institute was obsolescent. No one new ever joins and speakers become so repetitive after a time. Charley suddenly smiles at her and she returns the smile warmly.

"Right, ladies if we are all ready, I think it is time to begin." Booms Lily.

Miriam takes her seat and instantly puts her mind to rest. We shall see, is the last thing she thinks.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It is the night before the fete. The forecast predicted good weather, a hot day, in fact. Everything is organised. Rosemary's bedside clock tells her it is almost midnight. She wrestles with the duvet until eventually she agitatedly throws it off. There are so many voices in her head and she cannot discern between them. The most persistent urges her to check the cake again, even though she has only done so ten minutes before. Another asks her is she prepared? Does she know how will she give the cake to Rowena? Surely not before the fete else all will become obvious.

"I will save it, I will tell her it is one left over and that I know how much she likes Walnut cake, because she does you know? It's her favourite especially with coffee icing. I did ice it didn't I?" she asks an invisible someone. Panic freezes her and irrationally she jumps out of bed and rushes downstairs to the kitchen and slips on the bottom step in her haste. She jumps up and curses as she does so. Satan is definitely fighting with me, she thinks angrily. She halts at the entrance to the kitchen.

"Resist the Devil and he will flee from you." Says the voice clearly.

She feels uplifted by the voices tonight where on other occasions she has wanted to scream with despair at them.

"Yes I resist the Devil in the name of Jesus and will continue with my good works."

"Gods work is never easy, that is why he chose you. You must not let him or Rector Byrnes down, not at this final moment." The angels of God continue to lift her spirits.

She sighs with relief. Of course, if she is to be a good servant to her Lord she must not expect his demands of her to be simple. Lucy meows, anxiously following Rosemary as she rushes around the house.

Rosemary removes the cake from the fridge and sniffs it. A deep sigh escapes her and she almost sobs with the intensity of her relief. She tells herself she must get some sleep because tomorrow is such an important day.

Perhaps she will take a tranquilliser as they always help her sleep. She tries to remember where she keeps them. The Doctor prescribed them when she found sleeping alone difficult after...

"Don't allow him to enter your head. He has gone and will rot in hell," shrieks the voice venomously and Rosemary is afraid. She did not mean to offend her God or her guardian angels.

"Sorry," she whispers into empty space that for her is full of faceless people.

Finally she is again tucked into bed and Lucy sits happily at the bottom. Rosemary swallows her pill and waits for it to take effect. Lucy stares at her anxiously and as Rosemary's eyelids lower, Lucy settles herself more comfortably and begins to doze off too sleep too.

\* \* \*

It was a beautiful morning, and the forecast said it would be the hottest day yet. James boasts proudly about his ice cream stall idea.

"We will make a fortune on that one."

Robert had not been able to get hold of Virginia the previous evening and so had simply sent her a terse text message.

'Our garden is open to view so it would be prudent to make sure everything is locked up before you leave for the fete, also we need to discuss divorce, let me know when you are free.'

He has still not received a reply.

He has some letters to post and stops at Celia's house, which he passes on his way to the post box.

Celia opens the door before he knocks. In her hand she carries a large tray of cups and saucers. He can hear the faint strains of radio Four and recognises the programme with dismay. When Edward was at home they would always listen to it together and he had made a point of avoiding it since. He is lost in his memories and does not clearly hear what Celia says to him.

"Sorry, Celia, I was just wondering if you were seeing Virginia today but I imagine not."

She laughs,

"At the fete and so will you,"

Before he can respond she is already past him and on her way to her car.

"Sorry, Robert, so much to get to Lily's. Are you helping Seth get his plants and stuff? If not there is loads to be done, just find James." she calls back.

Of course, he should be offering to help someone. Jessica had been up and out of the house by eight. How idiotic of him not to think of Seth. Perhaps this was the time to put right whatever was wrong between them. Although Robert is not sure if anything is wrong. He surmises that Seth just got tired of spending time with an old man. All the same he had enjoyed his companionship. He walks back to Jessica's and gets into his car to drive to Seth's house.

Rowena packs her paintings with fragility. Although they are travelling a short distance she does not want to chance any glass being broken. She is poised over a particular favourite when Jonathan enters the studio. She looks serene and yet when she turns to him there is a wildness in her eyes that betrays the serenity. She is excited; he realises and is gloriously rapturous to be exhibiting her paintings, even at a small village fete. She is resolved that she will not endeavour to seek out Charley, although she has experienced a presentiment about the fete for days now. She wears a thin cotton dress and has twisted her hair into a plait. Jonathan contemplates her beauty, the brilliant blue eyes, which were now quite incandescent, indicative of her excitement, the prominent long nose which he had at first disliked most about her and then finally his eyes slide down to her soft mouth and it's enviable cupid's bow. Somewhere he had read how much women wished to have this cupid's bow to the point of painstakingly creating one with lipstick.

"You look lovely." He says appreciatively.

She looks caringly at him and reaches out a hand, which he takes gratefully.

"I don't mind you leaving. I admire you for your honesty. At least your not a hypocrite, that's more than I can say."

He squeezes her hand; he does not want her to be alone and shattered.

"You know how well you are facing things Rowena. It is marvellous and you may one day find Charley but if you don't there will be someone else that will make you happy. The important thing is you are not denying your true self anymore."

She looks distressed.

"I'm frail minded though because I don't have the courage to be open. What is the point in just being true to myself?"

He smiles.

"Because it is the best start. Come on," he releases her hand and carefully picks up some of the paintings.

"Let's get these packed in the car and to the fete."

She follows his lead and between them they pack the paintings ready for the afternoon.

\* \* \*

Rosemary lifts the eight other cakes she has made out of the freezer. By the time the fete begins they will have defrosted, she assures herself. She debates for nearly thirty minutes whether she should take the walnut cake out to the car first. Eventually she decides that would be the best thing. With slow deliberation and painful concentration she places her hands at the sides of the cake and it seems to float magically before her eyes to the kitchen table.

Already there, sits a cardboard box that she had obtained several weeks ago. With a large black marker pen she writes SOLD in big bold letters on the lid of the box and then with hands that shake uncontrollably she places the cake inside and quickly covers it with the lid. It is now entombed and she sighs with relief, there is a threat of tears that looms behind the sigh and she fights to control them.

"No time for silly things like that," the voice tells her firmly but gently and she feels guided and comforted at the same time.

The back door suddenly bursts open. A bright eyed young woman with hair flapping all about her face stares wide eyed at Rosemary. She wears a bright pink, low cut, tight fitting summer dress and flimsy sandals.

Rosemary's hand instantly flies to the cake box and she fights to stop the trembling in her body.

She is about to demand what the woman thinks she is doing when the frivolous creature opens her bright pink lips.

"Hi, I'm Miranda, you're Rosemary Peterson aren't you? I saw your boot open and thought you may need some help. Oh, you have made cakes, yummy"

Miranda dives towards the other cakes on the table to look at them.

"No! Keep away," Rosemary screams.

Miranda jumps back as though she has been shot.

"Keep calm," whisper the voices in unison "Don't make her suspicious."

Rosemary wipes beads of perspiration from her forehead. Miranda stares at her, unsure what she should do. After a few seconds she begins to take slow steps backwards towards the door.

"So sorry," Rosemary says and smiles.

"I am a little tense today. I have sold one cake already and of course I am rather nervous of transporting them to the car. Thank you for offering to help, I would be very grateful if you really don't mind?"

Miranda frowned. She was frivolous by nature and she knows she gushes too much but she cannot be timorous. Besides, she likes to lark about and one thing she detests is snarling odious women like Rosemary.

I should make her carry her own cakes, she thinks. Anyway they are probably so obsolescent as to even be edible. The house has a strange mouse like odour and she wrinkles her nose in distaste. I shan't buy one of them, she thinks angrily. Rosemary smiles falsely and Miranda feels she has no choice now.

"Which ones would you like me to carry?" she asks, having already decided she will not touch anything without Rosemary telling her it is safe to do so.

Rosemary points to two Victoria sandwiches.

"Those if you would. I shall bring the other three. So what stall are you running?"

She wasn't really interested; she just hoped the silly woman wouldn't be too close to her.

“Playschool,” Miranda answers simply as she carefully picks up the cakes. She also is not interested in making conversation now. She is beginning to feel her first perceptions of the village had all been romanticism and perhaps the truth was that everyone sulked about gloomily, or fumed thunderously. They didn’t seem to be as much fun as she had thought, apart from Robert and Virginia and now she hears they have parted. Perhaps they dappled too much in the dark mysteries of Millwood. She shakes her head and smiles for she knows she enthrals herself as well as enchanting her children with her vivid imagination, but it does make everything such glorious fun.

The boot of Rosemary’s car was immaculate, and Miranda stares at an air freshener block that sits like ‘big brother’ itself, in the corner.

“Put those to the back, my dear and I will put these in,”

Miranda jumps at Rosemary’s voice, she didn’t hear her come up behind.

She leaves her at the car and goes back to the kitchen and begins to pick up the sold cake. She wonders who would have bought a cake in advance of the fete. She takes a quick glance behind her and then quickly lifts the lid a fraction so she can peek her head inside. The smell of walnut is sickeningly overpowering and she pulls back while at almost the same time Rosemary grabs her by the waist and drags her roughly from the table. Miranda squeals as she feels Rosemary nails pinch her skin.

“How dare you!” Rosemary declares, her glare wide and frightening. Her jaw was clenched so tight, Miranda could almost hear Rosemary’s teeth grinding.

She pulls at her dress and struggles to control her tears.

“How dare **you!**” she retorts and marches to the door where she stops and looks over her shoulder.

“I think you are the most ungrateful and miserable person I have ever met.”

Rosemary gapes, she is speechless. She knows she has overreacted and made an awful mistake. This is exactly why her angels were warning her. But where are they? She struggles to hear their advice but all that is audible is Miranda’s rapid breathing and the hum of the refrigerator. Oh my lord, help me, she begs silently, as her imagination runs riot and she visualises Miranda at the fete.

“She went bonkers just because I looked at her cake, honestly she almost ripped my dress.”

Rosemary put her hands to her face in a gesture of despair.

“Oh, Miranda, do forgive me. It’s just the Fetes are so hard for me. I used to do so much with my husband before he left me for that....” She forces silent tears, and allows her body to shake slightly.

Miranda looks at her suspiciously. There was something odd about her but she couldn’t put her finger on what it was, all the same she was not staying. Thinking it best to make a polite exit she shrugs as she walks through the doorway.

“Forget it, good luck with the stall, see you later then,”

Rosemary was in a daze and barely aware that Miranda had actually left. Then a sudden pang of fear thumped her chest and she rushed to the box and opened the lid. The cake looks all right, she thinks but finds she cannot fully relax unless she takes it from the box and checks it properly. When she is totally satisfied she tapes the lid back down and takes the cake to her car. Finally, with it safely ensconced in the locked boot she allows herself a cup of tea to calm her nerves before the fete properly begins.

\* \* \*

Robert can see Seth in the distance. He stands by his van and seems to be talking to an older woman. At the sound of Robert’s engine they both look up and for

an instant he wonders if he should turn back. But it has now become impossible. He tries to smile as he approaches them but is met by cold stares. He is at a loss as to what has brought on this estrangement between them. He knows that his separation from Virginia must have affected Seth but Robert was finding the loss of Seth almost as hard to bear as the loss of Edward. He opens the car door and the woman walks towards him.

“Good morning Mr. Spencer. I am Seth’s mother.” She holds her hand towards him in a friendly gesture.

“Nice to meet you, Seth has mentioned you often.” He replies, accepting it graciously.

Seth still has not spoken and seems to have his head down so Robert cannot see his eyes.

“Would you like some tea? I have just made a fresh pot.” She looks kindly, Robert thinks, a homely woman.

She seems totally unaware of the food-splattered apron that she wears.

“I actually came to see if Seth needed a hand with his plants and if he wouldn’t mind helping me.” He looks at Seth whose head snaps up.

“You don’t have any plants now, your wife smashed your greenhouse.”

“Seth!” admonished his mother.

Robert wrung his hands together.

“I have lots of cut flowers, I thought they would sell well. You could help me with those. I could save you two trips by taking some of your stuff in my car.”

The ringing sound of a phone reaches their ears and with a polite apology Mrs Martin rushes in to answer it.

There is a short silence.

Robert sighs.

“I’m not sure what I’ve done but I don’t seem to see you much these days and when I do you seem very hostile. I’m sorry Virginia and I have broken up. It was the strain of losing Edward.”

Seth does not reply. He looks lost and uncomfortable.

“It wasn’t because of Jessica if that’s what you think. Although, she has become a good companion to me and when you get older and your health is not so good it isn’t wise to be alone. I do miss seeing you though. Jessica just isn’t quite up to plant talk.” He laughs.

Seth smiles and pushes his hands into the pockets of his shorts.

“There are loads of plants round the back. We could get them loaded up,” he says as though Robert had not spoken at all.

Robert nods and follows him. He begins to whistle. When they go back to the house for the cut flowers he will drop in a note asking Virginia when she wishes to meet and he can also check if everything is locked up. Kill two birds with one stone that way, he thinks sensibly. Seth begins to talk about the fete and their stall and Robert forgets Virginia instantly.

\* \* \*

Lily Fisher has established herself as director of the show. Already she has fumed at James Trueman for hanging bunting on the barn.

“That is private property and not part of the fete area, I did make that very clear at all the meetings.”

With a grim face he takes it down while she watches. She then drifts between stalls and makes helpful noises.

"Do you not think we should have the music playing now, it would encourage people to get in the mood?"

At one point a coconut, as a trial game almost hit her.

She wanders royally past ice cream stalls, narrowly misses an arrow as she strolls past the archery area.

She checks the tom-bola stall and asks Jessica who is covering it if Jessica is doing the bric-a-brac? And where were all the cakes? Jessica assures her that she will cover the tom-bola and that Virginia Spencer is doing the bric-a-brac.

She seeks out Minnie and asks her if she would take trays of drinks to the helpers.

"Then take the day off and enjoy the fete with your young man,"

Minnie blushes and hurries off to make the lemonade. Lily smiles, she is resolved to lose Minnie, whom she will miss dreadfully for she has been the most wonderful companion and she does not envisage finding another like her. Lily sees Miriam and rushes over.

"Do you think a beer tent is a good idea? I am worried people will get drunk. I don't want an infernal mess afterwards."

"I think it will be fine. It will be marvellous to have the brass band here, don't you think. I say Lily when are you dressing up as the gypsy?" asks Elizabeth as she carefully places jars of home made jam and marmalade in a nice pattern on the table.

"Oh my goodness," squeals Miriam as she sees James and another man carrying a large dead pig.

"It's the pig roast, don't look so squeamish Miriam please, and you a country bumpkin after all." Lily smiles and the sisters are not sure if it is a joke or a real insult.

They watch as she walks over to Miranda who seems to be arguing with the men who are setting up the bouncy castle.

"Everything fine here, my dear," asks Lily. Miranda looks frazzled and snatches a glass from the tray that Minnie is handing around.

"They want to move it to the other side, but I want it here because I have set my face painting up and it will be ideal to have them together. Besides the food is on the other side and I don't want the children knocking those stalls over."

"Quite right dear, also my little tent will be over there and not suitable for children. Put it here please gentleman."

"Minnie, Minnie," she calls as she notices her walking past.

"Would you mind awfully dear before you finish to bring out the big marrow. I need to set it up so people can guess the weight."

Virginia walks into the garden; in her hands is a large box full of items for the bric-a-brac.

Lily rushes towards her and kisses her warmly on the cheek.

"Darling, how splendid, is there more?"

Virginia nods.

"Boxes and boxes in my car. This is terribly exciting isn't it? I don't think I have ever been involved in a big fete like this before, I mean not hands on. I was always on boring committees, this is much more fun."

"Virginia, Virginia," squeals Miranda and quickly dashes towards her, two children in tow.

"Isn't it exciting. Oh, you look so lovely in that blue outfit. Do you like my dress? I'm jolly lucky to still have it on after Rosemary pulled at it so hard. Georgi stop tugging poppet, mummy is talking."

Lily's ears prick up.

"My dear, why on earth would Rosemary do that?" Miranda was on the verge of relaying her exciting

gossip when an enormous bang coupled with a piercing screech practically deafens them; this was quickly followed by Matt's deep voice.

"One, two three" he then proceeds to bang on the mike. "Can everyone hear me," he asks, his voice loud and distorted.

Lily shakes her head.

"I think the whole of Hawksworth can hear you," she shouts back, "God preserve us from men, ladies, believe me they serve only one purpose in life." She does not wait to hear Miranda's gossip for in truth she is not wildly interested in that kind of thing. Virginia and Miranda fall into peals of laughter as they watch her struggle with Matt in a bid to retrieve the microphone.

"Let me have it you odious little man." Her voice echoes around the grounds.

"Your not in charge of these proceedings," Matt answers meekly.

There is a screech as the microphone is snatched from him.

"I am while it is on my premises. Now, someone turn this thing down."

Miranda giggles so much she can barely stand still. Virginia smiles. Over the past few months she has discovered something rather remarkable about Lily and will be very sad to leave her. But Jonathan is insistent that they would leave directly the fete is over. Rowena has assured her that she is strong enough to cope and knows everyone will support her. She is doubtful if she will look for Charley, her philosophy seems to be that if it is meant to be, then Charley will find her.

"Then she will teach me to be as brave as you," she had given a weak smile and Virginia had felt like a mother abandoning a child. They too had become intimate friends in the past few weeks. She laughs inwardly as it occurs to her that no one would ever believe this story if it were ever to be told. It seems so sad that she cannot say goodbye to people, like Celia and Miranda. They have made a pact to stay in touch with Rowena, it is important that Jonathan knows she is well. The diocese has agreed to support her financially and have already offered her a small cottage on the outskirts of Millbridge, which she is happy with.

"This is not the sin of Mrs Byrnes," they had said at their last interview with Jonathan. They had offered Jonathan the post of warden at another rectory almost three hundred miles away.

"The Reverend does not live there but we need it kept in good repair for when that day may come. You may live there and we will contribute towards an allowance for you. We anticipate this situation lasting no longer than two years by which time you will have a position of your own choosing."

All in all, Jonathan had said it had been incredibly generous of them. Virginia had assured him that once her house was sold and she and Robert were divorced then money would not be an issue.

The aroma of the roasting pig reaches her nostrils and she pulls a face.

"Disgusting isn't it?" Miranda agrees. She looks around discreetly and then says in hushed tones.

"I'm so sorry about you and Robert. I would have come round sooner but... It isn't that I'm stupid just a bit of a scatter head. If you ever want to talk, do pop in."

Lawrence works morning till night, he would hardly know you were there. He hardly knows I'm there most of the time."

Virginia smiles, then in an instant, frowns as she spies Robert across the field laughing with Seth. Lily approaches her.

"Come with me darling, I need someone to help bring out the bowls of punch and you really must tell me what you think of my gypsy outfit."

Virginia follows and meets Robert's eyes as she does so. He attempts a half-hearted wave, which she dismisses.

By the time they bring out the punch Virginia is astounded at the transformation of Lily's grounds. She places the large crystal bowl beside the one that Lily had carried and smiles at the unknown woman behind the stall who nods her thanks. She then closes her eyes and savours the atmosphere of a traditional village fete.

The pig roast is cooking nicely, a mixed aroma of cooking flesh, roasted nuts and candy floss hit her nostrils and already the slight breeze that was apparent earlier had now left and it was becoming sultry. The bouncy castle was up and Miranda's two children had become two wide screaming mouths. Miranda was sipping lemonade and lining up her face paints. Funfair music blasted from the large speakers, reminding her of family holidays with Edward, which she quickly pushes from her mind and continues to let her eyes stray around the large garden.

The beer tent seemed huge but perhaps she was comparing it to Lily's little tent. Lily had designed it so it gave the impression of being very oriental. Lily wears an outrageous dress and covers her neck and wrists with jewellery that tinkles as she walks. Her hair is covered in a strange headscarf and Virginia had wound it around her head to make her look more mystical. She notes Rosemary stands by the cake stall with Celia who is in charge of the drinks stand. They are chatting, but Rosemary looks unsettled. Celia waves, and Virginia waves back. She hopes Robert will go back to Starkfield House and Celia will retain her job. She searches for the large marrow Seth had grown specially and decides she will try and guess the weight.

"Here, I thought you looked hot."

Virginia jumps. It is Rowena; she holds two ice cream cornets.

"They are terribly nice. I don't know where James got them. Have you got your stall set up? Mine is ready."

Virginia nods.

"I should put out one more box, want to help?"

They empty out the bric-a-brac and Virginia tries not to look at Jessica who is opposite setting up the Tom bola.

"You really must buy a jar of Elizabeth's home made marmalade, it is the best ever." Rowena says studying an ornament before placing it on the table. Neither of them sees Robert approach.

"Virginia?" he says simply. "Did you get my note?"

She nods.

"We can discuss it after the fete, now isn't the time and everything is locked up but I am sure you checked on that."

There was another screech from the microphone as James tapped it.

"Everyone settled? We have less than fifteen minutes before the show begins. All you hardy men, at three this afternoon we are having a tug of war, Matt suggests the North of Millbridge against the South. We will take bets for charity."



"Well, that should make interesting viewing," Lily whispers to Virginia as she walks past her towards her fortune telling tent. Robert looks uncomfortable as Rowena continues to stand by Virginia's side.

"Later then," he agrees and walks back to his stall. Virginia notes Jessica has watched the short conversation.

Rowena nudges Virginia and points to the small platform that had been erected as a stage for which announcements would be made. Jonathan was adjusting the mike. He looks very much the typical village rector. He wears a smart dark shirt from which his white dog collar is alarmingly visible. Beneath that he dons casual but neatly centre-creased corduroys. He has trimmed his beard quite short and Virginia finds she sadly misses the bushy beard that had scraped her face and breasts and shudders at the memory.

"Good afternoon Ladies and Gentleman. Before the show begins may I thank you all for your committed support as ever. It is the most wonderful effort and we can be exceptionally proud. Good luck to all of you and have an enjoyable afternoon."

Everyone applauds and with a loud screech the music begins again.

He finds it difficult to look at Rowena, when he knows his eyes will lock onto Virginia's instead.

"I thought we were having a brass band?" Miriam says and she walks towards Rowena.

Robert watches Virginia with Rowena and Seth begins to feel uncomfortable and hotter than he should.

He pulls off his fleece top to reveal a simple black sweatshirt underneath. At that moment Minnie approaches them with lemonade. She says something to Seth but he does not seem to hear her above the noise of the music.

"Thank you," he shouts.

"Would you like some help later?" she says again, but louder this time.

"Oh," he looks to Robert as though the deciding factor is with him.

"After this I have nothing to do except wander, you see." She offers in way of explanation.

Robert is busy lighting his pipe.

"More hands on deck that's what I say. I will be popping over to Jessica every so often and you never know you may get over run by enthusiastic gardeners at just those moments I leave. It would be splendid to have your help my dear, do you not agree, Seth?"

Seth is beginning to wish he hadn't removed his other top now, he felt reasonably more presentable in that.

He begins to pull it back on.

"Seth, you will roast in that, besides you look much nicer in that sweater," Minnie says softly, in the hope that Robert will not overhear her. Seth is enchanted once again by her warmth and acceptance and quickly removes the top.

Jessica rushes around to the stalls to give people their floats, and then they impatiently wait for James to ring the bell to tell them the off has started. Jonathan waits at the entrance to greet people and already there is a big queue, but he cannot see Charley...

\* \* \*

The night before she had phoned Brock while trying to conceal her rising panic. She failed miserably and instead of asking for advice had blurted out,

“Can you come? I need moral support. I just know I will never make it on my own.”

Brock had chuckled.

“I’m in the States darling, it isn’t exactly an national emergency is it? Why are you so agitated? You even have the husband’s blessing.”

She moaned and felt her heart fluttering.

“But what if she rejects me? Suppose she has found someone else? What if....”

“Charley, stop it” He said firmly. “You are talking crazy. She could barely cope with you. Now listen, don’t waver over this, do as he said and go. What have you got to lose? You haven’t seen her for over two years anyway. If it’s over then to be blunt, darling at least you can move on.”

She had not slept following the conversation; memories had invaded her brain like unwanted aliens. A raging storm seemed to erupt inside her head, where speculation destroyed fact and fear diluted desire. Waves of uncertainty would wash across her mind flooding her with unreasonable doubts. Wild visions of Rowena screaming at her to leave haunted her. Eventually the raging blizzard ceased to be replaced by an astounding calmness. She was beginning to feel resigned to whatever the outcome may be, but most importantly she knew there had to be an outcome and it was this that made her feel sanguine about the situation and finally she slept.

Now, the following morning it is her stomach that feels fragile. She skips breakfast and with trembling hands slides into the dress she had chosen the night before, but now it feels all wrong. She empties the contents of her jewellery case onto the bed and chooses the earrings and bracelets that Rowena always adored and then chooses her outfit to match those. Finally she is wearing a casual silk two-piece; the skirt floats generously around her legs in an almost comforting massaging way. Emerald drop earrings match the outfit and she pulls her hair into a loose bun accentuating her neck. She scrubs her face again, although she has already showered and stares at herself in the mirror. The image is of a tense nervous woman and she is impatient with herself. She looks at the clock, she is lingering. It is time to go. She grabs her bag and stands at the front door hesitantly, decisiveness still her enemy. With a hearty thrust at the door she marches out of it to face her destiny.

\* \* \*

It is now very hot and the ice cream stall is doing a roaring trade. Children wander happily with ice cream running deliciously through their fingers and creeping steadily down their chins. Young mothers stroll in their most revealing summer clothes enjoying the attention of the men. Jonathan finds his hand is sore from so much hand shaking. He is rubbing it gently when Lily storms up to him. She has felt chagrin for the past thirty minutes, mostly because the brass band has not arrived and it was she who arranged it and secondly the fact that no one seems to care is more irritating.

“Where is this brass band? Do you have any idea?” she snaps as though it is his fault.

At that precise moment a full entourage of musicians arrive and stand at the entrance to the gardens. Jonathan moves back the small barricade allowing them to pass through. It is then he sees Charley and sighs with relief. He was beginning to think she might not come. She hovers behind the band and thankfully Jonathan notes that Lily is unaware of her such is the relief experienced at the arrival of the musicians.

"I paid for you to arrive over half an hour ago so you can stay half an hour longer." She admonished and Jonathan was amazed that not one of the men answers back and he imagines their muted silence is the product of Lily's appearance in her gypsy outfit and over made up face. It occurs to him that she looks like some ludicrous freak from a circus and is powerfully overwhelmed to reach out and replace an offending piece of scarf that had unwound itself in her frenzy and which somehow had tangled itself around loose strands of reddish grey hair. But even as he is thinks of this action she retreats with the band following and he stares bewildered.

"The pied piper," says Charley, then feels stupid for having said anything and feels she ought to turn back.

"Yes, it's her... well one can't call it a garden can one. Anyway she said we could have it on her premises so she has taken it upon herself to be in charge."

They are both making small talk and Jonathan doesn't know how to tell her how grateful he is to see her. She looks quite beautiful, he thinks and to his horror wonders what she finds attractive in Rowena.

"I thought I would wander. Where is she do you know? I don't want to be seen immediately." She dons large sunglasses and an attractive boater, which make it impossible to recognise her. Jonathan uses the ice cream stall as a direction point for Charley to see Rowena. She seems disinclined to speak to him further and simply nods before moving through the barrier. She stops suddenly and his heart skips, he holds his breath.

"Sorry, do I pay or something?" she asks a look of embarrassment clearly evident.

He smiles, relieved.

"No, I am just here to look good and do the pleasantries."

She just nods again and walks away from him.

A balloon flies into her face and seems to stick there. There is a smell of toffee apple emanating from it. Miranda in her rush to retrieve the balloon, trips over her daughter sending Vanessa sprawling across the lawn. Loud screams come from her tiny mouth and Charley looks on bemused.

"Your balloon?" she says to a breathless Miranda.

"Gosh, yes, it would be wouldn't it? We must go down as the noisiest as well as the nuttiest family in this village." She takes the balloon and thrusts it at her daughter.

At that point the brass band begins and Miranda sighs.

"Goodness, so much music. Nessa, do stop crying now, else when daddy gets here you can go home."

She turns back to Charley but she has already gone. Miranda shrugs and decides to quickly pop to the cake stall and buy something in the hope of appeasing Rosemary.

Jonathan eyes drink in the kaleidoscope of colours that are the success of the fete; balloons of all colours float magically in the air either by themselves, or at the other end of a stick being held by some child with a fist like grip, while their other hand struggles to cling onto a fluffy ball of pink candyfloss. The sweet smell of the candyfloss, home made cakes and roasting meat are starting to make his stomach conscious that he missed breakfast. He finds he has to shield his eyes from the shiny brass instruments as the sun dances on them. Women in colourful dresses, queue excitedly outside Lily's tent, waiting to hear what destiny holds for them. He smiles again at the memory of Lily in her costume. Lily had become quite an enigma to him over the past few weeks. The strong smell of pork wafts towards him on the strength

of a light breeze, and he decides that some roast pork and beer would be an ideal lunch, however, he denies himself for a little longer and watches as young children lark about on the bouncy castle. He realises that Lily now has quite a gathering. He thinks of her now, how unobtrusive she had been when he and Virginia had met there. He looks now to where Virginia stands and their eyes meet instantly, he smiles and she acknowledges it with a slight nod of her head. He feels a deep sense of peace. The first few times they had met he became distrustful of their feelings for each other. Was it just lust and dependency? But within a short time the desire to devour each other's bodies was overtaken by a deep longing to talk and they did, heartily, seriously, frivolously and often wistfully. They discussed their pasts, echoing the other's regrets, each appreciate of their partners good qualities but accepting that there was not a future with them anymore. They talked at length about Edward and occasionally she would weep, they cautiously explored, rejoiced in shared interests. Often they would make love gloriously slow, and he felt as though both their bodies and minds were now inexplicably one. Sometimes before they left Lily would ask Virginia to play the piano and he always found her playing, profoundly moving and promised a piano would be the first thing he would buy. Lily always somehow disappeared, but was always back before they left. Even Minnie, whom he did not know at all, would often let them in and always with a smile. He sees her now, laughing at something Seth has said, her head back, and pure joy on her face. He wonders now, does she know about them? Would Seth have told her? He can't see Charley and looks towards Rowena who blooms as she talks to interested buyers about her paintings. The bunting seems to reflect onto everyone, or does he imagine it, he wonders? Jessica and Robert seem the epitome of the perfect couple, he puffing away contentedly on his pipe and turning to ask her advice on something he evidently already knows, but Jonathan can see it pleases her. He cannot help dislike the almost obscure pompousness of Robert. Miriam and Elizabeth, as usual, resplendent in what must be the oldest but certainly the finest dresses of their time. He shudders at the thought of leaving all these people that have played such a major role in his life. But leave them he must. He shakes all thoughts from his mind, like a feather duster clearing cobwebs and walks towards the beer tent.

Charley watches him as she watches them all. She has positioned herself just inside Lily's barn. The fete, a whirlwind of colours, makes her dizzy. A horse stomps behind her and it's friendly braying is company. She seems a million miles away from everyone and yet so close. It is so hot and her desire for an ice cream is almost as strong as that for Rowena. Just a cool drink would help. Her throat is parched, either from the heat or the now almost unbearable sight of Rowena. How she craved binoculars to see her more closely. She is beautiful, more beautiful than she ever remembered. How distant a memory it all was. Rowena is a picture of pure splendour, beauty so untouched, a fresh purity that one is reminded of a newborn baby. How did they let this all go so easily? No, why did she let it all go so easily? Her stomach rumbles but she feels sick. The aromatic smells seduce her taste buds but her stomach rejects them. Again she spies the wild woman with the children as they run across the fields. She focus on them for she is afraid to focus her eyes anywhere else. She is rooted to the spot and is fearful that if she does not approach Rowena soon she will have to leave. But she has no idea how to do so. All her pre-conceived ideas have not come to fruition; it was never like this in her head. The child is upon her before she knows it and is handing her a toffee apple.

'For you,' he says holding it out.

Charley stares for a few seconds until the woman is by her side.

“Georgie, what are you doing?” Then she looks at Charley, concern on her face.

“I say, are you alright? Do you feel ill? We have first aid people here. It is frightfully hot I know. I shall fetch help.”

Charley grabs her quickly before she can move away and feels the other woman tense.

“Sorry,” she says pulling her arm away, “I’m fine really, just cooling off here.”

Miranda relaxes; she couldn’t cope with another nutcase today.

“Have you eaten?”

Charley shakes her head, she is suddenly numb, and her legs are paralysed. Rowena is heading towards them and she cannot move.

“You probably need some food. It is a glorious event but so damn hot. Ah here is the Rector’s wife. I will go and fetch some food, what would you like?”

Charley wants her to shut up, feels she is close to slapping her. Oh God, Rowena don’t come any nearer or I shall faint for the want of you.

Then she is there, in her resplendent beauty, standing right in front of her, her cheeks a rosy red but glowing as if on fire. Her breasts sharp points straining beneath her loose dress, screaming take me. Oh, how she wanted her, now, here, right here in the barn. Go away you stupid prattling woman.

“Thank you, I am fine,” she hears her voice, strained, unreal and oh God is there a tremble in it?

Rowena’s hair frames her face. She is glorious, was she always this glorious? Then it dawns on Charley she must be dreaming. Then she hears the musical strain of Rowena’s voice and knows she is not.

“Thanks Miranda, I will look after our guest. I think there are people at your stall and Virginia is having some difficulties, why don’t you help?”

Miranda looks horrified.

“God, yes of course. I forgot. Georgie will run off and I lose track of everything. I hope you feel better, see you later,”

Charley watches her run off with the child in tow and realises she has no idea what is going on. She is a woman isolated in her own world.

“She means well,” Rowena says quietly. “Shall we go inside”

Charley sways, her legs give way.

“I don’t think I can”

Rowena takes her hand and it is as though she is reborn. Feelings rise in her, and she sees herself as phoenix rising from the ashes. Rowena strokes her hand as they walk into the darkness of the barn. She walks into the horse and hears Rowena’s soft laughter.

“You always said you would find me.” she whispers.

Charley feels herself lowered to the ground. How can this be, how can she be so out of control. Her body touches rough hay and the smell of horses and fresh straw attacks her nostrils and she believes it to be the most intoxicating fragrance ever. Then Rowena is above her and her lips gently brush hers. Overcome with a passion so long held in check she pulls her hard towards her and crushes her mouth against the soft lips until Rowena cries out. The horse, scared by the noise moves away. Charley’s hand slides up Rowena’s dress until it finds her underwear and then skilfully moves inside. Rowena lets out a soft moan and Charley kisses her gently, her tongue sliding over her upper lip. They believed there was no one to hear them and even if there was, so abandoned were they that in that moment they did not care.

In the heat of their passion they did not hear Rosemary as she reluctantly approached the barn with a plate of cake and a glass of lemonade. That blasted woman had pestered her so much; it was almost like she was doing it for devilment. Rosemary couldn't say no without looking fiendishly guilty.

"There is a poor dear desperate for food and drink and I do think roasted pig would turn her stomach. Why don't you take her a piece of your lovely Victoria sandwich and some lemonade? I would do so myself but I dare not leave the children. One of us will watch your stall. It would be awfully good of you."

Rosemary had spluttered her excuses at first but everyone had looked at her oddly until in the end she agreed.

Now looking around for the poor dear she felt aggrieved. It had been a wasted journey. Then she heard the muted cry and in total ignorant bliss enters the barn. Immediately she freezes. A chill runs through her bones, and bile rose up halting in her throat that had constricted. She stared at the ultimate obscenity in front her of, and then suddenly the bile pours forth. She splutters and both women turn in shock towards her. Rowena was the first to jump up, quickly straightening her clothes. Her hair, however hung wild, reflecting her passion in all its vivid colours.

"Rosemary!" it was all she could utter.

Rosemary stared beyond her to Charley. She tried to focus on her but had difficulty. Perspiration had run into her eyes mixing with her angry tears so that she could not see. It was dark and hot in the barn and she felt she would never get her breath again. It was indeed Rowena, but this other woman, who, what?

"I don't understand, I thought, I mean. Oh how could you, how could you do this to him, the poor Rector"

Rowena went towards her. Oh God, what were they to do now? Rosemary, of all people a woman clearly quite insane. Rosemary backed away.

"Don't touch me, you are profane. How many have you touched with your filth?"

There was a loud raucous from beyond and Charley peeked out. Something exciting was starting. They could not allow this woman to spoil the fete.

"Rosemary," she said gently, "I am Charley and I think it best if you didn't say anything, at least today. I mean think of all those people. Think of the Rector and...."

Rosemary spat at her feet and Charley shrank back, Good God who was this vile person? She looked to Rowena, who was about to speak when Rosemary began shouting.

"The Rector? You talk to me about the Rector, how dare you. What a righteous man. To have such filth for a wife"

Charley walked towards her, thunderous anger contorting her features.

"Now look here..."

Rosemary held her hand up and looked towards Rowena.

"No, you look. You look. God is watching you. Watching you and your filth. Wasn't the other one enough, that Virginia, didn't that drive him mad enough? And your disgusting drinking. It's time everyone knew about you."

Charley grabbed her and Rosemary immediately vomited onto her dress.

"Oh for Christ sake," cried Charley.

Rowena felt ill, oh what should she do? The woman was clearly out of mind with rage but why she could not imagine. Oh, have I driven her from her faith too? She thought sadly.

“Rosemary, please. Just wait, please till after the fete. There is so much you don’t understand about Virginia. You have it all wrong. Jonathan will be gone after the Fete. Everyone can then judge for himself but don’t do this to him now. Please.”

Rosemary floundered about; she turned this way and that, bumping into horses and falling over bundles of hay.

Where was the way out? What did she mean when he had gone, gone where? Then like an echo she hears her own voice.

“Gone, gone where? He can’t leave us.” It is a moan and Rowena instantly realises. Rosemary is in love with Jonathan. She thinks quickly, she feels Charley’s hand on the small of her back and her whispered voice saying ‘Careful darling, careful.’

“He isn’t leaving you Rosemary, not you. He’s leaving me.”

“Does she know about Virginia?” Charley whispers. Rowena shakes her head rapidly, realising it is the last thing she should hear now.

Rosemary looks around her as though for confirmation. There are no voices, why have they deserted her? She must see Jonathan.

“I must ask him,” she rushes from the barn and Rowena chases her, but she trips and falls and is left helpless to watch Rosemary as she runs towards the bright lights of the Fete.

“Oh God,” she moans as Charley helps her up. “What have we done?”

Rosemary runs as though being chased by wolves. She runs towards the lights and the music. It is all a blur.

A strong smell of sweat assails her but she does not connect it with herself. She needs a drink. She trips twice, curses and picks herself up. Once she looks back and sees the obscenities standing at the door of the barn. They are not pursuing her and she relaxes. Her jumbled mind tries to piece together the puzzle that taunts her. Virginia, there is something about Virginia, but what? The cake, yes she must not forget the cake, especially if the Rector is going away. He will want some cake. But he isn’t leaving her, didn’t the obscenity say that. But Virginia, what was it about Virginia? She claws at her face, why don’t the voices answer her? Tell her what this thing is she can’t remember? Her knees are grazed and her hair is a tangle, she is running and running and then a loud booming voice halts her. She almost runs into a line of men.

“Everyone ready. Ok we have divided ourselves but I am sure Seth Martin you should be on the South side” It is James Truman’s voice. She sees the men tugging onto a rope. Everything is going mad? Oh when should she get the cake, why wont they tell her? She looks behind her and can see Rowena and Charley coming towards her and panics. She rushes towards the men and hears James voice loud, crisp and angry.

“Rosemary, stand back dear or we shall have an accident”

She runs around to the other side and sees Virginia. Virginia, there is something about Virginia, but what? She stands beside her knowing somehow that Rowena will not come near her now.

She hears Seth call out.

“I am happy here thank you Ref. I think this side needs my support.” Seth glares at Jonathan who is holding the rope opposite him and then looks behind him to Robert.

“You happy to do this?” he asks Robert and Robert unwittingly recalls another time, another life when Edward had asked “Are you happy dad?” and Robert replies

“Happy as Larry son”

“Ok, one two three go, let the tug of war begin”

Rosemary watches as the men begin to tug at the rope. Their faces grimacing with the strain,

Jonathan is acutely aware of Seth’s penetrating glare, it pierces like a sword and he realises what this is? How they all underestimated this young man.

Minnie looks on proudly and finds herself shouting her support along with the rest of the crowd. Robert is panting heavily and begins to wonder why Seth is becoming so intense.

“Steady on old chap,” he hears himself say.

The roaring sounds of the crowd spur Seth on. Rosemary hears Virginia gasp beside her.

The north side are winning.

“This feels a bit personal,” Matt gasps with a laugh to Jonathan, but idly wonders what is going on.

Jonathan’s feet slip and he falls backwards. He hears Seth laughter above the crowd.

“Come on Rector don’t show your weakness now. Not to everyone.”

Virginia gasps, and Rosemary snaps her head to look at her and a pain shoots through her neck.

Jessica moves closer to watch, sensing something isn’t right.

“It’s getting awfully exciting don’t you think?” Miranda squeals.

Jessica is worried, Robert seems to be struggling.

“Come on old man, lets not get carried away,” Robert, says jokingly to Seth his breath laboured.

“Did you hear that Rector, Robert said not to get too carried away” He pulls on the rope and Matt slips to the ground. Jonathan struggles to stay upright as do the others on the south team. The damned boy. Jonathan tugs harder; surely he can pull him down with that deformed foot.

“What the hell, keep it fun lad,” one shouts to Seth who simply laughs, and Jessica shudders at the evilness of the sound.

Matt struggles up and grabs the rope again,

“You ok,” Jonathan asks but it is getting harder to talk.

“What the hell is going on?”

Jonathan ignores him and his eyes like a magnet go towards Virginia. The words are unsaid but clear.

“I love you, forgive me for this”

Her look towards him seems to acknowledge and Rosemary watches in silent horror and sees that Rowena is looking at her. Oh no, no. She screams over and over. No, no. He wouldn’t. She remembers the day Virginia came to the Rectory, She had thought it was because of Rowena. Oh God no. How many were there, how many to tempt. Here another obscenity to distract the Rector from his lord. She stares ahead mesmerised by the men tugging and moves beyond to the cake stand and as though her eyes possess a zoom lens, she focuses in on the cake under the table, safe and secure in its box. Her eyes move back to the men. The shouting is giving her a headache, why can they not stop?

“Oh Seth,” Rowena moans and struggles not to take Charley’s hand that she feels hovering by her side.

Jonathan shouts to the men.



“Now” and with a hefty pull Seth feels himself slide. Robert tries to aid him but it is too late. Seth falls to the ground but is up as quickly as he fell.

Jonathan meets Seth’s eyes.

“Let’s call it a day Seth. I say a tie. Everyone agree?”

There is a general mumble of agreement.

Lily Fisher looking slightly ridiculous has already realised that Seth has lost his head. The Brass band had stopped playing. Everyone looked on as Seth continued to pull even though his team looked on perplexed.

Jonathan, now feeling his hand was being forced pulled even harder.

“Seth,” pleaded Robert, “What’s happening Son”

His hair now soaked with sweat, Seth shouts to Jonathan.

“Do you want to tell Robert what is going on Rector, or shall I?”

Against her own volition Virginia finds herself screaming.

“Seth no!”

Miranda feels uncomfortable and begins to wish it would rain and then all this silliness would stop. Whatever foolishness it was, for she was sure she did not know but oh she had an uncomfortable feeling now that Virginia had shouted. Virginia was deathly white too, and Rosemary looked none too peachy either. What a kettle of fish this all was.

Lily suddenly jumps in and grabs the rope.

“James, call a stop,” she yells. “It’s a no win.”

Jonathan and his men collapse while Seth anger seething inside him drops the rope and marches towards Lily.

“You stupid old woman, get out of the way and you,” he points to Jonathan, “Grab the rope”

He walks back fully aware that his team have left him. Robert stands panting with Jessica.

“Grab it,” he shouts.

Jonathan stands up but does not pick up the slack.

“Seth, that’s enough son. I know you are trying to protect me but you don’t have to. Don’t embarrass everyone, least of all me.” Says Robert

Seth turns to Robert, tears running like a fountain. He rubs his hand across his nose, which is threatening to run down his face also. Minnie begins to cry and wants to run to him but somehow finds herself rooted to the spot. Virginia holds her breath and finds she is praying for the first time in over two years.

“Don’t you care what he did?” Seth sobs.

Jonathan walks gingerly towards Seth; aware of the terrible hush that has befallen everyone.

“Seth” he begins.

“You’re a fucking hypocrite.” Seth screams. “You have no right to be here, you should have left and taken her with you,”

Rosemary sees Seth’s finger pointing at her. Virginia stands silent beside her. Rosemary looks at the finger again, no it is Virginia, he is pointing at Virginia.

Lily looks desperately at James as if to say do something, but James has no idea what to do.

Then as if it were her cue, Rosemary steps into the arena. She looks like a witch. Her hair is a tangled mess and her clothes torn and dirty.

“I made a cake, “ she says. “I made a cake especially.”

### **Present day:**

Jessica is gripping her hands so tightly together that the knuckles are white. I realise I have been holding my breath and release it with a loud sigh.

"Poor woman, totally demented of course. If only we had seen it earlier but we were so full of ourselves as you have seen," she gave a weak smile.

"What happened to her?" I ask when I really want to ask is what happened to Jonathan and Rowena and everyone else. But I know she will tell me, albeit it in her own time.

She stands up abruptly.

"I need to walk. Come with me, there are things you should see. You still haven't seen the Church"

I find myself walking to the church. The sight of it in the distance does not seem strange. The story had brought it so alive for me it is as though I had been there several times.

"This is where you will preach" she smiles, but there is sadness in her eyes.

"Yes as Jonathan once did." Surely she will now tell me where he is. Is Virginia with him?

As though reading my mind she walks behind the church and there I see the bench.

"Virginia sat there?" It was a question I had to ask but I knew the answer and she simply nodded.

I see the cemetery; the place Virginia found so peaceful and I could bear the suspense no longer.

"So they are together?" I asked experiencing a thrill of pleasure I could not have imagined feeling earlier for now their happiness was paramount to me.

"Yes, in a manner of speaking," she continued to walk ahead of me

We walk together like ghosts, the silence almost deafening us. I look ahead to the rolling countryside and marvel at its beauty.

"It's glorious," I murmur in awe and then realise she is not with me. I turn around and see she is standing still in front of a tombstone and it is then I realise. This is why she has not introduced me to Robert, or is it her beloved Wallace. I see the tears glistening on her cheekbones and walk back to comfort her. I look fleetingly at the tombstone and put my arm on her shoulder and then feel my hands tingle like ice when I realise I have just read the beginning of a poem I now know so well *A life that I have* and with unbearable horror read with a dying heart the continuation of the poem that is deeply etched on the second tombstone, *A rest I shall have, Yet death will be but a pause*

"She baked a cake you see." whispered Jessica and I shuddered.

### **The Fete:**

Lily escorted Seth away. Everyone watched in stunned silence as Rosemary presents her cake like she is handing out a knighthood. She cuts it precisely into pieces. Miranda shudders and grabs her children.

"Come on darlings we have to go"

People are wandering off but Rosemary doesn't seem to notice.

Minnie rushes over to Seth.

“Plates, we need plates,” Rosemary looks around her. She is lost,, all she knows is that everyone must have the cake after all she made it especially.

“She was utterly mad, and we all pampered to it. I suppose it covered our embarrassment at the time,” Jessica shudders at the memory.

“No one wanted it of course, but how could we have known how deadly it was and that it was to be Seth who was to save us, or at least try to.”

My body tingled and I transported myself back to the day of the fete.

“Here Rector I made it for you,”

Jonathan takes the cake. He is still stunned and looks over to Lily’s fortune telling tent where she sits with Seth.

“Virginia, here, you must have some”

The cake is forced upon the small intimate group, while others wander away hoping not to be seen. The fete is over but everyone tries to be dignified. No one speaks but just takes a cake offered to them by a mad woman.

Rosemary panics when she realises they have no forks and runs to the food table, she tumbles on the way and Charley winces. Forks are thrust upon them. Jonathan still stares at Seth and Virginia looks at the cake and wonders what Robert will say if he ever speaks.

Seth is walking towards them and Rosemary sees him like a vision. He is to be the saviour and she knows it.

“Eat, please you must eat, I made it especially. Everything is spoilt if you don’t eat it, please, oh please”

She looks beseechingly at Robert who feels sick with the pain in his chest and cannot stand the thought of cake.

She pushes the fork towards Virginia.

“Please. I made it. It’s the Rector’s favourite, isn’t it Mrs Byrnes?”

Rowena openly clasps Charley’s hand.

“Oh for pity sake eat the God forsaken cake,” Jonathan cries.

Robert watches as Virginia obediently follows Jonathan’s lead and lifts the fork to his lips when Seth is upon them.

“No, don’t eat it,” the cake is attacked by Seth as if like a vulture and thrown to the ground.

“You evil woman, you’ve poisoned it. Why didn’t I realise?”

His hands were around her throat, he can hear choking but it is not from her. He turns around to see Jonathan on the ground.

“My God forgive you,” Says Seth as his hand sends Rosemary and the rest of the cake flying across Lily Fisher’s grounds and he then falls beside Jonathan.

### ***Present Day:***

I stared at the tombstones.

“She murdered them” I hear my thoughts spoken aloud and turn to Jessica.

“And Robert?” I am almost afraid to ask.

She begins to walk back.

“Oh he ate some”

She looked at me her face softer than usual.

“It was the most harrowing thing. Of course we thought they would survive. Who could have imagined otherwise. Poor Seth he tried so hard to save Jonathan but it was not to be, and Virginia died on arrival at the hospital.”

She turned from the graves and I could only meekly follow although my legs were so weak I was certain I would collapse as I pictured Jonathan Byrnes once doing. I still could not absorb what Jessica was telling me surely these people I had never met and now so badly wanted to could not all be lost forever.

“Jessica? What happened” I hesitated. “Robert, what happened?”

She looked for the bench and wearily sat down.

“It was too late for Robert, Seth tried but Robert had already eaten some, Rosemary had made it far more potent than she imagined”

I gasped and suddenly felt sick. I could not stay in Millbridge where such tragedy had struck.

“He has good days of course but the bad days are difficult”

My ears pricked up. Robert was alive. A man that I felt I had now known all my life was alive. I thanked God.

She laid a hand on mine, and its heaviness seemed to represent her heart.

“We are lucky, we survived and Seth is like a son, always there. Rowena could not stay, obviously the powers that be had made decisions for her and she and Charley left soon after the funerals. I cleared the rectory, as Church Warden it was my place. It was a terrible thing to do. I could not move Rowena’s paintings, one day she may wish to claim them, but for now it is too painful for her to return and I thought the new Reverend would not need all those rooms. I hear she is happy and I know Jonathan would have wanted that.

The journal I left for you. I hoped the new Rector would read it, make this easier for me to tell,” she tapped my hand gently, “And you have”

I squeezed her hand and the last words were left unsaid. There was a long silence and then she finally answered my unasked question.

“She is in Hawsworth. It’s a good hospital, but she does not know where she is and remembers very little of what happened. One day we shall visit Rosemary if that is what you wish.”

I nodded, although I was not sure I ever wanted to visit Rosemary.

She stood up wearily.

“I shall leave you now. We will expect you for dinner at Rose Cottage this evening. Robert will enjoy the company”

I watched her walk away from me and then turned back to the glorious landscape and tried to see it as Virginia first had, then softly I recited the last lines of the poem I had begun to know so well.

*A rest I shall have  
Yet death will be but a pause,  
For the peace of my years  
In the long green grass  
Will be yours, and yours, and yours.*

