



WHITE
ASHES

A Novel

John D Moulton



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“WHITE ASHES”

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PART 1



The Runaway





Northern England

1969



Chapter 1

Friday, March 28th, 1969.

There wasn't much to say. The carriage was empty but for them, and no one else would board now. The two were strangers, thrown together with nothing more in common than the sound of a rattling train and the soft morning light of spring.

He was far from shy but no master of casual conversation; it had always seemed so pointless—until now. His eyes were fixed to the pages of a paperback book but strained to steal glimpses of the lovely young girl sitting by the window on the opposite side of the carriage. He lifted his head to look outward, but beautiful as the countryside was, it could not compete with her. And so he dared to shift his eyes in her direction again.

The train rumbled on. He turned another unread page before lifting his head to glance at the sunlight that shone softly on her cheek. Her long blond hair fell beyond her shoulders to cascade down, turning in gentle, tumbling curves to her breast. *'Her eyes must be blue,'* he thought; *'they just must be.'*

As he pondered her age his heart sank: nineteen, twenty at the most. He heaved a silent sigh and broke the faintest smile; with his thirty-first birthday just weeks away, this was the first time in his life that he had ever felt—too old.

A struggle began within him as pessimism battled with his burning desire to see her turn his way. He had to find something to say, but the words that rolled around in his head sounded so trite. Another minute passed—and then another. Maybe a cup of tea would help him think. And with that, a genuine question came to mind. All he had to do now was ask it before he lost his nerve.

“Excuse me, love. Do you know if there's a restaurant on the train?”

The turn of her head was slow and downcast, almost reluctant; distant but not dismissive. “I don't know. Sorry,” she replied with a glance in his direction.

There it was: his wish granted, his yearning fulfilled. *'Yes! Her eyes are blue!'* he thought in a flush of boyish excitement that caused his heart to flutter. But as he soaked up the flawless beauty of her face, he saw a tear fall.

“Oh ... I'm sorry,” he said, now painfully aware of his intrusion. “I didn't mean to ... I'll go and find out!”

He left the carriage quickly to stand in the narrow confines of the corridor. Guilt overwhelmed him. How could he have been so insensitive, so selfish, not to see? But should he have left? Should he have comforted her? Should he return or leave her be? What right had he to interfere?

A little guilt washed over her too as she watched the smartly dressed young man leave the carriage. His question had shattered her desperate solitude, but as she considered the gentleness of his nervous smile and the speed with which he sought to respect her privacy, it was obvious he hadn't meant to impose at all.

She wiped another tear from her cheek, let the moment go, and was soon back where she had been, immersed in her miserable isolation, oblivious to everything but her plight and the hypnotic sway of the train.

She was barely aware of Derbyshire's beguiling landscape as it passed before her eyes. Her vision clouded to grey as an overwhelming memory surfaced yet again: the image of her

loved-one's face, pale against a white silk pillow, his handsome features tormenting her as she wished for his eyes to open and look upon her as only his eyes could. But in his perfect peace, her wish had been denied.

Tears washed down her face once more as she was tortured by thoughts of how it should have been. She remembered the early morning sun challenging the deep blue velvet curtains in the room where he lay. She remembered stooping to pick up her case. But mostly she remembered the pain as she turned to walk away, knowing she couldn't stay.

The train sounded a long, high-pitched whistle and her thoughts were broken. Determined to clear her mind and think no more, she drew a deep breath and looked to the splendour of the view beyond her window.

She lifted her gaze toward the clear blue sky just as the train thrust her into total darkness. The soft, rhythmic clatter intensified as the sound bounced around in the blackness of the tunnel, and then the carriage lights flickered on. As she looked at the window, all she could see now was her own face reflected in the glass, as it had been reflected in the mirror of her dressing table just a few weeks ago. There too, deep thoughts had been suddenly shattered, when her bedroom door had burst open, bouncing hard against the old oak wardrobe as if to orchestrate her mother's dramatic entrance:

'What the hell do you think you're doing? If you think, for one moment, that your father and I are going to let you run off with that no-good waster, you've got another think coming! And if you think you're running off with my best suitcase, you're wrong there too!'

The neatly packed suitcase had lain open on the bed, but its contents had soon scattered across the floor in the short-lived tussle that had followed. Despite her mother's petite frame, she was a deceptively feisty character, and it would not have been wise to test the lady's resolve too far. So mother had won, and the victor had tossed a crumpled sheet of paper to the floor before storming out of the room with her reclaimed luggage. The dishevelled letter had been an attempted goodbye note—a draft, rejected as totally inadequate. She had no idea where her mother had found it and had cursed in that moment at just how easily that little white informer had betrayed her. Yet now, strange though it seemed, none of the reasons that had compelled her to leave that day mattered any more. Her reasons were now far graver—driven by desperation, bound in absolute despair.

Her flight this morning had been unhindered, and a brief look at her watch confirmed that soon another note would be resting in her mother's hands. But today there would be no victors; no one had wanted it this way at all.

She stared into the reflection of her eyes, feeling lost in this noisy darkness. Intense loneliness imprisoned her. It seemed the more she tried to empty her mind of the turmoil, the worse it all became.

Blinding sunlight hit her face as the train sped out of the tunnel. She screwed her eyes up tight, and as she opened them again the sparkle of a lake came into view. Its surface glistened like a million jewels, there for the taking and yet not there at all. She huffed; now even a lake reminded her of him. Desperate to avoid the memories, she looked beyond the water to the mist that cloaked the distant hills, to the tall trees that stood majestically against the horizon, and then down to the lush grasses that sped by at the trackside. But still the lake called to her, and still it reminded her of him and of the day they first met. That had been two years and a lifetime ago ...



She was sitting on the river bank at a local park, replaying the words of a petty argument she'd just lost to her mother. Calmer now, she was watching the sunlight dance on the rippling water as it passed her by. A voice called to her. Bold, warm, and confident the words came, dressed in the faintest Scottish accent.

"Hi, how y'doin'?"

She looked around to see a young stranger walking toward her. His smile was broad across a face framed by long dark hair that waved casually down to touch his shoulders.

"OK," she responded shyly. He looked so relaxed, so handsome and so self-assured. She wondered how come she had never seen him before; the town was small and he couldn't be more than a couple of years older than she was. Where had he come from? And why had he spoken at all? She dragged her eyes away, thinking how infectious his smile was and how, all at once, she wanted him to go away and to stay.

He stayed.

"I'm new in town. Thought it was about time I got out and met a few people. Do you spend a lot of time down here by the river, or did I just get lucky?"

"Lucky?" she replied.

"I think so!" That charming smile was all over his face again.

She felt her cheeks flush a little and didn't know quite what to do or say.

"I'm sorry; I've embarrassed you ... I didn't mean to," he said, raising his arms a little. "I'm not very good around girls; maybe I should let you be." His shoulders slumped slightly as he raised the palm of his hand in apology and began to walk on.

"No! It's OK. Don't go," she insisted. "It's OK. Honestly." A tingle of delight rippled down her spine as she watched him turn back toward her, and with it came pangs of nervousness for encouraging him to stay.

He sat down beside her and plucked a long stem of grass from the bank. He used it to point at his motorbike some distance behind them. "I'm getting a new bike soon. It'll be a beauty! Nothing like my practice bike at all."

She glanced behind her to the little red motorcycle just outside the park gates. It seemed brand new. Looking back his way, she wasn't quite sure what to make of such a boastful claim. She'd often heard boys bragging about this and that around school, but rarely did the words hold any substance. Maybe it was time to knock this young man down a peg or two—just for fun.

She looked straight into his magnificent blue eyes for the first time, and there she caught an infectious excitement that couldn't be denied. The moment left her a little stunned, but she determined to follow through. "Oh yes, and who's paying for this new bike, then?" She smiled, quite sure she was about to hear a list of rambling maybes and half-baked excuses.

"Easy; Mum will—we're loaded!" No sooner had the words passed his lips than she saw a twinge of regret flitter across his face. Half his smile disappeared and an air of reticence replaced it.

"Lucky you," she replied, unable to resist the temptation to keep him grounded. "Most people work for years to afford such luxuries, but I suppose Santa will just ride up and park it by your Christmas tree!" She giggled at the thought.

But her smile was barely returned. The look on his face said it all: he was obviously feeling bad for the cockiness of his impulsive response, and it seemed he had no idea how he was going to get past it.

So now it was her turn for regret. "I'm sorry, that was rude. I didn't mean to—"

“No, no! It’s OK,” he said with a little of the joy returning to his face, “I probably deserved it ... What’s your name, anyway?”

“Rachael,” she answered. “What’s yours?”

“Jason Beauvale. Jay for short,” he added quickly. “We’ve just moved into The Manor, down the road. How do you do!”

He held out his hand enthusiastically. For a moment Rachael just looked down at it, a little taken aback by the formality, and in that moment she saw his smile diminish again. He was actually beginning to look quite nervous, and she quickly realised her hesitation wasn’t helping. With that she smiled, wondering how anyone so bold and so good-looking could possibly be nervous in her company. She took his hand and her fingers tingled at the touch. This was no ordinary hand. She tried to stretch the moment in her mind. *‘Oh, my God, he’s gorgeous!’* she thought.

A strange sense of excitement, faintness, shyness, and dumbness overcame her. It seemed her heart was in her throat and her head was spinning. *‘All this over a hand!’* she thought. She found herself staring deep into his eyes, and that surprised her too. She swallowed hard, but her heart was going nowhere; worse, she could hear it pounding through her chest and wouldn’t have been surprised if the whole of Ravensdale town could hear it too. She felt his hand slip away, but the two remained locked in each other’s gaze for one full second and eternity. His hand was gone, and the going intensified the moment. Would she ever touch him again? She could only hope.

Now it was his turn to clear his throat, and the words that followed came in an uneasy croak. “Will you come for a ride on my bike when I pass my test?” he asked. “You can show me around,” he added, the words continuing to stumble past his tongue.

His question did nothing to calm her as it conjured dreamy images of the pair riding high up there on cloud nine. And the playful response she offered surprised even her.

“Maybe ...” she said, mischievously, “... If you get lucky that is! And anyway—I thought you were no good at chatting up girls.”



The countryside rolled on; still the wheels clattered as the carriage swayed, and still she tried to stop herself thinking.

The lake gave way to the hillside that embraced it, and as the train journeyed on, so the last of the water’s enchantment was gone. Her eyes were dry again now as bittersweet memories soothed her. But she knew how dangerous the thinking could be and how quickly a fleeting smile could give way to her tears. She knew she must clear her mind.

She watched the trees and bushes swaying in the breeze, and the sheep and cattle as they grazed carelessly in the tumbling fields. A foal, not yet sure of its long, shaky legs, amused her as it struggled to stay close to its mother in those wide-open spaces.

The countryside had won her for the moment: peace and perfection at one.

There she stayed in uneasy submission until the carriage door opened. She glanced over. Two white plastic cups and a pinstriped suit were first to catch her eye.

“There is a restaurant,” the young man began, with a friendly smile and a look of mild trepidation. “I hope you don’t mind: I took the liberty of bringing you a drink. Tea or coffee? I can drink either—or both!”

Rachael was quite shocked by the unexpected gesture. Nothing had passed her lips in over twelve hours and refusing would be both pointless and rude. “That was kind of you ...

Tea ... thank you," she said, with a tiny smile. She took the cup, which was handed over with a warm sigh.

"Thank goodness for that," he quipped humbly as he took the seat beside her. "It's coffee for me every time!"

Rachael wondered whether he meant it or if he was just being kind. It didn't really matter. His friendly, relaxed manner was a welcome distraction from the memories that constantly threatened to besiege her.

"I'm sorry about before," he began. "I didn't realise—"

Rachael interrupted. "You weren't to know. I've got a lot on my mind. I'm sorry for being so short."

"Please! An end to all that—I'm Richard Bowman. Glad to meet you."

"Rachael," she replied as he offered his hand. A memory flashed through her mind; it hurt, and it didn't go unnoticed.

"I'm sorry. Perhaps I should leave you in peace."

"No! It's OK ... " The words choked her a little and she longed to move on. "Are you travelling far?" she asked.

"All the way, I'm afraid. Got to. The train doesn't stop!"

Rachael strained another smile. "*After* the train stops—where are you off to?"

"The city. A weekend business conference and then on to the office—boring, boring."

"What do you do?" she asked politely and then wondered if she should have asked at all.

"General management. That's boring too—managing generals!"

Rachael tried hard to smile again, but the result felt far from convincing. More from courtesy than curiosity, she cast her eyes upon him properly for the first time. His immaculate, dark brown hair was cut a good bit longer than most of his pinstriped colleagues would wear it. He looked every bit the modern young businessman about town.

"Thanks again for the tea," she said. "It's lovely."

"That'll be a first for British Rail, then!" he joked. "Are you going far, Rachael?"

"I'm London too." She said no more and hoped the vague response wouldn't be seen as curt. The fact was she had little notion of where she was going—or what she was doing, for that matter. The moment plunged her into silent thought again, and with it came the gentle voice of her father: *'You really must decide where you're going, love—life's too short.'*

The memory was too much; emotions overcame her again and she began to cry quietly. As she fumbled in her bag for a tissue, Richard's voice conveyed a quiet, unassuming compassion:

"Hey ... come on," he whispered. "Here, use this." He offered her the red silk handkerchief from the top pocket of his flawless, navy blue suit.

"I can't use that," she spluttered.

"Why not? Nobody else has ... " His gentle wit lightened the moment just enough to save Rachael from plunging deeper into her misery.

She smiled a little through her tears and took the handkerchief, gripping it tightly beneath white knuckles, her despair and anxiety still reeling just below the surface. She turned her head to Richard, though she couldn't look into his eyes. "I'm sorry; I can't—"

"It's nothing, honestly. Don't worry." Richard looked down before speaking softly. "We all need to cry now and then, Rachael, believe me."

The melancholy atmosphere hung delicately about them, but it was gradually replaced by an air of mild curiosity as the train began to slow and steadily juddered to a halt. After the

monotonous clattering and soft motion of the journey, all became silent and still as the carriage sat stationary amid its tranquil rural surroundings.

Richard broke the silence with a bemused huff. “Well, there’s certainly no station here,” he joked lightly. “Perhaps that flock of sheep are going to board!”

Rachael mustered another faint smile, but she remained unsettled—and felt a little claustrophobic now too. The unexpected stillness somehow rekindled her innate urge to flee from the wave of pain, confusion, and danger that seemed intent upon engulfing her.

Suddenly, the carriage door burst open.

“Tickets, please!”

The shock of the entrance set Rachael’s nerves on edge and she found herself rummaging in her bag almost before she was aware that she was doing so. Frustration soon compounded her many emotions as the ticket eluded her.

She glanced up at the conductor as he inspected Richard’s ticket, his out-stretched arm revealing a powder-white patch under the arm of a well-worn British Rail uniform.

“Don’t we get to go any further without them?” Richard mused, cocking a thumb to the stationary view.

“Sorry, sir, signal failure. Miss?” The conductor stepped directly in front of her, his obstinate hand looming heavily over her as she continued to sift through her handbag.

“I can’t find the damn thing! Where is it?” she muttered to herself.

“Don’t worry,” Richard whispered reassuringly. “It can’t be far.”

Rachael’s fumbling fingers touched stiff card at last and she snatched at it, drawing it up eagerly. But it was just an old keepsake ticket for Blackpool Pleasure Beach. The fun-filled images it recalled were more than she could bear, and as the pressure and heartache overcame her, so too did her tears.

As she floundered, Richard’s voice seemed to reach out in a courteous attempt to support her: “Look, I can vouch for her—I saw her buy the ticket at the station.”

But the conductor was not to be passed off so easily, “I’m sorry, miss; I really must insist.”

“I must have dropped it!” Rachael sobbed, frustrated with herself.

The conductor still hung over her like a tyrant intent on a kill.

Richard put his hand over hers and looked up at the oppressor before them. “Could you come back shortly, please?”

“Well—” the man began.

“Please!” Richard insisted politely but firmly.

The inspector shrugged his shoulders and left without another word.

Rachael felt quite cosseted, like a kitten saved from a rabid dog. She knew it was far from that really, but the thought calmed her and brought her close to smile. She breathed deeply and slowly released a heavy sigh. “Now I see how you manage your generals. Thank you for that,” she said, slipping away the hand that lay beneath his. “You’ve been very kind.”

Chapter 2

A white envelope stood tall on the dressing table. It shone brightly, lit by a shaft of morning sunlight that pierced a gap between the curtains. Like a crisp white sentinel, it stood awaiting duty in the silence of this well-kept room. The door opened to the rattle of a china cup on its saucer as Rachael's mother entered.

"Morning, love. Come on, time to—" The shock of the empty, unused bed drained her in one horror-filled moment. The words came under her trembling breath: "Oh my God, Rachael; not now!"

She looked around for signs of life. Rachael must have risen early or fallen asleep downstairs; perhaps she'd—

At last, the envelope caught her eye. It stunned her for a moment, and her knees became a little weak. She made her way toward it, fearing the reality. The teacup rattled louder but wasn't to be heard. Her heart was telling her the note would say 'see you later', but her head just knew it would not be so.

As she slumped hard onto the little velvet stool, the cup and saucer crashed onto the surface of the dresser, bouncing the cup and its contents into the air. The hot tea surged toward the floor, leaving the cup to cartwheel behind it, the sound of its landing dulled by soft carpet, the whole process totally ignored.

Her eyes were fixed on the words 'Mum & Dad' and her head filled with thoughts of the worst. "Oh no, Rachael, no," she muttered. Even Rachael, tidy-minded as she was, wouldn't put a simple bye-for-now note inside a sealed envelope. With shaking hands, she fumbled with the seal. She had to know the truth of it. And as the crumpled envelope fell to rest by the cup on the floor, she began to read:

*Dearest Mum & Dad,
My heart is breaking as I write.
I love you both, you know that,
but Jay will always come between us now.
I wanted it to be so different,
but now that can never be.
It's all so impossible. I can't take it any more.
I just can't watch it happen.
I love you. Forgive me. PLEASE.
Rachael.*

A teardrop fell to the bottom of the page.

In the bathroom, Rachael's father had just used the new scales to find he weighed just over eighty-two kilograms and wondered what that meant. At five feet ten inches tall, he presumed that wasn't at all bad for a man pushing forty, but later today he would find out how to make this new-fangled device tell him what he really weighed in stones and pounds, as it should. He looked into the mirror, splashed some cologne onto his clean-shaven face, pulled in his stomach, and ran his fingers through his wavy, dark brown hair. 'Not too shoddy at all,' he thought. He was no egotist, but he

realised it was wise to look after himself—especially given his intention to occupy this God-forsaken planet until at least his 125th birthday.

His mind was about to wander on to more pressing concerns of the day when he heard the crash from his daughter's bedroom. He knew his wife would be delivering morning tea, so he rushed to see if she needed help, calling as he went: "Everything alright—"

He entered the room to find his wife bent in bitter tears, her head resting heavily on the dresser top, her petite frame juddering as she wept. "Helen, whatever's—where's Rachael?"

Helen sobbed, clenching the note ever tighter in her trembling fist. "She's gone. Will there ever be an end to the torment that Beauvale boy has caused us. I wish ... Oh God! David, what are we going to do now? Where's my baby? What will she do?"

As David hurried across the room, a mass of visions flashed through his mind. Where would she go? What was she thinking? Recent tears. The arguments. The hell. And now, almost inevitably he thought, Helen's final realisation that she had lost; her despair, his bitter reward for all he had worked so hard to avoid.

Strangely, he had nothing to say. He knew he must be strong. He reached Helen's side and placed his hands upon her shoulders, but deep inside he felt an overpowering emptiness begging to be filled. His wife's gentle sobbing echoed inside his head and around the room that Rachael had deserted, leaving them lost in a vacuum of despair and regret. He knew Rachael would go to Jason's side, but what then? Where? When they talked of adventure—where? When they laughed about secret places—where? And where, where did it all go so wrong?

In his mind he saw Rachael talking excitedly as she sat at the dinner table a couple of years before: *'I met a boy today, down by the river. He was really nice. Gorgeous eyes—lots of money too!'* Her giggles bounced around his head. *'He wants me to go with him, I think, when he gets—'*

Then came Helen's interruption: *'You be careful, my girl—down by the river indeed. Who is he? What's his name? Do you know him?'*

'Helen! Give her a chance! She's a big girl now.' David remembered how his words had hidden his own quite natural concern. And now they rang with bitter repetition through his mind, until Helen snapped him from his thoughts.

"Oh God, David, you're going to have to go and find her!"

"I know ... but I can't believe she's done this. What's she said?" His eyes were welling up as he took the note. After reading the message he looked to Helen; her face was flushed, her cheeks awash with tears.

"What does it mean, David?"

"I don't know, damn it. I don't know." His frustration went as ever to his feet, and he moved away toward the window. He looked out as he had never done before at the vastness that had taken his daughter. Their home stood on the rise of a hill that allowed spectacular views of Ravensdale town and the Derbyshire countryside. Beyond the blue slate roofs of sandstone cottages, a patchwork of snaking drystone walls divided the fields into a crazy-paving pattern of luscious greens. But today David's eyes were focussed on the town as his mind raced through the streets and into every corner of his imagination, trying to best guess her most likely refuge.

"David, how could she do this? Now, of all times. What is she thinking?"

"I don't know, love. She's distraught. She's not thinking straight. Maybe she's just gone to stay with Kathy or something. She'll be back home soon, you'll see."

Helen's immediate response was sharp: "I don't believe that any more than you do! She resents how I feel about *him*, and now she wants as far away from me as she can get." Her

frustration was quickly deflated at the thought of such distance, and more tender emotions sought supremacy again. Tears glistened in her eyes and her tone mellowed. “She’ll not want to see me ever again!”

“Of course she will! She loves you—she said so. She’s just confused right now.”

Helen didn’t want to think of her daughter as lost and confused; she wanted her back, safe, in her arms where she belonged. “We’ve got to find her, David, soon—very soon. We’ve got to!”

“I know, I know. Maybe she’ll ring to explain herself. Later. Today.”

Helen held out her hand in a silent call for her husband’s return. “I want to believe that, David, but ...” She shook her head gently.

David responded and lifted her to her feet with both hands. He wrapped his arms around her and stroked her loosely gathered blond ponytail. As she laid her head on his chest, he whispered to her softly: “She’s a big girl now; she’ll be OK,” he said, not at all sure of his words. He held her in his arms for some time, gently swaying his body to comfort her. “We’ll sort it all out, believe me.” And how desperately he wanted to believe it.

Growing restless again, David squeezed his wife tenderly before releasing her to walk once more to the window. “Where the hell are you, Rachael?” he whispered.

The world turned carelessly on. In the street below, people strolled on by. A child giggled; another wailed in determined pursuit of some petty want. The occasional drone of a car passed by. In the distance, a truck driver’s horn echoed around the rolling hills that surrounded the town, as if to orchestrate the emptiness that had beset them. It seemed to David that this window stood as a barrier between despair and absolute indifference.

Helen walked to his side and took his arm. She broke the silence as she wiped another tear from her cheek. “I want my loving baby girl back, David. She’s changed so much, so quickly.”

“She hasn’t changed that much, love. She’s growing up—we just find it hard to adjust to her changing needs that’s all, and she ... well, perhaps she’s not quite mature enough yet to see things from our point of view and fully understand our concerns. We probably just overwhelm her sometimes, and she either explodes or walks away frustrated when we don’t see things her way.”

Helen’s irritation surfaced again. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know how you can stand there and say she hasn’t changed. *He* changed her. *He* caused us to drift apart—almost from the start! Cocky little—”

“Please don’t.” David interrupted. “It isn’t fair, and you’ll upset yourself all over again. It isn’t worth it!” He saw his wife’s face tighten as she pushed herself away from his side in a gesture of total disagreement.

“Isn’t fair? Isn’t worth it? How can you say that? Rachael’s gone, damn it, and *he*’s the reason—not *me*!” She moved back toward the dressing table, and, as so often happened at such moments, her exasperation went to her hands and she began feverishly tidying up: the cup was ungraciously returned to its saucer; tissues were heaved unceremoniously from their delicate powder-pink box to be thrown over the wet carpet and battered to a sodden pulp. “I rue the day she ever met that boy. Two years! And after everything—she walks out. Walks out! At a time like this!” Helen’s concern soon took her anger and crushed it again. “What are you going to do, David?”

“I’ll find her, don’t worry!”

“Don’t worry!” Helen responded with renewed exasperation. “Is that the best you can do? Don’t worry! Anything could happen to her out there, David. Oh God, it’s hopeless! You’re hopeless! You just don’t see it, do you? What he’s done to her—and to you, always siding with them against me. I know how you really feel, and I hate you for it sometimes. Always got to be everybody’s best friend; even *his*—against me!”

“Helen, that’s just not fair either!” He moved to comfort his wife again.

“Leave me alone—just leave me alone!” She hurriedly gathered up the mess, stood quickly, and stormed out of the room. Her steps echoed her temper as she thundered down the stairs and through the hallway.

“Helen!” David called. He wanted to reason with her, but her reply was scathing in its finality:

“Go and get her, David! Just go and do something useful for a change!”

The kitchen door slammed shut, and moments later rattles and bangs beneath him confirmed that, as ever, all things out of place were about to become the target of her nervous, frightened rage.

David stayed in Rachael’s room, but his anguish tore at his feet. How he wanted to go; how much his heart wanted all this lunacy to end; and how he wished Helen wouldn’t say such hurtful things when she was angry or upset. He loved his wife dearly and knew only too well how gentle and kind she could be, but all too often her pain or frustration would cause her to lash out and say dreadful things that she really didn’t mean. She seemed to believe that the best way to end a disagreement was cut first, and cut deep. He shook his head faintly; how ironic it was that at the moments he needed her comfort the most, her impulsive reactions would drive them apart.

Overwhelming sadness washed over him, taking away any desire to move at all. He sat down by the window in Rachael’s favourite chair. What would she do now? Deeper into thought he fell, and then deeper again, but in the end everything came back to the one question that gave him no peace at all: How did it all come to this?

It wasn’t long before a tear-filled plea jogged David from his thoughts; Helen’s voice echoed through the floorboards, delivering another blow that pained him:

“Are you going to stay up there all day, or are you going to go and find her?”

The words set David on his feet where he took one long, deep breath to calm his inner being, to refocus on the critical, and to let the comment go. He left the room and took the stairs steadily, readying himself for the distinct possibility of further anxiety-driven disparagement. He hated the feeling when time spent making his way to Helen’s side seemed to be over all too soon, but this was one such moment. And so it was that, with some trepidation, he joined his wife in the kitchen.

Helen stood silently with her head hung low, unconsciously biting her thumbnail. She had run out of things to tidy. Everything stood in splendid orderly perfection—and in absolute contrast to her own shattered state of mind. She wanted it all to be a bad dream that would go away, and she wanted her baby to be back home. Her anger had faded to limp submission, her thoughts of nothing but the worst.

“Helen, love, I’ll find her, I promise. I’ll go and talk to her friends, see if they can help.”

“We’ll never be free of him, David! Never!”

Silently, the grieving couple held each other close once again, but not for long. The telephone rang. Hope filled their hearts. David rushed to the phone. Surely it had to be Rachael.

He snatched the receiver eagerly to his ear. “Hello.”

Silence greeted his anxiety and consumed it.

“Hello!” he repeated. The emptiness confused him utterly. Why this awful void? “Rachael! Is that you?”

The slow purposeful clattering sound of a receiver returning to its rest was followed in quick succession by the awful finality of the low, droning dial tone.

David looked to Helen. “Whoever that was wouldn’t speak,” he said, irritated. “You’re right. It’s time to go and find her.”

“I’ll come with you ... I could help you look!” Helen replied anxiously.

“No. Someone has to stay here in case she calls. I’ll look high and low, believe me.”

Helen followed her husband through the door and out toward the gate. “David!” she called, but he was already climbing into the car.

Three times the starter tugged at the engine without response before it reluctantly fired into life. David revved the engine hard, impatient to be on his way.

Faced with what was likely to be a long, lonely wait in the house, Helen realised she had squandered the comfort of her husband’s gentle reassurance. “David! Wait!” she called. “Please don’t leave me this way!”

There was no reply, only a hand raised—whether in acknowledgement or in farewell, she didn’t know. The car sped off around the arc of the crescent and out of sight. How she ached to be with him for the search, but David was right: the telephone could ring again.

Helen slapped her thighs tearfully and then raised her hands to her face, regretting her earlier harshness. She stood motionless for a moment, then, as she pulled down her hands, she caught the blurry image of two elderly ladies across the street. They were obviously more than a little interested in all the goings on. But Helen turned without a word, to face her utterly empty home.

Chapter 3

There was a jolt as the train moved forward, and like a shock that ends a dream, it thrust Rachael back into her miserable reality. She felt quite guilty for those few moments of quiet tranquillity as they drifted away to be replaced by tangled thoughts of her recent past. Now, anguish, anxiety, fear, and trepidation fought for supremacy again, as this journey to heaven-knows-where was underway once more.

Richard was still sitting beside her and had been content to allow her some peace for a while. But now the sudden movement of the train compelled him to speak. “Oh, great. We’re on our way,” he said, not meaning a word of it.

“Hmm,” was Rachael’s only reply, and they both fell silent again.

Richard couldn’t help but reflect on his situation. He had left home this morning on a typical business trip, with a second-class season ticket on a train full of strangers, heading for a city that, to him, always seemed to be heaving with despair. Not for him the bright lights, the sights and the side shows, or all the glamour and glitz; just busy days, lonely nights, and the sooner away the better.

Now, out of the blue, here he was, sitting by Rachael; he had admired her, drank with her, consoled her, and even protected her like some knight in shining armour. In fact, if it hadn’t been for her sadness, he would say this had been the best trip south he had experienced—ever. He chastised himself for the selfishness of his thoughts, but much as her low mood concerned him, he didn’t want this journey to end and had cursed silently as the train moved on. He wanted to know her, to understand her sadness and to soothe her. But an hour from now she would be gone, lost amidst the crowds at one of London’s busiest railway stations, as the train released her like a grain of sand in a desert storm.

The rhythmic rattle and sway of the train held them both like flotsam in a rock pool at the water’s edge. The lengthy silence was becoming uncomfortable again, and there was so much Richard wanted to say. He felt almost that he were back where he had started, but he knew that couldn’t be true—he was beside her, and they were all but friends.

In this carriage compartment built for eight, the six empty seats were witness to the changing situation, but now each one of them somehow called him to leave her be. Despondently, he thumbed the pages of the book that had been neglected since its earlier employment as a cover for his clandestine attentions. God, how he wanted to befriend her; how he wanted to hold her; and how sure he was that it would never be. He unconsciously huffed a fragment of sad laughter through his nose at the thought.

The sound was barely audible, but it caught Rachael’s attention for all that. “Are you OK, Richard?”

The words washed over Richard like a welcome breeze on a hot still night. It had been longer than he could recall since such tender concern had come his way, and he wallowed in the moment. “Yes. Fine. Sorry. How are you now?”

Rachael strained an understanding smile. “You looked so deep,” she said, still desperately entangled in her own misery.

“Sorry; I think I was dropping off there for a moment. Forgive me,” Richard replied in an attempt to justify his demeanour.

“No, I saw sadness not sleepiness. I know.” She paused, glancing toward the window. “Perhaps we should just jump off this train together!” Another half smile took her face.

Anything ‘together’ sounded good to Richard. His gaze went to the window and he drew a deep breath. “Look at it out there, Rachael; it’s gorgeous, isn’t it? I’d love to have a view like that from my office window.”

“It is lovely; you’re right.”

Richard’s thoughts of city life clambered around his head again. “Hmm, and very soon the view will change to crumbling brown buildings cloaked in smog.” He wafted a loosely pointed finger toward the window, “Then you’ll see all the litter blowing about, doomed to rot in some miserable corner, like so many of London’s forgotten people.”

Rachael was quite shocked by his words. “That’s quite poetic—in a way,” she replied, trying to make light of it for his sake.

“Hmm. Did a lot to cheer us up, too, didn’t it?”

Richard’s sudden deepness surprised her, and through it she felt some affinity; she also felt that she may be the cause. “Sorry; I’m depressing the hell out of you, aren’t I.”

“No! It’s OK. I wanted to help cheer you up, and a pretty poor job I’m doing of it.”

“It’s too deep for that,” Rachael replied, dropping her chin. “Looks like we’re a fine pair together.”

The thought raced boldly through Richard’s mind, but he knew that even if this had been a partnership of any sort, it would be dissolved within the hour. How could he sustain it? What right had he to try? Once the train pulled in, why should she ever want to see him again? There must be any number of young men clambering to be with her—what could she possibly want with him? The more he thought of it, the gloomier he felt about the obvious truth: She didn’t need him at all.

The carriage door rumbled open. “Ticket now please, miss,” the guard said quite forcibly, obviously determined to assert his authority this time.

“Oh hell!” Rachael gasped.

As she desperately began delving into her pockets and pouches again, Richard pulled out his wallet. “Let’s not start all that again; please . . . how much was the ticket?”

“No! No! Absolutely not!” Rachael exclaimed, making for her purse. She raced to find the cash and her ticket dropped out of her bag and onto her lap. “Oh, I don’t believe it!” she muttered in frustration to herself as she handed over the slip.

Ticket punched, and robbed of his final triumph, the guard was gone without another word.

“Charming!” Richard whispered sarcastically.

“I can’t believe I didn’t . . . Oh God . . . my head’s just all over the place,” Rachael mumbled, as she plunged her face into her hands to sob quietly. Through her mind, her torment raged again: Jay’s peaceful features; her mother’s loving anger; her father’s impatient diplomacy; the screams that had echoed around her bedroom; the roar of Jason’s bike—on and on. And now the all-consuming silence, the emptiness, the hopelessness of it all. She felt Richard’s hand rest on her forearm.

“It’s OK, Rachael—”

“No, it’s *not* OK,” she sobbed, overwhelmed again by the depth of her emotions. “Please, Richard, just . . . just *please* leave me be!” With all the reasons she was on this train engulfing her, she leapt up from her seat and bolted for the door.

Taken aback by Rachael’s sudden dash for the exit, Richard found himself unable to move. The sliding door slammed open and it slammed shut. She was gone. He couldn’t believe it. He seemed somehow fixed to his seat as his mind chased after her down the corridor. Was he responsible for this? What was he supposed to do now? He ached to go and find her, but she’d asked him to leave her be. He gazed out of the window, his mind in a desperate quandary. Suburbia

greeted him. As ever, the scenery acted as his visual countdown to the greyness of city life. First, a few pleasant houses, then the estates of the would-be-well-to-do. Chimneys and terraces would soon follow as the prelude to those monstrous concrete buildings that sprouted grass and weeds from their nooks and crevices, like man-made mockeries of ill-kept haystacks.

Time was running out and Rachael was gone. He looked to the ceiling in dismay, and there on the rack was her case. She would have to return. But even as the thought offered him a little relief, another followed that dragged him down again: the very case that offered him some solace also held him prisoner. He could neither take it nor leave it to search for her.

He stood and opened the carriage door, hoping he would see her standing by a window along the corridor; but no luck. Disappointed, he leaned heavily against the doorframe and wondered what it was that troubled her so.

Feeling so intensely alone, he returned to where he had been sitting beside her. There he pondered his situation: his attraction to her, his concern for her, his desire to see her again, and the miserable thought that it might never be. He placed his hand where she had been sitting, and murmured, "Richard, my friend, you *have* to find a way."

Chapter 4

David pulled his car up sharp at the home of Denis and Barbara Akins. Until he and Helen had moved to the edge of town, the families had been next-door neighbours for over ten years.

Denis and Barbara's daughter, Kathy, was some fourteen months older than Rachael, but just who had taken whom under their wing could be a matter of debate. In reality, the answer was irrelevant; the girls had been best friends and mutual confidants since early childhood.

Rachael had always been the modest one, but Kathy had grown to become a gregarious, fun-loving young woman with a passion for flaunting her new-found figure. Her vivacious smiles and flirtatious nature made her very popular with the local boys and the object of growing disdain among the more judgemental of Ravensdale's conservative community. Whether vamp or an innocent teaser was a matter of many opinions, but one thing was for sure: in David's eyes, she was practically a second daughter—and if anyone was likely to know where Rachael had gone, it would be her.

Kathy was making her way to the front gate as David arrived. He couldn't help but notice the chirpy freedom she portrayed, with her silky, chestnut hair and pretty cotton skirt rippling in the breeze. The skirt was unusually long for Kathy—almost to her knees. But very much in keeping with her style was the low-cut neckline of her blouse and the way the delicate fabrics and broad black patent-leather belt clung to her curves.

David had barely opened the car door before he knew his hopes were dashed.

"Mr. Farrington! How are you? I thought Rachael would be with you?" Kathy came through the gate and closed it. Her smile dropped as she saw David's worried face. "Is she OK? I mean—"

"She's gone, Kathy. I hoped she'd be here with you, or at least that you'd know where she was."

"Gone! She can't be gone! What about Jay?"

"You may well ask. I don't know what to think. Can you help me look around—check out her other friends and things?"

"Of course, but I'm due at the store in ten minutes. The Mini's in for a service, and I'm late already. If you'll run me round there, I'll see if I can get off work, then we'll sort it all out, I'm sure."

"Thanks, Kathy; you're a pal."

She ran around the car and climbed in, tossing her hair behind her. She looked sympathetically at David's anxious expression. "We'll sort it out, Mr. Farrington; don't worry."

David needed no instruction for the journey; he had made the trip a hundred times, usually with Rachael on board. Until a year ago, both the girls had worked at the store most Saturdays for pocket money, but Rachael had 'retired', needing the time for studies and to be with Jason. Kathy had hung on though, and for her it had become practically a full-time job.

"When I saw you in the car I thought Rachael may be coming to, you know ... to talk. But I never would have guessed she'd do this. She can't mean to be away for more than a couple of days, surely? She'd have told me otherwise; I'm sure she would. It'll be a weekend thing. Time to think and all that."

"I don't know. They were getting so very close, and with all the pressure of late, well ..."

The short journey took them past the lane that led to The Manor. As they drove by, David glanced in that direction and then looked to Kathy. "No point to looking there."

Kathy hung her head down, “I still just can’t believe it.” Her eyes filled with tears and the two journeyed on without another word.

They arrived at the store and Kathy ran in. She was gone barely a minute before she returned smiling—a day off had been agreed.

“Should we go to the police, Mr. Farrington?”

“Not yet. I don’t suppose they’ll take any real interest for at least twenty-four hours or so, so we’ll waste a lot of precious time. We’ll go later—if we need to.”

And so the search began. From friend to friend they went, all around Ravensdale and the neighbouring villages and even searched the local beauty-spots. They were greeted with concern at every turn, but no turn revealed even the hint of a clue. The day dragged on; nobody had any idea, nor did they seem to be hiding anything. David had called Helen from a telephone box by the local fish and chip shop at lunchtime, and again when he and Kathy had stopped to pick up a quick sandwich from The Dog and Duck Pub at around six o’clock, but there was no news at home either. It was all starting to feel rather hopeless.

Daylight was gone as David and Kathy pulled into the roadside café out on the edge of town. It was a popular haunt for local youngsters, and the two had thought to grab a hot drink and ask around a little; but judging by the car park, it was quiet tonight.

Kathy was first out of the car. She walked in long strides, her arms a little way from her sides. Her gentle sway and delicate shoes looked better suited to a catwalk than to this gravel car park. David shook his head, and smiled: Kathy was such a diva sometimes.

She turned and called back to him: “Looks like George and Betty will be glad of the company tonight—I’ve not seen it deserted like this in ages.”

George was nowhere to be seen, but Betty was busying herself behind the counter as usual.

“Hello, young lady. Good to see you. What will it be?”

“Hi, Betty. Coffee for me, please—Mr. Farrington, what’s yours?”

“Tea, please. My round.” David was a little distracted; it was time to check in with Helen again, and he’d spotted a phone in the corner—but a crumpled ‘Out of Order’ notice hung from it by an aging length of tape.

Kathy was keen to offer the introductions. “This is Mr. Farrington, Betty. Rachael’s dad.”

“Hello, Mr. Farrington; a pleasure to meet you. Rachael’s such a lovely girl. A real credit to you. The best!” She looked to Kathy and put her hand to her mouth. “No offence, sweetheart!”

Kathy smiled, but a pang of mild jealousy flitted across her face.

Betty continued, “It’s so sad; what can I say. It’s impossible to imagine Jay and Rachael apart these days. Everybody’s so touched by it all. How’s she doing?”

“Rachael’s missing, Betty,” David responded, showing deep concern. “Have you seen her?”

“Missing! She can’t be missing! What about—”

“I’m sorry, Betty,” David continued, “this could be really important. Have you seen her today at all? Any word? Anything?”

Betty placed their drinks on the counter. “No, I’ve not seen her for a couple of weeks, actually. They were together then, of course. So close those two. Last time I saw them they were on their way to ... well ... one of their ‘secret together places’ they called it.” She looked down to the counter, wiping it casually with her apron, clearly hoping to avoid an awkward moment.

“Betty,” David began, taking on an anxious look, “she’s missing—we need to know. Please.”

It was easy to see that Betty was feeling a little pressured. But she didn’t hesitate long. “Oh, I don’t suppose it matters now does it? It was only kids’ stuff anyway I suppose. They used to pull

my leg about staying there overnight, y’know, but I know they didn’t really. They just enjoyed a nice posh meal there now and then, and a chat with old Joe, of course. I’d often see them riding back past here late on. Anyway—it’s the Taverner’s Hotel, y’know, down in Milton.”

Kathy looked to David. “She could be there!”

“It has to be worth a try! It’s the first real hope of the day!”

They couldn’t drink up fast enough as Betty continued her chatter. “And your Rachael loves Joe’s garden, you know. Often said she could spend her life in that garden, what with the wishing well and the old rose arch an’ all. She once told me their best-kept secrets were hidden in that well. Such a romantic that one. Jason had other ideas though; scour the world on his bike that one would—without stopping to draw breath!”

David was quite sure a long tale was about to unfold, and with that call home still needing to be made, he felt compelled to make a move before Betty really got on a roll. “Betty, love, I need to ring my wife, to see if Rachael’s called, and if not, to let her know we have a lead to follow. I see the phone over there is out of order. Any chance I could use yours, please? It won’t take a moment, I’m sure.”

Betty was shaking her head. “I’m sorry, Mr. Farrington, ours is out too—it’s the main line in that’s the problem. Truck driver caught the overhead cable when he pulled in. They’re here to fix it tomorrow, with any luck! I’m sorry.”

David heaved a sigh, but there was nothing he could do. He did have one more question though. “Betty, you said *one* of their secret places. Did they share any others with you?”

Betty was shaking her head again, “No, sorry, just that one.”

With that, David was ready to be on his way. They made their apologies and rushed back to the car.

Kathy spoke first. “It’s about fifteen miles to Milton, Mr. Farrington! I’m up for it if you are—it’s only twenty past nine!”

“Hmm, and home is in the opposite direction!” David pondered the narrow, twisting lanes ahead of them and how long the round trip would take. But surely there was no choice. Helen would have to understand; he just needed to call her, that’s all. “We’ve got to try it, Kathy! Are you going to be OK for time—with your mum and dad? It could be quite late by the time we get back.”

Kathy giggled. “I never get in before one o’clock on Friday nights—and sometimes I don’t get home at all. They’re well used to me going off and doing my own thing!”

“Of course. Sorry,” David replied, remembering Kathy was quite the young woman now. “Let’s go, then. I’ll ring Helen from the hotel.”

“You won’t need to! There’s a phone box on the way—I’ve used it many-a-time.”

The car was reluctant to start, but it finally coughed into life, and with a rare tyre-spinning start, David set off, turning left onto the Ravensdale road and then left again, down the winding, country lane to Milton.

They hadn’t noticed George pull up at the café, or seen the dusty gravel billow from under the wheels of David’s car, shooting like shrapnel over George’s truck.

The grey grit cloud dried George’s eyes and caught his throat. He burst in through the café door coughing. “Bloody inconsiderate sods! Twice in as many days! What’s the world coming to?”

“George! That was Rachael’s dad—she’s gone missing. They’re worried sick. Well, you can imagine! Asked if I’d seen her today at all.”

“Bloody hell! First some bloke quizzin’ me about the Beauvales, now Rachael missin’; what’s it all coming to? That’s what I want to know. Didn’t trust that other one though, something

not right about 'im. Wanted to know the ins and outs of the cat's backside, he did. Did they own The Manor or were they rentin' from a local. How would I know? Then it was how long have they been 'ere? On and on. Told him straight: Beauvale business is Beauvale business. Did all but tell him to sod off! Off he went, spinning his wheels all over the bloody car park!"

"George! You didn't tell me about this!"

"Oh, a' don't tell you every bloody thing, y'know. Besides, didn't think any more about it. Glad to see the back of him and good riddance!"

"But this could be really important—can't you see? Some guy comes snooping around asking about the Beauvales, then Rachael disappears! Did he say where he was going next? What could he have wanted? Oh God, George, I'm worried now. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Leave it out, woman! What bloody business is it of ours? Interfering where I'm not wanted isn't my style and well you know it! Now bloody-well leave it alone and that's that! Everybody dashing about minding everyone else's business. What's it all bloody coming to? That's what I want to know!"

Betty didn't answer, there was no point. George would curse and ramble for a long time now, putting the world to rights under his breath. But Betty was sure something was amiss, and she'd be damned if she was going to let it go.

The night drew on as Helen paced the floor of her bedroom, just as she had paced the floor of the kitchen, the hall, the living room, and Rachael's room most of the day. Anxiety alone fuelled her every move. The silence was fast becoming unbearable. *'Why the hell hasn't he rung in again yet? Where is he? Surely he should be home by now?'* The thoughts rolled round in her head time and again. She sat and stared down toward her feet as her mind took her back to a moment some eighteen months before—just one of many moments when she and her daughter had been torn apart ...



All was quiet as they sat drinking tea at the kitchen table, but that was about to change. Helen noticed a look of apprehension in her daughter's eyes as Rachael began to speak.

"Jay took me out to Ringway Airport today, it was really exciting. I've never been before. We had a bite to eat in the restaurant, watching people come and go—people from all over the world. It was really interesting!"

"Oh yes, and how did you get there, then? And why weren't you at school?"

"I didn't have anything important on at school, so Jay picked me up at dinner. We went for a ride around and just ended up there. I only missed P.E., and you hate me playing hockey anyway!"

"That's beside the point, young lady! How many times do I have to tell you, Rachael? I don't want you on that death trap of a bike! The boy rides like a maniac! Now I'm telling you for the last time, you stay off it!"

"Mum, you're impossible! He rides really well now, and he'd never take a risk with me on board. He's really safe, honest!"

"Rachael, that's enough! You stay off it, and that's final!"

"But Jay's coming round soon and we're going out. He's got a surprise for me—I've got to go!"

"Surprise! Well I'm telling you, girl, I've got a surprise for him: You are going nowhere, and that's it!"

"Mum!"

“Rachael, go to your room—now!”

Rachael turned with a look that told of disbelief and despair. “Sorry, Mum—those days are over!” She rose from the kitchen table to walk away.

“Come back here! Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m certainly not staying here; I’ve had enough!”

“Rachael! Come back!”

Helen felt an overwhelming desperation as she followed Rachael to the front door and witnessed the cold harshness with which it was slammed so defiantly in her face. Driven on by an all-consuming fear for the safety of her daughter, she snatched at the handle and flung the door full open again. Her throat rasped as she cried out for her return; the single word ‘Rachael!’ filled the street. But Rachael was running and out of her reach, leaving her fixed to the spot.

Love and caring had never felt so hollow and meaningless, as her daughter slipped further away. She felt so utterly helpless, so completely misjudged, and so totally alone.



Helen heaved a heavy sigh at the memory. “My God, nothing’s changed from that day to this,” she said to herself. “Still she runs from reality.” Another tear washed down her cheek and her eyes stung from the floods that had fallen during this torturously endless day.

She glanced at the time again: it was nearly nine thirty. And as the clock counted out the seconds of those otherwise silent moments, the telephone rang. The shock stiffened her spine as the noise echoed loudly around the room. She rushed to take the call.

“Hello! David?”

“Mrs. Farrington?”

“Yes.”

“It’s Bobby—Rachael’s friend. I don’t suppose you’ll remember me?”

In the moments that those few words took, Helen impatiently wondered at the reason for this late call. Was he just calling to chat with Rachael, not knowing she was gone? Was it him that called this morning? Was it news of Rachael? A message from David? What?

“It’s about Rachael, Mrs. Farrington. Mr. Farrington and Kathy saw me this morning, asking about where she could be.”

“Yes!”

“Well, I didn’t know anything then, but just now I’ve been talking with my mate, Jerry. He’s just got back from Manchester, and he thinks he saw her at the railway station about nine o’clock this morning.”

“Thinks? What does he mean—thinks?”

“He wasn’t that close. He said she was just going through the stiles with her head down low, so he wasn’t dead sure. But with Rachael missing, it seems to fit, so we thought you should know.”

Helen’s tone became grateful but despairing. “Did he see which train she was catching, or even if she was headed north or south?”

“No, I’m sorry, Mrs. Farrington, I asked him that. You split for north or south after the stiles, so he just didn’t see. We’re all really worried about her, Mrs. Farrington, after everything that’s happened. None of us can believe it ... If we hear anythin’ more, we’ll be right back, honest.”

“Thanks, son. It was good of you to call; I appreciate it.” A thought crossed her mind. “Bobby, did you or any of your friends try to ring this morning?”

“No, not that I know of. Do you want me to check?”

“Er ... yes ... Yes please—if you hear anything, let me know, OK?”

“Sure, Mrs. Farrington. Hope it all works out, best it can.”

They said their goodbyes, and as Helen replaced the handset yet another tear rolled over her cheek.

She turned to the window, but the blackness of the night was all that greeted her. Closing the curtains, she wondered how much more of the night she would have to endure alone, how long before she could share the news with David, and how long it would be before she would see her daughter again.

“Come on, David! What are you doing? Where are you?” She pushed her stiffened fingers through her hair and clasped them behind her aching head. Weariness was consuming her. As she wandered to the kitchen for some aspirin, a thought struck her: *‘Kathy! Bobby said David was with Kathy! David could be over at their place, having a drink, talking things through, and not giving me and my anxiety a thought!’*

She returned to the phone quickly, but as she dialled the number she glanced at the clock: it was getting late. What if David and Kathy weren’t there and Denis or Barbara answered? She knew Barbara well, but the two had never become close. She might have to go through everything to justify the call and she simply wasn’t up for that. The thought drained her. “Damn,” she muttered out loud as she clumsily dropped down the handset.

She turned back toward the kitchen, but then she couldn’t remember why. It was all too much. The hopelessness was overwhelming. She felt so weak. Emptiness became hollowness and her dulling mind led her to the sofa. Surely David would be home soon.

David grew ever more tired and frustrated. They had travelled a good ten miles down this dark, narrow, winding road. It seemed the lights of his car picked up nothing but endless rows of dry stone wall and hedging. “Where is that bloody phone! Helen will be going frantic at home by now, wondering where I’ve got to!”

“Mrs. Farrington will understand, surely? It won’t be long now. I know there’s a phone box down here somewhere. And we had to give the hotel a try—tomorrow could be too late.”

“Yes, well ...” David knew time was ticking away fast, and he knew he was going to be in for a hard time if nothing came of this—and running off down some country lane in the middle of the night with Kathy Atkins wasn’t going to go down too well either!

His stomach became more knotted by the moment with the pressure of it all: wanting to find his daughter, needing to call his wife, knowing how anxious she would be. He just had to get to that phone.

Almost unknowingly, he pressed his foot ever more firmly toward the floor. At each bend the tyres strained a little more to hold their course. Though he didn’t know it, Kathy was nervously gripping the edges of her seat.

“Please, Mr. Farrington, take it easy. We’ll be there soon.”

The tyres tossed gravel around the next long bend, and the next, then there it was: the familiar red telephone box had never been such a welcome sight to either of them.

“Thank God for that!” David grumbled, ungraciously slamming on the brakes and skidding to a halt on the grass to the far side of the box. He threw the car out of gear, snatched clumsily at the handbrake, and was out of the car almost before it stopped. He ran to the box, flung the door open, then froze in disbelief. The broken handset swayed in the breeze that passed through the smashed windows, the dial was buckled almost beyond use, and the floor was a mass of litter and shattered glass.

“The stupid bastards!” He rushed back to the car and opened the door, leaning in with one hand on the roof. “The bloody thing’s smashed to pieces, I don’t believe it!” In a moment of frustration, he pushed back from the car—a move he was about to regret. The force of his action was just enough to tilt the balance of the precariously parked car, and with the handbrake not fully engaged, the wheels began to roll on the verge that sloped gradually down to a ditch by the hedgerow.

David saw the steering wheel spin and heard Kathy squeal as the front wheels followed the line of least resistance down the slope. Blind panic took him as he grabbed hard at the door handle, desperately hoping to hold the car back, but momentum won. The ditch was no more than two feet deep and four feet across, but with the angle of the car and the uneven ground, it may as well have been a ravine. Kathy cried out again as the front corner of the car crunched to a standstill. One headlight went out; the other shone on brightly.

David moved quickly to the driver’s door. It was painfully clear that their chances of getting the car out would be remote, but he was going to have to try anyway.

He leaned into the car to find Kathy in tears.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Farrington, there was nothing I could do.”

“*You’re* sorry! Oh, Kathy!” David climbed back into the driver’s seat and looked apologetically at her.

Kathy threw her arms around his neck, clearly in need of some comfort. Their heads met in a clumsy closeness. “What are we going to do now?” she asked in a voice more forlorn than any David could ever recall hearing from her before.

“We’ll be OK,” he replied, trying to convince himself as much as her. He patted her knee gently and as his hand came to rest there for a moment, he looked apologetically into her eyes. In that instant something changed. It felt strange. They had been pals for years, and they had shared many a Christmas kiss, but this feeling was something very new. David was more than a little surprised to find the experience somewhat sensual, and a little embarrassing too. He quickly pulled his hand back and coughed a little nervously. “Come on, let’s try and get her out,” he said, feeling his heart pumping rapidly.

Kathy’s eyes dropped downward as something close to shyness appeared to overcome her. She took her arms from David’s neck to play with the hem of her skirt.

David turned the key. The starter motor tugged several times before the engine fired into life. Kathy took a hold of his arm, squeezing it as if determined to transfer all of her energy into the task. Try as he may to encourage some traction, the rear wheels just spun as the front end remained firmly grounded amid the long damp grass. The engine raced, the wheels whined, and the dirt below them splattered up under the body, but—beyond the faintest sway—the car was going nowhere.

Kathy held her grip on David’s arm throughout, and only when he switched the engine off did she relax her hold at all.

“It’s no good . . . we’re stuck!” David finally admitted. “What am I supposed to do now? How far is it to the hotel do you think?”

“Another four or five miles, I suppose, Mr. Farrington.”

David guessed walking that distance was going to take a couple of hours or more, especially for Kathy in those delicate shoes. He could only hope to wave down a passing car somewhere along the way. He heaved a sigh; he hadn’t seen another car on this road for all the time they’d been on it.

“It’s OK, Mr. Farrington—it’ll all work out; you’ll see.

David thought of their closeness and decided that one thing should change for sure. “Kathy, when are you going to stop calling me ‘Mr. Farrington’? You’re eighteen years of age now; why not call me David, like other adults do?”

She giggled. “Nearly nineteen, actually! And I’ve been wanting to call you David for longer than I can think—it just didn’t seem right somehow. OK—one condition.”

David smiled warmly. “What’s that?”

“Well, talking about being adult: on my eighteenth birthday I demanded everybody in the world call me Kate. You’re just about the only person I really care about that escaped! So, if it’s going to be David, it’s got to be Kate!”

“Come on then—Kate—we’d better start walking.”

David climbed out, but Kate’s door was trapped shut. She would have to exit through the driver’s door too. David took her hand, and as he helped her climb over the gearshift, her cotton skirt fell high on her thighs. He couldn’t help but feel self-conscious again, thinking how lovely she looked with the moonlight casting a silver glow through the windscreen, bathing her in its soft white light.

She gripped his hand firmly as she struggled out onto the grass verge. David relaxed his hold as soon as he knew she had her balance, but Kate held on firmly, just for a moment. She smiled gently. “Thank you ... David,” she said coyly.

David hoped that Kate wouldn’t see him blushing in the pale moonlight. “Er ... I’ll lock her up, then we can go.”

David had barely noticed how pleasant this March night was. Indeed, it could hardly have been a better night for a late stroll, but he didn’t have strolling on his mind. He still had an urgent phone call to make.

The glint of the stars and the welcome full moon made a dramatic backdrop for the mist-covered fields that stretched out to the horizon on both sides of the long road ahead. As they walked, the crunching of the grit beneath their feet joined a chorus of sounds that surrounded them, the croaks and whistles and the hoots and hollers of the nightlife all punctuating the would-be silence of the night.

Kate took David’s arm again. “Bit scary, isn’t it?” she whispered close to his ear, as if afraid to disturb some unseen menace lurking close by.

“There’s nothing out here going to bite you; don’t worry.”

“Oh, I’m not worried; I know you’ll look after me.”

David’s ego wasn’t beyond taking Kate’s comment to heart, and the words caused a fractured smile to break across his face, but, for all that, the task ahead grounded him once more. “Come on, Kate, this could take a couple of hours, so we better keep up the pace and try and get to that hotel before they lock up.”

Deep inside, David was feeling the strain of the day. He thought back to the crashing china cup that had urged him to hurry into Rachael’s room this morning. It seemed more like a week ago. As he walked, he tried to distract himself by taking in the atmosphere of this all-too-rare experience: the moonlight bathed the mist ahead as it crept through the hedgerows, spilling silently, gently, over the road; the silvery grey-green of the sparkling, damp grass; and the sapphire blue-black of the night sky, studded with perfect gems, each engulfed in tiny fragments of soft white light. It was all quite enchanting and stood in sharp contrast to his worrisome mood.

Much as he would have liked to relax in the allure of his surroundings, he was too troubled by thoughts of Rachael, out there somewhere, and then of Helen, worried at home and awaiting his call. Trying to shake off his concerns, he looked to Kate. How he wished he could share her

calmness. She had been a carefree girl for as long as he had known her, but right now her tranquillity seemed so totally out of place.

In truth, Kate had been quite concerned and surprised that her best friend hadn't talked to her before leaving. But for all that, she presumed it was a sure sign of Rachael's need for some space after everything that had happened. From the few words David had spoken on the subject, Kate realised there was still so much he didn't know, and it wasn't her place to say, for sure. Not unless she absolutely had to. It would all be so much better coming from his daughter. Kate also knew every detail of the daily conflicts Rachael had endured back home and wasn't even slightly surprised that she had sought to distance herself from it for a while. It did hurt a little though, that Rachael hadn't been to see her before taking off; after all, Kate would have wanted to help console her. Nonetheless, she was confident that everything would be fine and that Rachael would be home again in no time, and so her absolute certainty allowed her to relish this moment.

She too, was well aware that something had just happened back in the car, and she was secretly rather enjoying the sensation. She had always enjoyed David's company, and she'd had a quiet fancy for him for more than a couple of years—facts she was sure had escaped his attention completely. So for Kate, this was turning into quite an adventure. She had been given a day off work, had nothing special on for tomorrow, and now she was taking a late-night walk to a country hotel, holding firmly to the arm of a man who gave her heart the flutters. Her imagination was just beginning to run away with her when David spoke.

“So, what are you thinking about, then?”

“Oh, you know ... this and that.” She smiled to herself in the darkness as the contents of a magazine article entitled *The Merits of the Older Man* drifted back out of her mind.

They were just rounding a corner, and even in the moonlight, Kate instantly recognised a spot that brought back a fond memory. “That field over there—that's where Rachael and Jay crash-landed in the balloon. It was really funny!”

“Balloon? What balloon?”

“Oh, God ... Rachael didn't tell you—I forgot. Oh well, doesn't matter now, I suppose. It was last year, on the Saturday before her seventeenth birthday. What a fantastic day!”

David was quite amazed and his mind buzzed with thoughts of why Rachael had kept it from him.

Kate's eyes glinted with excitement at the memory. “Jay arranged it all and told me about it in secret. I had to make sure Rachael was at my house early that morning, and he pretended he had to go away to London with his mum for the weekend. I had to say I'd heard there was a hot-air-balloon meeting down at the meadows and that I'd love to go. It all went great. Mark Prindle took us in his car. When we got there, some of the balloons were already up. What a sight! They're so huge!

“Well, we started to stroll across to look at the ones still on the ground. It worked like a dream. Rachael pointed out this magnificent red balloon at the back: it was all done up like a gigantic strawberry—her favourite fruit, of course! The basket was so colourful too. She was really curious so she went over for a closer look. I remember—it was so funny—she said about wishing Jay were there and how he'd love it! I don't know how I kept my face straight.

“As we got closer we could see the basket was trimmed with fresh cut flowers; it looked gorgeous! When we got up close, Rachael was just saying how lovely they looked, and then, without warning, up jumps Jason from inside the basket with a huge bouquet in his arms. ‘And they're all for you!’ he shouted out, with that big beaming smile of his. Well, Rachael nearly fainted!

“Then he told her it had all been arranged as an early birthday present, of course; but when he asked her to get in, she looked petrified and excited all at the same time! So anyway, in she gets and grabbed Jay for a big kiss. It was all so incredibly romantic—but funny too. Rachael was in tears and that made me cry too! With all those flowers all round it looked like something out of a modern Romeo and Juliet movie. I’ll never forget it. I took some great photos—they’re the best I’ve ever taken. I’ll show them to you sometime.”

David nodded, feeling slightly taken aback by it all. He wished he could see the photos right now, but Kate’s story would have to do. “So how did it go?” he asked, intrigued.

Kate squeezed David’s arm and continued eagerly. “Well, there was a guy in charge, of course, and when he got the flame roaring and the balloon started to go up, my heart was in my mouth! Rachael threw the bouquet down to me and called me a rotter! Then she grabbed Jay again and up they went.

“I ran back to the car with Mark, and one of the balloon team shouted for us to follow his Land Rover. I’ve never known anything like it before—and I was only down on the ground!

“We followed the balloon for about an hour, around loads of country lanes. The guys in the Landy were doing lots of map reading and kept managing to keep track of them. It was ace when the balloon came down close enough for us to wave sometimes—they looked like they were in seventh heaven! When they got up high though, it somehow seemed hard to believe it was Rachael and Jay up there.

“Anyway, eventually they started to come down. It hadn’t struck me till then—where will they land? It was all going really well until right at the end. The balloon wasn’t dropping straight down; it was still moving sideways quite a bit. The wind must have been catching it. We stopped in the lane and heard the basket hit the ground with this almighty thud. It tumbled over and we could hardly see them at first for all the long grass. I was worried sick! We had to scramble over the wall and ran like mad to get over to them. But when we got closer, we couldn’t believe it! They were both rolling around in fits of laughter. Some of the flowers that had fallen off the basket were scattered around them—I took a picture of that too! It was so romantic! What a day!”

David had a lump in his throat. It was a lovely story, and his daughter had starred in it—yet he had known nothing of it until now. “Why, Kate? Why didn’t she tell me?”

“She was too scared—she said if her mum didn’t like her on the bike, she’d go mad about her being up in a balloon! She broke the heel on her shoe that day; said she’d have to say it got caught in a grid!”

David heaved a sigh, “Yes, damn it, she was probably right. I remember the shoe, actually; her mum was not best pleased about that. They were quite new. I tried to fix it, hoping to stop the argument. It didn’t of course. God, it all seems so futile now, doesn’t it?”

Kate squeezed David’s arm again and the two fell silent once more. David looked down to his feet as Kate looked up to the stars.

Some time passed with only the rhythmic crunching of their feet breaking the stillness of the night. Kate was enjoying the feeling of holding David’s arm so close to her and presumed to show her ease by humming from time to time.

David couldn’t be soothed by her calmness though. He remained impatient for this march to be over, to be in contact with Helen, and for Rachael to be at The Taverners Hotel. He pondered the thought of closing the day with no real news at all—no solace for either himself or for Helen, who he was sure had spent an endless day alone. He heaved a silent sigh; no doubt there would be no end to hearing about that either. He looked at Kate, put his arm around her shoulder, and smiled.

“You’ve been a rock today, Kathy. Thanks—for everything.”

“No thanks needed!” she replied, her heart racing as he squeezed her gently. “Being in your company has been a favourite pastime of mine for a long time; I thought you knew that. I haven’t had the chance to be with you for ages, and, well, helping just makes it all that much better. And anyway, I thought we’d agreed on Kate!” She knew the pressure was getting to him and accepted his apologetic smile. As so often before, she saw that he was taking the whole world on his shoulders. It wasn’t fair, and she ached to offer him so much more than just a little reassurance.

“Rachael will be fine you know. She’s my best friend, I love her dearly, and I just can’t believe she’s anywhere but where she wants to be right now. You have to believe that. This moment isn’t easy for her and ... well ... if you’ll forgive me, I think her mum’s never-ending resentment of Jay has forced her to take time out, to work out how she’s going to handle all this.” Kate paused, hoping she hadn’t caused offence.

There was no response, but she sensed from David’s gentle sigh that he probably agreed. She decided to continue on a more positive note. “She’ll be back, large as life, in one piece, and soon, you’ll see.”

“I’m sure you’re right, but why go without a word?”

“I thought about that too, and I’m sure there’s a big part of Rachael regretting putting us all through this. I still can’t quite believe she’s gone without saying anything to me either, but please try to believe she’ll be OK.”

“I know, Kate. I’m the one who keeps reminding her mom she’s a big girl now. But Helen just won’t accept it—fretting for her continually, and mostly with no real foundation—despite all I try and do to help her recognise Rachael’s growing womanhood. But this is different—just leaving like this. I honestly thought Rachael would need me now, and that really hurts. I’m worried for her, and on top of that I’ve got her mom’s super-charged anxiety to worry about too! God, I hope she’s home right now!”

Kate looked to David; she just had to ask. “Can we talk?”

“Of course we can—I thought we were?”

“No, David, I mean *really* talk. There’s some stuff I’m aching to say, but I’m not sure that I should.”

“Please ...” David responded, curious and not at all sure what to expect.

Kate hesitated, hoping this would come out right. “Well the fact is, *everybody* knows Rachael’s a big girl now, except her mother. But the fact is, *Mrs. Farrington* is a big girl too, so, frankly, it’s *her* problem—not yours—that she refuses to accept Rachael’s maturity.” Kate paused again before she continued. “It really upsets me to see you trying to play the emotional repairman all the time. You just can’t win, trying to keep them both happy, and the losing must make you *so* miserable sometimes.”

She looked to David and saw his head hanging down slightly, but she felt compelled to finish. “I’m sorry, but I think it’s high time to start thinking a bit more about *you*: your feelings, *your* needs, *your* life. There’s more to it all than wife first, second, and third, you know. I’d love to see you spend some time being *totally selfish*. You really should try it! Everybody does, at least from time to time.”

Neither spoke for a moment. Kate was suddenly quite sure she had been too outspoken, but, as usual, it was too late. “I’m sorry, I had no right. I—”

“No, no. I do hear you. I understand what you’re saying, and I can see why you would say it, but—”

“I know ... She’s your wife and all that. But, sorry, it has to be give and take a bit, surely?”

David pondered Kate's words. He contemplated the almost clinical nature of Helen's relationship with him and how he always had to make the first move to patch up the endless rifts. His mind wandered back to her comments this very morning: *'Go and do something useful for a change ... Always siding with them against me.'* He sighed again, wondering why she felt the need to say such things to him all the time. It might serve her right if he didn't call in before he got home. Bitterness washed over him for little more than an instant before he reminded himself that he wasn't perfect either.

His arm still hung around Kate's shoulders. It felt more than a little friendly, and he wasn't beyond admitting to himself, it felt good.

It was close to another hour before David saw that the bend ahead was bathed in soft yellow light, diffused by the lingering mist. Its source: the first of Milton's street lights. Civilisation at last. His pace quickened. "Come on, Kate. We've arrived!" As he jolted forward, he felt her grip on his arm slip away. "The hotel's over the road to the right, after the T-junction, isn't it?" he called back.

"Yes. At least I think so," Kate called, finding it hard to keep up in her delicate little shoes.

Moments later, there it stood in a warm amber glow. Its rich gilt nameplate shone invitingly, basking in the floodlights that reached up from below. Within the confines of the timber porch, a white light shone down onto the huge old oak door. David looked at his watch. It was just turned midnight. Milton High Street was deserted. He put his hand to the door latch, but the door held stubbornly firm against him.

"Damn! They've locked up!" He looked around for a doorbell. It was an old-fashioned rope pull and it worked with surprising ease. The resulting chimes echoed behind the door then gradually faded away without response. They waited for what seemed an age, and just as David was wondering if he should dare pull the rope again, a voice called out: "One moment, please."

A tiny panel opened inward from the centre of the door, and the light from within illuminated a large ruddy nose, from below which the voice of an ageing gent begged the question, "Can I help you?"

David answered, feeling all too conscious of having disturbed him: "Sorry to trouble you so late. My car's in a ditch down the old Milton road. We were making our way here and just hoped ..." The fumbling justification was doing little to ease David's guilt over their late-night intrusion. "Well ... we've had to walk for nearly two hours, and ... Do you have a couple of rooms for the night, please?"

Kate looked at him, quite shocked and instantly excited by the thought. She was expecting a taxi home, though the matter hadn't been discussed at all.

"Two rooms? I'm sorry, sir, we're only a small hotel and there's only one room vacant."

Kate spoke up in an instant: "That's OK, Dad. We can share!"

David opened his mouth to protest, for her sake as much as for his own, but it was too late; the bolts were already sliding from behind the door and the matter was all but settled. "Kathy! What are you saying?" he asked, in a firm whisper.

"Oh, don't be so old-fashioned, David!" she whispered back. "I know I'm safe with you!"

The door opened wide. "No bags then, sir?" the old gent enquired.

"Er ... no. We weren't intending to stay out. But with the car stuck just a few miles down the road, I thought I'd get it sorted out from here in the morning. Right now I'm just desperate to call the wife and let her know we're OK—Do you have a phone I could use, please?"

"Yes, sir; there'll be one in your room." The old gent looked at Kate then back to David. "It's a double, sir. Will that be in order?"

Kate took the lead again. “We’ll manage,” she said quickly, with a mischievous smile. “I’ll just have to put up with him snoring, that’s all!”

“Breakfast’s from seven thirty. And if you could sign in, sir, please. Here’s your key. Room forty-two. Top of the stairs, down the corridor on your left.”

“Thank you. We settle up in the morning, then?”

“That will be fine, sir.” The old man made for the door and bolted it securely. “I’ll bid you goodnight, then,” he said as he shuffled away down the hall.

David had been about to ask if Rachael had booked in, but as he took the pen to sign the register the question answered itself: Four single men and two couples had registered today. No Rachael. Disappointed and exhausted, he felt drawn to find his room, make that call, and rest at last.

“Room forty-two!” David smiled nervously at Kate. “I thought he said it was a small hotel!” Then he pointed to the desk and added, “Rachael isn’t registered.”

Kate took a moment to glance at the register for herself, just in case she recognised some other name that Rachael may have used. Nothing struck her, and nothing looked like Rachael’s writing either. “Oh well!” She offered a gentle smile that hid her quietly concealed excitement. “Room forty-two it is, then!”

“Kathy, I feel terrible! I just didn’t know what to say! I presumed I just got the old chap out of bed, and so suddenly I didn’t have the heart to just ask for the phone or to start asking questions about Rachael.”

“Oh David, stop it!” she said with a renewed smile. “Let’s go and take the weight off our feet. And it’s Kate, the *adult*, remember?” she teased. “Come on—time you were ringing home.”

They made their way up the creaky old staircase and along the dimly lit corridor. David couldn’t help but smile, listening to the sound of the old parquet flooring as it clattered softly under the turkey red carpet that had obviously seen better days. The place was little more than a quaint old inn, obviously run by quaint old folks.

As they reached the door of room forty-two, David mused for a moment at the huge, ancient-looking door key: was this a clue to the rickety lodgings that were likely to lie beyond this old oak door? He turned the key in the lock; the sound was heavy and sure. The door gave a gentle, high-pitched squeak as it opened. Beyond it, the room lay pitch black.

David was fumbling for a light switch but then felt a pull-cord touch his hand.

Neither were prepared for the vision that greeted them as the light brought the room to gentle life. Both were left quite breathless. The first sight to greet them was the magnificent four-poster bed, regally draped in tapestry, silk festoons, and lace. This was a mere centrepiece in the quite stunningly elegant room. Their eyes soaked it up: the oak beamed ceiling; the antique wardrobe; the fabulous alcove dresser with porcelain hand basin and gold-plated taps; and the cosy seating, set around a big bay window that was embraced by warm velvet curtains. On a side table stood an old copper kettle and a china teapot with its matching cups and saucers, all embellished with the accent of freshly cut flowers. It was all too much to take in.

“Oh, David, it’s gorgeous! Look at it all! I’ve never been in a room like this in my life! Look in here!” Kate had ventured through a door just the other side of the wardrobe which led to the bathroom. A huge gold-plated showerhead towered over a deep, white porcelain bath, standing centre-stage beyond the sink, the loo, and the bidet. Thick pink towels matched the deep-pile carpet. Everything was presented in quite splendid, pristine order.

“Oh, David, I could live here forever. I’ve just got to be dreaming!”

David had to agree. He had rarely experienced such luxury either and could hardly help wondering just what it was all going to cost. But for now he forced the thought aside. Pressing

matters beckoned, but the sight of the phone now filled him with apprehension. Here he was, locked in an old hotel, about to spend the night with a lovely young woman in a room that looked like the bridal suite. His car was in a ditch; he had no news of his daughter; he was tired; and he had to make a call that was going to be more than just a little troublesome—to a wife who was bound to be frantic.

Kate had returned to David's side. She put her hand gently on his back. "Come on, get that phone call out of the way, and then we'll just have to make the best of it." Her fingers ran purposefully down his spine as she moved away. "I'm going to try that shower!"

The touch made David tingle. He watched her wander toward the bathroom, and just before she turned out of sight, he saw her blouse fall from her shoulders onto the floor. With a deep breath, he turned away, trying to focus his thoughts on the task ahead. He stared blankly at the phone as he walked towards it.

The moment he had ached so long to fulfil was upon him, but now it held nothing more for him than dread. He dialled the first numbers with anxious speed before slowing in the certain knowledge of what was to follow. It was some moments before he dared release the dial on its final journey toward long and difficult explanations. Or so he thought. Seconds later the line rang out engaged. Hard on the heels of momentary relief came perplexed concern as he was forced to repeat the painful procedure again. Still engaged. He heard Kate humming in the shower, obviously oblivious to all but the luxury of her surroundings.

Five minutes passed as David waited anxiously to try again. Still engaged.

"Pass the towel would you?" David heard Kate call out.

He moved somewhat gingerly towards the bathroom and began to explain his predicament as he took the towel from the warm rail. "I can't get through. It's engaged all the time," he said, as he reached the shower curtain, towel in hand.

Kate flung the flimsy, translucent barrier aside. She was covered in nothing but shimmering water and stood, almost posing, in a pool of soft, white bubbles that clung to her feet. David looked away quickly as the image of her lovely young body burned deep into his memory.

"Thank you," she said, smiling coyly. "Ask the operator to try."

"Yes! Er ... yes, I'll do that," he said, his heart racing. He returned to the phone, head pounding, his thoughts flying in all directions. His concentration was severely tested as he dialled nine for an outside line—and was it zero for the operator? Of course it was!

With David's explanations made, the operator checked the line and returned with the news that the phone was busy but there was no conversation.

"Should I put a howler on it, sir?"

"Howler?"

"Yes. It alerts the user to return the handset to its rest, sir."

"You mean it's off the hook?"

"Yes, sir. It certainly seems that way."

"But this call is urgent!"

"Sorry, sir, that's all I can do."

"But there could be something wrong!"

"If you really think so, sir, I could put you through to the emergency services."

"Oh God, no! Er ... Yes ... Yes, do that. I've got to do something! Police, please."

In the moments that passed while the operator gave details of the call location to the local police, David wondered if he should have tried the howler thing first, but it was too late for that now; instead, he tried to concentrate on where he was going to start.

“Police. How can I help, sir?”

Through frustrated anxiety, David recounted the details of his missing daughter; the accident in his car; and, as best he could, how he came to be spending the night ‘alone’ in an out of town hotel. After that, he had to explain why he hadn’t reported Rachael missing earlier and, finally, how anxious his wife would be. The officer told him he would have someone call round and see Mrs. Farrington immediately to be sure that all was well and to deliver news of her husband’s whereabouts.

“Can we call you back, sir? Better still, can your wife?”

“Er ... no, I don’t think that’s possible. Reception isn’t manned overnight and calls in would have to be put through. *Damn!*”

“No problem, sir. Call us back in an hour; we’ll have some news on your wife by then. I’m sure all will be fine. In the meantime, try and get some rest—sounds like you’ve had a real day of it to me, sir!”

“Too true, officer! Thanks for that. Bye for now, then.”

“Goodbye, sir.”

David stood up, his mind a little easier for some positive action. As he stretched, Kate walked in, loosely wrapped in the soft, white confines of a bathrobe that hung off her shoulders.

“Did you make the call?” she asked gently as she approached him.

“Yes,” David replied. “But you wouldn’t believe the—”

“Shh ...” she said, allowing the robe to slip a little as she put her hands on David’s waist. “So everything’s done that *can* be done?”

“Well yes, everything I can do for now. I’ve got to—”

Kate moved her mouth to within the faintest breath of David’s mouth, before dropping her arms to let the robe glide down to her feet. Then she spoke the words softly onto his lips: “Time to start being selfish then.”

Chapter 5

Rachael found herself looking down into half a cup of stone-cold tea. She was sitting in a quiet corner of the restaurant car, one hand on her forehead, the other holding a white plastic spoon. Her mind had been strangely empty for some time, as if it could take no more. But now the tide was turning again.

Her head was full of little else but Jason: the romance, the excitement, the laughter, the love. Thoughts of their hopes and dreams and greatest fears continued to torment her and, through it all, the memory of his eyes and that smile. Again it took her back to a day she would never forget: a picnic one sunny afternoon, just a couple of months after they first met ...



Rachael was out with Jason in the hills to the west of Ravensdale on a sun-drenched afternoon. She was busy setting out a blanket and a small picnic she had sneaked out of the house in her rucksack. Jason was off exploring. He couldn't be seen for the bumps and hollows of the terrain, but she heard his call.

"Hey, Rache, come and look at this!"

She ran toward his voice.

"Here, Rachael," he called again. He was sitting on the grass, leaning back on his elbows with one leg stretched out in front of him; the other was not to be seen. "I was walking along and it fell off! How am I going to get back home now?" he smiled. "You'll have to change gear for me!"

"Jay, you're such a loon! What are you doing?"

"It must be around here somewhere, unless it's hopped off over the edge of the cliff back there!"

"Stop it!" she giggled. "You're dreadful. Whatever are you up to?"

"I found this hole in the ground. I thought it was a rabbit hole at first, but it didn't seem quite right somehow, look." He drew his leg out. "It goes down as far as I can reach. I dropped a stone, but I didn't hear it land."

"Jason, come away, I don't like it at all!"

"You're joking—this has got to be investigated! Let's find another stone."

"You're such a child sometimes, honestly. Here!" She threw a stone to him, still a little worried, although about quite what she wasn't sure; maybe the ground would open up and swallow him.

Jason clearly had no such thoughts in mind. He held the stone close over the hole and put his ear up close to listen. Several seconds passed.

"Wow! I don't believe it! It rattled and echoed for ages. It's fantastic! Get me another one quick, Rache, then come and listen."

"No, come away, please!" She knew she was wasting her breath; Jason was already frantically looking for more stones. "Jay, it must be a land slip or something—leave it alone, please. It could cave in!"

"Cave! Rache, you're brilliant! It's probably a massive cave. Oh, wow! Let's look around for an entrance!" He ran off toward the cliff edge.

"Jay, you're impossible! Come and get something to eat!"

But Jason was gone, exploring the terrain towards the edge of the plateau, his head no doubt caught up in mystery and adventure.

Rachael knew he'd soon be hungry, and so, just a little frustrated, she chose to cover her picnic and wait for his return.

It wasn't long before her name was called again; round and hollow it sounded, and seemed to be spilling out of that hole. It was Jason, of course, and fears of what he was doing set her on her feet again. She ran to the edge of the plateau and stopped in shock at first sight of the drop. It was all of fifty feet down.

"Jay, where are you?" she called.

"Here, Rache!" His voice came from somewhere below her. "Look! It's not an entrance, but it nearly is. I called your name into it. Sounds great, doesn't it! I bet it's massive in there. We've got to be able to get in somehow. It would be a great secret hideaway. I'm going to try and clear some rocks!"

Rachael crept a little closer to the edge to see him on a ledge twenty feet or so below her. She was speechless for a moment but then replied with a little anxiety in her voice. "You must be joking, Jay! Come back up from there, please!"

"You're such a worrier," Jason joked. "Come on, just think: maybe nobody's ever been in here. It could be really deep with masses of tunnels. I'm sure I can get through with just a few of these rocks out of the way. Five minutes! Just five minutes, then I'll come and picnic." His eyes were dancing with excitement, shining as only those eyes could.

"Jason Beauvale, you are impossible!" she called, her legs shaking a little. She looked to her right, wondering how he'd managed to get to where he was. A rough and precarious path swept in a series of snakelike arcs down to the dell below, but no bend was even close to Jason. He had obviously scrambled across on a route of his own. She clambered a little way down the spindly pathway, still unnerved by the long and rapid decent to the meadow below.

She could see Jason pulling and tugging against the stubborn might of the rocks, but nothing moved at all. He continued to heave and strain in dogged determination, and just as she called once more for him to stop, she saw him wobble backwards slightly as his footing slipped on the shale surface. As if in slow motion, she watched as his hands groped forward trying to regain their hold on the boulder, but before she could believe what she was seeing, Jason was suddenly tumbling down the rock face with an agonising scream.

For one horrifying moment, Rachael was fixed to the spot as she watched him fall. There was nothing she could do but cry out his name. She saw the back of his head strike hard on the smooth, unrelenting surface of a weather-beaten stone, and as he tumbled on, the stubborn branch of a dead tree on the rock face tore through his T-shirt, digging deep into the flesh of his back. Then came the awkwardness of his landing as he hit the valley floor and lay, quite motionless, below her.

Rachael scrambled down the twisting path, screaming his name again. She took the shortest route at every opportunity, but still it seemed a lifetime before she finally fell to her knees beside him, calling his name once more. There was no response.

"Jason! Please, open your eyes! Jason!" She looked helplessly around as the terrifying realisation hit her: They were miles from anywhere or anyone. "Jason, please!" She took him in her arms and pulled him to her breast, her hand spread wide across the back of his head. Holding him close, she rocked in a fervour of fearful tears. A warm, thick wetness began creeping through her fingers. "Oh no, Jay, no! Oh God, please don't ... *please!*"

Trying hard to think, she laid him down and scurried back up to her picnic site. Exhausted from the climb, she was finding it hard to catch her breath, but there was no time to waste on recovery. *'Bandage his head—Stop the bleeding!'* she thought, as she hurried to collect the tablecloth she had laid so carefully just minutes before. Dishes crashed as they tumbled away from her wrenching, blood-soaked hand.

Down the rough-hewn path she clambered again, with no regard for the pain of her slippery descent as her feet and hands battled with bramble and sharp stone. When she arrived back at Jason's side he was still lay motionless. She tore at the cloth, frantically ripping it into strips. Her eyes searched the hillsides, desperate for signs of life, but her calls for help remained unanswered, absorbed in the immensity of the surrounding meadows. She wrapped his head and stuffed a wad under his back, hoping to stop the bleeding there too. She coughed and cried loudly, her screaming pleas for help rasping hard at her throat.

Torn between her desperate need for help and staying with him, she could only hold him close. It seemed a lifetime passed by and that her world was at an end. She cursed his endless need for adventure, yet she ached for more. She hugged him tight, swearing never to let him go but fearing that she must, and, for the first time, she told him she loved him. And how she yearned for him to hear it. Her cheek brushed against his as she sobbed her loving words endlessly into his ear.

The hot summer breeze embraced them and wafted on. The clear blue sky looked down upon them as the long grasses swayed and rippled like a deep green sea around them; turmoil and tranquillity in equal measure.

Rachael had no concept of the time that had passed. She had never felt so helpless, or so very close to Jason before. Still she rocked him, still she sobbed, and still she whispered 'I love you'. As she drew breath to tell him she must go for help, a long, strained whisper came to her ear:

"I love you too, Rache."

Rachael was consumed by tears of joy as she hugged him close, but her joy was soon tempered by a lurking fear in her heart; her embraces hurt him and it was clear he was in need of urgent help.

The following hours became a blur of emotion and activity: the long run for help, the ambulance ride, Jason's pain, his groaning concern for the bike, the endless times they proclaimed their love.

And then came the long, heated squabbles with her mother back at home:

"What the hell did you think you were doing, Rachael? That was a bloody good tablecloth!"

"Mum, Jay nearly died!"

"The boy's a complete idiot; I've told you so all along. You could've been hurt too! He's mad, completely mad, and I don't want you seeing him again. That's it now; he's had all the chances he's getting!"

"Chances! Chances? Mum, you've never given him a chance! Not before you met him, not on the day you met him, and never once since!"

"Well if that's true, it's because I've been on to him from the start! He's a good-for-nothing no-good spoiled brat. He's just using you—can't you see that? You're just a look-good package under his arm, that's all. He'll drop you flat when he's bored with you. You'll see. Well I'm not having it! You tell him that's it; I'm not having him putting my girl in danger any more and that's final."



As Rachael stared into the tealeaves at the bottom of her cup, memories of the endless arguments drained her. She lifted her head and drew a deep breath, releasing it gently, trying to clear her mind. Why couldn't her mum be more warm and accepting like Jason's mum had been, right from the start? What a wonderful lady: full of living, full of love for her son, and full of a determination he would get the best from life that she could give. Happy days. But now ... how could she ever come to terms with everything that had changed since then?

Rachael closed her eyes in deep dismay and then opened them again with a weary sigh. She glanced over her raised cup and was shocked to find that she was looking down the carriage into the cold, penetrating gaze of a stranger's eyes. He shifted his attention in an instant, but she sensed he'd been staring for some time. She looked away, but the piercing depth of that momentary encounter chilled her. His raven black hair, mean, swarthy features, and almost contemptuous smile all played cruelly with her imagination. His presence roused a memory that she couldn't quite place. The thought tormented her: where had she seen him before? She dared to glance again, but he was gone.

Rachael looked to the window as the train slowed, approaching its destination. She had arrived. Quite why or for what she didn't know, but the answer would only come from moving on.

Richard remained where he'd been seated all this time. His hand still lay on the next seat, his thumbnail playing aimlessly with the crushed velvet pile. He felt that a spark of something very special had passed through his life and flitted away into darkness like an ember released from a night fire. "Plenty more embers, I suppose," he muttered, in a miserable attempt to console himself. But he didn't believe it even as he thought it. It surprised him how much he had been touched by his encounter with this lovely young girl whose turmoil he so wished to ease.

He looked up at her case, then outward at the city, but his mind looked inward, anticipating what was about to come: The drudgery of his daily routines, the endless to-do lists that added no weight to the accomplishments he hoped to cherish in his retirement years.

He remembered the words of the girl he had loved and lost: *'The work will be there when you're gone—dead or replaced by some other young-blood executive who thinks he knows it all but, just like you, knows nothing at all!'* He was about to delve deeper into his woeful destiny when the carriage door opened again. It was Rachael. His heart filled with momentary hope and his head with blind panic. Moments from now, they would part forever ... unless he found the words to say.

"Richard, I'm so sorry; I had no right to fly off at you like tha—"

The loudspeaker arrival announcement interrupted her, and it was a moment before she could continue. She smiled a little timidly. "You were a real help. Thank you," she said, reaching up for her luggage.

Richard rose quickly from his seat and pulled down her case. For all his time to think, the words just would not come. He couldn't even say how much he'd enjoyed her company—that would hardly sit well with her troubled mood—and asking for a date would be even worse. His head went straight into automatic mode as he fumbled in his pocket for a business card. "Rachael, take this. If you ever need a chat anytime, well, you know ... just call."

That fractured smile took Rachael's face once more as she looked down to the card. "I've never been handed a business card before ... it's ..." The sentence was never completed and the smile was all but gone. "Thank you. I will," she concluded, waving the card a moment before slipping it into her bag. "Well ..."

Richard prayed she might offer her number in return, but no; instead, came the final farewell that he had dreaded:

“I really am grateful for your company and concern. I’ll be OK now, honest. You’d better get back to managing those generals!”

Richard stood speechless as he soaked up her troubled smile, and he could only watch as she took her case and turned to walk out of the door. Feelings of total inadequacy overcame him. *‘Giving her a business card! What the hell was that all about? If you ever need to talk! My God, man!’* Full of remorse, he shook his head, picked up his own bag, and walked out of the carriage, in no mood to face the day at all.

Rachael made her way off the train and onto the platform. In an instant, she spotted him: the man from the restaurant car. He stood just beyond the ticket collector at the exit gate, feigning to read a newspaper. She could sense his eyes peering over his make-shift shield and homing in on her. Trying to ignore him, she moved ever closer and handed her ticket to the guard before moving on at a pace. She dared to glance back; he had folded his newspaper and was slowly coming her way.

She walked to the newsstand and stopped; he stopped. As she browsed around to waste time, he waited. She wandered to the flower stall; he followed. Her pace gathered in controlled panic. She was sure now that he was following her, and there could only be one reason for that: Her escape from Ravensdale had not gone unnoticed by her adversaries after all.

She passed under the arches of the station foyer and out onto the causeway to look for a cab; he followed. To her relief, she saw Richard standing by a limousine some distance away. His driver was loading his bag into the boot. She ran toward him. “Richard! Could I have a word?”

Richard recognised her voice instantly, but he hardly dared to believe his luck until he turned around and saw that she was heading his way. The sight pulled him from his doldrums in a moment. “Of course,” he called warmly.

“Very nice!” Richard’s driver whispered to him as she approached.

“Leave it out, Alan,” Richard whispered back, suddenly realising that Rachael looked rather stressed. As she reached his side, she spoke anxiously:

“Don’t look now, but that man back there—the one with the jet black hair—he’s been following me round the station! I’m scared! Could I beg a lift, just for a short way? Wherever you’re headed will be fine. I just want to be sure he’s gone.”

For Richard, intrigue followed hard on the heels of concern. He discretely looked over her shoulder. The man was showing no sign of interest at all, but that mattered little to Richard as fate had put him back in Rachael’s company again. “Jump in, Rachael. Alan, drop this case in the boot too, would you?”

Though Rachael felt relieved to be in safe company, she remained quite desperate to be on the move again. She was in the back seat in an instant, watching the man through the rear window. The boot lid opened, taking him out of her sight, and when it closed, he was gone.

Richard joined Rachael in the back of the car, ignoring another knowing look from Alan on the way. “What’s all this about then?” he asked as they set off.

Rachael looked through the back window time and again as she described the incident in the restaurant car and the man’s behaviour at the station. “I think that cab is following us,” she added, turning her face away from the back window.

Richard took a quick glance backward and then looked to Rachael with a huge smile. “One way to find out—Alan, take us round the block, would you?”

The cab followed. The passenger’s game was up. Richard looked at Rachael and offered a boyish smile. “I’ve always wanted to say this: Alan, lose that cab!”

“Love to!” came the reply, as if he had always wanted to hear it.

Alan was quite a driver, and in the moments that followed he bobbed and weaved through the London traffic in the huge limousine, like a shark ploughing through a shoal of minnows. It took less than two minutes to be sure the cab was gone.

Alan pulled into a side road. "How's that, then?" he exclaimed proudly.

"Nice one," Richard replied, and then looked to Rachael. "Feel better now?"

"Much better, thank you. I don't know what to say."

"That's easy. Tell me where you're off to, and we'll go there."

Alan turned and looked to Rachael, awaiting her response.

She fumbled in her bag for a moment and then pulled out a key to read from its labelled fob. "It's called Sloane Square. But it's OK, I can catch a cab from here. Thanks again, Richard, you've been a real life-saver."

Alan gave Richard a look of mischievous curiosity as this pretty young maiden bestowed the role of hero upon his boss.

Richard chose to ignore the glance and turned his attention back to his ward. "Nonsense, it's not far, Rachael. Sloane Square it is, then, Alan!"

"Very posh!" he replied, and they were off.

Rachael looked out of the window, trying to think this whole thing through. The encounter in the restaurant car and at the station had her worried enough, but the persistence of her pursuer had compounded her fear. What was it about that man? Where had she seen him before? It all had her heart racing again. Could it really be what she feared the most? All she really wanted now was to be left alone. She needed time to reflect; time to think.

Meanwhile, Richard was busy giving himself a serious talking to: *'Don't dare let this second chance go! Be damned to the fear of rejection, of being misunderstood, or any other pathetic excuse for not putting yourself forward. Come on, man—speak!'*

"Rachael ... Er ... why don't we meet up for dinner tonight. Nothing too special if you're tired; maybe a Chinese or something? What d'you say?"

She turned to him, her eyes offering only sympathetic apology as she drew breath to speak. "Richard, I'm so sorry. I can't handle it; there's no—"

"I understand. I'm the one to be sorry; I should never have asked. Pretend I never spoke. I'm sorry."

"No, there's no need to be sorry, Richard," she said as her eyes welled up with tears. "I can't handle all this. There's no room in my life. No room for ... anything. Please ... it's best you forget we ever met. It's just not possible."

"Hey, hey, slow down. I hear you. Please, I understand." He didn't understand at all, but knew he had no right to question her. Now he was back out in the cold again, down in the dumps again, feeling useless and purposeless again—and the journey to Sloane Square was all too short.

Alan pulled up alongside a corner café, jumped out to open Rachael's door, then went to the boot to pull out her case.

Rachael turned to Richard again. "I am so grateful to you, Richard. Honestly." A tear rolled down her face as she leaned forward to kiss his cheek. "'Bye," she whispered. She left the car in an instant, grabbed her case from the pavement, and ran off around the corner.

Richard felt miserably dejected as she disappeared out of sight.

"Charmed, I'm sure!" Alan declared, closing the rear door before taking the driver's seat again. "Straight to the office then, sir?"

A long silence followed. Richard could feel the tingling wetness of her tear on his cheek and did nothing to remove it. In his mind's eye, he was racing after her. The image faded as reality reined him back. "Yes. To the office."

Rachael hurried away from Sloane Square as quickly as her case would allow, the weight of it hindering her flight. She stopped and leaned back against a black wrought-iron fence that stood just a few feet forward of a huge, red-brick building. With her head raised high, she looked to the sky, silently begging for some release. But none would come.

"What the hell am I doing here?" she sobbed to herself as her thoughts swirled in all directions. "Oh God, please help me think straight. I've got to start thinking straight!"

Eventually, she took another deep breath, knowing it was time to move on. She looked again at the key she had held in her hand all this time. The fob read '23, Cliveden Place, Sloane Square, London SW1.' "Oh God," she muttered, feeling full of dread. "Time to get this over."

As she took an anguished look around her, she noticed the words Cliveden Place on a street sign directly across from where she stood. It was attached to the railing before the first in a long row of grand town houses, each four storeys high and with what looked like a basement below. She looked at the key fob again: number twenty-three.

She crossed the road and wandered a little way down the street until she found the right door. More than a little nervously, she climbed the four black-and-white chequered steps, flanked by black wrought-iron fencing. The illuminated bell push simply read Beauvale. The key shook in her hand, poised before the lock. She held it there unable to make the connection. A long moment passed as she held her lip clasped between her teeth, not knowing what waited unseen behind that grand, jet black door. Overwhelmed by anxiety again, she pulled the key back sharply. She wasn't ready for this.

In floods of tears, she ran back down the steps, down the street, and back into the square. With her case binding her like a dry anchor, she couldn't go far. Exhausted, she took a table in the outside seating area of the corner café. There she sat amidst a tumult of frenzied activity. The people, the traffic, the pigeons, the starlings and sparrows, all appeared to compete for every inch of space. Trying to gather herself, she sat not quite watching, but nonetheless aware of, these apparently heartless, soulless armies passing her by as if she didn't exist. She felt she could die here and rot unnoticed.

Her tears slowly subsided and she ordered a pot of tea, hoping it would buy her time. And it did. Slowly she became calmer as a fragile stillness took her to a place in her mind that was totally at odds with her surroundings. It echoed emptiness, nothingness, timelessness; oblivion. She ached for it to take her and keep her. But that was not to be.

Gradually her thoughts returned to haunt her. Everything was such a mess. She wanted to call her parents but knew that she couldn't. She thought of Kate, too, and that made her ponder her loneliness again. Oh, how she needed to talk all this through with her friend. She had cut herself off from everyone who loved her, everyone who cared, and everyone who wanted to help. The train had dragged her relentlessly to the far edge of her universe; a journey she had endured in the vain hope of some greater understanding, of some reason, and of escape. But none could be delivered until she reached her final destination.

An hour passed and still Rachael sat in her trancelike misery, hardly aware of her own occasional tear. Time had marched relentlessly on, carrying this reluctant passenger in its wake. At last, she realised there could be no other way; although she saw no future, she must deal with the past ... by facing the present.

Number twenty-three beckoned her again. She dragged herself wearily to her feet, heaved a sigh, lifted her case, and headed once more to stand by the railings, looking up at that huge black door. For over a minute she stood there, staring at the heavy brass door-knob and the keyhole below it. Her heart raced a little; she knew the moment had come. Key in one hand, case in the other, she climbed the chequered steps, thrust home the key . . . and turned it.

The door opened before her. The hallway beyond was dark yet not forbidding. Rachael stood a moment before feeling drawn inside. She put down the case and stepped backwards to close the door with her shoulders. She looked into the sullen shadows and wondered just what was coming next.

