

Flowers In The
Morning

IRENE DAVIDSON

Copyright © 2017 Irene Davidson

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. All the names, character, places and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

ISBN-13: 978-1974428977

DEDICATION

with love and gratitude,
to the memory of my mother
Audrey Scott Davidson

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	i
Prologue One - Liana	Pg #1
Prologue Two - Hamish	Pg #4
1 Hamish	Pg #7
2 Hamish	Pg #14
3 Hamish	Pg #20
4 Hamish, Liana, Jack	Pg #28
5 Hamish	Pg #34
6 Hamish	Pg #46
7 Hamish	Pg #54
8 Hamish, Liana, Jack	Pg #62
9 Hamish, Liana, Jack	Pg #70
10 Hamish	Pg #77
11 Hamish	Pg #89
12 Hamish, Liana, Jack	Pg #94
13 Hamish, Liana	Pg #105
14 Hamish, Liana, Jack	Pg #113
15 Hamish and Liana	Pg #126
16 Hamish	Pg #131
17 Hamish, Jack	Pg #141
18 Hamish	Pg #150

IRENE DAVIDSON

19	Hamish	Pg #161
20	Hamish	Pg #167
21	Hamish and Liana, Jack	Pg #173
22	Hamish and Liana	Pg #183
23	Hamish and Liana	Pg #190
24	Hamish and Liana, Jack	Pg #196
25	Hamish and Liana, Jack	Pg #205
26	Hamish and Liana, Jack	Pg #216
27	Hamish and Liana, Jack	Pg #226
28	Hamish and Liana	Pg #234
29	Hamish and Liana	Pg #239
30	Hamish and Liana, Jack	Pg #245
31	Hamish	Pg #251
32	Hamish and Liana	Pg #254
33	Hamish and Liana	Pg #259
	Epilogue -Betony Rose, Jack	Pg #263
	Illustrations -Maps	Pg #266
	A sample from Leaf On A Breeze, Bk 2	Pg #269
	About the Author	Pg #280
	Other Titles by Irene Davidson	Pg #280
	Connect with Irene Davidson	Pg #280

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Heartfelt acknowledgments and thanks are made to:

Dunedin radio personalities and Colin Lehman, for broadcasting my 'quest' to find the words for '*If I Thought you'd ever Change your Mind*'.

Ali,(who moved to Africa...) who read the entire manuscript, at a stage when it was still only semi-readable, ...and still, despite its obvious faults, offered only positive comments and encouragement.

University of Otago library staff, for their enthusiastic responses to my strange research requests (e.g. Are mute swans *actually* mute? And, would a Kent dialect *really* sound like something from 'Darling Buds of May?').

PROLOGUE ONE

LIANA

*Thus let me live, unseen, unknown,
Thus unlamented let me die,
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lie.*

Alexander Pope

Her body was furled tightly, breathing barely perceptible, looking to all intents and purposes as if no longer alive, although on rare occasions, she would disprove this by moving as she did now ...murmuring the soft unintelligible words of troubled dreams while stretching a questing hand, as if caressing the cheek of some long departed lover.

Her long, once gloriously lustrous hair had become matted and entangled with leaves and twigs, its rich russet tones dulled with time. Now and then, the twisted strands would drift across her face as she slept. Whereas once she might have tugged at them irritably with one fine-boned hand, it had been a long while since anything outside of her dreams had bothered her.

It had all started innocently enough ...when her anguished thoughts had disturbed her to the point of allowing no rest Liana had called, as she had in times past; upon the Spirit of the Garden to assist by gifting her slumber. When no solace was forthcoming from that quarter, she had taken it upon herself to request help directly from the plants. They had come to her aid ...at first only a handful of the lesser species, well-known for their mildly soporific qualities. Disappointed when these didn't have the desired effect, she had added to their numbers until she was surrounded by a pretty

meadow of herbs all noted for their strongly sedative and deeply sleep-inducing properties: valerian and hops; lemon balm and chamomile; lady's slipper and skullcap.

The trees came too -not by mere chance she had become covered over with fir needles from once immature but now lofty old pines and the leaves and blossoms of Jamaican dogwoods and lime trees. Their trunks had grown so closely together that they now encircled her, forming an impenetrable barrier between her body and the outside world.

Watching these events unfold with increasing disquiet, the Garden, discerning that a potentially-deadly cocktail of hemlock and opium had joined her bevy of lethargy-inducing plants, at last felt sufficiently uneasy to contemplate intervention. But the world moved slowly within the Garden's walls and it had tarried too long in making the decision to become involved.

She was gone too far into sleep to be easily awakened.

Instead, it amended her ill-intentioned scheme just enough that she would do herself no permanent harm from what it considered her temporary insanity ...so that now the pale green umbels of the hemlock and the pretty, but deadly flowers of the opium poppies were relocated to grow in a spot deeper in the woods. In their place, there grew swathes of St John's wort, passionflower and drifts of delicate yellow cowslips, dotted here and there with wild lettuce ... in hopes of calming her restlessness, easing her troubled spirit and tempering the self-destructive feelings that had led her to this place in the first instance.

Time, in the Garden's long experience healed *most* hurts ...but not, it seemed hers. For Liana's was grief, not encountered just once or twice, but too many times to be endured.

She had chosen this quiescent oblivion in the days immediately after her last love's departure, in preference to remaining awake and vulnerable to the all-too-familiar pain of grief and loss, which she knew from bitter experience, would only worsen in the weeks and months to come. Sooner or later, no matter how hard she tried, no matter how much she loved them, they all went where she couldn't follow and she was left desolate and solitary in the garden once more. The difference being, that this time she had made up her mind to never let love happen again. Confined as she was within the garden's boundaries, she had concluded that she must hide from all possibility of love ...retreating from the world into insensibility ...after all, she'd done it before with the Garden's blessing, sometimes for years at a stretch -but this time, if she had her way, she wouldn't wake to greet the dawn or gather posies of flowers still fresh with the early morning dew, she'd stay asleep in this comatose-like state and oblivious to pain forever and ever. She did not want to awaken,

Not *ever* again.

FLOWERS IN THE MORNING

And Liana knew, from bitter experience, that forever was a *very* long time.

But now, lost in dreams too deep to recall, she was slowly fading - trapped in a state of living death ...whilst all around her, the Garden could feel the impending loss, helpless to do little more than look on as the inevitable approached.

It did what it could to care for her -shielding her sleeping form from wind, rain and snow as much as it was able and maintaining a constant vigil over her ...all the while hoping against hope for a miracle...

and please God, it would come soon...

PROLOGUE TWO

HAMISH

*And thou art dead, as young and fair,
As aught of mortal birth;
And form so soft, and charms so rare,
Too soon returned to Earth!*

Lord Byron

A narrow beam of late-afternoon sunlight found its way between the densely overlapping branches, their leaves beginning that colourful decline that comes with the onset of autumn, -to fall like a spotlight through the open top of a compact classic convertible painted a vibrant green that had been parked beneath the trees. Its warmth momentarily caressed the hair of the car's sole occupant ...his near-black hair tousled from the breeze that had been created while he'd been driving dangerously fast. The sorrowful strains of Ravel drifted as a heart-wrenching refrain from the car's stereo speakers, the low but exceptionally clear notes dissipating in the still air until eventually they floated away to nothing among the trees.

It was difficult to say whether he was listening to the music or not, as his eyes had been closed for some time, luxuriously thick dark lashes resting on high strong cheekbones. Anyone chancing upon the car, parked to one side of a lichen-encrusted stone bridge in the quiet lane could have been forgiven for thinking that he was oblivious to anything other than whatever it was that made him look so forlorn ...but they would have been very wrong. For without bothering to open his eyes, he could have described his immediate surroundings in perfect detail ...from the pools of light and shadows cast by the dying sun to the cool trickle of water tumbling gently

over the slippery green rocks in the stream that ran just footsteps away from the front bumper of the car.

None of this would have surprised those who knew of his reputation as an artist, whose talent for painting nature was well-known. This was unarguably, the day-to-day stuff of life to him. So much so that even at this moment, at what could hardly be described as a high-point in his existence, he was innately aware of his environment ...and given the desire to do so, he would have been capable of reproducing the scene in detail from memory alone. But for now the sketchbook, pencils and sticks of charcoal that customarily travelled everywhere with him were sitting, untouched in the glove-box of the car.

His tall, well-built frame slumped in the driver's seat; long-fingered hands with nails that were never quite clear of paint residue linked loosely over the steering wheel ...head bowed so low that his forehead rested wearily on his entwined fingers ...and all because he'd forgotten, quite simply, that this particular piece of music was on this particular disc. Sometimes, he thought grimly, even he was surprised at how little it took to send him into a downward spiral of melancholy.

Six months ago, following a relaxed weekend spent outside the city it had seemed such a clever idea, to find a new home in the countryside well beyond the reach of London's motorways, ring-roads and overcrowded streets. He'd always known that the noise and hustle of city living wasn't for him, -but she'd loved the city, so he'd stayed to make a life there with her. It was crazy, he mused, that the very things that repelled him had enthralled her ...the never-ending din, the ceaseless traffic, the wall-to-wall parade of people and of course ...the plethora of shops. "Retail Therapy will do you good!", she'd said, gaily grabbing his hands and pulling him along behind her into the Conran shop on a rainy Sunday afternoon, or dashing to the after-Christmas sales with her girlfriends ...laughing and tossing her hair in that way she'd perfected ...all flowing lines and movement.

He still couldn't quite believe that, once married, they'd lived happily in one of the innermost Boroughs of London, urbanity flowing from every bustling street. He'd thanked God, back then, for the relatively quiet backwater that was their mews and its proximity to the park that he retired to when he needed a quiet space away from the maddening crowds that frequented every other part of the Borough. It was a tiny slice of nature he'd introduced their daughter Lucy to, and from a very young age she had shared his love for the urban wildlife if not the peace and tranquillity, of the park.

Acquaintances, who hadn't known them well would comment to one another that they were like chalk and cheese, privately wondering what it was that held the two so closely together and preparing themselves not to be overly surprised when their differences drove them apart ...not

comprehending, as both Hamish and Maud did, that their deep admiration for those very differences was, in fact, the glue that bound them to each other. To them, it had been in all respects a perfect marriage and he'd even found himself enjoying certain aspects of city life -like lattés sipped over the Sunday papers at their favourite cafe ...followed by the ambling stroll home, past shops (inevitably) and leafy garden squares, Lucy happily rocked to sleep in her pushchair.

But now, without her ...without *them*, he corrected, life was very different and he could feel the city inexorably draining away any desire for living that he might have had left in him. '*If a man is tired of London he is tired of life*', the words of Doctor Samuel Johnson, obviously a more stalwart supporter of the city than himself, came unbidden into his thoughts, taunting him even more. This man, Hamish thought, is very definitely tired of London ...as for the other 'tired of life' ...better, perhaps, that he did not think about that right now.

He was teetering too close to the edge, and he knew it ...though why he'd begun to contemplate such a radically permanent solution to his problems, after surviving so many months of their absence, was something he was unable to explain. All the same, he acknowledged, if something didn't happen soon he felt would explode with the pressure building up inside. He was short on sleep and missing meals and it seemed that his lack of success at finding a suitable house was compounding with his inability to deal with the losses he'd suffered ...and right now, as if to add insult to injury, he appeared to be on the wrong bloody road! Andrew Bristow, that pompous ass of an estate agent, had given incomprehensible directions to what was turning out to be another wild goose chase. He was lost. His impractical little gem of a car lacked a working GPS and he was one of the few people in the country who didn't feel the need to own a mobile phone - plus, he'd managed to leave the map-book behind at the B & B. Hamish glanced at the watch hanging loosely on his wrist. He was so late for the appointment now, he thought, he might as well give up and go back to his B & B to retrieve the roadmap. In truth, he didn't know why he still bothered; immediately, his consciousness came back with the reply and he corrected himself.

Yes he did. He knew *exactly* why.

It was a last ditch, desperate, gnaw-off-your-leg-to-get-out-of-the-trap sort of attempt to get his life back on track.

Straightening his spine and his resolve, he reached forward and flicked the stereo to another disc. That was more like it -heavy metal suited his mood. He increased the volume to an ear-blasting level and executed a fast, concise turn beside a gateway so overgrown that he barely registered its existence, before driving with speed that spoke of a careless lack of concern for his existence back the way he had come.

HAMISH

*Come into the garden, Maud,
I am here at the gate alone;
And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad,
And the musk of the rose is blown.*
Alfred, Lord Tennyson

“No, no and no ...to all your questions Hamish. That property isn’t for sale and you won’t be able to purchase it because it’s *never* been on the market. Not for as long as I can recall -and I’ve been in this business for twenty three years,” Andrew, the estate agent’s tone conveyed a personal insult that anyone should deny him the opportunity to sell their house, “...and I absolutely doubt that it ever will be,” he added, emphasising the ‘*absolutely*’ with a hand gesture reminiscent of a conductor completing the final bars of a symphony. Shuddering dramatically, he drew a deep breath, causing his double chins to wobble in a manner that had Hamish picturing one of the less-handsome characters from Star Wars –the image so strong that he’d half-expected gobs of spittle to fly from the agent’s puffy lips, “Absolute *Dragon* of a lady owns it ...and believe me -I’ve tried to convince her to sell on several occasions, but she refuses, point-blank, to even consider the possibility. I couldn’t even get past the answering machine the last time I phoned and the old bat wouldn’t so much as open the door to me when I visited her the time before that.” Andrew sounded quite astounded that someone would pass on the chance to talk to him.

Hamish fought back a smile, sympathising with anyone who found it necessary to deal with Andrew. He also found himself wishing that this

appointment had not been ‘*absolutely*’ necessary ...for while Andrew's ample Armani-clad backside was spreading itself comfortably into an over-sized and well-padded chair, Hamish was perched on the far side of Andrew's enormous pretentiously appointed desk, precariously balancing on a tortuous apology for a chair that had patently never been intended to be sat upon.

He was well aware that the whole scene was carefully contrived to give Andrew a sense of power over his clients ...from the expensive, if (in Hamish's opinion), tasteless furnishings, to the numerous framed photographs of Andrew in various ‘chummy’ poses with notable clients he had either bought or sold property for. Hamish grimaced inwardly at one particularly large and eye-catching shot of Andrew, standing between a well-known celebrity couple, with his arms draped around their shoulders, -his self-satisfied grin showing a mouthful of artificially-whitened teeth that would have done a shark proud. To top it all off, there was a garish certificate sited prominently on the desk that proclaimed that he, Andrew Bristow, had sold the highest turnover of property in the south of England for the previous three years running! ...marketable values noted in pounds sterling, of course.

All of this posturing and preening had quite the opposite effect on Hamish ...he really wanted to get up and leave, immediately. However, he needed something from Andrew and to obtain that *something*, he would put up with Andrew's annoying behaviour and a little discomfort for as long as it took. So instead of running for the door, he squirmed on the chair trying to find a more comfortable position, thinking with a prolonged mental sigh; well, if this is what it took, he would hang in there.

Andrew, sensing he had a captive audience, (his favourite kind), leaned forward, schooling his face into a thoughtful expression and rubbing a hand across his smooth-shaved chin, as if to check for stubble at ten o'clock in the morning. It was a move that was so obviously well-rehearsed that Hamish smiled inwardly, wondering how many times Andrew had stood in front of his bathroom mirror practising the gesture. Tapping a finger thoughtfully against his pudgy cheek, Andrew began to speak in low soothing tones that put Hamish in mind of a performance-hypnotist entrancing his audience prior to making them all believe they were dancing chickens or suchlike. “Hamish, my friend,” he launched into what Hamish suspected would be a long speech. He stared out the window behind Andrew's round billiard-ball smooth head, only half-listening as Andrew droned on in a sort of monotone soliloquy that, combined with Hamish's chronic lack of sleep, made it very hard to concentrate. He could feel his thoughts drifting under the influence of the coma-inducing quality of Andrew's voice, his gaze following the path of a flock of birds outside ...so that he missed the bulk of whatever it was that Andrew had just said.

Hamish shook his head and shifted again on the agonisingly uncomfortable chair -only by supreme force of will forcing himself to tune back in time to catch "...dear boy, you must know that if the place was on the market I would have shown you through already." ...It was like a daytime soap opera, Hamish thought wryly, you could miss half the episodes and still easily follow the plot. Andrew prattled on ... shaking a chubby finger to emphasise his point, "Believe me, I've had clients interested in that property before but I've never been able to get anywhere with it. Some on-going problem with caveats on an old will, I believe."

Andrew then waved his hands dismissively in the air as if to push the problem away, barely drawing breath before continuing, mock-cheerfully, "...frightfully sorry about that, but I *have* got a brace of delightfully excellent new properties lined up to show you. You *will* have time this afternoon to have a look through them, won't you?" there was heavy emphasis on the 'will' as he pushed two glossy pages with photographs and descriptions of prospective houses across the wide desk towards Hamish, sitting back and rubbing his hands together as if in anticipation of his client's approval.

Although the apology sounded trite, Hamish knew that Andrew was, quite probably, genuinely sorry. Not for Hamish (perish the thought), but for himself and the loss of a sizeable commission from a property that he wasn't able to sell. Hamish took the proffered pages, one in each hand and flicked his eyes over them with the briefest of glances ... that was all it took to ascertain that the first was nothing more than an exceedingly banal modern brick box, with enough added titivations to allow it to be described as an 'executive' residence, while the second was an ancient moated-manor house that would undoubtedly cost a small fortune in dry-rot treatments and heating bills alone. Both were completely unsuitable to his needs, and not even close to the kind of house that he was looking for ...it was well past time to look for a new estate agent, he thought ...or, perhaps, time to find out more about that house he'd stumbled upon, and which he now couldn't get out of his mind.

He, unlike Andrew, wasn't inclined to give up without at least talking face to face with the present owner.

"So, you know who owns the place?" Careful not to sound overly interested, and knowing full well that he wasn't about to be given something for nothing, Hamish played a quick game of '*eenie-meenie-minie-mo*' with the pages, randomly selecting the sheet of paper in his left hand ...the executive box. "This looks like a possibility. I'll have a look at it. But I only have an hour or two before I have to start back to London. I've got ...ah, erm," ...he paused, desperately trying to think of a reason why he couldn't waste any more than a minimum amount of his time. He frowned, and then prevaricated, "I've got a date ...this evening, and you know what a bugger the weekend traffic can be. If I leave too late it'll take me until tomorrow

morning to get all the way back to my place in Kensington.”

Hamish wasn't a particularly adept liar, -something that Maud had laughingly pointed out soon after they'd met. She'd said it that it wasn't a bad thing and that it would keep him honest. On the rare occasions he'd tried to be economical with the truth -like the surprise birthday party he'd organised at a friend's restaurant, she always seen straight through him, but he hoped that in this instance Andrew wouldn't pick up on his weak excuse to get away early. For the life of him he didn't know where he'd plucked the 'date' idea from? He hoped it was the kind of thing that Andrew would identify with and he smiled across the expanse of Andrew's desk in an effort to create some kind of bonhomie between them ...man-to-man stuff and all that -all the while thinking that the mere possibility of having to peruse yet another of Andrew's 'properties' left him feeling like he wanted to gag. However, he knew from bitter experience that if he didn't set some sort of time limit, he'd be looking at unsuitable 'properties' all afternoon. It was quite apparent to Hamish that Andrew and he were unsuited as agent and buyer -to someone of Andrew's sensibilities a house was little more than an expensive accessory ...a mere collection of bricks and mortar that he just happened to inhabit, and no more important to him than his current car or his designer suits.

Hamish turned his thoughts away from Andrew's shortcomings as an estate agent and dragged them back to the present problem -that of finding himself a new home that would meet *his* requirements rather than Andrew's. Now, this place he'd discovered -it definitely had distinct possibilities.



Three weeks before, -when he'd pulled over in that quiet lay-by the stone bridge to try and decipher Andrew's muddled directions to another unsuitable 'property'- he hadn't even been aware that there had been a house nearby. Yesterday, he had lost most of the day in being shown through five houses by Andrew, who enthusiastically extolled the virtues of each and relentlessly badgered Hamish into considering buying the last -perhaps which was how Andrew was successful in selling? Hamish had mused; -he wore clients down until they would buy just to shut him up. The only virtue of the last 'property', as far as Hamish could see, was that it hadn't been quite as horrible as the previous four. Another fruitless weekend was pending and he'd wondered how much more of this could he stand?

Later that day, while sitting in front of the cosy fire in the shabbily-comfortable sitting room of what was becoming his regular B & B, Hamish had decided to quit this ridiculous search and head north back to Scotland,

to where his family had a small place on the shores of Loch Ewe. He'd inherited it after his mother had died. There had been a house in Edinburgh as well, but five years ago, with Maud newly pregnant and thinking that his future was now in London, he'd sold the house. Nostalgia for childhood memories of wonderful family holidays spent clambering over rocks and fossicking for treasures by the Loch had made him keep the cottage, thinking that he would, in turn, take his own children to holiday by its shores. True, the cottage was little more than a crofter's shanty, lacking electricity and in need of repair, but it would do for one solitary man who sorely needed to sort his life out.

Feeling relieved at having made some sort of decision about his future, he felt he deserved some time off ...after all, he reasoned, he still had all of Sunday left in which to relax before joining the throngs heading back into the city. It was then that he'd remembered the stone bridge over the brook and the peaceful woods from weeks before ...this last cold snap meant that the trees would be practically leafless by now, but the denuded trunks and branches might be perfect for photography or sketching. He'd ditch Andrew, and take the day to do things he enjoyed instead.



He'd risen early to mist and a distinct chill in the air, but hadn't been deterred from going out. It was nothing a warm coat and a flask of freshly brewed hot coffee couldn't handle, he'd decided. Fortunately, his B & B hosts had added home comforts like freshly ground coffee and a small cafetière to brew it in. Hamish filled and set the kettle to boil, then prised open the tightly capped container, sniffing appreciatively as he measured out several generously heaped teaspoons of the richly scented dark ground grains into the cafetière. Once the water had boiled, he poured it over the coffee and left the mixture to brew while he showered and dressed in dark corded pants and multiple layers, topped off with a warm woven wool jacket.

Minutes later, he was outside, tossing a small backpack containing the filled flask, as well as gloves, scarf and his camera, onto the passenger side of the Austin-Healey, before folding his long body into the driver's seat and motoring away from the B & B as quietly as possible in hopes of not disturbing his hosts and the other guests any more than necessary. He had met an American couple who were sharing the room next to him at the local pub the night before, and had chatted over drinks and dinner. Both husband and wife were in their late-sixties, and enjoying their retirement enormously. In the course of the lively conversation Hamish had discovered that they were retired university professors who had travelled extensively. They'd been happy to share reminiscences about places both

they and Hamish had visited, but they were late-risers, they'd said, and he had no wish to wake them this early in the day.

With the convertible soft-top up and the heater on high, the little car warmed up quickly. Fortunately, Hamish found he had no trouble at all finding the spot where he had stopped previously. He pulled off the road and switched off the engine, pushing his door open and getting out admiring autumn's handiwork. The sun was up just enough to cast its light over the top of the low hills behind the woods and with a trail of hazy mist hanging just above the stream and a white dusting here and there that indicated touches of frost, this place was even prettier than he had remembered it to be. A few late leaves still clung tenaciously to the trees but most were scattered about on the ground, making a satisfying scrunch under Hamish's boots as he wandered onto the bridge. It was quiet, the stillness so complete that even the water in the stream below was flowing almost soundlessly and the day seemed to be holding its breath for a moment before it began. Remembering scenes similar to this from winters in Scotland when he was younger, Hamish huffed a few times out through his mouth, watching as the suspended vapour of his breath slowly disappeared in the still cold air in small puffy clouds.

"Brrr ...it's even colder here than I thought." Rubbing his hands together, he noted that his fingertips were already becoming numb and stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets. "Way too cold to be drawing." Talking to himself was a habit he'd picked up in this past year ...a by-product, he supposed, of too many long hours spent alone working and having no one at home to converse with afterwards.

He returned to the car. First priority, he decided, was to keep his hands from freezing, so he dug into the backpack until he found a pair of soft brown leather gloves lined with downy rabbit fur. They'd been an early Christmas gift from Maud, only weeks before the accident. And they reminded him so strongly of her that he'd hardly worn them since. Now, determined to make the effort not to sink back into melancholy, he fought hard to shrug off the memories which constantly threatened to engulf him, as he bent again to retrieve the camera and a soft mohair scarf, ...also bought by Maud as a gift from Lucy that same Christmas. He knew that unless he cleared out everything he possessed, it was almost impossible not to be reminded of them every time he turned around but that was an unthinkable solution, so, for now he'd just do his best to put his thoughts aside and get on with the day.

Wrapping the camera strap around one hand, he locked the car and pocketed the keys. It was as he straightened that he noticed the entranceway immediately behind the car. His memory flashed back to the day of his last, unhappy, visit to this lane, and he remembered seeing it, fleetingly, in the rear-vision mirror as he'd turned out of the lay-by to go and search for

Andrew.

Curious, he strolled over for a closer look. There was a gateway, wider than a standard pedestrian entry but not large enough to allow for vehicles, with solid wooden posts either side of a metalwork gate. It was difficult to see much because the shrubs either side of the gate had grown so rampantly that they'd overlapped one another, twisting themselves around and around the metal until they obscured most of it. Hamish removed his gloves, stuffing them in his jacket pocket and began snapping small twigs, then, with more determination hauled some of the more intrusive branches out of his way to enable himself to get a better look at the ironwork -which, it was becoming obvious, even with the little that he could see was beautifully wrought. No ordinary gate, this ...and all the more whimsical for its unexpected and seemingly isolated location.

From what he had so far uncovered, he could easily recognise metallic oak leaves and acorns, and a twining flower that looked like clematis. He paused long enough to snap off a few photos. Satisfied that he had taken enough 'before' photos, Hamish hung the camera and his backpack over a nearby branch and set to work in earnest pulling the living vines away from their metal counterparts. It took some time before he had the entire gate clear of growth, resulting in a surprisingly large mound of broken twigs and vines amassed in an untidy heap beside the gate. Hamish stuck his hand in his jacket pocket and pulled out a pristine white handkerchief, -the work of his weekly housekeeper, not himself- and unceremoniously spat on it before rubbing one of the metal leaves ...copper, verdigris-green with age and exposure to the elements. Further efforts showed that whoever had fashioned the gate had forged it using several metals to give the effects of different foliage and flower petals, most free from corrosion and in relatively good condition.

Another ten minutes of spit and polish, literally, and he had the entire gate cleaned up sufficiently to be able to properly appreciate it. The handkerchief by now was good for little else other than a rubbish bin. Hamish unconcernedly stuffed it in one of the backpack's outer pockets and stood back to appraise his handiwork ...the gate was certainly a fine work of art, but it struck him as odd that such a lovely example of metalwork should be here, stranded, it seemed, the middle of nowhere.

2

HAMISH

*And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*
Robert Frost

Or was it? Gazing over the gate into the woods beyond, he now noticed a leaf-strewn path of pale-coloured gravel, so overgrown with shrubs that it was practically jungle-like, but probably not completely impassable. It was hard to tell as he could see no more than half a dozen yards of clear path leading away into the undergrowth, before the lush vegetation obscured his sight. It seemed a shame, he reasoned, having gone to the trouble of clearing the gateway, not to attempt to open it, so he flipped up the simple catch and gave the gate a tentative push. If it had been rusted shut, he might have stopped there, but perversely, the hinges swung as freely as if they had been recently oiled and the gate opened with not much more than gentle resistance to the pressure of his hand. Needing no more encouragement than this, he pushed it far enough to pass through and closed the latch behind him, deciding that he had sufficient time to explore a little before returning to the B & B for his breakfast.

He reached back over the gate for his backpack, plucking it and the camera from the branch where he had left them hanging. Pulling the pack over one shoulder, he slung the camera carry-strap over his head and settled it under one arm so that he would have both hands free to fend off the shrubbery. The gloves he left in his pocket, thinking that he'd prefer to scratch up his hands rather than damage the soft leather.

With the deciduous trees almost bare of leaves, there was sufficient light

to see the way, though by mid-summer, when the trees would be in full-leaf, he doubted that anyone would even notice the path. As it was, the evergreen shrubs under the trees, some of which had grown over his head height, made Hamish's progress slow, and at times, painful. Pushing past outstretched laurel branches wasn't so bad, he thought, but when he came upon a massive, prickly holly bush blocking the entire path, he decided that it was probably easier to give up and go around. Struggling through the increasingly thick untidy undergrowth, he was unaware that the path had been leading him towards the stream until he was practically at the water's edge. Here, close to the bank, where the stream formed a natural break in the woods, allowing more light to reach the lower levels, the foliage had grown even more rampantly. It was with some effort that Hamish fought his way through a thicket of laurel and seedling birches to emerge, breathing heavily and feeling quite warm from his exertions, back on the path ...at the very edge of the water.

Whatever he'd expected to find as he batted the last of the errant branches away from his face, it wasn't the delicate structure that had appeared out of nowhere before him. Spanning the stream was a narrow Gothic-style stone footbridge, it, like the gate, all the more beautiful for its unexpected appearance. The soft mist that floated ethereally around its base just above the water-line and the almost-white stone glittering in the first rays of sunshine had Hamish reaching for his camera to photograph the scenery. He walked towards it, snapping as he went.

The bridge was roofed with graceful arcs of vaulted stonework, its walls interrupted on either side by three slim-columned arches. As the smooth stone approaches were still white with frost, Hamish trod carefully, clicking off several shots as he walked out to the centre of the span.

Leaning through the middle arch, he looked upstream in the general direction of the road bridge. Although he knew that the road and his car couldn't be far away, they were completely blocked from his sight by the trees and the bend in the stream. Without the infringement of these references to ordinary life, the sense of isolation and otherworldliness was complete. He hoisted his backside onto the parapet and sat, back bathed in the thin winter sunshine, eyes closed, enjoying the peace and tranquillity, and an absolute aura of aloneness that he knew he could never duplicate in London.

The gentle burble of the stream was a soothing balm to his troubled mind and emotions but it was chilly despite the weak sun and the parapet was freezing, even through thick corduroy, so after a short time he opened his eyes, grasping the pillars to either side to lean out to study the stonework along the outer walls. From this vantage point he was could see that beneath where he sat the stone had been fashioned into a garland of flowers that went in long loops from one end of the parapet to the other.

Although made from the same solid stone material as the rest of the bridge, the strand of blossoms had an appearance of fragility and detail that must have taken a person of immense talent, skill and patience many hours to complete.

Looking up, he saw that above each of the arches were carved small stone birds, each one posed differently, one caught singing, another perched on the side of a stone nest with a worm in its beak, and the third with wings outstretched about to take flight. His curiosity piqued, Hamish got down from the parapet and crossed to the opposite arches, placing his gloved hands on the parapet and leaning forward with his body to check that aspect ...on this side, the garland was identical to the other, but here the birds were replaced by squirrels, three again, -two posed as though squabbling over a nut At first, Hamish didn't see the third animal. A bare oak branch with leaves and acorns at the upper corner of the wall, sure, but no squirrel ...he looked again, wondering if the bridge had, perhaps over its long life, sustained some damage. But no, there it was ...he could see a fluffy tail, frozen in the act of scurrying around the corner of the endmost arch.

Seeing this, the thought came, unbidden, Lucy would be absolutely delighted with this, and she'd always loved to be taken for walks to see the squirrels and rabbits near their home in Holland Park. He must bring her and show her the bridge ...but then it struck him, almost instantly, like a hot knife through his gut ...Lucy wasn't going to be able to see the squirrels, and never would be again, ...so there was little use in standing here wishing for her presence, ...and yet, he couldn't help himself. It felt like he was continually picking at the scab over a wound -never giving it the chance to heal properly, he thought despairingly. He knew he shouldn't, but he kept doing it anyway. He shook his head to dispel the thoughts, knowing he would drown in his own sorrow if he continued down that particular path ...better by far to stick to this real path and carry on with his own adventure ...and he'd just have fly solo on this one.

With effort, he dragged his thoughts back to the here and now. First the gate and now this bridge, ...he looked to where the other end of the span disappeared, once again, into dense shrubbery, ...his curiosity was already ranging ahead to whatever else he might find down the path if he was to explore further ...and where his curiosity beckoned, he felt he had an obligation to follow.



Minutes later, Hamish was already regretting the impulse. Making headway was no easier on this side of the stream ...if anything, the shrubberies were even more prolific and overspreading than before ...and

the path itself seemed to be leading him further away from the road. He had hoped he might find a loop-track that returned to re-join the lane beyond the road-bridge, but that didn't seem to be the case, and now, with low insistent growls, his stomach was reminding him that he was overdue an excellent B & B breakfast. Added to that, his conscience had also begun to niggle at him with gentle cautions that he was almost undoubtedly trespassing on someone else's private property.

Having just fought his way around another particularly prickly clump of holly, he resolved to call it a day, and return back the way he'd come to his car and the B & B, when a movement on the periphery of his vision caught his attention. The blur resolved itself into a bright red-breasted robin, which landed on a branch directly above his head, hopped along to the far end of the bough, then with no apparent fear, fluttered down onto the path, less than three yards in front of his boots. It bravely stood its ground even as Hamish walked a few steps closer.

"Well, good morning gorgeous." Hamish spoke a greeting in a low tone, not wanting to frighten the tiny bird. "I don't suppose you'd happen to know where this path leads."

The robin looked up at him, tilting its head to either side as if considering a reply, then flying up into a shrub a few yards further along the path, chirruping encouragingly.

Feeling more than a little self-conscious, and a bit like some character in a children's fairy tale, Hamish followed, skirting a leafy laurel that had taken root in the centre of the path, ...not so much because he felt that the robin knew something he didn't, but, he reasoned, it seemed as good a reason as any other to continue. Also, practical man that he was, the way ahead was now a lot clearer than behind.

Keeping an eye on the small bird, he followed the path up and over a slight rise to find that the trees suddenly gave way to an open, roughly V-shaped area of grass set between the perimeters of the trees on either side. Not exactly a manicured lawn but not a rough field either. Standing at the edge of the woods, Hamish took stock. Well, it didn't look as if he'd come out in someone's garden -not unless they were a particularly unenthusiastic gardener, he thought, judging by the rank grasses and unpruned shrubberies that bordered the woods. The formal path, such as it was, ended abruptly at the edge of the woods, so from here on, he thought, it seemed that he would have to find his own way.

The bird flew over his shoulder as he left the shelter of the trees to wander out across the grass. The long stalks grown lanky with last season's seed heads stood stiffly white, frozen solid, and his feet left a dark trail of broken and bent stems where he had disturbed the frosted plants. Directly in front of him two very large and aggressively spiky holly bushes stood close together, looking like a couple of corpulent sentries standing to

attention. Together with the tall untrimmed yew hedge behind them they created an effective barrier out of the opposite side of the clearing. The little robin landed and sat watching him from on top of one of these bushes for a few seconds before flying up to perch at the apex of the shaggily unkempt, but still impenetrable-looking hedge, its far ends effectively sealing any gaps between the two arms of the woods.

Not being able to see any obvious exit, other than the path on which he'd arrived from the woods; Hamish hoped that, surely, there would be another way for him to continue that wouldn't require the use of an axe or a chainsaw to gain his freedom. Besides the hedge, a number of large woody hydrangeas, their old brown flower heads forlornly drooping, blocked the woodland margins, so that left the hedge. He could see the section of yew to the right of the holly bushes quite clearly and there was no sign of any gap that was large enough for a small animal to squeeze through, let alone a fully-grown man. To his left, the hedge was obscured by a thicket of half-grown, spindly, birch saplings, but a closer inspection showed nothing in the way of an egress there either, ...Hamish backed his way out and dusted off the coating of cold ice that he'd acquired over his jacket sleeves and hair by pushing through the birches. He could feel icy droplets melting down his neck.

Mildly frustrated, he looked up at the robin, who had been singing lustily from the vantage of his high perch all the while giving Hamish the distinct feeling that he was being laughed at by the tiny feathered bird for being so cumbersome. "It's all very well for you, you can fly. But look at me, ...no wings," he said crossly, flapping his arms vigorously, partly in a demonstration of his inability to fly but justified to himself, mostly, as an attempt to keep warm, "... so, you could either be a bit more helpful with directions, or buzz off."

At this, the robin stopped singing, looked at Hamish as if he was a bit of a village idiot (which by now, frankly, having stooped to talking and miming flight to a bird, he was feeling), and promptly flew back down to the largest of the hollies. It sat there for a moment before taking off once more, disappearing from sight so abruptly, that it took Hamish several seconds before he realised that the bird had flown behind what he had thought to be solid hedge to the rear of the bushes.

Hamish frowned and peered more closely at the tall hedge, this time noticing that the section immediately behind the two hollies appeared to be staggered -with one 'arm' offset from the other, maybe there was his way out? Tugging the sleeves of his jacket down over his hands to protect from the barbs, he raised a forearm over his eyes before bodily shoving his way straight through between the middle of the two bushes. It was not pleasant pushing through spikes from the thick thorny leaves, but he kept forcing his way against the plant's resistance until he was through. Once on the other

FLOWERS IN THE MORNING

side, he removed the protective hand from in front of his eyes, and there, to his right, was a gap between the two arms of the hedge that was large enough for him to walk through.

He bent his head forward to shake off the icy coating that had turned his hair temporarily white then straightened to look around. From this side, he could see that he had missed noticing the opening because whoever had planted the hedge had devised a sort of switchback effect with the yew folding back on itself to hide the passage. Like a tiny maze, the trick had disguised the exit. Despite feeling cold trickles of melting ice dribbling down his neck for the second time, Hamish was delighted with the small joke. He continued on round the corner. Here, the yew had been fashioned into a wide archway and the grass under his feet gave way to hard flagstones. Though he could feel them under his feet, they were almost invisible under a thick blanket of old yew needles. Ducking his head to avoid several season's growth of yew, he emerged from beneath the arch...

HAMISH

*It did not move my grief to see
The trace of human step departed:
Because the garden was deserted,
The blither place for me!*
Elizabeth Barrett Browning

...Stepping out into what he thought must *surely* be a derelict garden. It was still hard to be one hundred percent sure, as although the view had expanded somewhat, his line of sight was still limited by a group of densely-growing trees and shrubs to his right. Standing tall among them was a red beech of massive proportions, its trunk and lower branches covered in thick green ivy. It was certainly a beautiful specimen, but of more immediate interest was the long brick wall running away to his left -he could see little beyond it as the ground dropped away in that direction and the wall effectively obscured whatever was beyond its bulk.

Still, it looked as if there had once been a garden here, albeit, one long gone wild. The germ of an idea crept into Hamish's mind ...perhaps, he thought, with a whisper of hopefulness, where there was an unoccupied garden; there might be an unoccupied house?

Even without the promise of a house, as much as Hamish could see captivated him enough to put off all thoughts of breakfast and continue exploring. He pulled the gloves from his jacket pocket and tugged them over chilled fingers, while considering his next move. To his immediate left, the woods swept back a little -providing shelter to a grove of what appeared to be old fruit trees. He could hear a bird singing from among the trees and

wondered it might be the clever robin? He'd go that way, he decided...

...He walked down the length of the wall, weaving between trees that should have been heavy with fruit, come summer. As it was, the orchard was in a sorry condition, the trees struggling for survival among untrimmed grasses, weighed down by heavy clumps of old climbing roses and rampantly growing ivy. Instead of being tidily pruned, branches lay where they had snapped under their own weight and several trees appeared to have given up the fight, their withered, lichen-covered limbs silhouetted stark and lifeless in the cold morning air.

"I hope that if there *is* anyone here, they don't keep Rottweilers," Hamish muttered to himself as he moved forward, wading with some difficulty through frigid knee-high grasses. As he tracked parallel with the wall, he could see that it too was badly in need of repair. There was little mortar left to hold the old bricks in place, and many had worked loose as a result of successive winter's frosts and rain. The robin was back, first dive-bombing playfully close over Hamish's head then flitting his way along the broken brickwork at the top of the wall. He chirped cheerfully in a quasi-conversational manner as he hopped over the thick gnarled shoots of a wisteria that draped over the wall. The vines smaller tendrils had insinuated into nooks and crannies of the old moss coated brickwork and were contributing their share to the demise of the structure. The little bird reached the furthest end before slower-moving Hamish, who was hampered by the long grass and debris. It stood watching him then gave one last trill before disappearing again beyond the wall, just as Hamish approached.

The end section of brickwork, which had once formed an archway over a wooden gate, had partly-collapsed. The old gate, fallen from rusted hinges, lay to one side, its rotting timbers gradually subsiding back into the ground and bricks were strewn haphazardly where they had tumbled among the long grass. Hamish picked his way carefully between them. As he walked under the still-intact portion of the arch, he was aware of bricks precariously perched above. He tilted his head to eye them warily, hoping that the remaining blockwork wouldn't choose that moment to fall. Then, while gazing up at the remains of the arch and the lovely clear blue sky beyond, his attention was then caught by the flurried movement of a small flock of white doves circling overhead.

Distracted by the birds, he failed to notice that the ground beneath his boots had been transformed from tufts of grass and stone pavers into an almost solid sheet of ice where a burst water-pipe had been seeping. Ordinarily the ground underfoot would have been no worse than a small soggy bog, with the overflow running down a steep flight of fern-edged stone steps that led down the bank on the other side of the wall -but the overnight frost had transformed the already slippery algae-coated steps into

a treacherous mini waterfall of slick ice that the morning's sun had yet to reach.

Adding to his distraction, at the precise moment Hamish placed his booted foot on the icy stone slab that formed the stair's top riser; his attention was further-captured by the sounds of muffled thumping of feet running across the frozen grass, approaching rapidly from behind more tall yew hedges on his left.

He felt a wave of disappointment instantly wash over him. He'd been enjoying this solitary adventure, and wasn't in the mood to find himself apologising to some, undoubtedly irate, landowner about his presence in their garden.

But when he turned his head towards the direction of the sound the battle for balance was lost before it began. There was no purchase to be had on the slick surface and first one boot then the other went out from under him. He fell, and loud cursing filling the cold morning air as, arms flailing, he unceremoniously bumped, bounced, jounced and slid the entire distance from top to bottom, finally coming to rest at the base of the flight.

He lay there for a moment, confused and winded by his rapid flight, as a petite but well-rugged figure came to a hurried stop. Mitted hands on hips, she remained jogging on the spot a short distance away from his supine form.

"Spectacular landing! I'd give that a 9 point 5 out of 10," -the voice belonged to a woman but the body looked more like that of a child. As Hamish's vision cleared from the shimmering stars that indicated a near-miss with concussion, he saw feet encased in running shoes, legs tightly clad in warm black leggings, a light parka over a long-sleeved runner's vest and a close-fitting hat pulled so low on her brow that, with the collar turned up high on the jacket, it was difficult to see much of her face. She was now holding up both hands, warmly encased in bright red fuzzy mittens, miming a judge holding up a score card.

"I'd be more sympathetic," the runner pronounced matter-of-factly, "but you're trespassing and shouldn't be here." She paused for a moment, catching her breath before continuing, "then again, I probably shouldn't be here either, so what the hell, I may as well help you up." Walking to his still prone form, she held out a hand. Hamish had by now rolled over onto hands and knees while his head cleared. He turned his face to stare up at her.

"I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble," ...he groaned, "although, I think, under the circumstances, I might accept a hand." He held out his right hand to grasp her proffered mitt. Grasping it, still feeling a bit woozy, he let her take some of his weight as she tugged hard in the opposite direction to pull him to his feet. Unfortunately, with the disparity in their sizes and the fact by moving closer she also was now standing on the ice,

the action resulted in a comic moment in which she seemed to move in slow motion as her running shoes slid on the slick surface and with her arms frantically wind-milling, she was dumped on her rear end on the icy ground next to Hamish.

He had collapsed back on his stomach. He rolled over so that he could look into surprised lavender-blue eyes set in a pixie face and raised his eyebrows in an I-told-you-so sort of gesture. "I'd be more sympathetic, but maybe you shouldn't be here either," he grinned in sardonic mirth. "And you only get an eight point five for that. I think you could have done better on the dismount ...although I do think the arm action was pretty good."

Fortunately, she seemed to have a sense of humour. She reciprocated his droll grin before moving away. "Ouch, this stuff is lethal," she said, before shimmying on her bottom to the edge of the ice, away from Hamish and the steps. "And you're all on your own for that last remark. Too bad if you've broken anything important ...you'll just have to drag yourself to the closest hospital." She gingerly made it to her feet as Hamish regained his own. While her back was turned, Hamish kneaded a particularly tender spot on his backside where he imagined he'd have a spectacular bruise developing later. His head was still spinning and he reached up to rub at the beginnings of a lump under his hair where the back of his head had banged into the last step.

She turned towards him, dragging off her knitted cap with one hand while surreptitiously massaging her own rear-end with the other, in way that him smiling in sympathy, though he wasn't about to mention it. Her hair was cut raggedly short in a shade of blond that Hamish doubted was natural, especially given the bright lavender-blue tips that exactly-matched her eyes. Oddly enough, the colour suited her ...putting him in mind of a contemporary version of Tinkerbell. She opened her mouth to say something ...at, he could instantly tell, the same moment it dawned on her that she was in isolated place with a total stranger. A wary look flashed over her gamine features as, like dancers choreographed in some uncanny performance, they both took three steps backwards away from one another, he in an effort not to intimidate and she to put some space between herself and a potential threat to her safety.

Unfortunately, Hamish's third precipitous step returned him to the ice and he was once again flailing desperately for balance. In a purely-reflexive action, she rushed forward to grab him vice-like around the waist before he toppled backwards again.

"Whoa there," she cautioned breathlessly. "Haven't you had enough of that for one day?" she looked up with concern at him towering above her. "Are you okay? -you look a bit pale. You're not going to faint on me are you?"

"Sorry, you looked a little concerned, so I was backing off not to

frighten you,” he carefully replied.

“How’s that working out for you?” she now grinned up at him impishly.

“Well, considering that you’re the one holding me ...perhaps I should be screaming and running.” He replied, holding both hands out in a sort of nonthreatening, ‘*I give up*’ gesture. He looked down at her. “You’re strong for your size.”

She promptly let go and stepped away from him. “Thank you ...I think. Depends. Was that a compliment about my strength or a slur on my size?” Scowling theatrically, she stood with feet planted wide and both hands on her hips in what seemed like a practiced gesture of annoyance as she stared up at him. “...’Cos, I could take you down if I wanted to –you know?”

Hamish kept his hands in the air, thinking that her resemblance to an irritated Tinkerbell was even more pronounced with this gesture, while responding, “Yes. No. Please don’t. I hurt more than enough in places I can’t tell you about already.” His response took a more placatory tone. “Can I put my hands down now?” He slowly lowered his arms to his sides before continuing, “Perhaps we should introduce ourselves before we battle it out for your injured pride.” Holding his right hand out in the time-honoured fashion of benevolent greeting, he smiling winningly, completely unaware how the sudden smile transformed his features from merely good-looking to drop-dead gorgeous. “Uh, hi, my name’s Hamish and I know I shouldn’t be trespassing but I’m hunting for a place to live and this garden is just so damn fascinating that I couldn’t help myself.”

“Hi back at ya. I’m Sara,” she replied, extending a small brightly mittened hand to briefly touch his larger gloved fingers. “I live nearby and I happen to know that there’s hardly ever anyone in this garden ...apart from right now that is. I regularly use it as part of my running circuit. Which you’ve interrupted ...so I guess I should thank you since I really really hate running? I just do it to stay fit and keep the weight off.” She grimaced as she spoke.

“Well it seems to be working out for you,” said Hamish, in a parody of her earlier statement.

“Gee-wiz, two compliments in a row...you’re really on a roll.” She paused. “Yeah, well, I do what I can ...its touch and go when you’re my height and food is so damn delicious.” Eyes narrowed, she unabashedly looked him over. “How tall are you anyway? It’s giving me a pain in my neck just talking to you.”

“Is that an admission that you are kind of short? ...’Cos, to be perfectly honest, you are you know?” Hamish was smiling broadly by now, his eyes alight with roguish humour. “If you must know, I’m just over six-two. It would hardly qualify me to play major league basketball. I’d be a shrimp compared to those guys.”

“Yeah, right ...speak for yourself ...if you’re too short I’d be a damned

dwarf,” she spoke wryly in a tone that indicated she was less than pleased with her stature.

“I wouldn’t worry if I were you ...you look quite perfect to me.” He spoke without thinking. As soon as the words had left his mouth he realised he may have said something that could be misconstrued, and instantly tried to retract. “Sorry I really wasn’t trying to feed you a line ...I just meant you have perfect proportions for your height. I’m an artist ...I notice stuff like that.” He tugged off a glove to run fingers through his fine shoulder-length hair in a self-conscious gesture of embarrassment. With his rising embarrassment his soft Scot’s accent became more pronounced –sounding less influenced by his years in London and more as if he’d just wandered down off the Highlands. “...Bugger, I’m making a complete mess of this, aren’t I? I didn’t mean to get too familiar when I don’t even know you. Honest.” He shrugged his broad shoulders and stepped away to put more distance between them, careful this time to not tread on the icy patch. “I should just shut up before I do any more harm.”

The real problem was, he thought, he was so badly out of practice when it came to conversing with a member of the opposite sex, -given that these days he hardly spoke to anyone, let alone a complete stranger who as luck would have it, happened to be a woman.

“Look at you, all six foot two and tripping over your feet to apologise for nothing at all.” Sara noted the wide gold wedding band with its Celtic knot patterning glinting in the sun on his gloveless hand, and pointed to it, “...Makes me wonder how you ever got the girl with lines like that?”

Hamish instantly recoiled with an expression that reminded Sara of a wounded animal. His face shut down with the speed of a bank security barrier and his complexion, which had only started to recover its normal colouring, faded to an even paler shade of white. He swayed slightly and it really did appear as if he was about faint.

Sara briefly wondered what on earth she had said to cause such a dramatic reaction. He looked as if she’d struck him. Now it was her turn to apologise ... “What did I say? Obviously, she decided, something awful “...Hey, don’t you take any notice of me,”...she rambled on as she tried to make light of the moment. “What would I know about anything? ...I have height issues.” She looked behind him, pointing urgently this time to an old garden bench which was basking in the spotlight of the sun’s rays. “Why don’t you sit down there before you fall over again?”

Hamish stumbled to the bench and slumped against the slats. On closer inspection of the ancient woodwork that made up the seat and backrest, Sara fervently hoped the lichen-encrusted timbers wouldn’t choose this moment to snap. She walked over to gingerly perch at the opposite end, one hand balanced on the decorative metal scroll that formed the bench end, trusting that her light weight wouldn’t be the straw that broke this

camel's back. Hamish had replaced the glove on his left hand, but she could see him twisting the wedding band with his other thumb and forefinger beneath the leather. She wisely chose not to comment.

He averted dark pain-filled eyes, studying the ground as he spoke quietly. "Don't blame yourself for what just happened. It's not your fault –I have one or two 'issues' of my own."

"Ah well, don't we all? ...Anything you want to share?" she asked softly. "Sometimes I find it's better to talk to complete strangers ...puts a whole new perspective on things." She looked at him quizzically but not unkindly.

He shook his head. "No. Not right now, but thanks for offering." A hint of a smile touched his full lips, "Though I might take you up on it some other time."

She was left with the impression that his '*some other time*' could have been replaced with '*when hell freezes over.*' Why were men so pathetic when it came to talking about..., she mused ...well, generally, about pretty much anything that mattered. Oh well, it wasn't like she didn't have enough problems of her own without taking on those of some stranger who didn't want to share.

"Yeah, well, just try not to fall over again, and you'll save me a lot of effort ...and bruises," she quipped, patting his shoulder playfully and rising from the bench. "I'd better keep on. I left my son asleep at home and he might be wondering where I've got to if he's woken." Yeah, she thought dryly ... if the house tumbled down around him and all the food in the pantry disappeared. She started away, and then turned her body towards him as she jogged on the spot for a second or two to get her circulation going. "I might see you around..."

Hamish didn't answer and appeared to be preoccupied, his attention caught by something behind her in the garden. Sara turned to look in the direction of his scowling gaze but only saw the familiar double-rows of topiary yews that she ran past most mornings.

"Damn it," he said, with some force. "I was hoping this place was unoccupied. Now it looks like someone *does* live here."

"What do you mean?" Sara asked with a quizzical look.

"There," Hamish gestured towards the topiary, frowning as he contemplated the rows of closely-clipped yews that marched away from them up the garden. The huge trees were all trimmed into shapes that reminded him of something straight out of Alice in Wonderland and with a razor-sharp precision that suggested someone had only recently completed the work.

"Oh, you mean the yews ...oh, I wouldn't worry too much about those if I were you,"...Sara replied, a twinkle in her blue eyes. "You were right the first time. No one lives here." She glanced down at the face of a digital runner's watch she sported on her left wrist and made a small moue with

her lips when she read the time. “Now I’d really better get going...” she moved off and started to jog at a steadily increasing pace away from him, along a roughly-mown path that showed signs of regular trampling.

“Wait a minute...” Hamish stood and raised his voice a notch to get her attention. Sara, already near the far end of the row, halted her progress and turned around towards him, once again running on the spot to keep warm.

“What?” she called back, impatient to be off.

“Do you know who has been doing the gardening then? If it isn’t the owner, I’d like to get in touch and ask them a few things,” he questioned, walking swiftly towards her along the grassy path that bisected the soldier-straight lines of yew.

“Sorry, can’t tell you that ...I was sworn to secrecy.” She gave a knowing smile as she mimed zipping her lips. “But if you are really interested, have a look at the house before you go.” Saying this, she gesticulated with a hand loosely in the direction over her right shoulder, before running out of sight around the end of the topiary. In the few seconds it took Hamish to travel the distance to the spot where she had been standing she had disappeared completely.

“House? What house?” he muttered in frustration. He moved a few more steps, but listening intently, could not hear so much as a footfall that might suggest which direction she had taken. He turned back, grumpily. “So where’s the house?”

He looked around at the precision-clipped yews in their rectangular patch of grass that was, apart from the rough mown path, as wild and unkempt as the any of the garden he’d seen thus far. Ire rose at the feeling that he had just encountered another dead-end in the labyrinth that was his current life. But surely those clipped trees were an irrefutable sign that someone must live close-by. If so, where? There was no house here ...Sara must have been joking at his expense. Something he didn’t find it amusing at all.

He stood rooted in indecision, still standing near the spot where Sara had been a moment before, staring towards the far end of the topiary yews as he allowing his thoughts to spiral dismally downwards for several moments, before realisation eventually pierced the grey cloud that enveloped him ...that amorphous vine-covered outline, silhouetted up there on the distant terrace at the top of a double flight of stone stairs and surrounded by tall trees, ...was that a house?

HAMISH

*Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run.*

John Keats

Promptly forgetting both his angst and any previous concerns about incumbent owners, Hamish was drawn towards the shape. The mown path petered out at the base of the steep stone steps ...which, thankfully, weren't coated in an icy booby-trap. He ran up the first flight, crossed a small paved terrace then bounded up the next, excited anticipation rising with each stride. At the top there was more tall grass and he was obliged to cut an icy swathe through more of the wretched stuff. But he was beyond caring -so entranced by the sight before him. Well, as much of it as he could see that was ...which he soon established, even as he arrived at the far side of the wider top terrace, was not very much at all.

It appeared that the entire house, -walls, steeply-pitched roof and chimneys, was effectively camouflaged under a heavy blanket of red, yellow and orange Virginia creeper. The leaves grown so rampantly that all of the downstairs windows were completely obscured, and with only an occasional glint of grubby glass to give any clues that there might even be windows higher up.

As Hamish watched, the morning sun finally rose above the surrounding trees, setting the house aflame with bright autumn tones. And with the rising sun, Hamish felt a small kernel of hope stir within him again. At last,

it seemed he may have found the house he'd been searching for all these months ...and almost certainly, there was little need for concern that he might intrude upon any inhabitants as this house looked as if it hadn't been disturbed by human occupation for many years. Overgrown, leggy shrubs nestled up to either end of the building, towering trees crowded too-close to the walls, and that all-encompassing vine was the kind of camouflage few house-owners would tolerate.

For the second time that morning, Hamish found himself stuffing his gloves into his coat pockets, before enthusiastically setting about hauling back the vines with their colourful papery leaves in an attempt to see through the grimy glass of a downstairs window. But the creeper seemed to fight his attempts at removal and he only managed to clear a small area of glass. He also found that with the creeper growing so thickly over every other surface the interior was so poorly lit that he could see little in the dimness inside.

Giving up on the window, he moved back a little to take stock of his surroundings in the hope of finding a way inside. There was a central portico over the front door. The hanging tendrils of the creeper had formed a living curtain over the entrance, so he pushed this aside to try the door, finding, unsurprisingly, that it was firmly barred.

He retreated back through the dusty carpet of dried leaves and windblown garden debris that had collected around the doorway, brushing cobwebs that he had caught over his face and hair as he went around the side of the house. Fighting his way through more tangled greenery to reach the rear he hoped that he might find another door, preferably with a key conveniently left under the mat ...or, more likely, a broken window that he could unlatch, he thought optimistically. Something ...or anything, he wasn't feeling too picky, that would give him a justifiable excuse to venture inside without causing damage.

If this were London, an unoccupied house like this didn't usually survive long without someone breaking in to check out if anything of value had been left behind, or to vandalise. But instead of the hoped-for door or smashed window, he found his way blocked by a high stone wall. True, there was a gateway, but the heavy wooden gate was both solidly built and locked with a stout padlock. The wall was sufficiently sheer, with a steeply pointed stone coping overhanging the top edge that it deterred any aspirations he might have had of attempting to climb over.

Just his luck, he thought, to find a house that was exempt from vandalism. By this time, he had had enough of struggling his way through cold shrubberies, so instead he pulled more creeper away from what he thought could be another window, hoping to see something, however little, of the interior on this side of the house. He was out of luck, it appeared -as all he found was solid stonework under his scratched, and now freezing

fingers. It wasn't all bad news though. What he did discover was that the walls were built of that same lovely creamy-white stone as the little bridge over which he'd crossed earlier.

Finally, thwarted in all his attempts to see inside, he gave up ...blowing warm air on his aching fingers to bring them back to life, before replacing his gloves. Without suitable tools it was simply senseless to try and uncover any more ...the creeper had grown with such luxuriance that Hamish couldn't compete. He went back to where he had started, standing on the terrace before the front portico, craning his neck upwards to survey as much of the house as he could see.

It would be two stories high at least, he mused, if the steep angle of the roof and those vine-covered protrusions that could be dormer windows were any indication. The central portion of the roof rose even higher, with tall chimneys to either side of what might be a sort of tower room, or possibly a widows' walk, he couldn't be sure.

It certainly wasn't a large house -more of a cottage really. He imagined that there would be two or three rooms on the ground floor at most, but that would be sufficient for just one person. He glanced to his left. The dense thickets of trees and tall shrubs growing close to that end of the house rendered it practically impossible to see anything to that side and he didn't fancy fighting his way through more holly and brambles. He decided to leave it for another day.

Standing, his thoughts drifted beyond the present, already planning possible alterations to make the house suit his lifestyle. If there was insufficient light in the house for him to work, he might need to build a separate studio ...but that wouldn't be impossible, the garden was certainly large enough to accommodate another small building. He stayed for several minutes, lost in his musings about what the house might look like when it was cleaned up, before the cold and reality penetrated both his bones and subconscious sufficiently for him to realise that he didn't even know if the house was available for sale. Until he found the current owner it was, perhaps, somewhat premature for him to be planning renovations? He thought.

Galvanised into action by that thought, Hamish turned from the house and began to look for an alternative route to return to his car. Surely, he hoped, the woodland path could not be the only access to the house? There had to be another way in and out ...perhaps something wide enough for a vehicle? He'd had more than enough of fighting his way through greenery for one morning.

Then, he remembered, just before he had spotted the house he'd briefly glimpsed another, less significant building, barely noticeable among the trees at the top of the slope, opposite from where he had come down from the orchard. It was roughly in the direction that Sara had taken after they'd

met so hopefully she'd known something about a way out that he didn't. Searching, he saw a narrow path leading off through the trees to his left. As it was heading in the bearing that the building lay, he decided to follow it.

Within a few yards, he had been led to a gap in the most amazing hedge he had ever seen. It was obvious that someone must have been clipping these plants, as well as the yews. Although in need of a trim and a little ragged around the margins, they had the look of having been clipped within the past year or so. He walked along a wider gravelled path that was edged to either side with a double line of dwarf Buxus, trimmed square. Enclosed by the low hedges was a display of true Buxus sempervirens, mature boxwood and growing taller than his head in places. The box plants had been planted close to form a densely-matted, rounded, freeform structure that flowed in either direction from where he stood ...one curve of the double row snaking out of sight towards the house, and the other to the woods beyond the building he was trying to find his way to. The shapes were generously Rubenesque, their curvaceous forms abounding to create a spectacle like none other he had seen. With a thick coating of white frost covering the sculpted serpentine forms, it made a stunning display.

Frost ...Brrr ...that brought Hamish back to earth with a thud. True, it was a lovely sight, but it was also perishingly cold down here in the shade. Later, the weak autumn sun might pierce the tree cover to touch the frozen ground, but for now no warmth reached this part of the garden. So, stunning display aside, he felt it was high time he found his way out.

Moving quickly along the clear path, he reached the building that had been his goal -possibly an old carriage house. It was two-storied and solidly stone-built, but Hamish was in no mood to explore further. He had seen enough to know that this was the place for him. All he wanted now was a hot meal and a fire to sit in front of and warm his extremities.

He set off at a fast clip along a driveway that was passable but, judging by the luxuriance of weeds and mosses growing among the gravelled surface, little-used.

He followed it away from the building and up a gentle rise then back into the woods beyond. As he was negotiating the potholed track a robin flew close over his head and winged up ahead between the trees along the driveway. Hamish wondered if it was his feathered guide from earlier in the garden.

The drive led him back to the paved lane with the driveway exit blocked by a stoutly-padded, five-bar timber gate set between solid stone piers. When he got there, the robin was sitting atop the uppermost timber crossbar, singing at the top of its voice. Hamish stopped for a moment surveying the little creature. It halted its song and cocked its head to one side to stare back at him with dark beady eyes that gave the impression of more intelligence than a simple robin should possess.

Hamish shook his head to dispel the thought –bad enough that he found it difficult to talk to people any more ...if he started to converse with birds and animals on a regular basis he would find himself inhabiting a small padded room in a modern day equivalent of Bedlam. He'd put it down to whimsy ...since this place seemed rather full of it, but he couldn't resist one last one-sided conversation with the bird.

“Well, cheers for now and thanks for the tour,” he said amiably before continuing, “If I have my way, I'll be seeing you again, quite soon I hope.”

The robin gave a short sharp chirp, fluffed its feathers and flew off its perch back along the lane into the green shadows of the garden.

Hamish smiled to himself, feeling lighter in his soul than he had for months. He nimbly hopped over a cantilevered stone stile set in the wall beside the gate and alternately walked and slid down the icy lane back to the road bridge and his car. It was sheer bliss to warm his frosted toes in front of the car's heater, which he had blasting at maximum output.

He wrapped his chilled hands around a mug of coffee ...poured from the flask that he'd only remembered packing as he'd replaced the backpack in the car.

Now that he was comfortably ensconced in the warmth, he regretted that he hadn't taken time to snap more photographs of the cottage and garden. But first, his inopportune meeting with Sara, then the startling surprise of discovering the house had driven all thoughts of photography out of his mind. No matter, he thought. He'd take more photos on his next visit.

Coffee cup drained, Hamish manoeuvred the car onto the road, and headed back to his B & B and a well-earned hot breakfast.

Before sitting down to eat, he called Andrew, arranging a meeting for later that morning, determined to find who owned the house of his dreams.

LIANA

*And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,
And she forgot the blue above the trees,
And she forgot the dells where waters run,
And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze;
She had no knowledge when the day was done,
And the new morn she saw not:*

John Keats

She was cold. So deeply cold. Winter had come early to the garden, with a chill so intense that it pierced the thickening layers of her lassitude. Her

dreams were now filled with images of ice and snow.

Never before, awake or asleep, had the natural changes in seasons affected her like this: ...Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter ...each of the seasons had always been part of the very fabric of her existence and she had revelled in their distinctive differences with equal pleasure.

But now, in her dream-sleep, she cried ...and the tears turned to glittering fragments of ice the instant they touched her lashes.

JACK

In the darkest recesses of the woods there was movement ...something unpleasant was stirring.

Deep inside a dark musty cave laid an untidy pile of ancient bones covered in a ragged shroud. No one had ventured near the cave for many years. Even the tiny woodland creatures like the curious field mice, that might have easily entered the cave to pick the bones clean, had hesitated to make their way between the closely-packed stones that plugged its mouth. But the corpse had lain for so long that, eventually, fungi and tiny organisms had done the work of any natural scavengers, finally completing the cycle of degradation that saw the flesh returned to earth and the bones revealed.

Over time, the dark growth of a choking vine had overgrown and hidden the entrance to the former fox-den, set among craggy rocks alongside the stream that ran through White Briars wood. Now, after years of idleness, the vine sought entry by miniscule gaps and crevices among the rocks ...working its way into the fetid air of the cave.

As questing tendrils of the poisonous creeper grew more elongated and broad, a tiny shower of rocks was dislodged from the pile at the entrance, - this soon followed by others until several of the larger rocks fell, leaving a gap of proportions large enough for light to pierce the darkness. With the amplification in light, the shoots sprouted at an accelerated rate that soon saw them reaching the remains and wrapping themselves around the bones in a malignantly tender embrace.

Nature might abhor a straight line -but it abhorred a vacuum even more, and Liana's persistent absence had left a void in the balanced dance of power that controlled events within the Garden's boundaries, from small details to major happenings ...and where there is an empty space, venturesome weeds are often the opportunists that prove to be the ablest colonisers of an any unoccupied niche.

HAMISH

*London, that great sea, whose ebb and flow
At once is deaf and loud, and on the shore
Vomits its wrecks, and still hurls on for more.*
Percy Bysshe Shelley

Minutes from midnight, Hamish switched off the car's engine for the final time that Sunday. Despite departing Kent in the late evening in hopes of lighter traffic, the drive into the city had been mind-numbingly slow. To top it off, he'd arrived to find that in his absence, a deep trench had been excavated immediately outside his studio's single garage and whoever had dug up the road had omitted any provision for vehicle-access.

As garages were something of a rarity in the area, it had probably been something the contractor hadn't planned for. Cursing roundly, Hamish had been obliged to cruise around the streets in the vicinity of the studio for another twenty minutes, searching in ever-widening circles for a parking space -eventually squeezing the car into what was little more than a fissure between two cars, half a dozen blocks from where he lived. Not for the first time, he wished he'd invested in a smart car, as he sourly eyed several of the tiny vehicles occupying the most miniscule parking spaces imaginable -he had a moment of sardonic amusement when he spotted one sitting across the gap at the end of a pedestrian crossing! Though, if the local Kensington and Chelsea parking attendants found it still there in the morning it would undoubtedly end up on the back of a truck bound for the pound and a hefty parking-infringement fine.

Twisting in the narrow confines of the car, he turned to grab his

overnight bag and the steering lock, dumping one on the pavement and securing the other in place before getting out, locking the door and activating the car alarm. As he picked up the bag and walked away from the car, he knew that despite his precautions, there was a high probability the car might be broken into, stolen or damaged by the time he came back for it. The locks and alarms were merely an effort to keep his insurance company from increasing their already astronomically-high premiums, but in Hamish's opinion, they acted as little more than minor deterrents to London's latest breed of organised car criminals. He shrugged ...once a prized-possession, the Austin-Healey was now nothing more than a convenient method of getting out of the city on weekends. Other than that, from Monday to Friday he hardly drove, preferring to walk or take the tube. He strode away in a long, loose-limbed walk along the dimly-lit near-deserted street, the vehicle already forgotten.



Monday's alarm clock was replaced by a heart-attack-inducing jackhammer starting up directly outside Hamish's bedroom. Having purposely set the alarm back a little later to allow an extra hour of dozing, he was less than thrilled to be woken in such an abrupt manner. Although high up under the mansard roof, the room had windows facing the road and not for the first time, Hamish wished that the picturesque windows with their decorative Georgian mouldings had been double-glazed to dampen the sounds from the street.

Since going back to sleep was out of the question, he had rolled out of bed and headed for the shower. Even the pelting noise of the water wasn't enough to drown out the repetitively reverberating rat-tat-tat of the pneumatic drill, providing impetus for a brief shower and a frantic scuffling search of his wardrobe for suitable clothes to make a hasty get-away. Once dressed in dark jeans, teamed with short leather boots, a pullover and light wool coat, Hamish stood, looking down from the tall sash windows of the sitting room, watching with bemused interest during a lull in the drilling as a workman lugged two heavy short planks into place over the trench directly below him, allowing belated access to the garage.

"Too little, too late," he muttered grumpily.

The contractors were obviously keen to continue the destruction they had begun over the weekend, so the respite was brief. When the maddening noise recommenced he knew it was high time to get out of the studio.

He spun on one heel and marched across the airy light-filled room to pick up a large, flat, plain-paper wrapped package that had been propped against the kitchen counter. Just able to tuck the cumbersome parcel under one long arm, he headed swiftly downstairs, grabbing a bright yellow brolly

from the large ceramic urn by the front entry before opening the door to the deafening din. The morning air was still, grey and cold but he knew from experience that it didn't do to trust the weather in London, whatever the season, unless you enjoyed the prospect of an unexpected dowsing.

He hurried across to the far side of the road after circumnavigating the contractors, who had progressed to breaking up the pavement in front of the next-door neighbour's doorway and set off along the footpath towards Campden Hill Road. The footpaths were uncrowded as the majority of commuters had already left for work but one or two late-starters were still to be seen. Watching a man, nattily dressed in a businessman's regulation dark-suit-and-tie ensemble, briefcase-in-hand and countenance frowning with all the worries of the new working-week, hurrying round the corner in the direction of the tube station, Hamish was thankful that his line of work meant he no longer had to join that particular rat race every weekday morning.

Brushing these thoughts aside as he approached the next intersection, Hamish traversed the road, nimbly avoiding a black cab heading in the direction of Kensington High Street and stepped up onto the opposite pavement to push against the solid-looking but timeworn door of a café that was heavily decorated with painted panels and embossed Celtic knot designs. The chips and gouges in the battered black gloss paint around the margins of the door's brass kick-plate revealed the variegated spectrum of colours that it had sported during its long life. A sign suspended from a wrought-iron crossbar above the doorway proclaimed, in gold-leafed gothic lettering, 'The Minstrel'. A painted figure of a lute-player, resplendent in brightly-coloured mismatched hose and breeches cavorted below the name for the musically or historically less well-informed, though Hamish strongly suspected that any self-respecting medieval minstrel would not have worn such garish attire. Two small tables draped in pristine red and white linen table cloths and complemented by cane bistro chairs sat between large terracotta pots with standardised ball-topiary bay trees. Walking by, Hamish nodded his head and smiled a brief good morning to an older couple seated at one of the tables, whom he recognised as regulars.

As the heavy door swung smoothly shut behind him, the distant drilling and traffic noise from the road was instantly muffled to insignificance, to be replaced by the haunting melody of Loreena McKennitt's *The Bonny Swans*. Listening to the haunting music, Hamish decided that the folksong was a huge improvement, -despite the tragic lyrics- over the commotion outside. Venturing further in, he noted, on the periphery of his vision, a woman breakfasting alone at a table set in the front bay window, back-lit by the colourful multi-paned stained glass front windows. She was dressed in iridescent blue velvet, of a shade which combined with the light from the window put him in mind of Millais's pre-Raphaelite painting of Mariana,

though the fitted dress was considerably shorter and combined with patterned tights and knee-high leather boots that spoke more of contemporary fashion trends than anything favoured by the pre-Raphaelite cohort.

The Minstrel was a café-restaurant that sometimes doubled as a live-music venue. Its front section veered towards dim, slightly dingy, and definitely more shabbily-comfortable than high-end chic, with a motley collection of memorabilia and old stringed instruments hanging from the high timbered ceiling and rows of colourful coffee pots that took up space on narrow shelves along one wall, much of it dating from the early years of the café's existence as a bohemian coffee bar in the 1950's.

More important to Hamish than the décor, though, was the heavenly aroma of freshly-ground coffee beans wafting in the direction of his nostrils. He sniffed appreciatively, enjoying the scent of the in-house blend which the café's proprietors roasted on site. The patrons at this time of the day were not exactly 'morning' people, Hamish thought wryly, as he wended his way between an eclectic assortment of tables and mismatched chairs towards a solid timber counter decorated with old tin signs, positioned half-way down the narrow room. The atmosphere felt almost library-hushed with the café's occupants either chatting quietly whilst concentrating on their coffees and food, silently catching up on the latest news in the morning papers or absorbed in reading books and magazines.

"Giddy, Hamish mate. Are y'here for breaky, or just a caffeine hit?" A disembodied voice with a strong Australian accent suddenly broke the silence, emanating from somewhere near floor-level behind the counter.

Hamish could see no one and startled by the unexpected sound, frowned as he peered towards the direction the voice originated, before remembering that the service lift to the café's basement storage cellar was set flush in the floor directly behind the bar. The next moment, a blond head atop a tanned face with mischievous blue eyes that looked as if it belonged more on a surf board at Bondi beach than behind a bar in Kensington and Chelsea, rose with eerie smoothness above the polished granite surface of the counter top. This was closely followed by the broad, muscular shoulders and compact torso of Steve, Hamish's closest friend and co-owner of the café.

"That just never gets old does it?" Hamish glowered across the counter, setting the umbrella down on its spotless surface while he readjusted his grip on the parcel.

Steve's cheerful freckled face broke into a wide satisfied grin that put Hamish in mind of the Cheshire cat, as he set down a carton of wine on the countertop. "You should've seen your face, mate. You looked like you'd heard a ghost!" He tore open the cardboard carton and started pulling bottles out, laying all but two in wine racks on the wall behind the counter.

The last two he placed in a cooler set under a second stainless steel workbench on the rear wall. He straightened then turned back to face Hamish over the countertop. "I was just bringing some bottles up from down under, so to speak. Saw you in Alice's looking glass," he pointed to a small convex mirror set unobtrusively on the back wall "Now, you here to eat or are you gonna stand there all morning scaring my customers away? Coffee, croissant, muffin, Danish? Or how 'bout a cooked breakfast with good old bacon and eggs," he broke into a sort of soft shoe shuffle while singing, "...*ya gotta have a good breakfast,* ...you know how the song goes ...still, maybe I shouldn't sing it. Its blimin' sacrilege the way those ad sharks always ruin a perfectly good song." Hamish knew his friend was referring to a recent TV ad campaign for an over-sugared, generically awful breakfast cereal that had butchered the song's lyrics –Steve was something of an expert on mid to late twentieth century music and it was not the first time Hamish had heard him complaining about the manner in which advertising maltreated music.

"Double espresso and a full cooked breakfast, '*Mommy dear*,'" Hamish ordered, pulling a face while rubbing at his ears as if in pain. "And you are sooo right about the singing. Not so much because it was destroyed by the ad but because little children cry when you sing," he raised an eyebrow, "...I thought I came in here to get away from the din, but now that I think about it, you make the pneumatic drill outside my place sound good."

"Ha ha, look who's talking?" Steve retorted, rising to the bait as he prepped the coffee machine with the practised ease of someone who had done this a thousand times before. "I remember the last time you sang anything. It only took three double whiskies and some very dodgy cocktails to get you to try out the Karaoke machine....and the results ...well all I can say is ... don't give up your day job, mate. Just as well those pretty daubs of yours sell for squillions, 'because you'd be starving if you had to sing for your supper."

"Huh. All I have is your word for it ...I don't remember a thing about that evening." Except, Hamish thought, a ripper of a headache and a parrot-cage mouth the next morning, "...for which I place the blame *squarely* at your door." Hamish endeavoured to look cross then gave up, his face breaking into a smile. "Who recorded that number, anyway? ...Was it Pink Floyd? Or one of those Aussie bands you're always harping on about?" Hamish knew that Steve, who spent much of his free time rummaging through endless boxes of dusty old albums in street markets and music stores, would undoubtedly know the answer.

"Shame on you, you ignorant Scot! For your information, that was Super Tramp, *Breakfast in America*, Nineteen-seventy-nine." Steve knew music trivia the way football fans knew cup results. "I have that album ...vinyl, mint condition. Sounds as good as the day it came off the press."

He spoke with benevolent pride, reminiscing, “And I bought it from a stall on Portobello Road, my first week away from home. I remember the occasion clearly, because I was dirt poor and had to go on very short rations for a week to pay for it ...and the lyrics those miscreants destroyed was all about having kippers ...in fact it was eating kippers for breakfast. Ugh,” he made a face, “Gross! As if ...but still, you’d think they could make up their own songs, rather than parasitizing someone else’s, wouldn’t ya?” he paused a moment before continuing, “And, I might add, Caruso, you chug-a-lugged those drinks all by yourself ...I was just the barman.” He puffed out his chest, “...and Linda likes my singing just fine so you can stick your derogatory comments about my wonderful voice up yer ar...” always aware of his clientele -Steve noticed a rather prim-looking elderly lady had lowered her book and was regarding him with a steely gaze, “...that’d be, ...um, ar...jersey,” now his accent morphed into pure ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’. “Ar, top o’ the mornin’ to you Miss Prendergast, lovely day isn’t it?” he finished, somewhat lamely, smiling charmingly towards the woman, who evidently satisfied, nodded, smiled and returned to her book.

“Now as for you, you reprobate...” Steve turned back to Hamish, grimacing when Hamish pulled out his wallet to pay, “crikey mate, put that thing away and go find yourself a seat in the back where you won’t upset the paying patrons. I’ll bring your breaky to you.” He pushed the completed coffee across the counter towards Hamish then tossed a folded newspaper in his direction, which Hamish caught with his free hand. “We opened the new addition on the weekend and there’s no-one down there right now, so you can have it all to yourself.”

“Righto Cap’n Sparrow, whate’er you say,” Hamish replied. He couldn’t resist adding, “...you are without a doubt the worst pirate I’ve ever heard of.” Tucking the newspaper between the parcel and his arm Hamish hooked a finger through the loop of the umbrella’s handle before collecting his precious coffee. As he moved away from the counter he heard Steve’s expected rejoinder behind his back, “But you *have* heard of me!” and smiled broadly as he walked through a narrow arched opening at the far end of the bar and down two shallow steps the rear section of the café. Part of a recent remodel of the building, the space provided the café with greater capacity and a more upmarket restaurant area without compromising the original café space.

A plush leather-covered bench seat and a narrow bleached oak banqueting table decorated with old silver candelabra stretched along the left wall -teamed with gothic-inspired but contemporarily designed high-backed metal chairs. The opposite side of the room contained half a dozen marble café tables, coupled with elderly and slightly sagging, though immensely comfortable, cane chairs all loosely grouped near a pretty art nouveau fireplace. Hamish was pleased to see a fire was merrily ablaze.

Taking advantage of the absence of customers, he moved a ceramic jug full of pretty autumn flowers and leaves aside to place the package and umbrella on an adjacent table, before sinking into the cushions of a chair closest to the fireplace. He stretched out his long legs towards the warmth of the gas-fuelled flames and sat relaxed, his arms hanging limply, draped over the chair rests with the newspaper held lifelessly in one fist, preferring to watch a flock of sparrows squabbling for seed at the bird table hanging from a crab apple tree in the courtyard than concentrate on the news of the day.

Before long Steve arrived with the food for Hamish and another full plate for himself. Plonking his backside down in the seat opposite Hamish, he said, "Thought you might like some company after all. It's pretty quiet this morning and Linda's in the kitchen if anyone needs anything urgently." Steve, and his wife Linda, had been stalwart friends these past months, supportive when needed, yet laid-back enough not to crowd Hamish with unwanted sympathy and attention. The two friends ate and drank in peaceful silence, enjoying the unruly antics of the birds outside.

"Like what you've done with the place," Hamish said at last, putting his knife and fork down on the now empty plate and waving his hand to include both the light-filled room and the outer courtyard, visible through tall glazed doors.

"Well, it's thanks to you mate." Steve replied, grinning. "Half the ideas for the renovations were yours." He grinned across the table at Hamish. "You should see the back wall and the garden at night with all the lights on ...it's ruddy brilliant! Hey, you want to join us for dinner tonight then you can see for yourself? The kids were saying on the weekend that Uncle Hamish hadn't been round for ages ...you've been away practically every weekend for the last three months, you know. So, how is the house hunt going, anyway?" he enquired. "Found your *'just right'* yet, Goldilocks?"

Hamish guffawed, looking across at his blond friend. "If anyone's Goldilocks here mate, it's you, not me." He paused, considering, "Thanks for the dinner invite. I'd like to join you but I've got a thing on at Rosetta's gallery tonight that I can't miss. Though, I could probably make it by around seven thirty if that's okay?" He glanced down at his watch. "Arghh ...speaking of time, I've got to get going. I'll fill you in on the other stuff tonight. I promised Rosetta that I'd have this to her first thing, and she'll have my proverbials if I don't get a move on. Thanks for breakfast." Draining his cup as he rose from the table, he picked up the package, and headed with long strides towards the archway.

"Hey, mate, don't forget your girly-yellow broly!" Steve tossed the umbrella. Hamish turned and caught it like a bandsman's staff. "Around seven-thirty will be fine." Steve spoke louder to Hamish's fast-retreating back. "I'll catch ya later ...if you and your proverbials survive Rosetta's

tender ministrations, that is!” This last comment was lost on Hamish, as he had already disappeared up the steps and was half way to the front door. Steve turned back to the table, laughing to himself as he collected the dirty cups and plates, picturing Hamish being reprimanded by the diminutive Rosetta for being tardy. He’d only met her once, but that was more than enough for him to decide that she wouldn’t be the kind of person to mince words if she was upset.

As he turned off Campden Hill Road onto a side street, Hamish mulled over the news he’d intended to tell Steve about the house he had discovered. Ah well, he thought, it wouldn’t hurt to wait a few more hours before sharing it all with his friends. And perhaps it might be a good idea to let the dust settle in his mind before recounting the story? He walked along on auto-pilot, deep in thought, ...stepping sideways to narrowly-avoid a particularly disgusting heap of still-steaming dog excrement, whilst replaying in his mind the interesting day he’d had the day before.



After dragging Hamish around both the predictably banal executive box and the excessively appointed Baronial mansion, Andrew had eventually ‘remembered’ the name, but not the number; of the owner of the house that Hamish wanted so badly. He’d also reiterated, more times than Hamish cared to count, that it would be of no use whatsoever making contact, as the owner would never sell. Hamish, his patience sorely stretched, withstood another ten minutes of Andrew rabbiting on about the finer points of the property he’d just shown him, before he was able to extricate himself from the agent’s tenacious clutches. He had raced back to his B & B, precious slip of paper with ‘*Miss Isabella Kendal, Rye*’ scrawled upon it, safely tucked in his pocket. A little detective work with Directory Services, and he soon had a phone number.

He dialled ...impatiently counting rings and half-waiting for an answerphone to cut in, “27, 28, 29...” ...at thirty, disappointed, but determined to try again later, he was about to disconnect, when a woman’s voice, crackled with age and short of breath, answered. It was Miss Kendal, and she was not at all pleased with the disruption of his call. She had been outside bringing in her washing, she said waspishly, and was not inclined to converse with strangers on the telephone, ...but Hamish, with an unaccustomed eloquence born of desperation, had managed to keep her on the line long enough to explain politely why he had called. To his utter surprise and pleasure, by the end of the conversation he had managed to convince her to allow him to visit and speak to her in person. ...At least, he thought he had persuaded her. It wasn’t until later; with the knowledge of hindsight that he wondered if it hadn’t in fact been otherwise. She had,

quite suddenly, cut through his impassioned speech and told him to come and see her, right now, that very day, if he was interested in the house. She then provided him with her home address in Rye. Though by now it was late-afternoon, and getting dark and cold outside, Hamish had replied that he'd be down as soon as possible. He put the phone down, thanked his hosts, paid for the call and his stay, and jumped back in his car. It was only after he had already driven some miles that it occurred to Hamish that he hadn't so much convinced her to see him, as she had ordered him to call on her, rather like the queen summoning an underling to an audience.

Rye, originally an important port on the southern English coast but now, because of silting and shifting to the coast, sited a short distance from the sea, had, like scores of English towns, expanded over time around a much older central core. Ordinarily, Hamish would have enjoyed wandering the narrow cobbled streets that twisted through the oldest part of the town, taking his time to admire the old half-timbered houses and idle away the evening fossicking in some of the antique shops that lined the quaint lanes, but on this day he was focused on one thing only. Miss Kendal had advised him that it would be easiest to leave his car in the nearest public car park and walk the short distance to her home, as the street was unsuitable for anything much larger than foot traffic. Following her precisely-given directions, he found the place without too much difficulty. She resided in a splendid rambling two-storied and dormered house on Mermaid Street not far from the Inn of the same name. There was an estate agent's 'For Sale' hammered into a tiny patch of green in front of the lower bay windows, now prominently displaying a 'SOLD' sticker slashed across the sign. Hamish was somewhat surprised to see that the sign belonged to Andrew's firm. Trust Andrew, he thought, uncharitably, to have a finger in every pie still be making a profit out of this, even if he couldn't sell another house to Hamish.

He climbed up several steps to knock on the front door. The old lady must have been stationed at one of the downstairs windows watching for him as Hamish had barely rapped on the heavy brass door knocker before the door swung open, though when he saw the lady who had opened it he wondered how she'd moved so quickly. The grey-haired woman who answered the door was thin to the point of emaciation, her spine curved in a dowager's hump and walking with the aid of two canes.

"Mr McAllister I presume?" she pre-empted brusquely before he had a chance to open his mouth to introduce himself. "It's far too cold to stand here talking. Follow me, and close that door behind you." With that, she turned and started in the opposite direction. He did as she had ordered; following along a dim hallway as she hobbled, slowly and painfully back into an overly warm sitting room.

What followed was an interesting two hours of quasi-polite but

nevertheless probing questioning, over endless cups of tea accompanied by cucumber sandwiches and scones, as to how Hamish came to know about the ‘cottage’, as Miss Kendal called it. Where did he come from?; What did he do for a living?; ...and a lot of other information about the happenings of the past two years that he had not planned to share with someone whom he had barely met. At one stage during the conversation Hamish couldn’t help but feel that he was being treated more like a new suitor, under interrogation about his morals and prospects prior to being allowed to embark on a first date, than a prospective house-buyer. He certainly got the distinct impression that he was being evaluated by the old lady. Just for what -he wasn’t sure?

By the end of the second hour Miss Kendal appeared to have run out of questions. She sat back in her high wing-backed chair, and contemplated him for a moment before speaking, gnarled old hands with the enlarged knuckles of an arthritic lying quietly in her lap.

“You’ve been surprisingly patient, Mr McAllister, to suffer my inquisition with such forbearance, but I must make it clear to you, before I continue, that the estate agent was telling you the truth, as far as he understood it, when he said that you would be unable to buy the cottage. My younger brother, Jonathan ...my only brother ...was living in the cottage before his disappearance in the years after the Second World War, but it hasn’t been inhabited since.”

Disappointed at this news, Hamish was about to try and convince her otherwise when Miss Kendal held up a hand to forestall him, “It is rather complicated to explain, ...but the cottage has *never* been ‘sold’, to my knowledge, although the title deeds have eventually been passed on to each occupant, ...they in turn have cared for the house and its surroundings. In fact you might describe it as a kind of ‘trust’, or, more realistically, a caretaker position rather than that of an owner ...if you see what I mean?”

Hamish didn’t, and was about to ask a question when Miss Kendal stopped him once more with, “However, I do have a proposition for you that may be to both our advantage. As you saw when you took your impromptu tour around the garden...” she waved her hand in dismissal when Hamish apologised, once again, for his trespass, “...I’d have probably done the same in your place.” She smiled at him for the first time since opening the door but Hamish couldn’t help but feel there was something speculative in her eyes. “As I was saying, you’ve seen the state of the garden and the house for yourself. The fact is that both need a considerable amount of time, energy and money spent on repairs and the interior of the house hasn’t been updated since before the war. Jonathan left everything he had to me in his Will to look after the place, but when that money ran out some years ago I was not inclined to spend my own savings on the upkeep of the property. Frankly, I have no wish to be worrying about it any longer

This house of mine,” she picked up her canes and thumped the carpet with the end of one to make her point “...is sold. It is too difficult for me to live here and I am moving into a rest home ...and I would like to not have to concern myself about the cottage. I have not ventured there to see it for the past few years, and from your description, it has gone downhill far more than I’d thought, ...so, my proposition is this,…” her next utterance dropped like a bombshell upon a stunned Hamish, “if you can provide me with adequate references, you may move in whenever you wish, ...for a sort of ‘trial’ period, so to speak. I’m not able to offer you more than that at present, but as I have said, it is rather complicated.”

Hamish’s disbelief must have shown all too clearly on his face, because, at the sight of him the old lady chuckled outright, saying, “I may be old, but I’m still a pretty good judge of character. I know what sort of person I’m looking for; I just hope it’s not too late.” She appeared to be on the point of saying more, then apparently thought the better of it and didn’t elaborate further.

Hamish, momentarily shocked by the offer, assumed that she’d simply meant she hoped he would be able to save the house and its garden from neglect.

She went on, her tone brisk and business-like. “Now, you go home and think my offer over then let me know your decision. And, just to keep everything all legal and above-board, I’ll give you the name of my lawyer for the references. I would appreciate it if you could advise me ‘yes’ or ‘no’ by the end of this week. You see, I’m moving very soon ...you couldn’t have come at a better time. Most fortuitous, don’t you think?” the manner in which she spoke suggested that a response was not required.

With some effort, she gathered both canes and arose from the chair, shaking her head at Hamish’s offer of assistance to cross to a dark-stained sideboard where she rummaged through a drawer to find the lawyer’s card. Feeling bemused at the strange turn of events, he took the business card that she handed him, upon which was inscribed ‘Fletcher, Lloyd & Owens’ and a London phone number. Despite Hamish saying that he could see himself out, she insisted upon accompanying him to the front door. As she made her way hesitantly back down the passageway with Hamish by her side, she added, as something of an afterthought, “You said you were an artist ...well, it may help you to know that the cottage has an art studio. You wouldn’t be the first artist who has lived there. When he wasn’t busy gathering intelligence for the government, my brother was a sculptor, stone mainly ...he did the work on the little bridge you described so well.” The catch in her voice gave away a depth of feeling that she hadn’t put into words, but obviously still felt keenly, so many years on, at the loss of her beloved sibling.

Hamish said a polite farewell and left the house in a daze, to return

FLOWERS IN THE MORNING

down the twisting cobbled streets to his car. He was so astounded by her suggestion that his thoughts flew about the small car's interior like a bird trapped in a conservatory. He drove back to London through a mantle of thick, cold, mist that had descended to obscure the surrounding countryside, unsure how he should respond.

HAMISH

*Where has commerce such a mart,
 So rich, so throng'd, so drain'd, and so supplied
 As London, opulent, enlarg'd, and still
 Increasing, London?
 William Cowper*

As Hamish neared his destination, he was still undecided. On one hand, it seemed an opportunity too good to miss ...a chance to move out of the city into a house that he was almost certain he would love, and a garden that was far beyond his expectations. But, on the other ...he wasn't so sure that he liked the prospect of becoming some sort of glorified tenant, responsible for fixing the place up but not owning anything. It would be a huge commitment, and besides, he had the niggling feeling that Miss Kendal had not told him the full story of why she had so suddenly changed her mind about allowing someone to move into the 'cottage' after so many years. There was definitely something about the whole set-up that set alarm bells jangling in his head.

He was still pondering this upon his arrival at the gallery. Approaching the door, he made an effort to put any thoughts aside other than those concerning his work, knowing that Rosetta would require his full attention. As he surveyed the gallery frontage, Rosetta's most recent choice of exterior decorating made him smile and muse at how she invariably managed to charm the council into allowing her 'artistic licence' when it came to local bylaws. Her gallery had always been known as 'A Work in Progress', but this last overhaul had seen the space gutted and redesigned, so that now

everything about it followed that theme, inside and out. In a recent interview with *Time Out* magazine she'd been quoted as saying that she would have liked to say that the gallery's appearance paid homage to the myriad of scaffolding-entombed buildings and monuments that were so typical of central London, but, since she didn't like to lie, she would have to admit that it just gave her an ideal excuse for staying open while major remedial work was being done on the building.

For months now, the gallery's front wall had been encased in scaffolding, in itself hardly worthy of comment, except that here, each metal pipe was painted in a rainbow of garish colours, and the thick walkway planks had been carved in intricate fretwork and painted so that they had become works of art themselves. Added to this the sheets of heavy plastic that might have normally protected passers-by from the occasional falling projectile had been replaced by wide strips of multi-coloured plastics, embellished with wooden cut-outs of tools and the outlined figures of workmen tumbling head-over-heels from the heights. Rosetta, the gallery's owner, had placed mannequins clothed in her idea of painter's overalls on the scaffold and regularly moved them into new positions. Today, Hamish looked up to see an overall-clad builder balancing on the uppermost heights of the scaffolding, one foot on the boards, the other stretched precariously on a narrow windowsill, ...but there was no cause for concern, ...it was just an old shop dummy.

As Hamish walked through the door he narrowly avoided another figure, this one a female dressed in heavy work boots and paint-splattered overalls and frozen in mid-stride on her way out of the gallery. She was clutching a plastic sack full of rubble in one hand and carried an empty gilt frame slung over her opposite shoulder. As Hamish passed by, her eyelids flicked open and her head turned to follow him for a moment before swivelling back to its original position. What gallery patrons didn't realise was that they were being filmed by a small video camera hidden inside the head -in a cunning combination of performance art and security-system.

Inside, the wooden floorboards had been stripped back and painted in broad black and white stripes rather like a zebra crossing. This, however, was also incomplete ...another mannequin, using a miniscule artist's brush was crouched with its back to the far corner. Head down, and apparently concentrating on applying paint to the final taped-off section, he seemed unaware that he was painting himself into a sort of Chaplinesque sort of predicament. The counter was an old door, curling with partly-stripped of layers of paint, balanced on two builder's saw-horses and supporting a paint-splashed cash register that reminded Hamish of early typewriters and the wall behind it had been painted in *trompe l'oeil* to look as if it had partially collapsed, ...loose bricks were piled around the base of the gap, and another mannequin, this one armed with a miniscule artist's trowel,

appeared to be attempting to remortar the brickwork.

As for the rest -the long walls of the gallery were a constant 'work in progress', changing colour at a moment's notice, depending on whatever Rosetta was currently exhibiting. This morning they glowed with a deep, rich burgundy red that looked good enough to be bottled and drunk. Rosetta had a good eye and her choice of colour was, as always, perfect. It created a lavish backdrop for the larger-than-life, flower-strewn canvases that hung all along the walls. Hamish studiously ignored the paintings, knowing that the more he looked; the he saw things he would want to change and improve. Instead he focused on the far end of the gallery, where another overall-clad figure was balanced near the top of a ladder, seemingly frozen in the act of straightening a painting on the wall. Casually observed from the street, it might have been mistaken for another of the mannequins, but at the sound of Hamish's footsteps the figure turned then spoke, shattering the peaceful scene with strident New York tones that sliced through Hamish's consciousness like a dousing of ice-water on a hot summer's day.

"Hamish-bloody-McAllister! It's about blimmin' time you turned up. I distinctly remember saying, get here *first* thing Monday morning! That would have been at least an hour ago, if not more." Rosetta glared down at him over half-glasses perched on the end of her nose. She'd picked up a builder's level, which had been sitting on the top step of the ladder, and now waved it menacingly at Hamish before using it to check that the painting was hanging straight and true. She made a slight adjustment to the huge frame before rechecking with the level. Satisfied, she removed her glasses to leave them hanging around her neck and climbed down the ladder. She slipped her feet into ice-pick red heels that had been left at the base at the ladder and advanced on Hamish, hands on hips and full of ire. At five feet five with the heels, which were something of a trademark, Rosetta was petite -but it was an unwise person who made the mistake of assuming that her small stature put Rosetta at any kind of disadvantage. "That had better be what I think it is, McAllister, or you're in big trouble." she pronounced, gesturing towards the parcel under his arm. Then added, as an afterthought, "And where the hell is my 'Good morning' kiss, you big Scottish loon?"

"Are you sure I dare come close enough to give you one?" parried Hamish, his Scots accent becoming more pronounced as he responded to her intimidating manner. Despite the words, he bent his tall frame sufficiently to kiss her on both cheeks and hugged her with his one free arm, before holding out the parcel towards her like an offering. "Yes, it is the final painting for the exhibition and you have my sincere apologies for the delay but it really did need the weekend to finish drying."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever ...spare me the details, honey? Right now I just

need to get this thing on the wall. We do have an opening, tonight, if you recall,” Rosetta interrupted brusquely. She was all business as she took the wrapped painting from him and walked over to place it on the counter, removing it from its protective cocoon of heavy brown paper. She handled the package deftly, but with utmost care. Hamish always knew that his work was in the best of hands with Rosetta. When it came to mounting an exhibition, nothing escaped her attention ...everything would be perfect down to the last tiny detail -from the wall colour and lighting to the music, advertising and catering ...or there would be hell to pay for some poor soul.

The last sheet of paper was pulled away, to reveal a much smaller canvas than those already on the walls. Rosetta replaced her glasses and held it at arm’s length to better study the painting. Instantly, the look on her face dissolved from that of mild irritation to one of wonderment and delight. Unlike the paintings already hung, this painting depicted, as well as Hamish’s more easily recognised detailed floral work, a number of brightly-coloured butterflies delicately fluttering among the flowers and a large caterpillar climbing a green shoot. It was more than just that the composition was perfect and the brushwork finely detailed, -there was something undefinable about the painting that elevated it beyond the mundane into a world that few could follow. Rosetta called it magic. Hamish was more inclined to call it hard work and years of practise.

“Wow! This is so far beyond gorgeous that I’m lost for words,” she gushed. “Hamish, you’re a bloody-great Highland marvel! ...and I guarantee you won’t hear that compliment among all the ‘Art-speak’ this evening.” Saying this, Rosetta stopped for a moment and looked sternly over her half-glasses at Hamish before continuing, “...You WILL be here for the opening won’t you?” It was as much a command as a question. “There’s a lot of interest in this show. The gallery phone’s been ringing so hot all week that I’ve had to put the answering machine on just to get any work done, ...I’ve pre-sold half the paintings, some of them to buyers abroad who have never seen your work and are buying on the basis of your reputation alone and several of them have flown in specially to be here tonight. They’ll want to see YOU.” Rosetta tapped Hamish’s chest twice with her index finger as she paused to draw breath, “...Well? Do I hear an affirmative to my first question? I know you haven’t been too keen to venture out of late ...but this reclusive thing is not good for business. You may not be aware of it, but a sizeable percentage of your work is bought by women, and as brilliant as I know you are with a palette knife and a paintbrush, I’m sure that some small part of the appeal is as much you as it is your paintings.” While saying this, Rosetta looked up at Hamish, evaluating his appearance, part mother-hen, part businesswoman. “A bit of a tidy-up for those wild locks wouldn’t hurt either. I can hardly see your face for all that hair,” she complained.

Self-consciously, Hamish ran a hand through his hair. Rosetta’s

comment reminded him that it had been months since he'd bothered to have it trimmed. He smiled down at her and said a trifle cynically. "Yes mam ...and I suppose you'll be expecting me to wear a suit as well?"

His cynicism went right over Rosetta's head, both literally and figuratively. "No, I don't think that will be necessary, the hair cut will do. You are an artist after all ...and I'm sure, knowing you that you'll look good, whatever you wear. It's just that with a face like yours, people deserve to be able to see it. Now, I'll expect you to be here promptly by six o'clock for nibbles, drinks, photo ops and drooling admiration. Okay?"

"You make it sound like so much fun. How could I resist?" Hamish replied dryly. He added a proviso, "but on the condition that I'm out of here after the first hour. That'll be about as much as I can stand and I've got dinner with friends at seven thirty."

"Fair enough, an hour will do. You've got a deal," she said. "Now off you go and get that haircut," she shooed him towards the door. "I've got a lot to do before this evening. Bugger," she muttered to herself, fixated at the painting in her hands, already ignoring him and focused on her next task, "...I think I'm going to have rehang everything to make this the centre of the exhibition."

Summarily dismissed, Hamish exited the gallery. He'd planned to catch a bus from the High Street to Knightsbridge, but as he came out onto the pavement he noticed the sun making a brave attempt to peek through the clouds and decided he'd rather walk. First, mindful of promise to get a haircut, he detoured to nearby Drayson Mews, striding along a back lane paved with granite to reach the door of a tiny hair salon tucked in among the garages and private houses that had once housed horses and carriages for the surrounding mansions. Julia, his usual stylist, caught sight of him reflected in the mirror over her current client's head and stopped in mid-snip. She clutched her heart in mock-shock and dismay.

"Ugh, Hamish!" she exclaimed, twisting around. "I almost didn't know who was under that mop? Honestly, what have you done to your hair? Well, at least I know you haven't been to anyone else ...that's obvious." She left her client, walked across to the counter and ran a glossy dark blue painted nail down the list of the day's appointments, "hmmm, ...absolutely no free appointments today, ...but you're clearly an emergency case, so I'll slide you in between my 11:30 cut and midday highlights. Say around ten to twelve. You'd better be on time though."

"I'm hearing that a lot this morning," Hamish replied with a sigh. "Anyone would think I'm one of those people who are pathologically late for everything. But I appreciate you making the time for me, so thanks, I'll be here."

With the appointment organised, Hamish made his way out of the salon and wandered back up the mews. It seemed that everyone around him was

ultra-busy this morning ...still, he thought, that was London for you. It was good of Julia to have fitted him in at such short notice -but he was tired of always having to live by appointments and schedules. London wasn't a place where anyone tended to just 'drop by' or 'walk-in' for anything, friends included. After Maud's death the hassle of phoning first to make arrangements to visit their old friends had proved to be too much of a disincentive for him and he had lost contact with most of them. Even Steve and Linda were usually frantically busy, striving to balance the café and restaurant with their family life, but they had always made the extra effort to keep in contact with him and they were generally to be found around the café as they both lived and worked out of the same building.

Exiting the mews, he took a short cut to Kensington gardens alongside York House, stepping carefully to avoid the usual smears of dog faeces littering the pavement. Over the years, this path had developed a reputation as an unofficial dog toilet, so much so, that the local inhabitants had unaffectionately named it *dogshit alley*. If only the people who loved keeping dogs in the city loved picking up after them as much, it would make for nicer environment for the rest of us, he thought grumpily, as he negotiated the path. As it was, getting through the alley unscathed was a mental challenge almost equal to tanker captains avoiding mines in the Persian Gulf during the war.

Once safely through the alley, Hamish crossed Palace Green and entered the gardens by a gate alongside the palace. Instantly, the landscape improved considerably. He picked up his pace and made good time along the tree-lined path that led past the Serpentine Gallery. There was no time this morning to stop and check out the kind of cutting-edge art that the Serpentine specialised in, -not if he was going to make it to the Food Halls at Harrods and back in time for his hair appointment, so he kept on, leaving the gardens by the Prince's gate and hurrying along Kensington Gore to his destination. Errands completed, he returned to Kensington High Street by bus, although at the snail's pace the buses travelled in the heavy traffic, he could see that he wasn't saving time by riding. Frustrated with the lack of speed, he jumped off the slow-moving bus and travelled the last part on foot, arriving at the salon with mere seconds to spare.

True to her word, Julia squeezed him in between her appointments. Chatting non-stop, she had him shampooed, styled and dry in less than twenty minutes.

"There now, that looks much better," she pronounced, holding a hand mirror behind Hamish's head to allow him to see her handiwork. He barely glanced, but thanked her again for her efforts. How good or bad he looked had ceased to be of any great importance to him. He hadn't been vain even before Maud and Lucy had died, but since that day he just didn't care about what people thought of his appearance. He showered and wore clean

clothes and deodorant ...and well, that was pretty much that.

Julia's next client was already tapping a foot and staring pointedly at his watch, so she whisked Hamish out of the chair and directed the salon junior, who had been sweeping up a rather large pile of Hamish's hair, to take his money.

"Why does the world feel as if it's full of managing women today?" Hamish muttered to himself as he left the salon and headed, down the mews. He nodded a greeting in passing to a mechanic who was working on a sleek convertible jaguar in the open doorway of Drayson Garage as he ambled his way back to Kensington High Street.

He had to admit, if only to himself, that it felt good to have his hair out of his eyes and off his collar. He hadn't realised how long it had grown until Rosetta had, in her usual forthright fashion, pointed out that his hair needed cutting, but he would have had to tie his locks back in a pony-tail had it grown much longer. Still, at least his long hair had kept his neck warm -unaccustomed to the cold around his ears, he turned up the collar of his coat. Having nothing in particular to do before the evening's opening and dinner, he strolled home for lunch, picking up a large bunch of flowers from the flower sellers at the Tube station en route.



Back home, Hamish found he couldn't settle to anything, least of all starting another painting. The afternoon dragged on as he potted aimlessly. He tidied paints that were already well organised and eventually prepared a canvas ... although he already had several stretched and ready to go. All the while he was thinking about Miss Kendal's proposition. He wasn't sure why he didn't just jump at the offer ...except, that it seemed somewhat too good to be true. He didn't know if he could trust the old lady -what would happen if he did all the work to fix up the place and then she kicked him out? He picked up a piece of paper and a scrap of charcoal and started to jot down things that he'd want to discuss with the lawyer, then lost himself for nearly an hour doodling sketches of the house and garden around the edges of his writing.

He was thankful when it came time to get ready for the evening. Showered, shaved and dressed, he took a quick look in the mirror to make sure he would meet Rosetta's approval. His neatly trimmed reflection stared solemnly back at him. He had chosen a pair of dark chinos, comfortable leather docksiders and a soft merino slate-grey polo-necked pullover ...more to keep his freshly exposed neck warm than for fashion. Tall, broad-shouldered, athletic, handsome, -he would have been any woman's dream...but his dreams revolved around only one woman and a little girl and a life together that was no longer in the realms of possibility. Slamming the

FLOWERS IN THE MORNING

wardrobe door shut on his unsmiling reflection, he wished, for the umpteenth time that it could be as easy to slam a door on his morose thoughts. Since that didn't seem likely to happen in the next five minutes, he pulled a well-worn black leather jacket off the coat rack near the door, activated the burglar alarm and went out into the dark.

HAMISH

*I paused at every grievous door,
 And barked a moment, holding up my hand,—and for a space
 A hush was on them, while they watched my face;
 And then they fell a-whispering as before;
 So that I smiled at them and left them, seeing she was not there.*
 Edna St Vincent Millay

Standing very still, wanting to remain anonymous for a few moments longer, Hamish waited in the shadows under a doorway opposite the brightly-lit gallery. From his vantage point he could see that Rosetta's was so overcrowded with patrons that fashionably-attired people had spilled out onto the wide pavement around the front doorway. Men, dressed in the unofficial city uniform of dark suits, vests, shirts and silk ties and women clad in expensive designer dresses that they must be freezing in, stood about in small groups, clutching champagne glasses and chatting animatedly. The urge to turn and run was almost too strong to resist. 'Unsociable' did little to describe how Hamish was currently feeling, but he had committed himself to this and he knew Rosetta would be devastated ...not to mention livid, if he didn't show. He took a deep breath and willed himself to take the first step that would carry him into the crowd. "Once more into the breach..." he muttered, as he stepped out into a gap in the traffic and crossed the street.

Exactly one hour later, his features tightly controlled, he returned polite goodbyes to Rosetta and a heavily bejewelled woman who had, in Hamish's opinion paid far more than she should have for the painting he had

delivered to Rosetta that morning. As he started up the street he exhaled mightily and determined that it would be a cold day in hell before anyone, Rosetta included, would convince him to attend the opening of one of his own exhibitions. He felt as if he'd been flayed alive by overeager art critics, enthusiastic collectors and social wannabees, all desperate to shake his hand and shower him with meaningless compliments, with even a few going so far as to provide him their insights to the deeper meaning behind his own work. In the future, he decided, if people wanted to purchase his work they could do so without him being present at the event.

An hour ago, upon entering the gallery he had been immediately confronted with the tableau of Rosetta, talking loudly with a well-known collector who apparently couldn't understand why the smallest painting in the exhibition should have the largest price tag. Even over the hub-bub of conversation and the sounds of a harpist playing in the far corner, it was obvious that they were having a heated argument. Rosetta, who had rearranged the entire collection during the day to show off the newest painting to its best advantage, was, admittedly, on something of a short fuse. As the discussion went backwards and forwards between the two combatants, the volume rose until both were almost shouting and Hamish could see that Rosetta was close to losing her cool. He was bemusedly wondering if it would come to blows -despite her size, he'd put his money on Rosetta any day- when, suddenly, she noticed Hamish. "Ah, there you are." She patted the patron on his arm, "I see my artist has arrived. Excuse me, I must go." True to form, she couldn't resist a parting shot, "and if you think that we should be selling art by the yardage, rather than on the strength of an individual piece's true worth, perhaps you are in the wrong gallery!" ...with that she turned on her vertiginous Louboutin heels and left the collector, who was rich enough that he was unaccustomed to being disagreed with, standing open-mouthed.

"You look like a man who needs a drink, Hamish dearest." Rosetta swept two tall glasses off a nearby tray and passed one to Hamish as she led him further into the fray. She took a deep swig of her own drink, before letting out a satisfied, "hmmm" as she surveyed the crowd. "He's not so bad, really," she said, indicating the gentleman with whom she had been arguing so vehemently just moments before. "I'll probably apologise later, when I've calmed down a bit, but it really gets on my wick when people don't understand that in art, size doesn't matter." She raised one eyebrow sardonically, and then smiled a small knowing smirk, "He's just a bit put out because he had already bought one of your other paintings earlier in the week and Gloria Swain beat him to that one." She pointed across the gallery to the small painting and an overdressed woman who was proudly showing off the work she had 'just acquired' to her friends.

Hamish spent most of the next hour being forcibly introduced to

countless strangers, until he felt worn out from smiling and shaking hands. He did manage to briefly hide-out for a minute or two while Rosetta was deep in conversation with the director of the Tate gallery. He leant against the cool plaster of the gallery wall, close to the harpist. She, dressed in a gown of midnight blue silk, was playing beautifully. He let the gentle notes of a twelfth century French love song wash over him and had just started to relax, watching the delicate precision of her fingers as they skimmed across the strings, when Rosetta returned to drag him away once more. As he followed Rosetta's purposeful back, the harpist caught his eye for a moment with a look of sympathetic understanding, before returning her attention to her music.

True to her word, Rosetta allowed Hamish to leave after the agreed hour. When she caught him looking at his watch for the third time in as many minutes, she said, "Oh for goodness sake, stop that fidgeting and get out of here." She gave him a push towards the door, adding, "We've both done well tonight. Everything that wasn't presold was sold in the first half hour and I think you've schmoozed enough for one evening." Noticing Hamish's pained expression at her last words, she added, looking up at his strained face, "you think I don't understand how hard all this is for you, but I do." Her expression hardened. "I just can't allow feelings to get in the way of work ...and this is 'work'." She swept an arm around to indicate the crowded room. "These are the people that buy your paintings and keep this gallery running ...and there's no room in their busy lives for your personal tragedy ...fact is, there's hardly room in their lives for their own tragedies. See that man over there -Rosetta discretely indicated a grey-haired, well-dressed but grim-faced man who was chatting to another couple - "his wife left him last weekend, and took their children and all the furniture. Monday morning, he was back at work, as usual. He's the CEO of a big international corporation, and they have no time in their corporate schedule for him to have a break-down." She smiled wryly, "I know it sounds harsh, but that's just the way it is in the big city. There's always someone waiting in the wings to step into your shoes if you falter." She glanced around the room, "half the people here have major problems of one kind or another, but they can't afford to show that they're down about them." Shrugging her shoulders, she repeated, "It's just the way it is. You tolerate it, or you get out."

As he wended his way through the side streets towards The Minstrel, Hamish thought about what Rosetta had just said. He detoured to the studio to pick up the flowers and gift for his hosts he'd bought earlier, then, still lost in his thoughts, made his way to the door that led to the flat above the restaurant. He was surprised to find a note pinned to the frame, requesting his presence in the restaurant proper. Following instructions, Hamish fervently hoped that he wasn't going to be faced with another

crowd of people; he was in no mood to face more strangers. But it was too late to back out now, so he dutifully tried the handle of the restaurant door. It was locked and he couldn't see any lights inside, which seemed somewhat strange considering the note. He rang the doorbell. No answer ...he waited a moment then pushed the buzzer again.

He was starting to wonder what was up, when the door opened suddenly of its own accord. Or not -there might have been no one in sight but a little titter of a sound from the other side of the heavy door gave him a fair idea of who might be behind it. He walked casually inside, putting the flowers and a small beribboned cardboard box down on the nearest table, as if unaware of anyone else's presence.

"Helloooo, anyone home?" he carolled. Once clear of the door, he suddenly pulled it away from the wall and pounced on the small figure of Jamie, Steve and Linda's three year old son, who had been crouching behind the door. "Gottcha." Hamish said, catching the little boy up in one smooth movement and swinging him over his shoulder. Jamie squealed and giggled even more, then said, "Hamish, we got a big surprise for you! Daddy's lit all the...,"

A second childish voice spoke forcefully out of the dark, "...Don't you tell him, Jamie Patrick Taylor. You'll ruin our surprise if you do." The voice belonged to Jamie's big sister, Alice, who at seven, thought she was far more mature than her younger brother. By now, Hamish's eyes had adjusted to the dim light and he could see her head peering from behind one of the tables close to the door. As he moved further into the room he could also make out, reflected in the mirror at the rear of the counter, their parents, hiding behind its bulk ...Steve, shielding the flickering light of a candle with one hand, while the other was over Linda's mouth, trying unsuccessfully to stifle her giggles.

Hamish leant over the counter top with Jamie dangling from one shoulder and looked down at the pair. "Might I enquire as to just what you two miscreants think you are doing down there?"

The two adults clambered up from the floor. "Well, if one small boy could have kept quiet, it was supposed to be a big surprise." said Steve, looking meaningfully at Jamie. "The plan was that we were going to wait until you'd got to the archway before we popped out of our hiding places." He placed the candle on the counter top to provide a little light, before handing Hamish a large pair of scissors. "Here, you'll need these." Steve waved his arm towards the archway, across which was tied a broad red ribbon. "If you'll do the honours, mate? We thought the new extension could do with an official opening, and who better to do it than the designer himself?"

"But I didn't design all of it. I just helped out with some early ideas."

"Detail, mate. And besides, we've already paid the architect enough not

to want to give him dinner as well.”

Accepting the scissors, Hamish walked over to the ribbon. Before he had a chance to cut it, his eye was caught by the twinkle of hundreds of tiny lights outside in the courtyard. He was flabbergasted. Without thinking, he ducked under the ribbon and leaped down the steps, dropping the scissors on the long banqueting table before tugging open the doors to the courtyard. The entire rear wall was alight with a myriad of pulsating colours that ran in slow waves across the surface. Sure, he'd imagined what it might look like in his head but the reality was even better than what he'd conjured in his mind. The surface of the wall had been covered in thousands of tiny coloured translucent glass tiles which looked pretty during the daytime but were transformed into something magical at night. One minute he was reminded of a golden wheat field blown by gusts of wind and the next of iridescent blue-green waves crashing against the shore. He stood for several moments, just absorbing the spectacle, before Steve, who had followed him spoke, “Looks awesome, doesn't it mate? Worth putting that fancy lighting system behind the glass tiles, aye? This is the first time we've powered it up.”

Hamish recovered to answer, “It's like a flying dragonfly, isn't it? And, those hand-made tiles give it a whole different character than if they'd been machined. The lights look incredible.”

“Yeah, well, like I said -your idea, mate. Um, your civic duties still await you sire.” He handed the scissors back to Hamish.

Returning to the top of the steps and the others, Hamish grasped the scissors in two hands and ceremoniously cut the ribbon, intoning in a deep regal voice, “By the power vested in me by ...you guys, I hereby open this extension. May God Bless this restaurant, and all who eat in it,” then, as an afterthought, “and may they never suffer from gout or indigestion.”

“Or anything worse!” added Steve with fervour.

“I hope you don't mind, Hamish, but the children insisted that we eat down here.” Linda added. “After all, it would be a shame to go back to the flat when the boys have put so much time into those blessed lights ...the electrician was here all afternoon and it's taken Steve and Jamie half the evening to get them working properly, so we'd better stay and appreciate them awhile.”

“I'm all for appreciating someone else's work of art, Linda.” Hamish said on a long sigh. “As long as it's not my own, it'll be just fine by me.”

“Do I detect a subtle hint that you may not have totally enjoyed the attentions of your adoring public at this evening's arty-farty exhibition opening?” jibed Steve, as Hamish helped Jamie slide along the banquette seat to places set at one end of the long oak table. Linda and Alice had disappeared into the kitchen to retrieve the food.

“I don't know what gives you that idea.” Hamish replied, sitting back

and kneading a spot at the back of his neck where the muscles felt tight and knotted with stress. “Fact is,” he leaned forward across the narrow table, “If I never have to do it again it might still be too soon.”

Linda returned, bearing a large casserole and a bowl full of piping hot chips on a wooden tray. “I hope you like kiddie-food, Hamish. Jamie and Ali chose this evening’s menu so it’s chicken casserole, chips and salad. Just as well there are no food critics in the house tonight,” she quipped, “we might be in danger of losing our Michelin stars.”

“Your menu choices sound wonderful, Linda.” Hamish replied. Then he turned to Alice, who had been following her mother, carrying a large bowl of green salad. “Ali my sweetheart, would you be kind enough to do a wee job for me? I left the flowers up there on the table with a little box that you might be allowed to open after dinner. Could you run up and get them for me please.” Alice retrieved the gifts, dwarfed by the large bouquet of flowers -an artfully tied bunch that included long, bright stems of Bird of Paradise, huge Banksia flowers and Eucalyptus for Linda, and a box of Godiva truffles -family favourites- for which he had made the trip to Harrods that morning.

“Hamish, you gorgeous Gaelic charmer you.” Linda was enthralled with the flowers. She tweaked the sharp, beak-like end of a bird of paradise flower, “they’re like a little piece of home.”

“That’s London for ya. You gotta love it. You can buy anything here,” Steve grunted. “Must play merry hell on your air miles though mate? Your environmental footprint will be the size of Godzilla!” He laughed. “Well, the girls have done the food, and you’ve provided the after-dinner treats, so I guess I’d better go and find something suitable to drink as my humble contribution.” He disappeared up the steps to look in the wine rack behind the counter. “Here we are,” he said, brandishing a bottle of red wine as he came back down. He had also removed a bottle of champagne from the restaurant chiller. “A nice drop to help us mellow-out a bit later and something cold and bubbly for swigging right now.” saying this he deftly uncorked the bottles, leaving the red sitting on a table near the warm fireplace while he filled tall slim glasses with the cool champagne. He passed these to his wife and Hamish before filling smaller sherry glasses with ginger beer, which he gave to the two children. That done, he said, “O.K., on yer feet everyone. It’s time for a toast.” They all stood, Jamie balanced on the seat next to Hamish, who placed an arm around him to ensure he didn’t fall.

Steve turned to Hamish. “To Hamish, my best mate, whose creativity and vision made it possible for us to contemplate starting this extension.” he raised his glass.

“To Hamish,” repeated Linda and the giggling children, who were having trouble remaining serious. “And,” Steve continued, turning towards

Linda, “here’s to my magnificent wife, who has been utterly marvellous putting up with all the chaos and rubble that the aforementioned vision created! Now, enough of that. Let’s eat.”

It wasn’t until they had finished dinner and retreated upstairs to the flat for coffee and chocolates that Hamish had a chance to tell his friends of the extraordinary events of the past weekend. Sitting comfortably, with a sleepy chocolate-smearing Jamie snuggled on his lap, Hamish recounted his discovery of the house, his meeting with Miss Kendal and the strange offer that she had made him.

Alice’s reaction was immediate and enthusiastic, “Ooh, it sounds brilliant! Can we come and visit for holidays and stuff? There might be a ghost or something. It would be so cool.” The mention of possible ghosts brought Jamie semi-awake and back into the conversation for a brief moment.

“I don’t like scary ghostas, I only like nice ghostas ...like Casper.” he mumbled sleepily. Hamish smiled, hugging him as he drifting off to sleep again.

Steve’s response to the tale was less positive.

“I’ll admit, it sounds pretty amazing to have a house sort of dropped in your lap like that,” he said in tones of disbelief, mixed with a hefty dose of cynicism, “But you met the old lady, Hamish ...do you think she’s on the level? She wasn’t a few sandwiches sort of a picnic or anything, was she?” he questioned, gesturing with his hands to indicate that Miss Kendal might have been a bit loopy.

It was Linda, normally the practical member of the family, whose preference was for thinking long and hard before making any major decisions, who was uncharacteristically excited. “I think it sounds like just what you were looking for.” she said. “I say ‘Go for it’, ‘Grab it with both hands’, ‘Don’t look a gift-horse in the mouth’, ‘Carpe diem’, whatever. Just do it before you overthink the whole thing.” She looked searchingly at Hamish. “You know you don’t want to live here anymore, so what better opportunity are you going to find than this to get away? Of course, we’ll miss you like crazy, but it’s not like you’re moving to Canada or somewhere we can’t visit.” She looked searchingly in Hamish’s eyes, “I really think you need this.”

They talked for a while longer, Steve still unconvinced that it wasn’t some kind of dodgy set-up, and Linda equally convinced that it was a heaven-sent opportunity, until Hamish decided he had to go home. He passed Jamie back to his parents and took his leave.

Back at his studio, Hamish thought about Linda’s words. As his footsteps resounded around the empty room, he acknowledged that she was right. What, of any real value, did he have to lose that he hadn’t lost already? He had got to the point where he dreaded coming in the front

door. He hardly slept, working far into the night to avoid awful repetitive dreams that saw him as a helpless bystander, watching as his wife and small daughter died horribly in a fiery pile of twisted metal, victims of a multi-car pile-up on a foggy motorway.

Maud had been heading to Bristol, just after the New Year, on a weekend jaunt to her parents. Hamish had elected to stay home to finish work for what he had thought at the time was an important exhibition. Now, he couldn't forgive himself for not being behind the wheel of their car, even though the crash investigators had told him that Maud had in fact managed to brake, narrowly avoiding a collision with the cars in front of her, only to be slammed into by a truck unit travelling at excessive speed too closely behind.

Nowadays, the studio, which had seemed to grow smaller by the day as Lucy learnt to crawl and cruise around the furniture, was just another reminder of what he no longer had. In the week before the crash he and Maud had talked about looking for a larger house for their small family, which with a second pregnancy confirmed had been set to increase. Hamish shied away from any thoughts of the loss of their unborn son as Maud and Lucy's deaths were already more than he could deal with. He had been spared identifying their charred bodies -there being little point to that exercise- and after the closed-casket funeral, he had kept only a few precious items to remember them by; a few photos, a favourite toy left behind in the rush to depart London and Maud's ruby and emerald engagement ring recovered from the crash.

Tired, but knowing he wouldn't sleep, Hamish trudged up the spiral stair that led to his work space, hoping to lose himself for a while in his painting. It was one of the ironies of the past year that he had done some of his best work since the crash. Painting was his lifeline -it required a level of concentration that effectively blotted out any other thoughts for hours at a time. So much so, that he had come to rely on it as some might use drugs or alcohol to dull pain. To make it possible for him to carry on working through the night he had installed daylight bulbs in the studio to compensate for the lack of natural light. Like the small oil he had taken to Rosetta -the resulting paintings were astounding.

These days, he thought grimly, it was the only area of his life that seemed worth the struggle.

HAMISH

*We looked o'er London, where men wither and choke,
Roofed in, poor souls, renouncing stars and skies.*
Theodore Watts-Dunton

If Hamish was still unsure about whether to accept Miss Kendal's offer, the rest of the week seemed to go out of its way to help make up his mind.

The following morning, after less than three hours sleep he was woken at the dot of seven a.m. by the contractor's hammering. He had stopped to have a quick chat with the workmen the day before and there was, according to the foreman, nothing that could be done about the noise, which would be continuing intermittently for at least another week or two. As Hamish had wandered back to the studio the night before he had noticed the usual trite, blandly-apologetic council signs dotted about on the street verge. All the apologies in the world meant nothing to those having to go about their daily lives with the constant additional noise and disruption. He'd groaned inwardly at the thought of having to put up with the din for hours on end, every working day including Saturday mornings, until the work was completed.

This knowledge provided sufficient incentive for Hamish to phone Miss Kendal's lawyer, Charles Fletcher, who, even at this early hour was already in his office. He had been alerted to expect a call from Hamish. "I happen to have a cancellation this morning," he said, "I don't suppose you could get here by nine o'clock?"

Hamish looked at his watch ...eight fifteen. "Hmmm. Where, exactly, are you?"

The lawyer gave directions to a building close to Victoria station. Hamish thought for a moment, calculating ...if he took the Circle Line from Notting Hill Gate he could probably be at Victoria in time, providing there were no delays. "I'm on my way." he said, putting the phone down and grabbing his coat and wallet.

He was delayed at the tube station, first trying the ticket machine only to find that it was out of order, then queuing to buy a ticket from the window. As he stood waiting his turn, he couldn't help overhearing an argument in front of him between the attendant behind the counter and a frazzled commuter, who was complaining bitterly about the lack of service. Listening to the exchange, he marvelled at how London Underground still seemed to go out of their way to employ staff whose primary job-skill appeared to be that they could carefully calculate just how rude and unhelpful they could be without resulting in a formal complaint to management. Oh well, Hamish thought, it wasn't as if his morning was all that shiny to begin with.

Once in the tube, standing squashed against fellow travellers in the doorway of the overfull tube carriage and unable to move further down the carriage, he was forced to stare through the glass partition alongside the doors at the row of commuters who had been fortunate enough to find seats. Those who weren't occupied with their smartphones were reading one of several morning newspapers, catching up on whatever gossip and tragedies on offer from the tabloids for the day. He wondered what it was that made people gain enjoyment from reading about other's misfortunes, and was reminded of how the same papers had reported the crash that had taken his wife and daughter, as well as another seven other drivers and passengers. Hyped-up headlines and grisly photographs had accompanied stories that revelled in the loss of life -and the grief of those like him who had lost loved ones in the accident was just fuel to the fire of the media's coverage.

He remembered exiting the studio, unwittingly, the morning after the crash, to be greeted by a barrage of cameras with flashlights and reporters wielding microphones, wanting to capture, first-hand, his reaction to the tragedy. He'd stayed inside as much as possible after that, until the event had become yesterday's news, but the memory still rankled. At the next station, few passengers alighted and even more managed somehow to board, making what had been an uncomfortable position even worse. For the next ten minutes Hamish was assailed with the malodorous scent of a fellow-traveller who had neither washed nor bothered to use deodorant. Too tall to stand straight, his neck bent in an awkward position, he was thankful that he didn't have to use London Underground's transport system, particularly at rush-hour, on a daily basis.

At last the train rattled into Victoria. Thankful to be standing upright

again, Hamish moved with the slow tide of people towards the ticket barriers. Through at last and out on the crowded street, he skirted around a slow-moving woman. Walking faster to make up lost time, he narrowly-avoided stepping on the legs of a homeless man sleeping rough in a doorway. He dropped back the pace, thinking that at times it seemed that the city attracted these people like a rotting carcass attracted flies.

He was reminded of Conan Doyle's lines in 'A Study in Scarlet', where he'd described London as '*That great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained.*' It seemed that little had changed, in that respect, since Sherlock Holmes had fictitiously roamed the city. It wasn't that Hamish minded giving money to organisations that genuinely helped people, but he drew the line at giving to people begging on the streets. There were too many organised scams going on in the city, targeting the constant flow of tourists who thought it fine to give a coin or two and then leave the city, making it more difficult for people like himself, who had to live and work here, to walk down the street or sit at a sidewalk cafe and drink a coffee without being accosted. These days, anyone withdrawing money from automatic teller machines was inviting danger. More and more reasons to leave, he thought.

It was a relief to reach his destination -a tall, nondescript office tower opposite the former Army and Navy department store. Glancing at his watch, which read five past nine, Hamish gave his name to a security guard who phoned upstairs to check that his was a bona fide appointment. He was ushered towards the lifts and whisked, at a speed that would have done credit to a fair-ground ride, up one side of the central atrium. Just as well, he thought, as he got out on the twelfth floor, that he didn't suffer from phobias about heights or glass-bottomed lifts. A PA dressed in the feminine version of a power suit greeted him politely and after a short wait he was shown in to the office of a young, fashionably-suited man who looked every part the successful London lawyer. He was a little surprised. Charles Fletcher, Miss Kendal's lawyer, was not the elderly bespectacled gentleman that Hamish had somehow expected from his conversation with the old woman.

"I'm glad you could make it," Charles said politely, rising from a plush executive chair and coming around the desk to shake Hamish's hand in greeting. He waved Hamish towards one of two comfortable armchairs grouped around a coffee table in a corner of the room, taking the other himself.

Hamish wondered how this could be the lawyer who had handled Miss Kendal's affairs since her brother's death. "You're younger than I imagined."

"My father was Miss Kendal's lawyer until his retirement last year," Charles explained, "and I've more or less inherited his client list, but I'm

still a rather junior partner in the firm, despite the name. I've, erm, been instructed. Commanded -one might say, by Miss Kendal to give you the keys to the house once you have provided me with adequate references." He smiled, revealing perfectly white teeth. "She has left it up to me to decide exactly what 'adequate' is. It would seem that she has already made her decision about you and the rest is purely a formality of sorts. I realise from what you said on the phone earlier that you haven't made up your mind whether to take her offer yet. You do realise that she has put a time limit of the end of this week?" he waited a moment, watching as Hamish nodded his understanding before continuing, "Perhaps it might help you to make your decision if you knew that Miss Kendal has also instructed me to prepare documentation to the effect that anything you spend on the property in the first three months of your 'tenancy' should be reimbursed, up to a limit of five thousand pounds. I realise that that sum will barely get you started on repairs but it's a beginning. You would, of course, have to keep a record of everything you spent and send the receipts on to this office. Miss Kendal is willing to make this provision so that if you choose to leave at the end of the three months you won't be out of pocket."

Noting Hamish's surprised look, he continued, "Miss Kendal gave me the impression that your timely arrival had taken a load off her mind, she is very keen that you take up her offer." He handed Hamish a sheaf of papers that he had been holding and pointed out where signatures were required, the pages tagged with bright yellow post-its.

They talked for a short while longer. Hamish had his list of questions, but Charles was unable to answer the majority of them. After fifteen minutes the receptionist knocked quietly and announced that his next appointment was waiting. The lawyer saw Hamish to the door with a parting comment, "Well, I expect I'll hear from you by six o'clock, Friday evening. As long as you get the signed agreement and two references here by then, the place is yours. I'm sorry I haven't been of more help, but if there's anything else that you want to ask, please don't hesitate to phone."

Unwilling to return underground to the Tube, Hamish elected to walk. Alighting from the lift and once more at street level, he found that the temperature had dropped by several degrees and the morning's light mist had suddenly developed into a thick fog, which had descended on the city. He walked briskly, choosing his route more for interesting streets than for directness and quite enjoying the muffling affect that the fog was having over the city. But by the time he had reached Brompton Road at South Kensington, he could feel the back of his throat start to tighten. Realising that he was probably doing himself more harm than good by walking, he decided to hail a cab. Seeing a black cab passing with its light on, he stuck his hand in the air and signalled the driver. As he climbed in the back of the shiny black vehicle, the driver, who sported an argyle cardigan and a

handlebar moustache, chattily said, “You don’t want to be out in that stuff ...it might not look as bad as the London smog of the fifties and sixties, but its every bit as lethal. A right pea-souper that is. There’s a warning out over the radio, telling folks to stay indoors and not venture out, and ‘especially if they’re troubled by asthma and the like.’”

Once home, Hamish tried to stay inside, but by mid-afternoon he had to get away from the noise of the drill, which was pounding away at irregular intervals and making concentration virtually impossible. A shame, he thought, looking down on the street from the upstairs window as he cleaned a palette knife with an old rag, that the contractors didn’t heed the pollution warning and call it a day themselves. Though, having seen several of them smoking cigarettes on their tea and lunch breaks, he supposed that concern for the state of their lungs was not a high priority.

Despite the health warnings he decided that it would do him as much harm to stay indoors as to go out and retrieve his car, which he had not moved since driving home from Kent. He fossicked in the back of the wardrobe for his bike mask, putting it over his mouth and nose in an effort to minimise breathing in the polluted air while he walked to where he had left the car. ‘A good thing too’, he thought, when he got there. A council notification was stuck to the front window informing him that ‘*Due to impending council works to be carried out on the roadway, any vehicles still left parked on this street by 8 a.m. Thursday, tomorrow, would be forcibly removed and impounded*’. As he unlocked his car he looked along the row of vehicles still parked on the street, all displaying similar notices and wondered how many of them would still be here on Thursday morning, falling prey to the council’s parking police. Then he noticed that more than one had flat tyres and a late-model Porsche, parked two spaces along from his own had been keyed. A long gouge had been scratched deeply into the paintwork. Shaking his head, he closed the Austen’s door again and walked around his own car, fully expecting to see some kind of damage, but was relieved to find that all four tyres were still fully inflated and the paintwork was untouched. He breathed a sigh of relief ...he’d been let off this time. He manoeuvred out of the tight parking space and drove back to the studio, carefully crossing the planks to the relative safety of his garage.

Car out of harm’s way, he retreated to the Minstrel for coffee, taking a small sketch pad, pencils and pens with him for some drawing practice. It seemed pointless to go back to the studio, just to listen to the din of the drill for the rest of the afternoon. Two hours, numerous small sketches of the café’s patrons and too much caffeine later, he headed back home. As he approached his front door, he spied Caitlin Evans, one of his neighbours, walking in the opposite direction with her baby son Sean strapped into his pushchair. The little boy was crying lustily, his tearful face peering unhappily out through the clear plastic rain cover. Caitlin was Irish, married

to a Londoner, but not so long out of Ireland that she'd lost her beautiful Irish lilt, as well as a wickedly impish sense of humour.

She paused briefly as they passed, enquiring loudly enough to be heard over the crying infant, "How are you Hamish?" Not waiting for a reply, she continued in the same breath, "I wouldn't be out and about in this horrible filthy weather but Sean's developed an ear ache and needs to be taken to the doctor."

Hamish sympathetically remembered similar babyhood traumas with Lucy but before he could open his mouth to express his understanding or offer to drive her to the surgery she continued. "It's just round the corner and so close that it's hardly worth the effort of hailing a cab." The volume from the pushchair increased as she added, louder this time and speaking over her shoulder as she hurried on her way, "Sorry I can't stop longer, but a word of warning Hamish ...you might want to be watching out for Evil and Niggly ...your burglar alarm went off about an hour ago and I'd bet next week's pay they'll be lying in wait for you coming back, all set to launch their usual complaints."

Evil and *Niggly* were Caitlin's nicknames for their less-than-pleasant neighbours, Eva and Nigel Haworth-Jones. Short of going right around the block and approaching the studio from the opposite direction, Hamish knew he had to pass by the street windows that let onto Eva and Nigel's flat to get to his own door. It was almost worth the effort and the extra dose of pollutants to avoid them, he thought, but he opted instead for the direct approach.

Sure enough, as he approached the front steps, he saw the net curtain in the neighbouring front window twitch. He barely had time to open the door, deactivate the reset alarm and read the short message left by the security company that monitored his system before the phone rang. He picked the receiver up and held it at some distance away from his ear as the shrill tones of Eva informed him of his shortcomings as a neighbour. His attempts to politely apologise for the noise and inform her that the note he had been left said that the alarm had most likely been set off by a cat coming in an upstairs window met with a barrage of invective and threats to contact the council before the telephone was slammed down in his ear.

Rubbing at his abused ear lobe Hamish sighed, and went upstairs to look at the offending window. It was now tightly shut, presumably by the person from the security company. Sure enough, there were dirty paw prints all around the window ledge where the animal had climbed in, though how it had managed that feat was more than Hamish could work out. There was a sheer drop of several metres down to the courtyard and the window had only been left open a few centimetres. The cat must have inched along the garden wall, and jumped the gap between the wall and the ledge. It gave the term 'cat-burglar' a whole new meaning, he thought, with

wry amusement. Still, the poor puss must have got a horrible fright when the alarm had gone off, if the scrabble of paw prints where it had turned and fled the scene were anything to go by.

Noisy alarms aside, it took very little to irritate Evil and Niggly ...Hamish remonstrated himself, -he really shouldn't think of them by those names- there would be hell to pay one of these days if he should ever slip up and accidentally call either of them that to their faces. Caitlin had bestowed the nicknames shortly after Sean had been born. Having a new baby in the flat above Eva and Nigel had elicited a veritable flood of grievances, and the new names had seemed to fit their personalities so aptly that they had stuck. Since Caitlin lived directly above the pair, she bore the brunt of their ire and regularly had to put up with complaints ranging from abusive phone calls to nasty little notes shoved through her letter box. They were a pair of bullies and Hamish couldn't help but feel they ripely-deserved the worst of the dust and noise from the road crew as their flat was at ground level.

After a solitary microwaved dinner-for-one, he took out the papers that Charles Fletcher had given him that morning. He read through the fine print, spreading the sheets of paper out on the low table in front of him. Sitting staring at the documents he mused that all week and particularly today, the city had seemed to have gone out of its way to show him some of its more offensive aspects: crowding, pollution -noise and air-, vandalism and annoying neighbours among them. And those weren't the worst that could happen, by any means ...terrorist bombings, fires and suicide-killers had changed the fabric of the city in a way that even the IRA had never achieved. Post 9/11, no one living in a large city was naïve enough to assume that they were safe from just about anything or anyone.

Hamish sat silently for a moment, then spoke to the empty room, "Maud, my sweetheart, I know you loved this place and I wish that I could stay ...but it's killing me. I've got to go." He picked up the pen he had tossed beside the papers, quickly signing all the copies before he changed his mind and went to off bed -to sleep the first night's unbroken sleep he'd had in months, free from his recurring nightmares.

*If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?*
William Wordsworth

LIANA

Where the cold had affected her from without, now, a deep-seated hunger was gnawing at her insides and her dreams became imbued with

FLOWERS IN THE MORNING

images of a sumptuous banquet that she was missing. Like the cold, this visceral hunger was a sensation that she'd never previously experienced, but still she resisted the urge to wake and slept on.

JACK

The vine grew rampantly, twisting and knitting itself together in a tangled web of green, coaxing bones back into a whole. Not yet fully fashioned, but taking on the unmistakable semblance of human form. Internal organs and a heart of sorts were moulded, still not functional but closer to life than they had been in the hundreds of years since his untimely demise.

The Garden was aware of the happenings in the cave but in its current state could do little to intercede. Without Liana the balance was askew and tipping towards the dark ...and that was never a good place.

Anyone who knows Nature, realises that Nature unbalanced is the stuff of nightmares and only taken lightly by those too foolish, arrogant or greedy to know better.

HAMISH

*To one who has been long in city pent,
'Tis very sweet to look into the fair
And open face of heaven.*
John Keats

It was already late afternoon as Hamish strode towards the cottage. The dying sun, caught in its last moments before disappearing beyond the woods, cast weirdly elongated shadows along the curves of the box hedging that fringed the path and his own shadow took on a life peculiar, leaping alongside him in a grotesque dance that reminded Hamish of some crazier incarnation of Peter Pan's shadow. If there was a slight urgency to his step it was because the removal firm's truck was due any minute now and he still had to clear a passage into the cottage for the removalists.

He looked up at the deepening gloom of the sky. The light would fade to nothing shortly, and they'd all be carrying boxes and furniture in the dark if that truck didn't arrive soon. It had taken longer than they'd estimated to empty the studio and the journey out of London had been agonisingly slow. He'd driven south separately, hoping to arrive with enough time to open the cottage and clean sufficient space to pile his belongings, but now with the hold-ups, any clean-up would have to wait. First priority, he knew, was to find the cottage's side-door and get it open, so with a motley collection of unnamed keys clutched in one hand and a pair of sharp secateurs in the other, he was preparing to do battle with the creeper.

The western entrance into the cottage should be just off the path -he had, according to Miss Kendal, missed it that day when he had first

explored. She had expressed surprise that he shouldn't have found this, as it had been part of a substantial addition to the cottage that her brother had constructed not long before the outbreak of the Second World War.

As Hamish rounded the end of the hedge he saw what she had described ...and why he'd missed it.

Jutting from the western wall of the cottage was the curved glass roof of a sizable conservatory. At the height of summer it would have been covered in the same form-hugging envelope of Virginia creeper as the bulk of the cottage, but now, so late in the year, there were gaps, here and there and many of the leaves had fallen to lie in untidy heaps around the outer walls. This still left multiple thick strands of the creeper's shoots and tendrils camouflaging the structure, blurring its elegant lines.

The fallen foliage made it possible, at least, to find the doors, a set of double French doors facing what would have been a sunny courtyard, Hamish imagined, in times past, before the trees and shrubs to the south had grown so thick and tall. He kicked away piles of old leaf-litter and debris that had banked up against the doors then hacked enough of the vine from around the entrance to expose the doorway, before trying keys in the lock. On the third attempt he succeeded in finding a key to fit. Though unlocked, the doors still wouldn't budge, so, bracing a foot against one, he forced the other open on hinges that noisily protested years of disuse. Propping it open with rock he found in the garden, he went inside to look around.

The room smelt of stale air and a lack of sunshine, but on cursory inspection at least, there was no damp. Even with the glass canopy, the light was dim, filtered through the network of vines and rubbish that had collected on the roof. As Hamish crossed the tiled floor to a second set of double doors his feet left tracks in the thick coating of grime, as if he'd walked through newly fallen snow and dust motes hung suspended in the still air where he had disturbed it. He used the keys again and pushed the doors ajar. These, according to Miss Kendal's sketchy description given to him on the day of the interview, should lead to the living areas of the cottage.

The open doors revealed two curved steps that rose up to the sitting room. But here, beyond the conservatory, with daylight fading and the windows covered with their thick webs of vines, it was as if someone had left heavy drapes drawn. Hamish wished he could switch on a light, but uncertain about the condition of the wiring and wanting to get it checked by an electrician before reconnecting the power, he'd decided to leave that until after he moved in. He made a mental note to sort it out, first thing tomorrow. Moving a few steps into the room, he could just make out the pale forms of dust-sheet covered shapes that were pieces of furniture left by Jonathan Kendal, but little else. Despite the lack of light, he was about to go

further, to search for the stairs and find a way up to the next level when a shout from the open door of the conservatory stopped him in his tracks.

“Hey, there! ...Anyone home?” the voice belonged to Ben, the removal firm’s driver. Hamish quickly retraced his steps to the outer door. He greeted the other man, who was staring around him with a look on his face that plainly said, ‘Whew, what a mess! ...rather you than me.’ Diplomatically, he kept his thoughts to himself, saying instead, “Int’resting house ...where do you want us to leave everything?” Before Hamish could reply, he answered his own question, “I guess you’ll be wanting to have a bit of a clean-up before you start unpacking everything, so we’ll just stack your stuff close to the door here, and you can give us a ring to collect the boxes when you get yourself sorted out.” Then he continued, by way of an explanation as to why they were so late. “We got stuck in a ten mile tail-back just after we got off the M25 and I thought we’d never get out of it. It turned out to be nothing more than rubberneckers, slowing down to look at nothing in particular, as far as I could tell. They’re not the most manoeuvrable things, these big rigs ...can’t swip and swap across lanes like those little sports cars, so we just had to wait it out. But we’re here now ... so we’d best get on with it. There’re two of us, but if you’d like to give a hand we’ll get it done faster. We backed down the driveway as far as the carriage house, like you said, and Mike’s already getting the first load on the trolley. It’s getting dark fast, but I’ve got some storm lights we can set up along that path so we should be okay.” Again, he didn’t wait for Hamish’s reply, already moving off at a brisk pace back down the path toward the truck, obviously keen to get the job over and done with.

The next two and a half hours were spent ferrying heavy cartons and furniture from the truck to the cottage. By the time they had dumped the last of the boxes, night had taken hold completely and the sky was full of stars, with only the occasional wisp of cloud. A full moon had arisen, which, along with the lamps that Mike had placed at intervals along the path, gave them enough light to find their way between the truck and the house.

Rolling a sack-barrow in front of them, Ben and Hamish made their way back to the truck for the last time, retrieving all but one of the lamps. Dismayed at the state of the house in which they were leaving their client to spend his first night, Ben had kindly offered Hamish a loan of one of the lamps, saying that it could be returned when they came back to collect the packing cartons.

The temperature was dropping. Mike, keen to get away home, had the engine running and was standing waiting to close the rear doors by the time they arrived back at the carriage house. They heaved the sack barrow inside and locked the doors then the two men jumped into their warm cab. Hamish waved the lamp in farewell as Ben gave a blast of the truck’s horn

and rumbled off up the driveway.

Hamish turned and started along the path to go back to the house, the sound of his footsteps scrunching noisily in the gravel ...his body exhausted and hungry, but feeling jubilant at the day's work done. He was ambling along, trying to remember which of the multitudes of cartons he might find some food in, when, perversely, the garden beckoned him more than the prospect of dinner, so he pushed his way through a gap in the hedge that he'd noticed on one of his many trips to and from the truck. His footfalls were instantly muffled and he shuffled along what was a rough track, enjoying the sensation of wuffling his way through the thick carpet of dried leaves that had fallen on the path.

He made his way down a gentle slope and through a circle of trees that, stirred by a tiny breeze, waved ghostly white handkerchiefs. Curious, he held the lamp up to one for a closer look ...it was a dove tree, *Davidia involucrata*, the white handkerchiefs were long bracts that hung from its branches, glowing in the moonlight. As he carried on down towards the bottom of the bank the trees changed from deciduous to evergreens, with a thick canopy of leaves blocking the moonlight so effectively that he needed the lamp to help him find his way under their low-hanging limbs to steps that led down to the sculpted yew-terrace. Mindful of his previous experience with steps in this part of the garden, he descended carefully, holding on with one hand to the trunks of saplings growing alongside the stone stairway.

Once out in the open, the moonlight was so bright that he no longer needed the lamp. He flicked the light off, leaving it sitting on the bottom step and stood quietly staring out into the garden, allowing his eyes to adjust to the altered light and enjoying the all-encompassing silence, ...so noticeable after years of city noises. True, there were sounds, but they were hushed and only of the garden. The peaceful stillness of the night-time garden was like balm to his soul. For this alone, he thought, the move had been worth the trouble.

He hadn't come down the bank with any clear intention, but now that he was here he thought he might explore a little. Looking up towards the house he could see the tall trees to either side of the building, and the roof outlined against a blue-black sky studded with bright stars. The moon was at his back. He had turned his face upwards, searching for the outline of the man-in-the-moon, when something half visible further down the garden, beyond an opening in tall hedges caught his eye. He wasn't sure, but he thought he had seen the pale figure of a woman, ...but just as he caught sight of her a small cloud scudded across the surface of the moon, taking with it most of the light.

He retreated to where he had left the lamp, picked it up and flicked it on. There were more steps, three down to a circle of stone paving, then

another three leading to a small, untidy, grassed terrace. He trod warily on the greasy moss-covered surface, conscious that it would not be very clever to fall and possibly twist an ankle, alone as he was, at the bottom of the garden. Holding the light high, he could see that the steps divided here, to either side of a raised stone rill. Water would have gurgled its way down these channels once, bouncing from side to side along the gaps in the stonework, but for now it was silent ...tufts of grasses and ferns grew in the channel where the cascade should have flowed and circles of grey lichens shone dully in the glow of his light. Another job, he thought, to add to his already burgeoning list.

As he stepped off the last slab onto grass, the cloud moved on and the moon's light shone radiantly once more. This time though, there were two moons, one high in the sky and another clearly reflected in a small pool. Hamish stepped towards the pool for a closer look. He stopped suddenly; startled by the call of an owl that must have been roosting in the trees on the far side of the pool. It took off and silently flew across the face of the moon, the path of its noiseless flight only marked by its snow white feathers. As he started to step out again he was warned by an infinitesimally-slight movement along the surface of what he had thought to be solid ground. Experimentally, he touched the toe of his booted foot to the 'ground' ...even that light contact was enough to set another ripple skimming across its surface.

It appeared that the pool was, in fact, considerably larger than it had appeared at first glance. It had been set at the same level as the surrounding ground, but with all of its margins and most of its surface covered in weed, there remained only a small clear spot in the centre where he had seen the moon's reflection. Hamish laughed out loud at the mental picture of himself, sitting in the water covered from head to toes in green slime and water weed, which is precisely what would have happened, had he taken one more step. Perhaps, he thought, exploring was best left to the daylight. Still, at least he had solved the mystery of the disappearing lady ...for there she was right in front of him. He moved around the pool towards her, mindful of keeping a decent distance between his feet and the water's true edge.

She was balanced on a large flat rock close to the edge of the pool ... interrupted, it seemed, in the act of stooping to place a beribboned wreath of flowers on the water's surface. Well, Hamish thought ruefully, at least it would have been water if the pool had not been choked with weed. He stood as close to the pool as he dared and held the lamp so that its light played over her face, ...upturned, looking back towards the rill steps and the house, as if she had been disrupted by the sound of someone approaching from that direction. She gave the impression that she was poised to flee from the pool should she be discovered, but, in truth, she wasn't going

anywhere. What Hamish had seen as a white dress was, in reality, folds of white marble, carved and polished into a loose flowing gown, bare feet peeping from beneath the fabric. Her hair bound in a thick plait and interwoven with more flowers, fell, coldly white, over one shoulder.

She was beautiful, but there was more than a hint of sadness about the figure, and a sort of wistfulness that the artist had implied in her face and her manner, a talented artist at that, Hamish acknowledged, recognising the skill that would have been required to render a block of hard stone into such a figure, ...it left Hamish wishing that he could have met the woman who had been the model for this, ...but then, he thought, this statue must have been in the garden since Jonathan Kendal's time at least, ...so there was little point him wanting to meet whoever had modelled for it, ...she'd be an old lady by now, wizened by age like Miss Kendal, assuming she was still alive. This was nothing more than a rather lovely statue, capturing a moment long since passed.

He looked at her face again ...oddly disgruntled and unjustifiably irritated that, no matter how brilliant the sculptor, there was always something disappointing, to him, about marble eyes. After all, he thought, it wasn't as if being sightless mattered to her. Hamish wondered how he had missed seeing her that first day he had walked in the garden, but then he reasoned, once his attention had been caught by the discovery of the house, he had given little thought as to what might have been in the opposite direction.

He yawned and rubbed at his eyes as a wave of tiredness hit him. He had hardly slept the night before and had been up early organising for the removalists. It had been a very long, hard day and now, all at once, it was catching up on him. Besides which, he shivered, it was getting cold out here in the garden. The forecast for the next twenty-four hours had been awful, with an unseasonably early fall of snow predicted. Looking up at the sky, Hamish could see more clouds racing across the heavens; they'd soon obscure the moon and stars -perhaps the predicted cold front was on its way. Still, he was thankful that the weather had held off for long enough that they had managed the unpacking without rain.

Knowing that he still needed to manufacture some sort of meal and a bed for himself before he could call it a day, he turned away from the pool with its lonely statue and retraced his route back to the house.

*And then there crept
A little noiseless noise among the leaves,
Born of the very sigh that silence heaves.*
John Keats

LIANA

The garden felt a quickening, and, though spring was still a long way off its denuded trees set up a whispering message. "Someone has come to love and look after us. Now, you'll see, it will be alright. ...wake up ...wake up ...wake up -please...wake uuup....." This entreaty was repeated endlessly, hoping somehow to pierce the veil of lassitude that surrounded her sleeping form.

Over the next days, drifts of nodding snowdrops flowered all around her bower, their pale little petals all the more beautiful for their unexpected appearance, leaving the imprint of her body clearly outlined under its cold blanket of unseasonal snow.

She made a small noise as if objecting to the interference, then turned away like a somnolent child feigning sleep on a cold winter's morning ...pulling the covers back over its head after a parent has given the first call to wake.

The Garden, however, like any caring parent was not about to give up that easily...

JACK

And, in the dimmed light of the cave a heart, long silent, began to beat.

HAMISH

*With gentle hand
Touch - for there is a spirit in the woods.*
William Wordsworth

A thin wisp of wood smoke spiralled lazily above the trees to hang floating in the clear, cold morning air. Hamish, tending the bonfire that had taken him some time to get started, took a deep breath, enjoying the scent of burning boxwood. He'd known, before lighting the pyre, that it would have been more environmentally friendly to have started a compost heap, but there was something so deeply satisfying about putting a match to the large pile of clippings and garden rubbish that he'd been adding to for the past two weeks that he'd decided, just this once, to go with his instincts. There would still be plenty of material for composting once he'd finished this first clean up.

Despite the crisp temperatures, Hamish, working hard and feeling increasingly warmer as the morning wore on, had been gradually removing layers of clothing. He tugged his heavy ribbed fishermen's pullover over his head and added it to an untidily growing pile of cast-offs that included a padded jacket, scarf and a hat. Having woken in the pre-dawn chill in the unheated house, he had put on as many clothes as he could find in an attempt to combat the sub-zero temperatures, but after venturing outside, following a quickly snatched breakfast, he had discovered that it was actually warmer in the garden than in the house. Now, down to rolled-up shirt-sleeves and a tatty pair of old jeans that had seen better days, plus thick woollen socks inside a new pair of stout work boots, he was feeling

more comfortable.

Still, the sun was lying so low in the sky that combined with the cold, clear, weather the ground between the tall yew hedge and the woods was in a state of permafrost, which resulted in his feet remaining a little chilly, even after his exertions. Only one tiny patch of snow remained from the early snowfall of two weeks ago, lying in a shady corner that the sun couldn't reach. He was glad, not for the first time since he'd started working outdoors, that he had replaced his old uninsulated Wellingtons with the pair of sensible safety-capped boots. The wellies, which Maud had purchased for working in their pint-sized London garden, although smart and an attractive shade of green had done little to keep out the cold, despite -or because of- their gentrified appearance.

He had only just completed trimming the garden's box and yew hedges that morning. It had taken the better part of two weeks of hard work and he was glad that he hadn't needed to trim the yew figures of the central lawn. Still, he'd jumped right in at the deep end, choosing to trim the difficult serpentine hedge first. This had been problematic, resisting his first tentative attempts with small hand-held secateurs to tame its shaggy outline, until he'd decided to treat it more like a living freeform sculpture than an ordinary hedge. He'd had to spend time, standing back and studying the bumps and hollows of the hedge, before he felt confident enough to start over. Once he had the feel of the shapes hidden under all the regrowth, he had found it a lot easier to tackle; especially now he had the right tools to do the job.

As he had brought very few garden tools with him from London, he'd hoped that there might be suitable shears or clippers in the gardener's shed, which he had already located, next to the carriage house and attached to one end of a rundown, empty glasshouse. In the day or so after he'd moved in, he'd done nothing more than open the door a few inches and check that there were, in fact, tools in the shed, but he hadn't made time for a closer inspection. This, he discovered on his next inspection, was a mistake. His second inspection revealed a collection of garden implements that wouldn't have looked out of place in the British Museum, along with an old push-mower with a broken handle and a pair of ancient, rusty hedge clippers that had obviously not been used in years, so Hamish had postponed work for long enough to make a list of those things he'd seen in the shed which were beyond repair, then had driven to Ashford to find a garden and DIY shop.

Surprisingly, he had spent an enjoyable hour chatting with the shop's owner, who turned out to be an avid gardener who was more than happy to give Hamish useful tips on pruning and topiary. They'd discussed the merits of various garden spades, shears and pruning paraphernalia while helping Hamish make his purchases. When Hamish arrived back at the house the new electric hedge trimmer had made the initial work of removing the bulk

of the regrowth much easier and quicker, but he resorted to hand tools to achieve the finished form. Putting the clippers down for the final time and standing back to admire his completed work, he had been aware of the same feeling of satisfaction that he felt after completing a painting. Only difference was, he'd thought wryly, as he massaged gently with one hand behind his aching shoulders to try to ease the overworked muscles, he'd get to do this particular work of art again in a few months' time. He hoped that it would get easier with practice.

He had then raked and transferred all the trimmings to a heap in the centre of the clearing, the same one that he had discovered that day when he had emerged from the woods, using a new, brightly painted red wheelbarrow for the job that had been favourably compared to a racing car, a Porsche no less, by his garden shop guru.

Hamish, who had driven Steve and Linda's Porsche, sold soon after Jamie's birth, to be replaced by something more suitable for a family of four, thought that the barrow lacked something in the handling, especially on tight corners, compared to that vehicle.

Job done, he mentally ticked it off the long list of tasks that he had decided to work through, in whatever order took his fancy. Next, though, looming high at the top of his list was more pruning ...including that tall yew hedge with the artful gateway he'd discovered when he'd first visited the garden. That was when he realised he would need a ladder -and he went off in search of one. When he found it, lying rotting in the overgrown grass behind the glasshouse, it became clear to him that a more exhaustive list of tools for the renovation work -both for the house and the garden- would be necessary if he was to save himself from wasting half his life over the next weeks going backwards and forwards on shopping expeditions. The cottage was still without a phone, so he went inside to retrieve his mobile and call the garden shop ...with any luck they would be able to deliver the items he needed, and he could get on with other work in the meantime. There certainly was no lack of jobs to choose from.

Once the ladder had arrived, part of an impressive package of tools and equipment recommended by the garden shop, it had taken a couple of days of constantly scaling up and down its many rungs before Hamish was satisfied that he had the sides and top of the tall hedge straight and true. He'd also cleared the switchback entrance, taking out the overgrown holly bushes that had given him so much trouble on his first visit to the garden and replacing them with two tall spirals of topiary Buxus in large terracotta containers that had arrived with tool order number two. He had spotted them on his first visit, and while they didn't perhaps qualify as garden tools, they more than made up for that with their commanding presence. The clearing had proved to be an ideal spot for his bonfire, protected as it was from any breezes that might fan the fire out of control. Though looking up

for a moment at the blue, cloudless sky, Hamish thought that any possibility of that happening was pretty remote. Still, he preferred not to take chances. It would be embarrassing, he thought, to say the least, to have to explain to Miss Kendal how he had burnt down her house and the surrounding woods.

He leaned on the rake he had been using to push the last errant leaves back into the pile, and watched the fire greedily gobbling up the by-products of days of labour. Well not so much products, thought Hamish, yawning, as debris created by a lot of hard work. The real by-products of the past fortnight were a house which once more had windows through which one could see and a garden with hedges and topiary shrubs neatly trimmed. He knew that he had barely scratched the surface of work that needed to be done to make the house habitable and return the garden to its former glory, but it was a good start.

Staring into the flames, he let his thoughts drift a little, imagining what it would all look like by the time he reached the end of his list, but there were still too many uncertainties, -especially around how long he might stay- that made daydreaming seem pointless. Better to think about what he was doing right here and now. As if in agreement, the fire sent up a shower of sparks that had him taking an involuntary step backwards and brought his attention scurrying back to the present task. There was no danger though, it had just been an old, rotten bough collapsing into the flames, one of the branches he had cleared from under the orchard trees; and the sparks that flew around hissed into nothingness the moment they touched the frozen grass. He'd used some of the dry wood from the orchard to get the fire started, ...with so much green material to burn he had thought it might prove difficult but the way it was burning now it would be all down to ash before lunchtime.

The flames were mesmerising. He was watching them, and despite his best intentions, drifting once again into daydreams, when a polite '*harrumph*' suddenly interrupted the quiet. Startled, he spun around to see where the sound had come from. An elderly man stood, cap in hand, in the gap between the yews. Hamish estimated that he could have been anywhere between seventy and eighty years old, his hair snow-white, but his body still ramrod straight.

"Terr'bly sorry. I never meant t' scare you, but I seen the smoke from home and were a mite worried it could be kids from the village, playing with matches." While speaking, the white-haired man pointed upwards at the drifting plume of smoke from the bonfire. "Not that they've ever been a problem, like, but I couldn't think who else it might be. Instead ...it appears you've saved meself a job."

When Hamish looked quizzical, he continued. "I should intr'duce meself. Arthur Blaine, at yer service." The Arthur, came out Arffer, just as

think in the sentence before had become fink. He stretched a wrinkled, sun-spotted hand to shake Hamish's, his grip firm, while explaining, "...I used t' work here as a lad, with me father. He were Mr Kendal's gardener, like, and well, he loved them old yews so much that I just couldn't let 'em go, ...even *after* his stingy sister stopped paying t' have them kept tidy, like. Them're over three 'undred years old, y'know. I were coming over t'day, t' make a start on that twisty box nightmare, but I see'd you got to it first. Can't tell you what a relief it is t'me aching back that I don't need t' cut that accurs'd thing. I've been keeping the yews and box clipped since me father passed away in '75, but it's really gettin' too much for me old bones. I gived up on the rest of the garden, years ago like."

Since Arthur tended to replace his 'th's' with either ff's or v's, Hamish found he had to concentrate in order to understand just what it was that he was saying.

"Well, that solves one mystery." Hamish said, introducing himself. "I was hoping I'd be able to find out who had been taking care of the yews. I'll admit I wasn't exactly looking forward to shaping those, so if you're happy enough for me to do the work when they next need a trim, your advice would be much appreciated." he said.

"You're on. There's a bit of an art to it ...more of a knack, you might say. Still, I'll be more than 'appy to stand down 'ere on the ground and give advice. So long as I aint going t' have t' go up and down that there blessed ladder." Arthur replied, looking relieved that someone had offered to take over the job.

They stood and chatted idly for a few minutes. After small talk about the cold-snap and the prospect of a long winter, Arthur explained that he had recently retired from his own gardening and nursery business, based just over the rise beyond the woods to the east. He'd vacated the nursery, he said, in favour of his daughter, who now ran the business. Not that he'd had to move far, he laughed shortly, being less than a mile away in a little cottage in the village of Thornden. He invited Hamish to visit, saying that if he turned left after leaving the driveway, he would find himself there before he knew it.

"You can, o' course, walk over by that there woodland path. It'd be more direct, like," Arthur pointed south towards the bottom of the garden as he spoke. "Starts down there be'ind the pool, an' it would bring you right out there by the village churchyard. There once were paths all through them woods, but no one except the village kids - playing 'Robin 'ood' and suchlike, or maybe smoochin' couples lookin' for someplace quiet like to be by theirselves, has used 'em much these past years. It's all got pretty overgrown now."

"I know what you mean." Hamish concurred. "I believe I found one of those paths the first day I saw the house. The next time I venture into the

woods, it'll be with a chainsaw."

Arthur was, naturally enough, curious as to how Hamish had come to be there, so he spent some time explaining how he had found, and came to be living in the house.

"Well, that's a bit a good luck, to be sure. I'm that pleased that someone 'as finally come t' look after the place." Arthur remarked. "Goes without sayin', it needs fair bit o' work ...still..." he looked Hamish over critically, "you look young and strong enough t'andle it a'right. By the way ...it 'as a name y'know ...White Briars. S'prised you aint found it ...chiselled in fancy letters in the stonework over the front door, though, when I think about it ...its most likely 'idden behind that 'orrible creeper. When I were a lad, wonderful white roses growed all over the front of the 'ouse ...then, with hisself dead an' gone, that damned vine jus' took over the place. Bane o' my father's an' my life, it were; grew unnatural-fast and we jus' couldn't keep it off the house, so 'eventually, we lets it go. I see ya cleared the winders 'an left the rest ...me, I'da 'auled ev'ry last strand off the 'ouse ...an' poisoned its roots."

Hamish chose not to reply, having his own views about the Virginia creeper. Instead, he steered the conversation towards the safer ground of what trees he might plant to replace those that were dead or beyond saving in the orchard, ...he wanted old varieties that would produce fruit with great taste, not the supermarket-style pap that he'd become accustomed to in London, where good-looks and shelf-life were frequently more important than flavour. They discussed the merits of different apples, ...Arthur was a keen cider-maker, suggesting Hamish plant Sweet Coppin and Kingston Black; both very old varieties of small, sweet apples that would be ideal for cider, They talked for a while longer about pears and stone fruits, before Arthur said that he must be getting on, adding that he didn't want to hold Hamish up when the weather was so favourable to getting work done, especially when he knew that he had so much to do.

The fire had died down to embers, so Hamish left it to walk back through the garden with the old man. As they walked, Arthur described parts of the garden as he remembered them from the days when he'd worked with his father. Jonathan Kendal, he said, had been more interested in his sculpting than in maintaining the garden, although it was he who had planted the long box hedge and trimmed it into its present shape.

Still chatting, the two men crossed the terrace in front of the house, and made their way through to the paved space in front of the conservatory.

"I see you've cut back those infernal shrubs, and found the front path again." Arthur noted, looking around with satisfaction at the cleared path and trimmed shrubberies. "I let a lot o' the paths go ...only kept up them that was needed t' get around. After Kendal went, even when me father were alive, ...it got so as we'd no sooner clear a path, 'specially up 'ere close

to the 'ouse, than it would be overgrown again, so after a while, with one thing an' another, we gave it up. M' father sayed it was like the house were in mournin', an' tryin' to disappear, so we should leave well-enough alone." Having said this, the old man opened his mouth, apparently about to add something, then shut it firmly, causing a multitude of lines around his jaw to deepen with the tension of his pursed lips.

They were starting along the path to the carriage house when Arthur mentioned that there had once been an enclosed herb garden in an area behind the serpentine hedge closest to the house. "It was beautiful, like, with paths in a sort o' criss-crossed 'cart pattern like one o' them old knot gardens but it got too much to keep up after the war," he said sadly, "and it was one o' the first parts o' the garden that we left t' go back t' wild."

Hamish was intrigued, "If you could remember what the beds looked like, I'd like to recreate the garden," he said, "after I get some of these other clean-up jobs out of the way, that is." he added.

"I'll have a think about it," Arthur replied, looking happier. "Y'know, I reckon those brick paths might still be there, under the weeds an' grass. Be worth yerself havin' a look for them sometime, ...an' I've got stacks of old pictures o' the gardens, black an' white o' course; some of 'em're in albums, but mostly in shoe boxes, -no order to 'em, but I never could throw 'em out after me father passed on, ...some from before his time, too. I'm pretty sure there should be one or two o' the herb beds among them. It might be of some 'elp with 'memb'ring the planting, like."

They'd reached the carriage house, where Arthur had left his car, an ancient Wolseley which looked as if it would have been more at home in a wrecker's yard than on the open road. It took the old man a considerable effort to wrench open the driver's door. As he was about to clamber behind the wheel, he turned to Hamish, frowning as he said, "I prob'bly oughtn't to say this, but there's stories you'll 'ear about this place, y' know, like my father sayin' it was in mournin' an' shroud'n itself up, an'all, ...an' more besides. I wouldn't take too much notice if I were you ...I doubt there's much truth t' most of 'em..." From his manner, Hamish could see that he wanted to say more, but was hesitant to continue.

Hamish, interested, said reasonably, "How will I know if there's nothing in them if I don't know the stories in the first place?"

"I s'pose you've got a point there." Arthur agreed, obviously relieved that he had an excuse to carry on with his tale. "Like I said, I prob'bly shouldn't be passing this on, but, well, this place is supposed to have some sort of spirit thing, ...that moves things around and does stuff, ...not in the house, mind, ...more like, out in the garden. I figure you 'ave a right to know, since you're living 'ere an all, like." He looked embarrassed by his admission, his face a bright red contrast to his shock of white hair.

"What, like a garden poltergeist, you mean?" Hamish questioned. At

Arthur's vehement head-shake; "Well, what then? You don't mean that I have fairies at the bottom of the garden, do you?" he said, trying, not particularly successfully, to control his smile. When Arthur concurred with a short self-conscious nod, "Well that's a relief. If that's all I've got to worry about, it shouldn't be too much of a problem. Bit of a let-down really ...I would have thought that any old house ...or garden, in this case, deserves at least one decent headless ghost or wailing wraith in its lifetime."

"No, no, no. Not a ghost ...that's dead people." Arthur sounded frustrated that Hamish didn't understand. "I aint explainin' it properly. I don't have nothing to do with all that mumbo jumbo stuff, but I does know that Mr Kendal's 'Mrs' disappeared right away after that there telegram arrived to say 'e'd been killed, like. And it don't 'alf send goosebumps down me spine when I remembers coming into the garden not too long after 'e died. It was eerie-like; ...Me dad 'ad set me to cleanin' muck out o' the low pond, when all of sudden it was like the ground an' the trees, all round me, were cryin' and wailin', fit to burst, ...you should've 'eard the sound, ...well, I weren't much more'n a lad, still wet be'ind the ears an' all, an' I lit out of 'ere an' wouldn't come back with me father for weeks after. Mind you, I aint never ever 'eard or seen anything else like that, in all me years since, but it were a fair long while 'fore I'd go back down near that there pond again. That's said to be herself down there, y'know ...that there marble lady by the water. It were done long before me father's time ...Jon Kendal might'a been a sculptor an' all, but 'e's not the one what done that. Even as a little nipper, I thought it were odd, that old marble statue lookin' so much like 'er ...Mrs Kendal herself, y'know."

"I didn't know there was a 'Mrs' Kendal?" Hamish questioned, latching onto what he thought was the one pertinent thing in all Arthur's ramblings. "Jonathan's sister never mentioned her brother having a wife. Surely she should have taken over the house after her husband died?"

"Well, folks in the village called her 'Mrs', but I don't reckon they might've been 'ficially married or suchlike, an' they didn't have any little uns. People round 'ere aint inclined t' throw stones when it aint necess'ry an' I think it were just their way of being polite to her, like." Arthur said unctuously. "Anyway, like I were sayin', 'fore you int'rupted ...she dis'ppeared, mighty mysteriously, a day or so after that there telegram came to say that 'e weren't ever comin' back. Aint been no sign, not 'ide or 'air of 'er since."

"Perhaps she had family living somewhere else, and went back to them after her lover died?" suggested Hamish.

"You might be right an' all, but I wouldn' know about that." Arthur said politely, plainly discounting Hamish's theory. "Anyway, the stories go back more'n Mr Kendal's time, an' me father used t' tell me things 'bout the garden too, ...strange goings-on ...trees flowering all of a sudden like; not

there one day an' completely covered in blossoms the next mornin', in mid-winter, like, ...an' plants bein' moved about after 'e'd planted; like someone'd disagreed with where 'e'd put 'em, ...an' bunches o' flowers turning up in the garden shed for 'im when 'e'd worked extra late in the garden, ...stuff like that. My mother accused 'im, once, of 'aving a secret admirer when he brung some of 'em 'ome, but 'e said it were the garden's sprite thankin' 'im for all his 'ard work. After she went spare about not havin' heathen flowers in 'er house 'e took t' leavin' 'em in an old preservin' jar in the gardener's shed. I can still remember 'em ...beautiful bunches they were ...all sorts o' wonderful colours and the scent of 'em were 'eavenly. And they'd last for weeks an' weeks without dyin'. He said it were to be our little secret, like ...he wasn't one t' throw away good flowers, an' what mother never knowed wouldn't hurt 'er."

"None of that sounds too ominous to me, Arthur." Hamish replied. "I think I could stand a few bunches of flowers, myself, -and if the garden objects to something I plant, well, it's welcome to move it." It was obvious from the tone of his voice that he didn't believe a word of what Arthur had told him, but he wasn't going to say so to the old man's face.

"Yeah well, like I told ya, most of its just stories ...but I thought you ought'er know, just in case." Saying this, Arthur climbed into his car, slamming the door several times before it closed. Banging his fist down on the lock, he muttered something about needing to get that fixed, "Can't get the thing durned thing open, then can't keep it shut." he complained to Hamish through the open window which he had wound down with difficulty, before turning on the motor. He proffering a small green business card picked from an untidy pile spread over the passenger's seat, "My daughter insists I 'and these things out to anyone I meet who might be lookin' fer plants." he said loudly, talking over the noise of the engine, which was running less than smoothly. "Like I said, she's took over the business and is always on the lookout for new clients. She done one of those fancy-pancy courses in 'orticulture and design and stuff, mostly by correspondence ...waste of time, if you ask me, -not that she ever does- ...no substitute for experience, I says. But, she knows 'er plants, if I do say so meself, an' she could 'elp you choose stock that would do well in the garden. Might save you making expensive mistakes like some folk round 'ere do ...'an I know a good tree surgeon, an' 'all. You'll be wantin' to do something about those growin' too close to the 'ouse 'fore they comes back into leaf in the spring, like."

"Thanks ...I'll keep it in mind." Hamish said, as he took the card, reading;

**BLAINE'S NURSERY
THORNDEN**

emblazoned in gold against a deep green background, with phone, fax, postal and e-mail addresses all lined up neatly underneath.

“She a bit of a one for all that ‘igh-falutin’ stuff, but like I said, she knows ‘er plants a’right ...so don’t be a stranger.” Arthur had to practically shout the last, as he dropped the car into gear with an ear-damaging graunch before rumbling off up the drive; clouds of blue-grey smoke billowing from the exhaust almost obscuring the hand waving from the open window. Hamish waved back, as much to disperse the haze from in front of his face as to say farewell and promptly moved away from the fumes. “I thought I got out of London to get away from the traffic pollution,” he muttered to himself, as he returned to check on the barely smouldering bonfire. “Hmmm, fairies ...what next ...throw in a few elves and pixies and I could start my own theme park.”

It took little effort to put the conversation out of his mind, as he ran the hose from the nearest connection and thoroughly doused the embers.



As he rewound the hose onto the reel he planned his next task, knowing that he really needed to make a start on some of the house-cleaning and unpacking, which he had been putting off since the day he’d moved in. Steve and Linda had offered to come down on the weekend to lend a hand with some of the work, and Hamish wanted, at the very least, to have somewhere suitable for them and the children to sleep. That, he knew, would mean doing something about the upstairs bedroom and the studio before they arrived.

While the weather had been so settled, he had spent most of the daylight hours outdoors. Once inside in the evenings, he had made a few desultory attempts to clean some of the kitchen and unpack a few of his belongings, but they had remained mainly in the cartons. He was so enjoying the novelty of working in the garden, going to bed early and sleeping through the night that he hadn’t yet got around to much of the indoor work.

He didn’t know if his improved sleeping habits had anything to do with his daytime exertions and the fresh air or with the change of location, but it was such a relief, after so long, to open his eyes, refreshed after a good night’s sleep. Even if he was waking early in a frigidly cold room, he fervently hoped this would continue.

In the meantime he was making the most of it; little more than camping-out before the fireplace in the smallest downstairs room, a little library-cum-den annexed off the kitchen. As it was the only room with carpet and with the night-time temperatures dropping regularly to sub-zero, it had seemed the obvious place to sleep on his first night in the house. He’d been so tired that he had done little more than unpack blankets and a pillow from a

carton conveniently marked 'bedding'; dragging the seat cushions off a dustsheet-covered sofa in the sitting room to make himself an untidy nest. Resorting to sleeping in his goosedown sleeping bag, a left-over relic from college climbing trips to the French Alps, he had been asleep within seconds.

Admittedly, waking up was less pleasant. The morning temperatures were so cold that a central heating system was now high on Hamish's list of 'must haves' if he was to stay in the house for any length of time, but for now he was loath to risk changing anything in case he went back to his old sleeplessness. He built a fire each evening to take the chill from the air and slept with the bag's hood pulled up over his head to keep early-morning chill at bay.



Levering off his boots under the front portico, Hamish went inside in search of food. The work outside was giving him an appetite as well as helping him sleep.

He skirted around piles of unopened cartons on his way to the kitchen. 'Kitchen' he thought ruefully, was a bit of a hopeful term for a room that had little more than a large ceramic butler's sink and a bit of old laminate bench with a pock-marked delaminated surface, under which were badly-sagging shelves. There was an electric oven, but Hamish was unwilling to risk his life using pre-war electrics that had been left to the mercies of rodents and rust for over half a century. He'd been relying on a supply of frozen heat 'n' eat meals, warmed in the microwave, for most of his evening meals. Fortunately he had also brought the fridge-freezer and a few other bench-top appliances from the studio, because anything that had been left in the kitchen was pretty much defunct. His 50's-styled refrigerator was right at home in this kitchen, he thought, and a good place to start his new kitchen design from.

Washing his sooty hands in ice-cold water wasn't overly pleasant, but he was hungry and it took an age to wait for hot water to travel from the old cylinder to the kitchen tap, so he quickly rinsed and dried his hands before his fingers froze solid. A new cylinder, closer to the taps and with lagged pipes, he thought ...more jobs for the ever-growing list.

After flipping the switch on the espresso machine, he opened the fridge door and pulled out cold chicken left over from his previous night's supper, plus a container of pasta salad and butter and mayonnaise from the door shelves, before dragging open the crisper drawer to scoop up tomatoes, cucumber and lettuce. Gathering up all his finds in his arms he pushed the fridge door shut with his foot then carried them to a small bright-yellow Formica table set in a lovely windowed alcove in the outer wall of the

kitchen. The table and matching chairs had been a welcome find, and unlike the stove of a similar era, were in pristine 1940's condition.

He walked back to the large terracotta crock on the bench to check if he'd left any bread out. He hadn't, so he grabbed several slices from a loaf in the freezer and threw them in the microwave to defrost. Taking a plate from the single shelf under the bench, he thought, -new shelves and cupboards ...add to list ...then reached for a knife from one of several jam jars full of clean cutlery on the bench top. New kitchen cutlery and utensil drawers ...add to list. No, he thought; as he manufactured a substantial doorstep sandwich ...just make that. New Kitchen. Period.

Lunch prepared, he carried it, along with a mug of freshly brewed hot coffee, to the sunny spot just outside the conservatory doors that had quickly become his favourite place to sit and think. Sitting on a paint-peeling garden bench in the weak sunshine, devouring his lunch with gusto and sipping fresh hot coffee, he took time to muse over all that had happened once he'd made the decision to move.

HAMISH

*She is coming, my own, my sweet;
 Were it ever so airy a tread,
 My heart would bear her and beat,
 Were it earth in an earthy bed;
 My dust would bear her and beat,
 Had I lain for a century dead,
 Would start and tremble under her feet,
 And blossom in purple and red.*
 Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Once he'd started the ball rolling, Hamish had found that events took on a life and a speed of their own, and he'd had little time for reflection between making the choice to move and actually moving. As soon as his signed documents had arrived at the lawyer's office, Charles had been on the phone, advising Hamish that the keys were on their way to him as they spoke. True to his word, a courier package had arrived within the hour, containing an assortment of unlabelled keys and Hamish's copies of the paperwork, signed and sealed.

Hamish, now that his mind was made up, had immediately picked up the phone and had the studio listed with an estate agent. In a desirable neighbourhood and freehold, the studio had sold within days, before the photographs had even had time to appear in the agent's brochure. By the end of that day, Hamish had organised a date for the removal firm and started to tie up any loose ends of his life in London. Whether the Kent cottage worked out or not, he had decided, he had absolutely no intention

of returning to the city.

It had seemed auspicious that he should move into his new home on the first day of December. He had been dreading spending another Christmas alone in the studio. Last year, his first Christmas after the accident, he had still been numb with grief and had hardly noticed the season going by, but this year, he was sure that he would feel every reminder of Maud and Lucy over the holiday season. December had been Maud's favourite month ...especially, she'd said, as it gave her a bona fide excuse to spend Saturdays shopping with the crowds. She would happily spend hours searching for just the right gift for friends or family members, stopping for coffee only when Hamish insisted that he wouldn't go a step further until he'd had a break. Shopping, she knew, was not his forte. She, however, was as delighted as any small child at the anticipation of Christmas and would drag Hamish out in the evenings, first down Regent Street to admire the lights ...where they'd have to stop at every window with Christmas displays, including Liberty's department and Hamleys' toy store, followed by Harvey Nichols and Harrods before she would allow Hamish to tow her home. Lucy had been too young at the time of her death to get overly excited about Christmas ...she was still more interested in the boxes and paper that her presents came in than their contents, ...but if she'd lived, by this year he was sure she would have started to share her mother's effervescent excitement.

Yes, it had been good to get out of London before December got to him, thought Hamish, as he drank the piping hot coffee ...and he had no plans to visit in the near future.

Upon moving in, Hamish's first priority, after necessities such as the electricity and water, had been to employ a scaffolding firm to make it possible to reach the highest windows and the roof that was totally covered in vines. But after some thought, Hamish had decided to carry out the work of clearing away the Virginia creeper himself, not wanting to remove any more than was absolutely necessary. That snapshot in his mind's eye, of how beautiful the small house had looked when he had first seen it, lit bright red and orange by the morning sun, had stayed so clearly with him over the past month, making him less than eager to entrust the work to anyone else. Since the upper windows would be difficult to reach once the scaffolding was removed, he took the extra time to clean the multitudes of tiny glass panes. Now, all of the windows, on the outside at least, were sparkling clean, and the house looked postcard perfect from the spot where Hamish had first seen it ...it was only upon entering the front door that the true state of the interior became evident.

As he had worked, clearing first the steeply pitched roof, with its small central turret and twisted brick chimneys, then the upstairs windows, Hamish started to get a better feel for what the house might have once

looked like. Uncovering exquisitely-wrought details, he had begun to think of the cottage as his pocket-sized Gothic masterpiece. The tiny central tower room had been a surprise, one he had yet to investigate properly, as he hadn't, so far, found a means to access it from the inside of the cottage. He wasn't entirely sure that it was designed to be accessed at all or had been added more as an attractive folly than a space with any practical purpose.

Lunch eaten, it would have been too easy to doze off in the warm sunshine, tired as he was from his morning's labours, but knowing there was work to be done still, Hamish forced himself to move from the bench. Sighing, he headed indoors with his plate and mug. Shortly afterwards, armed with the vacuum cleaner, a stout broom, and a bucket full of bottles of various cleaning solutions and cloths, he climbed up stairs which started from a small entrance hall immediately inside the front doors.

With the stairwell windows cleared, the afternoon light made kaleidoscopic patterns of kingfisher blues and greens, counterpointed with bright red and yellow, shining through the diamond-shaped panes of coloured glass of the tall windows onto white marble steps. The vestibule was open to the floor above and similar colours had been repeated in a long chain of glass lampshades that were suspended from a single fixture set high in the ceiling above the open hub of the stairwell. Set in motion by a tiny breeze, the light reflected through these filled the entire stairwell with waves of pulsating colour.

Hamish paused on the stairs for a moment to enjoy the scene. But the sun, unfortunately, also accented the thick cloud of dust motes that hung in the air, reminding him of what it was he was here to do. He had only been upstairs once since moving in. By the time he had got back to the house the evening after the movers had left, he had been so tired that he hadn't the energy to eat, let alone begin exploring the house, so he had left coming upstairs until the next morning. It had been a dull, grey day and he had not been impressed by what he had seen. Since then, he'd been so busy outside that he hadn't ventured upstairs again until now.

At the top of the stairs he stopped to put down the cleaning equipment before turning to his left to open three tall casement windows that were positioned underneath a pretty oriel window that faced southwards over the garden. The air through the opened window was fresh, if a little overcool, but it would help, Hamish thought, to air the large room and hopefully, get rid of some of the dust at the same time.

He went back to stand in the middle of the room and look around, amazed at the enormous difference removing the creeper had made.

This was the largest of the cottage's rooms, the stairs opening directly onto a high-ceilinged studio-cum-sleeping space -replete with solidly constructed built-in furniture that looked as if it had been in the space since its inception. Deep storage cupboards ran along the wall under a round

window set high in the west wall and an immensely solid, damask-draped, oak tester bed sat next to a pretty green marble fireplace, occupying the rear wall. At the far end of the room, down two steps, was a projecting alcove - jutting from the wall to form a second sleeping space under the eaves. A bathroom was tucked in the north-east corner -directly above the downstairs laundry. This was the one area that was private from the rest, the change in level made by steps just inside the door. Aside from quick glance, Hamish had barely bothered to venture into the room. Since living in the house he had made do with the downstairs facilities, washing in the laundry off the kitchen, and using the tiny toilet-room that was tucked under the stairwell.

When he had seen the state of the basic bathroom facilities, he had mentally added showers -upstairs and down- to his list ...before thinking that he might have to stop adding to the list for a while, until he'd cleared a few of the more pressing items off it.



But the reason he stood now, mouth open, transfixed by the change in the room was all because of the light. When he had first looked upstairs it had been to find a disappointingly dingy, sunless space that had little if any resemblance to the warm light-filled studio he had left behind in London. Now, with the removal of the creeper from the south-facing casements and oriel, the large circular window in the end of the gable and the high dormers that functioned as skylights, sunlight literally *poured* into the space from all directions.

The difference was phenomenal. He smiled with satisfaction, thrilled with the change that his hard work had wrought. *Now* it looked more like an artist's studio and he could readily imagine himself working here.

He spent the rest of the day industriously cleaning, vacuuming and mopping. Driving spiders from webs that must have taken generations to build.

By the time he had finished, the upstairs was habitable and the beds and bathroom, though Spartan, were clean enough for his guests. He'd also made a very interesting discovery regarding the tower.

The studio cupboards had proved disappointing. Hamish noted that if Jonathan Kendal had been a sculptor, there was little left that gave any indication of his work. He supposed his sister or the mysterious disappearing '*wife*' must have emptied the studio and cupboards after his death.

From the little he'd gleaned about his predecessor from Miss Kendal, her brother had been involved in some sort of espionage work that had seen him going to and from Germany and Russia, both throughout the

duration of the war and in the years after until his disappearance and presumed death. Given the sporadic nature of the work, he would have undoubtedly been able to continue a certain amount of creative work here in the studio. At least, Hamish knew that was what he would have done if he had been in similar circumstances. Too long away from his painting and he started to feel the effects. He hadn't minded taking a break these past weeks, but now that he had seen the studio, his fingers were itching to hold a palette knife and paintbrushes once more.

But not today, he told himself sternly. He pushed all thoughts of painting aside and went downstairs to retrieve bedding and mattresses brought from London. The four-poster was missing a mattress but he'd checked, and found that his own should fit well enough. It took a gargantuan effort to single-handedly manhandle the awkwardly heavy thing up the stairs, but he eventually dragged it into the bedroom and onto the bed.

Puffing with exertion and feeling inordinately proud of himself he stood back to survey the scene. There was little time for self-congratulation though, as he still had to manufacture beds for Jamie and Ali. He searched cartons, and emptied boxes until he found two single futons that he and Maud had used as occasional guest-beds in the studio. He ferried those up to the alcove then fetched enough sheets, pillows, comforters and blankets to ensure the children and their parents would be warm and cosy. At last, late in the day, the beds were ready and looked clean and comfortable.

But not for him. He returned downstairs to speed-heat yet another frozen meal and spent the night in the same spot he had occupied since moving in.

HAMISH

*Kent, sir - everybody knows Kent - apples,
cherries, bops, and women*
Charles Dickens

Linda, Steve, Alice and Jamie arrived the following afternoon. Excited voices filled the cottage as the children ran around the house exploring, immediately entranced when they found the bed under the eaves. “We wanna live here too!” they chorused to their father. “Why can’t we move to the country like Hamish?”

“Now look what you’ve started mate,” Steve groaned to Hamish, rolling his eyes in horror. “Sorry kids, but No-Can-Do. Your Mummy and Daddy are certified city folks, born and bred. We don’t do well anywhere with a population under three million,” ...he thought for a moment, “Nah ...make that, five million ...minimum. We’d shrivel up and die if we had to live somewhere like this. In fact, ...ugh,...” he clutched his throat, making gurgling noises as if he was having trouble breathing, “I can feel it starting already, ...I need traffic fumes, ...need, more, buildings, ...need,...” he sank to his knees, stretching out a hand like a dying man pleading for water in the desert, “...neeed, ...a double latté.” He toppled forward. A few convulsions followed then he lay still.

“Well, I can make you a coffee, if that’s all it takes,” Hamish replied dryly.

“Dad likes to think he could’ve been another Hugh Jackman. Might’a helped if he’d gone to acting school, ya think?” Ali said, showing sophistication beyond her tender years.

“Don’t feel bad.” Hamish said, noticing an incipient wobble in Jamie’s downturned lips. He crouched down and put an arm around the little boy, who had been less than impressed by his father’s play-acting. “You know kids, you’re always welcome to come and visit me for weekends and holidays. And as for you,” he rose and nudged Steve’s prone body none too gently with his foot. “Don’t give up your day-job.”

Steve opened one eye at the prod and batted the foot, making the children smile again. The moment was forgotten and Jamie and Ali were soon involved in a heated argument over which one of them would sleep closest to the window –their father stepped in to separate the warring factions before a fight developed and the decision was made with a coin toss, won by an exultant Ali.

Disappointed, Jamie’s lip started to wobble once more. As a diversion, Hamish beckoned him and his sister over to the big four poster. “Come and see something I discovered yesterday.”

Curious, the two followed Hamish to the ornately carved timber structure. Steve was less than impressed. He rapped his knuckles lightly on the panels of rambling roses that were at the end of the bed. “Looks a lot like a bed to me ...bloody enormous and not going anywhere anytime soon, but still just a bed.” He looked it over. “Why’s it got such a solid end? This must be over half a metre thick. Seems like a waste of space?”

“You know nothing, Grasshopper.” Hamish replied sagely, comically wagging his eyebrows at the children. “Now I’ll show you what I discovered yesterday when I was cleaning.” Saying this, he scooped Jamie up and pointed to a central rose motif. “Press right there, kiddo.”

Jamie stuck out a finger and pushed where Hamish had indicated. There was a loud ‘click’. Alice, who had been standing to one side, exclaimed, “There’s a door in the end of bed,” she stuck her head in the newly-revealed space, “...and there’s tiny little steps going up. Cooooo-all!”

“Ok, just wait down here a second and I’ll sort out the next bit so it’s safe.” Hamish had to shimmy sideways to negotiate the narrow space. He disappeared. To reappear a moment later, standing above their heads on the tester of the bed.

“I am intrigued, oh master.” Steve looked upwards at Hamish. “But what now? That platform is still way too low for bungee-jumping you know ...so, what’s it for?”

“Patience laddie ...did your mamma not tell you it was a virtue?” Hamish murmured as he picked up a long wooden rod with a brass hook on one end that had been lying on the platform. “I found this when I was cleaning up yesterday as well,” he brandished the rod.

“Very nice too, mate.” Steve’s tone plainly indicated that he thought that Hamish had somewhat lost the plot as a result of spending too much time on his own. “And just what are you gonna do with that?”

“Watch me, you doubting Thomas.” Hamish answered. As he spoke, he reached up above his head and snagged a ring set in the ceiling, using the hook. He pulled hard. A hitherto unnoticed trapdoor opened and a set of telescoping stairs slid smoothly down to connect with the platform. “Ta da!” Hamish trumpeted -like a magician conjuring a rabbit, then added, “You should have seen me when I tried it the first time yesterday ...I didn’t realise that the steps were there when I opened the trapdoor and the ladder just about took my head off ...I ended up in a heap on the floor after making a jump for it.”

“Now, that would have been worth seeing, mate!” Steve laughed. “It doesn’t look all that secure though ...Is it safe to bring the kids up?”

“I reckon. As long as we’re careful. I’ve checked it out and everything seems pretty solid. There’s not much room at the top though, so watch your head when you come up,” Hamish cautioned. He clipped the rod into supports that folded out from one side of the stairs, making a handrail of sorts. “The rail will help you to balance, but don’t trust your weight on it” he warned.

Steve appeared at the top of the steps with Jamie in front of him. Alice, who was not fond of heights, took one dubious look at the ladder contraption before electing to run downstairs and find her mother.

The others followed Hamish, Steve staying close enough to grab his small son in case he should slip. Hamish disappeared through the trapdoor first, and then Jamie poked his head up through the hole to find himself in a tiny room. As Hamish had said, the ceiling was barely high enough for a man to stand straight but perfect for small boys. Hamish, the tallest, stood with his shoulders hunched and his head held low, like a turtle in its shell, avoiding the lowest beams.

“Way cool.” Jamie pronounced, pausing in awe to gaze around, with his body still halfway through the trapdoor entrance. The tiny room had windows on three sides with a small glazed door set in the fourth. The glazing in the door was worked as a picture-window with tiny panes of lead-edged coloured glass depicting the image of a beautiful titian-haired lady surrounded by flowers, birds and woodland animals. The light shining through the coloured glass reflected on the pale floorboards in a shimmering mosaic.

“Way keep going, will you,” his father’s muffled voice spoke from below. “Some of us are still stuck on this rickety ladder and would like to get onto something more solid.”

Hamish leaned to grab Jamie under his armpits and hoisted him up into the room. Steve soon followed. “Wow, you’re right mate,” Steve said. “Way cool.” He pulled himself through the trapdoor and rose to his full height gingerly. The roof was so low he could feel his hair brushing the rafters.

“But wait, there’s more.” Hamish opened the door with a flourish. The

child-sized lintel forced Hamish and Steve to bend almost double to avoid banging their heads on the unforgiving stonework but Jamie thought it was great to have a door his size and cheerily told them so. It opened to a narrow widow's walk -made safer by the exceptionally solid stone balustrade that encircled all four sides.

Standing there felt like being on top of the world, with unimpeded views far across the gardens and surrounding woods. Hamish could see a steeple off in the middle distance, which he thought must be the church in Thornden that Arthur had mentioned.

Steve, less impressed, conceded that the balustrade was probably sound ...but still kept a firm grip on Jamie's small hand.

Hamish pointed out the extent of the garden. Once the trees came back into leaf in the spring the views would be more restricted as many of the larger trees were taller than the house, but for now it was possible to see the tiny white figure of the statue by the pool to the south and the stone footbridge to the east. The road was still hidden by the woods but Hamish could hear a car changing down as it negotiated the slope between the drive and the village.

Steve must have heard it too. He said, pointedly, "goodness me, a car ...so there is the odd one now and then? You know mate, if you stay here too long you're going to forget how to drive well enough to negotiate the Hanger Lane gyratory when you come back to London. And all this fresh air's got to be bad for a bloke.' He looked across at Hamish, "Seriously ...what's Kent got that London hasn't got more of, and better? Go on, bettcha can't name me two things."

"Let's see.' Hamish pretended to think. Well, hops, for one ...and apple trees, for another." He replied light-heartedly, treating the question with humour. "You know I'm very fond of apples ...and beer ...and besides, I'll have you there to drive me around the place if I forget how to drive when I come up for my once-yearly city visit."

Steve had made it quite clear that he thought Hamish was mad to leave London and all that it had to offer. He had argued everything about the move with his friend -from the folly of selling the studio and effectively burning all his bridges, to the possibility that it would be bad for his career. In the end, neither backing down, they had more or less agreed to differ. "We'd better get back down to the girls or they'll think we've fallen off the roof," Hamish said, not wanting to rekindle the discussion.



Despite his misgivings, Steve pitched in to help Hamish and Linda finish cleaning the downstairs rooms and unpack the remaining cartons.

By Saturday evening they had an impressive pile of flattened cardboard

cartons sitting on the sparkling clean black and white checkerboard tiles of the entrance hall and everything from the London studio had been found a place in the cottage. As if to make up for his earlier grumbles, Steve had insisted on preparing dinner and had shooed Linda and Hamish from the kitchen after giving them a goblet each, filled with mulled wine. Jamie and Alice lounged on the rug and sofas in front of the wide fireplace in the sitting room, basking in the heat of the flames, a large bowl of crisps within easy reach between them and glued to a new movie. Tired after a day of discovery, they had both expressed profound relief at seeing the television and blue-ray player unearthed from packing.

Linda and Hamish retreated from the noise of the movie to a pair of comfortable old armchairs that had been placed in a cosy alcove formed by the walls of the entry hall and the conservatory. Hamish flicked the CD player on, the sound low, so it wouldn't disturb the children, sinking into one of the chairs, one hand covering his mouth as he tried to suppress a tired yawn.

Linda, standing at the window, looked out at the dark garden for a moment before drawing the curtains across the wide bay. "I ran the vacuum over these but they'll need to be cleaned properly sometime." she said, indicating the heavy draperies. "I don't know if they can be washed or should be dry-cleaned and I didn't want to risk ruining them. Perhaps if you can wash them it'd be better to leave it until the weather is warmer and you can hang them outside to dry." She turned to perch on the arm of the other chair. "You know, it's pretty amazing that they've survived so well. They're hardly faded at all."

"I suppose I have the vine to thank for that." Hamish replied. "It's cut out so much light that the sun has barely touched anything inside. I was surprised myself at what good shape everything was in. The cottage hardly needs any repairs at all. It's mostly the garden that requires work, but I'm on my way to getting that sorted."

Linda sipped her wine and studied Hamish's face before speaking. "You know, you look so at home here already, Hamish. Not in a Lord-of-the-Manor kind of way but more content than you've looked in a long time. It suits you ...I stand by what I said in London when you first brought the idea of this tenancy up. I think the move will be a good thing." She stopped for a moment, considering her words before continuing, "You do know, don't you, that Steve doesn't *mean* all that negative stuff he's been spouting about you leaving the city and coming down here. He wouldn't come out and say it, but I think he just misses his best friend ...he's been griping on ever since you left that he'll never find another drinking buddy again or someone to play tennis with. It's a bit pathetic," she laughed, "if you can cut him a bit of slack, I'm sure he'll come round soon."

"It's okay Linda," Hamish reassured. "I can take a bit of flak from Steve

and its nothing compared with what you two have put up from me. I don't know what I would have done these past eighteen months without him, and you to talk to."

"I'm glad we could be there for you." Linda answered quietly. "I remember how hard it was for us that first year or so after Patrick died ...and we still had Ali and each other." Steve and Linda had suffered their own heartbreak. They'd had a son, who would have been between around five years old, had he survived, but having been born with multiple heart problems, he had lived for a short six months. Steve had once said to Hamish that the *one* good thing that had come out of it was that he was able to empathise with some of what Hamish was going through.

"Hmmm," Hamish turned his head away to look towards the glass-fronted bookshelves which lined the alcove. He could feel the familiar aching sensation of sorrow tightening across his brow and balling up in his stomach. Fighting for control, he thought, some days it felt as if most inoffensive comment could start him grieving all over again. He listened to the music playing softly in the background –Sarah McLachlan singing 'Mary'...he could barely catch the words over the background noise from the television, but he knew them well enough that it didn't matter if he heard or not. Dear God, he thought, I've really got to start listening to music with happier lyrics. He got out of his chair, intending to change the disc.

"I'm sorry." Linda apologised, having seen him turn away. "I didn't mean to remind you..."

"No, it's not your fault." Hamish looked back at her as he chose another disc. "You must know what it feels like. It comes and goes ...and sometimes the least little thing will set me off. To be honest, I do find it a huge help that I don't have to pretend or put on a 'happy' face with people like you and Steve. And there is a certain solace to know that others have been through something like this and made it out the other side ...but other times, as I'm sure you know it doesn't make a blind bit of difference." He swirled the cooling wine in his glass before taking a deep whiff of the rich scents of cinnamon, orange and cloves that wafted from the surface of the wine. He set the glass to his lips and drained it, saying more forcefully, "let's change the subject, shall we?" Setting the empty glass down, he occupied his hands with lighting the candles of a tall, many-branched iron candelabrum that sat behind the chairs.

"What do you think of my new house?"

Linda followed his lead. "I think it's wonderful, and every bit as beautiful as you said it was. I like the delightful quirkiness ...like the open spaces upstairs and the window in the bathroom the overlooks the kitchen. Good thing it's got louvered shutters -it's not really a house made for privacy is it? Or for a lot of ...occupants," she hesitated at using the word

‘family.’”

“No, I don’t think it was ever intended for more than one or two,” Hamish replied, thinking back to his conversation of the previous day with Arthur Blaine, “which suits me perfectly. And it certainly is a lovely house. Far beyond my expectations, but still not mine ...yet.” He had plans to look further into the possibility of buying the house outright, thinking there must be some way of getting around the stipulations of the will.

Linda continued, “I’m no architecture buff but I love all these beautiful details and twirly bits ...they look like they should be made out of spun sugar.” She waved her free hand to indicate the ornate stonework roses above the window and the intricate tracery of carved wood around the bookcases ...and I hear I missed an adventure while I was slaving over the lunch prep. A secret tower room no less ...Jamie is completely hooked and insists we move in with you. He thinks it’s a medieval castle or something straight out of one of his fairy tales. And then, when the children discovered that there’s a door from the stairwell to the little study off the kitchen.” The door had been disguised as a bookshelf on one side and hidden behind a tapestry on the other and it had taken the children’s sharp eyes and small hands to find the opening mechanism. “Well, between that, the tower and the garden, Jamie is completely smitten with the place. It’s going to be a mission to get him to go back home.”

“Hmmm,” Hamish nodded in agreement. “I hadn’t even noticed that door. I guess I’ve been spending so much time outside that I’ve neglected to explore the house properly. But the cottage is not as old as you might think. I found the date over the front door when I was removing the Virginia creeper ...1841. That puts it in the Gothic Revival era ...you know, along with the Houses of Parliament and Strawberry Hill.”

“Sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about Hamish.” Linda replied ruefully. “Well, I mean, I do know of the Houses of Parliament ...I’ve done the Intro-to-London-101 thing ...you know, double-decker bus tour, Tower of London, Madame Tussauds’ and all, but that’s about as far as my knowledge goes. I’m not exactly a native, remember? And I did come here originally to go to cooking school ...not a lot of teaching about architecture there ...it was mostly *‘chop zut onion more finely Leenda’*, and, *‘Whad do you zeenk you are doing Leenda? I zaid clarify zee budder not burn eet!’*...” her sendup of her volatile French cooking teacher was spot-on. She added, “I’ve got to say, if I’d heard of Strawberry Hill, I’d have assumed it was some kind of fancy dessert. Still, I am interested, so tell me more.”

“Well, in that case,” Hamish’s face became animated as he continued. “All this decorative work, the ceilings, walls and the patterned floors,” he indicated the two-toned hardwood floor of the sitting room, “It’s all pretty standard for the time. And Jonathan Kendal, the previous incumbent, kept to the style when he added the conservatory. It would take an expert to tell

the difference -he even used encaustic tiles on the conservatory floor.” Noting Linda’s puzzled look, he explained, “those unglazed octagonal tiles in the conservatory with the black bits in the corners ...tesserae -they’re the sort of thing you’d expect to find in an abbey or a cathedral. So Jamie was right when he said it looked ‘medieval’. Though if he wants to see a real castle, perhaps you’d better take him to Bodium one day while you’re down? It’s not far away and I’m sure he would love it. It’s exactly a small boy’s idea of what a castle should look like. I’m not sure if it’s open all year or not but I could check it out for you. I’ve got a National Trust guide book somewhere in the study. I had to stash my books in there since these bookshelves were already full.”

“You’re right; there isn’t a lot of space left here,” Linda agreed, looking around at the crowded shelves. I’m surprised at how much has been left in the house. I might have expected a few bits and pieces of built-in furniture, but not all these books, lamps and paintings as well. You’d think they would have been claimed by some relative by now or sold off? And that bed upstairs, that’s something else!” She looked down at Hamish from her perch. “You know ...its very kind of you to offer to let Steve and I have your bed but I’m not too happy about you sleeping on the floor down here. Are you sure you don’t want your own bed? We would be absolutely fine on these sofas,” she pointed to the two oversized sofas that had been unearthed from beneath their dust sheets

“Don’t waste your breath, Linda. I’m quite happy where I am and remember I’ve got the fireplace in the study. I hope you packed your warm p.j.’s and hot water bottles, like I told you, because you’ll need them ...there’re no namby pamby radiators in this house to keep you warm.” He smiled. “Besides, if one of the children wakes up and needs you in the night you’ll be nice and close up there. You’d never hear them if you were downstairs.”

“I guess you’re right,” Linda conceded. “But my conscience dictated that I at least make a feeble attempt to let you have your own bed. Truth is - I’m quite looking forward to trying it out. It’s so very ...regal.” she waggled her eyebrows suggestively and attempted a wicked leer. “Steve and I can play Kings and Queens ...like we’re in the Tudors.”

“You keep your bawdy thoughts to yourself, lassie.” Hamish said in his most strongly accented Scots. He knew Linda’s light-hearted banter was an attempt to alleviate his dour mood. “But, the way we’ve been working young Steve this afternoon, I’d suggest you might be better off to take a good book to bed.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” she agreed, laughing, “...knowing Steve, he’ll be out like a light the minute his head hits the pillow.” She jumped up and walked over to the closest bookcase. “So ...is there anything on these shelves that I might like to read in that very fancy bed?”

“I haven’t had time to check the bookshelves.” he replied. “But you’re welcome to borrow anything you find interesting.”

Linda reached up to open the front of one case. “It’s a good thing all these books were behind glass. It saved me a huge job, not having to dust them.” She scanned her eyes along the first shelf of spines, “pew, not a lot of light fiction here. Some of them look really old, and from the titles, I’d say that whoever collected them had a real thing about plants and gardening.” She moved on to another shelf, “...Oh, and with a side-line in ancient myths and legends. There’s a whole case-full of those.” She read some of the titles and authors, “a heap of fairy books by Andrew Lang, Cicely Mary Barker, someone called Dinah Craik and, look ...this little Japanese tale about the Fountain of Youth. She waved the book in front of Hamish before returning it to the shelf and picking up another. “Oh ...here’s something that might be worth a look.” She had pulled out a book and opened it, leafing through the pages. “Tsk, tsk ...look at this ...someone has underlined bits and written in the margins, not in English either ...I hate it when people scribble in books.” She replaced the book amongst the others on the shelf to continue her search.

Curious, Hamish got up to look. He ran his finger along some of the books, noting titles. The books ranged from beautiful leather-bound tomes to garden DIY manuals that would have been contemporary to Jonathan Kendal’s time and earlier. “‘*A Gardener’s Guide to Rose Care and Pruning*’ ...well that should be useful, I’ve yet to attack those massive climbing roses in the orchard.” He continued along the row ... “‘*Gardens of a Golden Afternoon*’, by Gertrude Jekyll. I might have a look at that myself when I get the time.” Then, “Hey ...here’s something you might like to read ...‘*All Passion Spent*’ by Vita Sackville-West.” He grinned mischievously, “...it could be an apt title for tonight.” Linda laughed and he added, “Sackville-West grew up and lived most of her life not far from here, first at Knole then at Sissinghurst Castle.” He opened the front cover of a small book, and whistled, “Whew...this looks like a first edition, signed by her. Perhaps we should be handling these with white kid gloves. Still, as far as I’m concerned, there’s not much point having a book if you can’t read it. You want this?” he held the book out to Linda. She wrinkled her nose and shook her head in reply, so he placed it back on the shelf.

Steve chose that moment to poke his head around the kitchen door to inform them all in stentorian tones that dinner was served. “We’re eating in the kitchen since the only other table is out in the conservatory,” he said loudly, “and it’s probably arctic out there by now. I have two words for you, Hamish ...centraaal heeeating!”

“Don’t do that, Daddy.” You sound like a scary ghosta, wailed Jamie. “And I don’t like scary ghostas, I only...,”

“...like nice ghostas!” chimed Ali, Linda and Hamish in unison.

FLOWERS IN THE MORNING

Laughing, Hamish scooped Jamie up off the carpet and over his shoulder. They all filed into the warm kitchen to eat dinner.

*Of joys departed,
Not to return, how painful the remembrance!*
Robert Blair

LIANA

She stirred, unable to drift back to deep sleep. The whispering had risen to a crescendo that could no longer be ignored. Eventually, faced with the inevitable, she rolled languorously onto her back, disturbing the thick blanket of leaves that had covered her. Her eyes still firmly shut against the bright daylight, as if reluctant to acknowledge that she was, in fact, awake. Some considerable time later, she raised a hand to rub knuckles over her eyes before slowly opening the long lashes and struggling to sit up.

This should not have happened, she thought crossly as she looked around, now fully awake. She had neither asked for it nor had she wanted it.

Contemplating her immediate surroundings, she was perturbed to notice the absence of those plants she had chosen to encourage her long sleep. Next, she realised that wintry sunlight now fell on the glade, the pine trees having been swept back to where their influence could no longer reach her. Crossly, she observed that her herbs had been supplanted by others. Most notably, *Coffea arabica*, interspersed with the iris-like leaves of *Acorus calamus* or sweet sedge and the large, curled ‘donkey ear’ leaves of horseradish, alongside pungently fiery *Armoracia rusticana* ...all well-known for their stimulant and tonic properties. And there were creeping stems of scarlet pimpernel, *Anagallis arvensis* which she knew to be remedial in cases of melancholy. *Nothing* remained of her original plantings.

“What mischief have you done?” she cried broken-heartedly, knowing that these plants, which had a purpose almost completely opposite to that which she desired, had not grown by mere chance.

“You have mourned long enough,” she caught the faint impression, drifting on the soft breeze, rather than the words themselves, souging through the branches above her head. “It is time you started to live again. There was ...no ...choice.” The last words drifted away into the cold morning air.

“And who are YOU to say?” she interjected angrily, now shouting into the empty space around her, her annoyance palpable in every carefully enunciated syllable. She knew full-well to whom she was talking... “Sixty years or six hundred....it was MY CHOICE, MINE! You had NO right to interfere!”

She halted the tirade as suddenly as she had started, aware that the object of her ire had removed itself from her presence and she was talking, now, to thin air. Realising that she had lost her audience, her anger melted away as quickly as it had come and she sat, slumped and alone among the trees, sobbing softly.

Already, the memories of times long past and loves long gone were flooding back ...and the torture she had sought to escape was beginning once more...

JACK

She was not the only one. The Garden's whispers had stirred another into full wakefulness. In the twilight of the evening, a figure had peered out from the cave near the burbling stream, staring intently into the burgeoning night with sharp leaf-green eyes before emerging and slipping noiselessly among the trees to disappear into the woods.

From her perch high in the branches of an oak tree overlooking the waterfall an owl hooted a warning to the other woodland creatures.

"Beware," she cried.... "Green Jack is back!"

And as most the forest creatures knew, nothing good could come of that.

HAMISH

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Dylan Thomas

The week started badly. Waking alone on Monday morning, it was as if everything had colluded to make the day dismal. Steve, Linda and the children had left to return to London late on Sunday afternoon, and Hamish, who was normally at ease with his own company, found himself immediately missing them, especially the children. All Sunday evening, the house had felt unnaturally quiet without the sounds of their childish squabbles and laughter and he'd gone to bed early to get away from the oppressive silence.

When he woke in the bone-chillingly cold house the next morning, it was without any of the sense of purpose that he'd had since moving in. Mustering all of his resolve, he got up, washed and dressed, only to discover, when he drew the curtains back that the skies outside were as grey as his mood, -which did nothing at all to help lift the feeling of depression that had settled around him. He went up to the studio, intending to make a start on a new painting but his resolution fled after half an hour of staring at a blank canvas.

Finally, after he'd spent the rest of the morning wandering aimlessly around the house, starting then abandoning several small jobs, he went outside with the notion that he might clean out the carriage house or the garden shed. He was in the right frame of mind, he decided, to throw something away!

As Hamish walked between the newly shorn hedges of the serpentine

path the sun made a valiant gesture, appearing briefly through the clouds. Approaching the carriage house, he was struck by the similarity of the scene now before him to a lithograph he had admired at the Royal Academy's print exhibition a few months earlier. This was, he thought, surely a winter version of the same. The stark contrast of light and shadow around the square, two-storied stone building set among trees had triggered an image in his brain.

The artist's name was somewhere in his memory but he couldn't quite recall it ...he tried an old mental trick that usually helped him remember ...sifting through the alphabet letter-by-letter in an effort to bring it to mind "...I, J, K", he muttered under his breath. K, that rang a bell. K for, hmmm? He tried the vowels, "Ka, Karl," that was it, but Karl who? Try as he might, the last name remained tantalisingly out of reach. Rosetta, he knew, could tell him. She was a walking directory of artist's names and once she saw someone's work she never forgot them. That reminded him that he'd have to ring her soon, very soon, or she'd be breathing fire the next time he saw her. He had purposely left London without providing her with his new mobile phone number, wanting some time alone to rediscover some sense of peace and purpose that living in the city, without Maud and Lucy, had stripped from him.

Today was not a good day to be thinking about peace ...or for calling Rosetta, he decided. He'd done more than his share of thinking in past months -and not all of it positive. Now was time for some action -first, he'd take a look at the dovecote. He'd had it in his mind for a few days now that he would like to restock the garden with doves. He bounded up steep stone steps to one side of the building, stopping on the landing outside a low gothic-arch door. In a sort of automatic response that years of city living had ingrained into him he had already pulled the set of keys out of his pocket and had started flipping through them to find one that looked as if it might fit. Turned out it didn't matter as the door wasn't locked after all.

He turned the handle, pushed experimentally and it swung inwards with only a token protest, so he stuffed the keys back in his pocket and went through, ducking slightly to avoid the low lintel. The door swung closed behind him, cutting off the light but small lancet windows set in the front and the apertures in the rear wall that would have allowed birds to fly in and out let in enough daylight for him to look around.

Not that there was much to see. The roofline was a simple gable running end to end, with apertures and landing pads for the birds under the rear gable and just enough head space for him to stand upright towards the two opposite ends. The centre of the room was filled with tiered nesting boxes that went from floor to ceiling, three sides effectively forming another tiny square room, with a door facing Hamish completing the fourth. He pulled the door open to find storage shelves and on the floor were the remains of

what must have once been a bag of bird feed, plus several wire-mesh screens. One screen was torn and mice or other small creatures had taken care of most of the grain long ago. The bag was now little more than piled up shreds of hessian.

The air was stale and musty in the enclosed space and Hamish could feel his nostrils and throat becoming irritated with the dust he had stirred up ...he backed out of the small space, thinking he would go and look around the other side of the boxes. Dust and bird droppings, disturbed by his movements, hung thickly in the still air and he suddenly sneezed almightily. Feeling another sneeze coming on, he looked to see if any of the small lancet windows could be opened. They couldn't, so he went back outside and down the steps to find a stone to wedge the door open. That was an improvement ...now at least while he was close to the door, he had some breathable air. But a cross-draught would be better to clear the dust ...he remembered seeing louvered slits in the wall facing the driveway. These had been covered with solid shutters on the inside. He unlatched them and fixed them open ...and was instantly rewarded with a cool draft of air wafting over his face. Now he could work without choking.

Looking around, the only nest that appeared to have been used in the recent past was an untidy one tucked between the rafters and roof that might have belonged to a blackbird. Bits of old straw, broken eggshells and dry guano littered the floorboards below it. Mice droppings and spider webs were the only other signs of life but that was nothing, Hamish thought, that couldn't be fixed. All that was required was a broom and a dustpan and he'd seen those in the garden shed next door. He trotted down the stairs again and was back shortly, broom and pan in hand, spending an enjoyably mindless half hour sweeping out the central storage cupboard and all the boxes, and clearing over sixty years of dirt, droppings and cobwebs.

Next, he went downstairs to check out the carriage house, it was time, he decided, to make some space to park his car inside, rather than leaving it under the trees where it had been for the past weeks.

He wrested the heavy doors open with some difficulty. Unlike the door to the dovecote, these had been locked, with a simple padlock and chain that Hamish knew would have presented little more than a moment's hindrance to any competent London thief. Fortunately, it wasn't necessary for him to try out his lock-picking skills, as the key had been among those on the ring he'd been given. The doors would need some work though, before he could use this as a garage on a regular basis as they were sagging under their own weight on rusted hinges.

When Hamish ventured inside he discovered why the studio in the house had been so empty of artist's paraphernalia. It was all here. To one side there was something the size of a small car hidden under a tarpaulin, but what claimed his immediate attention were the kinds of materials that

he had expected Kendal would possess, blocks of wood and stone, -most of them untouched- but some partly worked and abandoned in their half-finished state. He lifted a sack covering work on a stand, to find one half-chiselled side of a man's face peering out from a block of marble, forever frozen in mid-genesis. On the floor, stone rosettes and small creatures similar to those he had seen decorating the covered bridge lay scattered about. Tools had been dropped in untidy piles on the bench and some had fallen to the floor, as if someone had brought them here from the house all those years ago and dumped them hurriedly, wanting to be rid of them. Files, chisels, adzes, mallets and hammers were strewn across the bench's surface and the floor below. Hamish stooped and picked up a chisel, testing its edge with his thumb. It was still honed and sharp, but others he could see, had been badly damaged by being dropped on the hard floor. He straightened again and gazed around, wondering where to start. He would need a barrow to move much of this, preferably a sack barrow. With any luck there might be something here, if not, he would go and get the barrow from the gardener's shed.

He scrutinised each of the walls, searching for what he needed. Empty, the space might be large enough to house two small cars. Since he only required room for the Austen-Healey it would be enough to tidy all this stuff to one side. That would mean moving that thing under the tarpaulin ...he pulled the cover off to reveal a surprise. A small dog cart. It was a pretty little thing, decoratively painted with white and yellow daisies on a blue background. Covered as it had been in the dimly-lit shed, the paintwork colours were as bright as the day they had been applied but it looked as if mice had nibbled through the leather of the padded seat and set up house in the wadding. Bits of horsehair and old cotton filling were scattered over the seat and floor of the cart. Someone had set the cart upon blocks under the axles, presumably to preserve the rubber tires from perishing. Hamish reached out and spun one of the wooden spokes to check ...the wheel turned easily and the rubber appeared sound. He had not expected the carriage house to actually live up to its name, although this little cart hardly deserved the title 'carriage'...having about as much in common with the it's horse-drawn contemporaries as a doll's push chair had with a full-sized perambulator.

Still, this wasn't going to help move anything. Hamish peered into the dim corners ...there, just what he needed ...leaning against the far wall beside stacked sacks, with the last sack still on it. Hamish checked the contents of the sack before deciding what to do with it ...it was full of clay, as were the others in the pile beside the barrow. Though the contents had long dried out from years of sitting disused, it would still be perfectly good for modelling once remoistened.

He studied the bags of clay, thinking. He hadn't worked with clay since

his time at college, but it was a medium that he'd enjoyed and the chicken mesh and coils of heavier wire sitting next to the sacks had given him the germ of an idea. He hefted the barrow with its sack, leaving it next to the tap by the garden shed, then found a large sheet of plastic in the shed and dumped the contents of the sack out onto it. Adding water, he spent a few minutes working it through then rinsed his hands and went back inside to start rearranging Jonathan Kendal's tools and materials. He returned to knead the lumps of clay throughout the rest of the morning and early afternoon until it was ready to use. By that time he had finished organising in the carriage house, had made space for his car and done all he could do to tidy the garden shed. The tools that were still useful had been hung on hooks on the wall or left neatly on the swept shelves. He'd even sharpened and oiled the spades and a pair of shears he'd unearthed that he thought might come in useful. The rest of the tools, he'd sorted into piles: unusable, throw away; mendable, keep; and the last pile ...no idea what this is for? ...ask Arthur next time I see him.



Hamish took a short break and returned to the house to eat a late lunch before tracing his steps back to the garden shed. He heaved the clay up onto the wheelbarrow then added the coil of wire, the mesh and some of the Jonathan's tools, before pushing the loaded barrow along a path he'd discovered the week before that led around the disused glasshouse before curving down the slope to the pool and summerhouse.

When he dumped the barrow's contents near the edge of the pool had no clear idea of what he intended to make, then he noticed the cool white features of the figure across the far side of the pool. Human form, female ...hmmm...that was somewhere to start from.

He grabbed the heaviest coil of wire and bent it into a crude form, using tools and wire cutters when he needed them until he had a basic form to build upon. He pegged this solidly into the ground then continued to craft the shape with lighter wire and mesh. Within minutes he was totally involved in the task before him ...his concentration absolute as he worked as fast as the materials would allow. Once he had the armature completed he started covering the formwork with clay, working upwards from the base.

He couldn't have said, afterwards, at which point he became aware that he was attempting to model Maud. Sure, the figure was crudely rough ...it had never been his intention to make something smooth and finished, but by now he was working so feverishly quickly that the clay was stuck onto the armature in great globs ...he sculpted it where necessary to resemble Maud's body, but in places he left the clay almost unformed ...but the

longer he worked the more the moist clay under his hands began to feel like her skin ...shaping her diaphragm, he imagined that he could almost feel her breathing, her chest rising and falling with each inhale and exhale, then, as he fashioned her breasts, hanging pendant as she bent forward with outreaching arms, it was as if the nipples hardened as they had in life when he had touched her intimately.

By now, he was completely absorbed in the act of trying to recreate his lost wife, lover and the mother of his child ...smoothing the curves of her hips and belly, lost in the sensuality of the slippery, moist clay, -moving upwards to gouge, hollow, add and take away, to fashion the planes and surfaces of her face. He hadn't thought that he would have been able to recall the exact nature of her form ...but as her beautiful eyes appeared beneath his fingertips, he knew, with a sureness that left him breathless, that he would never forget how she had felt or looked. Her form was etched so deeply into his subconscious that nothing could ever take it from him ...as death had taken her with such brutal swiftness.

Then he knew, with an instant clarity of thought, what, or more accurately, who it was that she was reaching towards. This smaller armature took less time and was even cruder in its representation. He stabbed the heavy wire pegs into the ground with a strength born of anguish, forcing the mesh around the wire to shape stubby little legs, a rounded body, arms and the beginnings of a head ...By now he was working so quickly that the exertion was starting to show on his face but the form was emerging, -a small child, a little girl, taking her first tottering steps towards her mother.

He was so completely absorbed that he failed to notice, first the gathering clouds, then the rapidly darkening sky. He was still modelling the last of Lucy's babyish features when the rain started, vehement in its intensity. As large, heavy droplets splashed on her soft upturned face the features started, almost instantly, to blur...

"Nooooo!" he cried ...turning from the sculptures to wave his fists at the sky ...his creative urge replaced by an instantaneous and huge anger at the elements that would rob him of his loves once more.

"NOOOooo!" he thundered. "Don't do this to me ...YOU HEAR ME ...STOP RIGHT NOW! ...DON'T DO THIS!!!" He ranted, shouting at the top of his lungs until he was hoarse ...venting his long-suppressed anger at everything and everyone ...at Maud for wanting to go and visit her parents, at God ...for allowing the accident, at whatever had caused the first cars to veer out of their lanes, setting off the chain of events, ...at the driver coming up behind her who had been unable to stop, but, most of all, ...at *himself*, for not being there and neither saving nor dying with the two people he loved most in the world. Here he was ...alone. Pathetically forced to carry on living when everything that he had treasured was gone ... It just wasn't fair.

He sank to his knees, his energy spent. His anger replaced with self-pity, he dropped his head down on the wet grass and started to sob ...his salty tears washed away instantly by the downpour, weeping out his loss and anguish in a way that had been impossible in the many months since Maud and Lucy had died.

It was pouring by now. He was drenched, his hands and arms smeared with wet clay. The rain, falling in sheets, was pelting down with such force that it was almost painful, but he didn't move. He stayed there, curled up into an almost foetal position beside the likenesses of his beloved wife and daughter until the storm passed. By then he was chilled to the bone and it took all of his concentration to haul himself slowly and painfully, to his feet. If anyone had seen him, they could have been forgiven for thinking they were witnessing an old, sick man attempting to regain his feet after a fall.

Mercifully, it was so dark, that once he was on his feet he could no longer see the rain-ruined figures in the inky blackness, and he stumbled back to the house to tear off his wet clothes and drop, exhausted, into bed.

*If misery loves company,
misery has company enough.*

H.D. Thoreau

LIANA

He was not alone...

...She had stood, unseen, in the deep shadows under the wide eaves towards the back of the old summerhouse, watching the man as he worked.

At first, it had been little more than idle curiosity that had kept her there ...she had no intention of making her presence known, let alone speaking to this stranger but something in his manner demanded her attention. Then, little by little, she too had become caught up in his frenzied act of love and creation. So that by the time he had completed the figures of the woman and child she couldn't have moved had she wanted to.

She stayed as the deluge started, keeping vigil with him ...sheltered under the roofline the downpour didn't bother her but she could see that he was thoroughly wet, cold and wretched. Still, she ventured no nearer, but when he at last got to his feet, she followed, moving wraith-like through the trees behind him, making sure that he found his way safely to the shelter of the cottage.

Afterwards, she returned to the glade by the pond, with its damaged figures. Unsurprisingly, the features of the woman and child were almost unrecognisable after the savaging they had taken from the rain. She reached out a finger and touched the mangled mess that was the woman's face, not

fully understanding why the man had been so very upset that the rain should affect his creations. They were, after all, only soft clay and it was quite reasonable that they wouldn't last for any time out here in the elements ...but, perhaps there was more to it.

She knew sorrow when she saw it -and that man was suffering great anguish. It was so strong that even after the cleansing storm it was still a tangible thing here in the glade, hanging suspended in the damp mist of the air above the pool, long after he had gone.

HAMISH

*I met a lady in the meads
Full beautiful, a faery's child
Her hair was long, her foot was light
And her eyes were wild.*

John Keats

Hamish opened his eyes before closing them again almost instantly. He raised a hand over his face to block the intense light before opening his drowsy eyelids once more. He didn't need a clock to tell him that it was late in the morning, -he'd left the curtains open and the sun was streaming into the small room through the panes of the bay window. A moving pool of bright winter sun had been slowly tracking across the leafy patterns of the study carpet until it had shone directly onto his upturned face, waking him.

He sat up and pushed the feather-filled sleeping bag away, freeing his upper body and stretching his arms wide before getting up to pad across, bare feet enjoying the sun-warmed patches, to open one of the casements. An instant inrush of cold air reminded him it was still winter, sunshine or no, but he left the window open all the same. He grabbed a pair of jogging pants and a pullover that had been hanging over the back of a chair, putting these on before turning to survey the room, with its messy nest of cushions, sleeping bag, blankets and pillows still marking where he had been sleeping for the past weeks.

"About time to make some changes," he pronounced determinedly, as he stripped the inner lining from the bag and pulled up the sheet he had

been using to cover the sofa cushions. The linen was bundled under his arm and carried off to the laundry. On his way, he encountered his wet clothes from the night before, sitting in a sodden heap in the middle of the kitchen, so he picked these up on his way past and started the washing machine on a first load of grubby garments. He tucked the freestanding clothes airer that had been leaning against the laundry wall and took it with him, retrieving the sleeping bag from the study then opening the front door and setting the airer on the stone-flagged terrace in front of the house. The bag could stay outside in the sun for the rest of the day and then he'd put it away.

It was time, he'd decided, that he stopped camping and started living in this house. Suddenly, his thoughts were rudely interrupted by an audible gurgling emanating from his stomach, complaining loudly at the lack of dinner the night before, so he quickly returned the sofa cushions to their rightful places, dumped the now-folded blankets on the sofa-back and went through to the kitchen to forage some breakfast.

He sat in the sunshine on the front stoop while he ate cereal, followed by boiled eggs and toast soldiers, alternately sipping from a cup of strong coffee held cupped between his hands which was helping to keep his fingers warm, while mentally playing back some of the memories of the previous evening. Even now, so soon after, his recollection was fading, -the experience taking on an aura like that of a series of fuzzy, sepia-toned images from which he could only recall snapshots rather than the whole. That wasn't so unusual, he thought, he was accustomed to losing chunks of time when he worked ...what he did remember, with a clarity he couldn't ignore, was the intensity of his rage, and equally ... the overwhelming urge he'd felt to end his existence.

Okay, he thought ...purposely spotlighting those feelings for consideration -why had he behaved like that now, so long after the accident? Of all the emotions he'd felt since Maud and Lucy's deaths, he'd never thought that anger was a major player ...bit parts, certainly ... he'd supposed that that was pretty normal ...but certainly not anything approaching the intensity he had felt last night. Then, in a moment of clarity, he understood ...ever since Maud and Lucy had died, whenever he'd felt angry he had done his best to ignore it. Thinking he'd turn his negative feelings into something more positive, he had worked on in spite of them ...so that in the end, unacknowledged, they had been all that fuelled his work, whereas before, his passion for life and for Maud, and his absolute delight in his beautiful daughter had been his inspiration. He hadn't painted since he had moved from the studio, and the anger, unvented, had been building up inside him, like magma in a volcano, until something had had to give.

Well, it had certainly *given* last evening, he thought wryly. At the same time, it occurred to him that he glad that no one had been around to see his

behaviour.

And what about the more morbid thoughts? Well, maybe that wasn't so hard to work out either in hindsight. He'd known that he'd always felt guilty that he hadn't gone to Wales with them, like he might have been able to save them both with his superlative driving skills, he thought, humourlessly. Fat chance ...he knew from the crash investigation that Maud had managed to stop the car without his help ...and what had occurred after, well, *his* presence wouldn't have made a blind bit of difference. He might as well get over it, he thought, because there was no way on this earth that he could change the events of that awful day.

Sitting there in the weak winter sunshine, he realised something quite pivotal. He felt better sitting here, right now, than he had in a long time ...not dance-like-no-one's-watching great, admittedly, but much better. Alone. Yes. But not lonely, -at least not in that impenetrable, glass-wall-between-me-and-everyone-else way that he had felt for so long.

It was a good feeling.

With a newfound sense of awareness, he looked up and around at the garden. It too seemed to have changed ...nothing he could quite put his finger on, but he sensed something profoundly different ... reminding him of times when Maud would twirl in front of him, teasing and saying, "Guess what's new?"...and he would be left floundering, trying to work out if it was a subtle difference he was looking for or something that should be glaringly obvious.

He sat for a few minutes longer, enjoying the peace and solitude, until a drifting cloud obscured the sun. As the shadow touched him the air temperature chilled instantly and he shivered. "No matter," he thought, He had already decided what he would do for the rest of the day. He got up to take the breakfast dishes inside and change his clothes, before going off to collect the tools he would need from the shed.



...It was mid-afternoon by the time he flicked the chainsaw's kill switch for the last time. He pulled off his hard hat, protective glasses and thick gloves, stowing them with the saw and axes behind a huge old elm, where they couldn't be seen by anyone chancing by.

Turning, Hamish surveyed his handiwork, visible only as far as the first bend in the meandering path. At regular intervals along the edges of the track were neatly stacked piles of firewood, some cut from fallen branches of oak, beech, elder and birch trees that had proved too heavy for him to shift and others consisting of greenwood from young saplings which had taken root in the pathway.

He had managed much of the initial clearing with the axe and handsaws,

resorting to using the chainsaw more frequently as the day wore on, slicing with ease through the trunks of several larger beeches that had fallen directly across the path, and just now, cutting through a thick bough of the elm that had sheared off from the grand old tree, narrowly missing the kissing gate that was the entrance to White Briars wood from the village of Thornden. The house's name was scarcely visible, carved into the timber gate ...mostly obscured by a thick pelt of green moss that coated the surface of both gate and posts. Although he hadn't wanted to disturb the peace of the woods any more than necessary, the use of the chainsaw had quite literally cut days of hard labour into hours.

Straightening from stowing the tools, Hamish observed the woods nearest. A low stone wall ran away through the trees in either direction from the gateway, presumably marking the property boundary between White Briars and its nearest neighbours (he wasn't entirely sure). The track beyond the gate forked on the village-side of the wall to run alongside the boundary and into the village-proper. Both paths looked well-maintained and well-used. He must find out who his neighbours were and invite them over for tea, Hamish thought, but not right now ...having come this far he was curious to explore the village itself. Going through the gate, he followed the path towards the village for its last twenty yards until he reached the edge of the woods.

As Arthur had described, the woodlands terminated right on the periphery of the village. Stopping a moment before leaving the sheltering privacy of the trees, Hamish could see that once it parted from the woods the path changed into a gravelled lane with grass verges, running between a low capped stone wall to his left and a higher brick wall to his right that was adorned with the pruned and trained canes of climbing roses that would be gorgeous come summer, judging by the sheer number of them. A rooftop with tall twisted brick chimneys was just visible beyond the coping of the high wall, but he could easily see the churchyard with its solid square-towered church to the opposite side, enclosed by the lower stone wall.

He decided that he might as well take a look at the church before investigating the rest of the village. As he walked along he could feel the sun's rays on his back as the last of the weak afternoon sunshine shone down upon his shoulders. Working had kept him warm, but once he'd stopped he'd begun to cool down almost immediately in the shade under the trees, so the warm rays were welcome. He looked over the top of the lichen-encrusted wall to admire the building. He could see a covered entrance porch with a typically Norman square tower rising above it. A herringbone-patterned, leaded broach spire sat atop the tower and raised its pale head against the blue sky. The church appeared to have been built using the same white sandstone as White Briars, although it would, most likely, be much older than his house.

His house, hmm. That was a bit of Freudian slip straight from his subconscious, he thought. Still, it sounded good. Not that it was a possibility, what with all the legal mumbo-jumbo surrounding the title to White Briars ...but it made for a nice day dream.

He had reached a covered lych-gate leading to the churchyard -set diagonally at the end of the narrow lane between two massive spreading yew trees that must have been centuries old. This was opposite one corner of a roughly triangular-shaped village green, surrounded by a narrow asphalt roadway. To one side of the green, grew a large weeping willow, spreading its trailing branches over a circular bench seat that overlooked a small pond and over in the far corner Hamish could see a stonework Celtic-cross memorial. The space was enclosed by houses and a tavern that looked so picture-postcard perfect that they could have been the set of a period drama ...except that there were no actors to be seen. There was no sign of any residents out and about and Hamish had the place to himself, or so he thought.

Hamish, mesmerised by the scene, was still staring in the opposite direction as he put his hand out to lift the latch on the gate, when a sudden "Hey there ...I say ... hold up a minute ...don't touch that!" pulled him up. He stopped, hand frozen in mid-air, ...he'd been so distracted that he had missed seeing a man, crouched on his knees directly on the other side of the gate, paint brush in one hand and a tin of white paint in the other.

The figure now rose and stepped back, putting the tin of paint down to open the gate for Hamish. As an ecclesiastical collar was just visible underneath a thick pullover and a pair of paint-splattered overalls, Hamish assumed that he must be faced with the vicar, a small, grey-haired man in his mid to late fifties who would have been rather nondescript if it weren't for vivid blue eyes under thick bushy eyebrows. They lit up his face when he smiled, apologising politely, saying "Sorry about that ...I'm not trying to keep you out." When Hamish looked hesitant, he added, "It's fine, really ...you could have touched the latch, but I could see that your attention was elsewhere and I've only just painted the rest. If you'd put your hand on the gate and pushed it, we'd have both been covered in paint ...well," he smiled ruefully, glancing at his paint-spattered overalls, "...not that it would have mattered much to my clothes ...but I thought I'd try and save yours." He continued, chattily... "I wouldn't be out here doing this in the normal scheme of things but I had somebody cancel an appointment at the last minute so thought I'd steal outside and do this little job while there was a smidgeon of sun about. You sort of came out of nowhere and gave me a bit of a start. Actually, now that I think of it, I didn't hear a car pull up. Are you staying in the village?"

"I came from the woods. That's why you didn't hear a car." Hamish replied, hoping that the question came from the vicar's natural interest in

people, rather than nosiness. "I was clearing the path from White Briars ...it's a wonder you didn't hear the chainsaw."

"As a matter of fact, I did, but I just assumed it was someone from the cottages hereabouts cutting up firewood -they do from time to time." Now he was looking at Hamish with undisguised curiosity. "I'm so sorry. I thought you were a tourist. We don't get a lot of them at this time of year but there's always the odd one that likes to go places when all the others have flown south for the winter ...but I've just now twigged as to who you must be. So, shall we start from the beginning again and I'll introduce myself, as I should have done if I'd had any manners." He opened the gate then extended his hand, "I'm David Cowley, Vicar of Saint Michaels ...and you, I'd guess, must be the new owner of White Briars?" This last was couched as a query, rather than an absolute statement.

"Yes, I am ...although technically I'm the tenant, not the owner ...well, sort of ...it's complicated. Anyway, I'm Hamish McAllister. Glad to meet you." Hamish took the outstretched hand and shook it. His own hand came away from the contact with daubs of white paint all over his palm.

"Oh no!" the Vicar exclaimed, "Now, that's precisely what I was trying to avoid. I'm so sorry. Do come inside and we can both wash this paint off before I inflict any more damage. There's a sink in the church that the flower ladies use ...I'm sure they won't mind if we borrow it to clean up."

He led Hamish towards the church. As he was talking he divested himself of the overalls, leaving them lying on the paved path, before beckoning Hamish indoors. There was a covered porch with a glass-fronted notice board advertising the times of Christmas services, village playgroups and upcoming local events. They went through the open door into the church then down the length of the aisle, to a tiny side room that was furnished with little else other than a porcelain butler's sink set in a stained stone counter. "Sorry," the vicar said apologising for the third time in as many minutes. He pointed to the sink, "there's only cold water, and its near freezing at this time of year ...it's just as well I'm using acrylic paint. It's supposed to be quick-drying but fortunately; it washes up easily in cold water."

Once they had both washed and dried their hands they went back out into the church proper. There was less space inside than Hamish might have expected from the exterior -the walls must be awfully thick, he thought. A single central aisle, with solid wooden pews, beautifully carved on the ends, ran either side from the chancel to the tower. Shallow recesses in the side walls housed, on one side, a small altar and on the other, some sort of tomb or memorial.

Noticing Hamish's evident interest, the vicar said, "I take it you were hoping to have a look around inside the church?"

"Well, Yes I was ...but I can see you're busy vicar, so if it's not

convenient I can leave it for another day...” Hamish, not wishing to be a nuisance, turned to leave.

“...Oh no, it’s no bother. None at all! I was just finishing anyway, even with this bit of sun it is getting too late in the day to carry on painting and I wouldn’t dream of letting you go without giving you the ten p. tour.” He took Hamish’s silence for acquiescence. “We’ll start with the tower, shall we? Come this way Hamish ...And please, call me David. I prefer first names, if that’s alright with you?” He directed Hamish back to the square tower, set between the entrance portico and the nave.

David started to tell Hamish about the church ... the timbre of his voice showing that he’d given this ‘tour’ many times before. “Architecturally,” he began, “this church is a bit of a mongrel ...in the sense that it represents a mixture of styles. Though, personally, I find that makes it all the more unique.” First, he pointed to a section of stonework low on the tower wall, “that’s Saxon,...” then he turned to point out the arch above their heads, “and this is Norman, -the main part of the tower is Norman-built as well ...also, but we’ll leave it for another day, there’s a crypt under the church, built with stone that seems to have been pillaged from a roman villa that was discovered a couple of miles away.” They made their way through a gap in the pews that allowed access to the eastern transept, “this iron tomb is fourteenth century ...supposedly one of the oldest of its kind in the country, but the western transept is pure Victorian ...and, let’s see ...the pulpit’s Jacobean, dated 1626 ...and the font is Saxon as well ...found in a garden in the village in the 1930’s, -don’t ask me how it got there, but it finally found its way back to the church,” he smiled congenially. “The altar table is local marble ...do come and see...” he bent to remove a hinged section of the communion rail to allow Hamish through, “...if you look closely you can see snail fossils in the stone.” He pointed out several outlines of fossilised creatures in the thick slab. “As you can see, it’s a bit of a hodgepodge of styles and you don’t have to look too hard to find that nearly every period of church architecture has left its mark somewhere in this building.”

Hamish nodded his agreement and David continued, “I rather like that - the continuity of generations of worshippers leaving their mark ...and there’s a sense of unity here, even given all the differing styles that transcends mere architecture. I believe that it’s more connected with the desire to create something pleasing to God, you know?” The Vicar was one of those people who used his hands expressively as he spoke.

They had moved back out to the porch. Ushering Hamish out before himself, David pulled the heavy outer door closed. They stood looking out at the churchyard, centuries of gravestones scattered about among the grass.

Hamish mulled over what David had just said. “Yes, I think I understand what you mean,” he responded. “Often the most profound buildings evolve over years, or millennia ...rather than happening all at once.

But that thinking doesn't go down well in this age does it? There's a trend to want to demolish what came before and start over with a blank slate."

"Ah yes ...I meet that that in my line of work as well," David sighed. "And not just with buildings either. Relationships -especially marriages ...it's sad how many people are willing to demolish something they have already in order to start anew," David smiled ruefully. He glanced at his watch. "I know it's rather late for afternoon tea but, if you don't have to get back for anything important ...would you like to join me for a hot drink at the vicarage? It's just over there," he directed Hamish's gaze towards the two-storied house he had seen earlier beyond the rose-covered high brick wall.

"I've done enough work for the day and a hot drink would be welcome about now, thanks." Hamish replied.

David picked up his overalls then retrieved the tin of paint and brush. He put a hand, experimentally, on the paintwork of the gate. It was still just slightly tacky. "Won't be long 'til its dry," he said, "it's hardly worth me putting up a 'wet paint' sign." They passed through, shutting the lych-gate behind them and strolled up a short gravelled driveway. The vicarage was a large square-shaped Georgian edifice, three stories high if you counted the dormers in the roof and it reminded Hamish of a child's picture of a house. Six over six double hung windows were set symmetrically around a central doorway and tall chimney stacks adorned both ends.

They entered by a side-door, David leaving his paint brush to soak before making the promised hot drinks. They spent the next two hours in companionable conversation, sitting in front of the fire in David's study, finding they had much in common, despite a twenty year age gap. The talk ranged from such diverse subjects as art, architecture, politics, philosophy, religion and chess. As they chatted, two of David's three cats wound their bodies around Hamish's legs -one jumped up to drape itself over his lap while the other slept, dog-like, on its back in front of the flames. In the course of the conversation they found they had something else in common. David mentioned that he too was a widower ...his wife, Catherine, had died five years previously after a long battle with breast cancer. Their three daughters were all grown and had left home, two married with their own children and the youngest working in London. Before leaving, Hamish had invited David to White Briars for dinner and a chess match the following evening.

It was fully dark by the time Hamish said goodnight and headed home through the woods. The evening sky was clear enough but there was little moon. He was holding the flashlight that David had loaned him after he'd declined the offer of a ride home.

As he entered the woods Hamish found that was totally reliant on the bright ray of light emanating from the torch to find his way. He eased

through the kissing gate then retrieved only the chainsaw, deciding to leave the other tools until morning. Still, the path wasn't difficult to follow, with his neatly stacked piles of cut firewood acting as cairns to mark the way. He hadn't travelled far, the beam of torchlight bouncing from tree to tree in front of him, when he caught sight of a pale figure on the path just out of range of the beam. He was more surprised than concerned as he hurried to catch up with the mystery figure, thinking it must be someone out for a walk who had chanced upon his cleared path and decided to explore a little.

He lost sight of the figure momentarily but as he rounded the next bend in the path he saw her again -the outline was definitely that of a woman. The pale shape he had seen had been her dress, reflected in the farthest glow of the torch. "Hello. Who's there?" he called, feeling somewhat silly. Well, he thought, what else could he say? "Stop ...you're on private property," or, "I won't hurt you ...I just want to know what you're doing here in my woods?" It didn't really matter ...there was no answer. But what on earth was a lone woman doing out here in the woods on a chilly winter's evening without a warm coat? Hamish sped up to try and spot her again but she had disappeared. He was at the end of the path now and the carriage house loomed ahead, -she'd probably taken fright and run back up the driveway to the road. There was little point looking for her, he decided, he'd just frighten her more if he tried to follow her.

He gave up the chase and stowed the saw in the gardener's shed before making for the serpentine path back to the house.

LIANA

Shivering almost uncontrollably in her perch high up in the tree above him, Liana watched the stranger go by.



Reaching to open the conservatory door, Hamish almost trampled a bunch of flowers before he noticed them lying on the stoop. Stretching over, he unlocked the doors then bent to pick up the flowers, taking them with him into the kitchen. As he passed through the sitting room he noted how cold the house was. He'd cleaned and set the fire after Steve and Linda had left but the cottage hadn't been heated since they'd gone back to London. He found a small vase, filled it with water and popped the flowers into it before carrying it back to the sitting room. Leaving them on a low side table he lit the fire and ventured back to the kitchen to find something for supper.

Later, after hot soup followed by macaroni and cheese -eaten while sitting in front of the blazing fire, he picked up the vase and studied the

small bunch ...wondering who had left it at his door. The posy was lovely ...composed of delicate snowdrops and lavender surrounded with forget-me-nots, rosemary and white babies-breath, all hand-tied together with stalks of lavender intricately knotted around the stems. Hamish was touched that someone had been thoughtful enough to leave them but had no idea how he was supposed to thank the donor's kindness since, rather oddly, they had been left anonymously. And something else was odd; most of the flowers were summer varieties that no one would have in their garden at this time of year. And they were not the sort of stock that a florist would sell...

Shaking his head, he set the vase back on the table and wandered over to the bookshelves -thinking he'd find something to read. He looked along the shelves of gardening books until he found a row of books that piqued his interest, he pulled out two manuals on roses, another on the art of shaping topiary and a prettily-illustrated Victorian volume about the meaning of flowers. With the books tucked under one arm he turned to the curtains, intending to draw them across to keep the heat from escaping. As he pulled the heavy drape across, he saw the outline of his sleeping bag outside on the terrace, where he had left it to air that morning.

"Bugger," he muttered. It had slipped his mind that he'd left the thing out there and it would be getting damp in the evening air. He hurriedly put the books down and went out through the portico door to retrieve the bag.

He had switched on the outside light and was already pulling the sleeping bag off the airing frame when he saw a figure lying at the top of the steps that led to the lower yew garden. Bag forgotten, he hurried over. Even in the dim light he was sure it was the woman he had seen in the woods earlier. She was sprawled face-down; as if she had tripped on the last step, was clothed only in a flimsy pale-coloured sleeveless dress and was barefoot. She must be freezing, he thought. She appeared unconscious, or worse -he reached down to take hold of her arm and turn her so that he could check for vital signs. When he touched her she flinched slightly -so at least she was alive- but her skin was ice-cold. Hamish wrapped his arms under the limp body and picked her up. She weighed so little that it was like picking up a child rather than a fully grown woman ...he was aware of too many protruding bones under his hands and when the light from the front door fell on her he could see that she was thin to the point of emaciation.

He carried her inside. Thinking she was probably hypothermic, he set her down her carefully on one of the sofas, turning it away from the fireplace so that she wasn't in the direct heat from the flames. He wanted to warm her, but not too quickly or there might be a risk of doing more harm than good. He grabbed up the folded blankets from the back of the sofa, shook them out and placed them over her then picked up the phone, intending to call an ambulance. He was kneeling by her side with the phone

balanced on one palm dialling 999 with his thumb, while he attempted to check her pulse with his other hand, when her eyes fluttered open.

“Wh, what ...are ...you ...doing?” her voice sounded scratchy and feeble, as if every word was a struggle.

“I’m calling emergency services ...to get you to a hospital.” His reply was curter than he’d intended but he was worried that delay might cost her dearly.

“No ...you mustn’t.” This was stronger ...but she was obviously ill so he started again to make the call. She reached over, with some effort and covered the phone with her hand. “No hospital, please...” The whispered words were so faint that he barely caught them. He looked at her, her skin was so pale and translucent, like some Victorian lady who took great pains to stay out of the sunlight, or, more probably, someone who suffered from a chronic illness. Blue-green eyes the colour of a deep pacific lagoon, fringed with long dark lashes watched him warily. She might be beautiful, he thought if she gained twenty or, make that even thirty pounds and did something about her hair. It was awful -long and lank, twisted into almost Rastafarian dreadlocks and full of leaves and even a small twig or two. Still, despite her dishevelled appearance, -he couldn’t place her ...but she reminded him of someone. It was uncanny.

“Okay then. No hospital.” He stood up. “I don’t know how you got like this, but you need food and I’ve got to get you warmed. Will you be alright if I leave you for a minute?” She nodded, closed her eyes and sank back on the cushions, exhausted.

Hamish raced to the kitchen, poured a little of the soup he had made for his own supper into a mug and threw it onto the microwave to reheat. He grabbed it out as soon as the timer went off and returned to the sofa.

Despite the warm room, she was shivering. Kneeling again, he managed to spoon a small amount of the lukewarm soup into her mouth. She barely swallowed and by the fifth mouthful shook her head and pursed her lips. Her eyelids had remained closed as he fed her, baby-fashion, and she was shaking even more now.

Hamish frowned. He was worried that her core temperature might be dropping dangerously low ...he’d seen exposure before and, by the looks of her, she was half-starved as well. He had agreed upon not calling an ambulance -for now, at least. As far as he was concerned that was a promise he’d break in an instant if he thought it necessary, but as long as she stayed conscious he wouldn’t make the call. He picked her up, blankets and all and carried her upstairs to the four poster bed, balancing her body at the edge of the mattress as he pulled back the covers before placing her in the centre of the bed.

Her dress was so light that it seemed hardly worth-while taking it off, but it was damp and cold and skin-to-skin contact was best to warm her, so

he removed it, dropping it in a soggy heap on the floor next to the bed. She was a little light on undergarments but he gave it little notice, more concerned at seeing how her ribs protruded through what little flesh she had. He pulled the thick duvet back over her before removing most of his own clothes and crawled in under the covers, ...turning her so that her body fitted neatly into the curve of his own and wrapping his arms and legs around her, giving her as much of his own precious body-heat as was able. He lay there, holding her close for what seemed like hours, listening as her breathing gradually settled into a deeper, more relaxed pattern and regularly checking her pulse.

Eventually, tired from the day's labour, and this last, unexpected emergency, he too slept.



When Hamish woke, it was some time in the early hours of the morning and still pitch-black. The sensation of waking, his arms encircling a warm body, was so foreign that he lay for several moments before remembering what had transpired.

Her skin felt warm, her pulse was regular and she seemed deeply asleep so he unwound his arms and legs carefully, not wishing to wake her, and eased himself out of the bed. The air in the room was chilly against his unclad skin, so he padded across to a tall scotch chest in the corner of the room and fished in the dark until his hand found some night clothes and a warm sweater. Dressed, he went downstairs to heat water for hot water bottles -one for her and one for him. He crept back, tucked the warm bottle in beside her then retreated to the platform with the futon beds he had made up for the children. Crawling across to the furthest one, he snuggled under the covers and lay looking out through the uncurtained window at the multitude of stars in the early morning sky, waiting for the bedclothes to warm sufficiently so that he could drop back off back to sleep. He was relieved that his unknown guest, whoever she was, seemed to out of danger. Tomorrow, -today- he corrected, he would ask David for the name and number of a local physician who might do house calls but for now it was enough that she was breathing and sleeping soundly. ...He yawned, warm now, he pulled the covers up over his ears and quietly drifted back to sleep.

JACK

From his vantage in the Beech tree outside the window, Jack watched the sleeping mortal. He'd been following Liana through the woods as well ...not exactly stalking but curious at her diminished state; ...He'd seen both her collapse and the rescue but hadn't felt an iota of concern for her well-

FLOWERS IN THE MORNING

being. The health and welfare of others were of little interest to him.

“Such a noble gesture on the part of the little man,” he spoke in quietly contemptuous tones, his conversation directed to a striped feral cat balanced on the branch alongside his head.

He wasn’t sure what to make of all he’d witnessed this night, or, more importantly, how he could turn it to his own gain. “This is an intriguing turn of events,” he muttered, leaning back to recline comfortably against the broad trunk of the old tree, his leaf-covered body all but disappearing into the surrounding foliage.

HAMISH AND LIANA

Can we love but on condition that the thing we love must die?

Robert Browning

“Checkmate!” David pronounced triumphantly.

Hamish glanced around the relatively crowded chess board, trying to find some way out of his predicament, but David, sitting opposite, his smile widening, was correct. Hamish’s king was in a helpless situation from which there could be no reprieve, retreat or reprisals.

“I’m making this too easy for you, aren’t I?” he said ruefully, sweeping the pieces to one side. He noticed the empty tumbler beside David. “Another whiskey?” he asked.

“Thanks” David replied, settling in his seat and draping an arm along the back of the sofa. Then as an after-thought, “As long as you don’t think you’re trying some sort of rear guard attack to dull my senses with alcohol. I feel it’s only fair to warn you that it won’t work. I’ve been draining leftover communion wine for the better part of twenty years now, so I’m a hardened drinker.”

“I thought you watered that stuff down so much that’s there’s hardly any alcohol left in it?” Hamish raised an eyebrow, his tone questioning.

David just grinned in reply.

“And ...I doubt that a couple of whiskeys are going to have too much effect on you, though if it did I might stand half a chance of winning a game.” Hamish poured a generous measure of Laphroaig single malt into David’s glass before sinking into the cushions of the sofa opposite. They had positioned a small side table in front of the sitting room fire, drawn the

sofas closer together and had spent a pleasant evening eating, talking and playing games of chess -all of which David had so far won.

“I wouldn’t worry too much ...you’ll improve with practice. And it’s not life and death after all, it’s just a game.” David leant back against the comfortable cushions with his drink. “That was a grand dinner, thank you. I would have understood if you’d wanted to cancel it, with an unexpected houseguest and all. Did you manage to get through to Dr McLean after you called me this morning?”

“Yes, I did. Thanks for the number. He was kind enough to come round and examine her. Not that she was exactly thrilled with the attention. But it appears that there is nothing wrong that some good food and rest won’t fix. She’s been asleep most of the day -I’ve had to wake her several times to get her to eat. I sat with her until the doctor came. I’d say whatever she’s been through, it’s her exhausted and sad. Sometimes she sleeps quite peacefully and then she starts crying in her sleep and mumbling about someone called John. From what she was saying earlier it sounds as if this John-chap has gone and left her. I’ve never heard anyone talk like that in their sleep before ...she sounds so forlorn. She’s still refusing to tell me her name so I don’t know if there is someone I should be contacting.”

“Who knows if that would be a good idea, anyway?” David cautioned. “It may well depend upon what she’s running away from. Still ...if I can be of any help at all, please just ask. I’ve had a fair bit of experience with counselling.”

“Hmmm, but in my experience you have to want therapy for that to work,” Hamish replied. “I checked on her not long ago and she’s sound asleep now. So, since there’s nothing more either of us can do this evening, shall we get back to the game? This time I believe I’ll win.”

David raised an eyebrow, grinned evilly, and set up the board for a rematch...



Even before Hamish opened the outer conservatory doors he could feel the cold seeping into the unheated room. As he bid Hamish a cheery goodnight, David did up the buttons on his thick winter coat, adjusting his scarf to cover his ears.

“The barometers dropping fast. If this keeps up I have a feeling we might be in for a White Christmas. It’s been nearly ten years since the last so I feel we must be due one.” After repeating his thanks for an enjoyable evening and reissuing an invitation to Christmas lunch at the vicarage, which Hamish politely declined, he left, carrying the torch that he had loaned Hamish the night before.

Returning inside, Hamish felt restless. He remembered the books he’d

left on the chair the previous night, forgotten after the distraction of discovering the woman in his garden. Deciding to read by candlelight, he carried the heavy candelabrum to behind the sofa. He lit the tiered candles before switching off the room lights then picked up the books he'd chosen and returned to the comfort of the fireside. It wasn't over-bright but between the lambent glow of the candles and the fire's dancing flames there was sufficient light to read. He started leafing through the book on the language of flowers. Catching sight of the posy over the top of the pages, he decided, purely out of curiosity and because he had nothing better to do, to look up the species in front of him. First there was babies' breath, he turned pages until he found it –that was *innocence*; then forget-me-not, fairly straight-forward, he thought, *not forgetting*; lavender denoted *calmness*. He turned the yellowed pages to rosemary –that was one he'd already known ...rosemary for *remembrance*; lastly were the snowdrops, they, interestingly, represented *hope* and *consolation*.

He stared at the little bouquet with renewed interest, wondering if it was a random act of kindness that these flowers had been left on his doorstep or if someone was trying to tell him something?

It was late by the time he went upstairs to his alcove bed. Navigating his way up the stairs by a single candle he'd taken from the stand after extinguishing the others. He checked on the sleeping figure -she was hardly visible under the covers of the big bed- before tucking a freshly warmed hottie at her feet. The doctor had assisted her to dress in a pair of Hamish's flannel pyjamas, which although overlarge, were thick and warm -so he knew she shouldn't be cold. Her washed dress was hanging, a pale shape, on the door of the wardrobe.

Satisfied he'd done all he could for the day, Hamish continued to his own bed where he slept peacefully and dreamlessly.



As David had predicted, snowflakes started falling shortly before lunch on Christmas Eve. Hamish spent an energetic morning carting firewood from the woods. The dry wood, he took directly to a covered stack along the rear of the house, the green he piled neatly beside the carriage house, ready he hoped, for next winter. Rather than putting the last load of dry logs onto the covered pile he opened an ingenious little door that had been let into the rear wall of White Briars, close to the downstairs chimney breast. Behind, was a narrow cupboard, large enough to store two or three days of dry firewood. He refilled it, replacing wood already burnt the previous nights. At the back of the cupboard a second door opened from the sitting room to allow access to the stacked wood, so saving the necessity of going outside to replenish the supply in bad weather.

Looking at the darkening sky, Hamish pushed as much wood into the corners of the space as he could -if David was correct in his prediction of a heavy snowfall, he might be glad of it.

He kept working, enjoying the exercise, until the snow began to fall so heavily that it was becoming difficult to see. Time, anyway, he thought, to check on his house guest. Earlier that morning she had managed to eat some pieces of bite-sized pieces of fruit before turning away and pulling the covers back over her head, making it clear that she had no wish to talk. He had left her sleeping when he had gone outdoors. It had given him a chance to think and decide what he might do about her. That she needed feeding to gain weight was a given, ...He felt bad that someone might be worried about her disappearance but he decided to leave well enough alone for now. He would continue to care for and house her until she was strong enough to ...to what? To leave, he supposed ...but go where? Well ...for now, it was Christmas and he had no plans to go anywhere for the holiday season so she was welcome to stay. He pulled his boots off and went inside, determined to wake her for long enough to make that known to her.

Padding up the stairs in his stocking feet, his noble intentions came to nothing. She was gone. So were the pyjamas, the extra blanket that he'd put over her that first night when she was so cold and an old woollen sweater he'd left lying on the chair beside the bed. Hoping he was mistaken, Hamish checked the upstairs bathroom and then, systematically, the rest of the house. There was no sign of her. She must have crept out the front door while he was going backwards and forwards between the woods and the house. He was crossing through the sitting room for the second time, wondering if he should call the police, ...not for the petty thefts, they weren't important, but it was snowing ...what an appalling time to leave! ...Then he saw the flowers lying beside the little posy on the chess table. He stopped in his tracks.

Spread out across the table was an odd collection of flowers and greenery. A single spike of agrimony which he recognised from Maud's interest in Bach flower remedies, a sprig of yew and a third flower he was not familiar with.

He picked up the agrimony ...it had been left atop the little book he'd been reading the night before, which he had a feeling was significant. He put the stem down with the others and opened the book, searching. Sure enough ...agrimony signified thankfulness or appreciation ...a polite '*thank you*' for his efforts on her behalf ...well, nice of her he thought sourly. He turned to the pages near the back of the book for the explanation for the yew. It indicated '*sorrow*' ...hmm, from her melancholy ramblings while asleep, that one came as no real surprise. He crossed to the book shelves to find a volume on plant identification ...it didn't take long before he recognised the orange-golden umbel-shaped head of butterfly weed.

Referring back to the first book, he discovered that it meant ‘*Let me go,*’ ... “so, putting them all together,” he muttered to himself, “*Thanks a bunch, but I’m really unhappy so let me leave,*” and, presumably, “*I don’t want to be followed.*” Yeah, right. Like that was about to happen.

He stuck the flowers in the vase with the earlier posy, -realising as he did who had most likely given him the previous bunch. Pulling his outdoor clothes back on, he hurried outside and spent the rest of the day searching the garden and the woods for any sign of her. The only place that he couldn’t bring himself to check was the glade down by the pool. She might have sought shelter in the old summer house but he had no desire to see the ruined figures of the clay sculptures he had made so took a chance that she would not hide somewhere so obvious.

He didn’t find her -hadn’t really expected to. By the time he returned to the cottage the snow was beginning to settle. He hoped that wherever she had gone, it was out of this weather. He phoned David, who promised to keep an eye out around the village in case she should turn up there, then went to prepare himself something for dinner. It was when he checked the fridge for the left-over chicken from the previous night’s roast that he found that she must have taken food supplies as well ...including the remains of the chicken and roast vegetables, most of the fruit from a bowl on the bench top and a loaf of bread. He checked the pantry shelves to see what else she might have borrowed, feeling more pleased than irritated ...at least with food she would stand a chance, as long as she had found shelter, but it looked as if he would have to find something else for his own dinner.

Resigned to eat more like a pauper than a king on Christmas Eve, he reached into the back of the pantry cupboard for a packet of Rice Risotto.

HAMISH

The Rose has but a summer-reign

The daisy never dies.

James Montgomery

Christmas morning, the garden was like a fresh, white canvas from one end to the other. But Hamish, from his vantage point high up on the widow's walk, knew that he had not climbed up the steep steps just to admire the view. He'd been hoping, like some Good King Wenceslas in his tower, to spy a lone figure down there in the snow ...but nothing larger than the fox he'd spied running casually across the open space of the yew garden had moved in the space below.

A chirp from the turret roof behind him had Hamish twisting and craning his neck upwards. A robin was perched near the edge of the roof, peering down at him. It chirped again, took off and flew around his head before landing back where it had started.

"Don't tell me you're the same little guy that gave me the Cook's tour of this place when I was floundering through the woods."

The bird sat preening and looking as smug as a robin could. Hamish rested his backside against the parapet. "Well, it's good to see you again. I wondered where you'd got to," he spoke casually, as if chatting with a friend. "A very merry Christmas to you," he smiled, pleased to see the little fellow.

The robin chirruped once more, flew up to perch briefly atop the weather vane above the turret then flew off down the garden. Hamish watched the little bird until he disappeared from sight into the trees near the

carriage house. Checking his watch, he could see that it was time he was away himself.

He ducked through the tower door and turned his body to go down the ladder, humming the tune he'd been thinking of while up on the walk ...careful not to bump his Christmas present to himself and the other reason he had made the climb to the tower. A celestial telescope, bought shortly after moving into White Briars but before he had realised that the tower was more than ornamental. He'd left it in the packaging until this morning ...he and Maud had always opened their Christmas gifts in the morning before going off to church, and he'd wanted to retain some semblance of the tradition even if she wasn't there to share it with him. Steve and Linda had left gifts while they were down, after trying unsuccessfully to convince him to come back to London for the holiday. Hamish had already phoned to wish them and the children a merry Christmas ...Jamie was beside himself with excitement at the Thomas the Tank Engine rail set that Hamish had bought for him and Steve had said that he *REALLY* wished that Hamish had been there in person to help put the tracks together at six a.m. that morning. Don't worry mate, he'd said with a hint of menace ...he'd get his one day.

Hamish left the house by the front entranceway, planning to wander down past the yews on his way to church. It was a perfect morning for a walk -there was stillness in the air, as if everything in the garden was holding its breath on this most sacred of mornings. Like a small boy, he enjoyed leaving footprints in the pristine surface of the snow ...as he approached the top terrace steps he stopped and looked behind at his tracks. Ideal snow for making a snowman... He felt a sudden sharp pang at the reminder that he had no one to make a snowman with, or for, then let it pass ...the snow was still beautiful, regardless of him having anyone to show it off to or not ...beautiful, and cold, ...he had two pairs of woollen socks inside his boots and wore thick brown corduroy trousers, a warm merino wool polo-neck and forest-green pullover, coat, bright red scarf and gloves. He hoped the walk would warm him before he arrived at church. Those old buildings, he knew from experience, with their thick stone walls could be worse than ice-boxes if they weren't pre-heated.

With the coating of snow, the yews looked more fairy-tale-like than ever, marching in their double ranks either side. This morning, appropriately, they resembled huge plump Christmas puddings with whipped cream on top. Hamish had brought the camera with him and spent several minutes photographing before he moved on towards the gap that led to the pool. He knew that he could have avoided the lower garden altogether by taking the path up through the trees to the carriage house but it seemed silly on a day like this to miss out seeing any part of the garden when it was decorated so especially for Christmas. He stopped at the top of the divided flight of

stairs, looking down over the rill and the pool with its white marble statue, to the summerhouse at the far end of the glade. The summerhouse was a one-roomed octagonal structure, mimicking the shape of the pool and set back among the trees. As it was well down his fix-it list Hamish had taken little notice of the small building since his arrival ...it was in a run-down state and would take considerable time if he was to repair and paint it himself. Now that he was here, he supposed he should check it to make sure that his runaway houseguest hadn't taken shelter.

The rill and steps had collected snow in an enchanting way so he took more photos before descending. He walked around the pool on the side closest to the marble lady and farthest away from his own sculptures, not feeling quite ready to look upon the damage the rain must have done.

Still, he couldn't ignore them completely, and the harder he tried not to look the more they drew his gaze. From what he could see they were well-covered in snow ...they both looked as white, now, as the marble statue of the woman. She was as beautiful as ever, frozen in her act of grace, placing her snow-capped flower wreath upon the water. He went past her and peered through the grimy windows of the summer house ...nothing in there other than years of accumulated dust and dirt and a small upright wood stove in the centre of the room. It was surprising though, the space inside was larger than he had first thought. That first night he had found the pool and sculpture he had overlooked the summer house completely, more than half-hidden as it was, subsequently he had been preoccupied with working in other parts of the garden and had given it little thought, but if the heating could be improved and basic facilities added, it might make a charming guest studio. It was something to think about ...he was musing on the possibilities as he carried on round the pool towards the path that would lead him up to the gardeners shed and the track to the village.

As he approached the entrance to the path he couldn't avoid walking closer to the figures of the woman and child ...it was odd, he thought, how the snow had adhered to every part of the sculptures, not just the upper surfaces. Curious, he went closer. He was within reach of the larger figure when he realised that what he had assumed to be snow was, instead, thousands upon thousands of tiny daisy-like flowers, growing in clusters so tight there was no space between them. He went across to the figure that was his little daughter ...she too was enveloped in the same delicate floral skin. He knelt in the snow beside her and touched the miniscule petals. The gently tantalising scent that his touch released into the cold air was so sweetly divine that he breathed it in deeply.

For the second time in that glade, tears coursed freely down his cheeks. This time, though, his weeping sprang from joy as he tried to take in this beautiful gift that was nothing short of a miracle, and that someone had seen fit to give him this Christmas day.

“Thank you,” he said, simply, to the open air ...as he walked around and around the two figures, taking photographs to capture the scene. By the time he was satisfied he had enough shots, his footprints had made a deep figure eight in the snow surrounding the sculptures. Surely the flowers couldn’t last long in this cold ...they would be like some ephemeral Andy Goldsworthy sculpture, here for a few hours only. The photographs would help him to remember.

It was time to leave. He looked at the time; he would have to hurry now if he wanted to make it to the service on time. He turned and exited the glade, making for the path to Thornden.

Arriving puffing slightly but not late, he slipped quietly into a rear pew. To his amusement, the organist was playing a spirited rendition of ‘*Good King Wenceslas*’ and somewhat to his surprise, the church was pleasantly warm so he took off the coat and scarf and stuffed his gloves in a pocket. Saint Michaels looked wonderful. Someone had looped long garlands of holly and fir, entwined with ribbon and bright red berries along the walls and on the end of the pews were flat circular wreaths ...each made of berries in a variety of hues....red, orange and gold, deep purple, green and white, some with circlets of tiny cones or sprigs of green fir around the edges. The use of the berries and natural greenery rather than artificial decorations fit perfectly with the timber and stonework of the old country church.

It was pleasant just to sit quietly at the back and be something of a spectator. Several people smiled in his direction as they came in and said ‘Good morning’ or wished him a ‘Merry Christmas’ and by the time the service started the pews were full. Hamish found his thoughts drifting a little during the sermon ...to other Christmases growing up in Scotland and with Maud in London. ...David kept his address short, undoubtedly in deference to the knowledge that people had places to go and turkeys to baste. The children sang a version of “*Away in a Manger*” in various keys and a woman with a lovely contralto voice sang ‘*O Little town of Bethlehem*’, then the service was over. Hamish put his coat and scarf back on and prepared to leave.

David greeted him at the porch. “Merry Christmas, Hamish. You’re looking very festive this morning.” He leaned forward a little, “Any sign of your mysterious lady?” he queried.

“Merry Christmas to you too, David. And no, I haven’t found her yet. I came through the garden and the woods this morning but there were no human footprints other than my boots.” There were people behind him, waiting to speak to their vicar so he added, hurriedly... “I must tell you later about the most amazing Christmas gift I received...”

“Whatever it was, you look happy. That’s good enough,” David paused, seeing something in Hamish’s face that hadn’t been there before... “You wouldn’t reconsider my offer of Christmas dinner at the vicarage with me

and my family, would you? I promise you, there is always enough to feed several extra mouths. My daughters are here with their families and you would be most welcome. You can turn up anytime between now and midday...I can't promise you a quiet afternoon but the food is sure to be good....especially since I'm not cooking. My children tend to think I am inept in that area and it may be that they are right," he finished, laughing.

"Actually, I would love to come, thank you. It appears that I've lost my own house guest, so I don't need to stay at White Briars for the day. ...You haven't heard any mention of her from your parishioners, have you?"

"Lovely, we'll set a place for you. Please don't feel you need to bring anything. And, No, I'm sorry, I've heard nothing. If I do, you'll be the first to know, but perhaps she doesn't want to be found? I hope she's not out and about in this cold weather ...I'm only managing to stand here because one of my daughters was kind enough to give me thermal underwear for Christmas." He smiled broadly, before turning to greet the next group.

Hamish continued on his way. He had passed under the lych gate and was striding along the path towards the kissing gate when a loud voice called his name. "Mr McAllister, hey there, wait up!" Arthur Blaine, out of the church, had seen him and was waving. He was accompanied by two others, both muffled in hats, scarves and coats. Hamish backtracked to the church gate to speak to them.

"I wanted to introduce you to my grandson." Arthur said, after Christmas pleasantries had been exchanged. "This 'ere is my daughter." Hamish shook hands with the bright red mitten that was held towards him but could see little of her face, her woollen scarf and hat hiding all but her lavender-blue eyes. The short greeting she gave him was somewhat muffled by the thick layers of her scarf. "And," Arthur put a hand on the boys' shoulder, "this is 'er son, Mattie." ...at a narrow-eyed glance from his daughter, "...er, Matthew, that is. Anyways, e's been 'ounding me to talk to you ever since I told 'im you'd moved in. He's keen to take on the job of mowin' your lawns over there at White Briars come spring-time, if ye want 'im to ...fer pay, that is. An' any other odd jobs he could do for you. He's savin' up for one o' them BMX bike things ...e's dead keen on anything that 'e can try an' break 'is young neck on, ...bikes, skateboards, you name it, if it's got wheels an' goes fast, 'e's keen."

"I got the helmet and safety pads for Christmas, but my mum says I have to save up for half the bike by myself, before she'll put up the other half of the money." Matthew said enthusiastically. His mother remained silent on the matter.

Hamish considered the boy, trying to hide his own smile and doing his best to appear serious, "I see no reason why you couldn't do that, Matthew. Though, I'm thinking of buying a ride-on mower, so you would need to learn to drive it -safely. With your mother's permission of course?" He

glanced questionably at Matthew's mother. She shrugged her shoulders but didn't respond.

"Awesome!" Matthew was obviously happy with the prospect of zooming around the lawns on a ride-on. "I'm twelve, but I'm strong for my age ...you ask mum. I do all sorts of stuff at the nursery. Don't I mum?" Matthew turned to his mother pleadingly, looking for her support. From the little that Hamish could see of her, she looked very young to have a twelve year old son ...and Matthew was already several inches taller. Hamish wondered how such a small woman managed the day to day jobs around a nursery.

She shrugged once more in acquiescence. "I've already been pestered so much that I've had to agree to this plan. Not that I'm entirely thrilled with it. But Matthew is a big help ...I think Dad's already told you I run the nursery nearby." As she spoke she was unravelling the scarf from around her face and dragged off her hat – revealing first, short white blond hair with coloured tips, although, unlike the previous time they'd met the tips had changed to a brilliant shade of red. Sara's grinning face emerged from behind the scarf, her eyes merry as she gave Hamish the once-over. "Look at you," she said laughingly, "All settled into White Briars. ...So, you found the cottage then? I was wondering if you'd open your eyes enough to see what was right in front of you, that day we met." At her father's questioning noise, she turned to him, explaining, "Hamish and I have already run into each other, so to speak. Although, if I recall correctly it was more a case of Hamish skating onto a patch of ice, looking speculatively up at him, "I trust your rump has recovered from the falls?"

"Why thank you, yes. But it wasn't just *my* rump ...you fell too if I remember rightly."

"A minor bump in comparison to your spectacular oopsie," she rejoined. "Anyway, I didn't know that it was you that Dad was talking about when he said someone had taken over White Briars. He didn't mention a name. Just said you were 'foreign', by which, I now realise he meant, Scottish." She turned back to her father with a bemused expression. "Really Dad? *Foreign*? Scotland's been part of Britain for quite some time now and last time I looked you didn't need a passport to go backwards and forwards across the border.

Her father made a non-committal "Harrumph." Sara just shook her head, causing the red tips of her hair to bob about in an interesting way.

"And to think, I stopped running through the garden because I thought some 'foreign gent' owned the place and wouldn't like me trespassing. It was a good excuse to stop, anyway." Sara shrugged, "No matter ... I've been intending to come and speak to you myself. Just hadn't got around to it with the Christmas rush and all. Dad said you might need some plants for the garden and I'm always on the lookout for new business. And if you're

interested, I can get you a couple of swans for your pond. I know someone who is keen to get rid of a pair that they bought before realising that they're not the most sociable of pets for a small garden."

"And Granddad said there's a dovecote at White Briars ...we breed white pigeons," Matthew added enthusiastically.

At Hamish's blank look, Sara added, "You know? Pigeons. Birds. With feathers. That say "coo" and live in lofts. Or in attics. Or in dovecotes, like yours."

"Granddad and I breed them. To sell, that is." Matthew was keen for Hamish to know that the pigeons were not part of the same package deal as the swans.

Evidently business acumen ran strong in this family, thought Hamish, wryly. In less than two minutes he'd been propositioned with someone to mow the lawns and do odd jobs, additional plants, swans and now doves. He was impressed. "I've already cleaned out the dovecote and *was* thinking about restocking it so I'm definitely on for the doves. Pigeons. Cooing birds. Whatever." He gave Sara a questioning look. "But I don't know how many? Perhaps you could advise me on that?" he said, "And I guess that the swans might be a good idea to help keep the pool free of weed. As long as they're not too unfriendly?"

"Oh no, they'll be fine. They just need a bit of space, that's all." Sara said unconcernedly, "I can bring them round tomorrow if you like?"

Phew ...these people didn't mess around, he thought. "I guess that would be okay," he concurred, wondering what he'd got himself into. He looked down at Matthew, "as far as the lawn mowing goes, you've got yourself a job. Come round with your mother and we'll agree on a rate ...but you won't be able to start until the weather improves a bit. I doubt that even you would want to be mowing in the snow?" He looked back at Sara, "and you, please feel free to trespass any time. I know how much you love jogging and I'd hate to discourage you from cutting through the garden on your runs."

Sara's grimace was answer enough.

"Choice!" Matthew said, grinning from ear to ear. "I promise you won't regret it, Mr McAllister." he was already skipping away, chanting... "BMX ...here I come..."

"Thank you very much," his mother said. "I appreciate that." She looked up at Hamish for a moment before asking, "Um, do you have any plans for Christmas dinner? Because you'd be welcome to come and join us ...if you haven't got something organised already. It'd be nothing fancy. It's just dad, Matthew and me."

"Thanks for asking, but I've just now accepted an invitation to the vicarage." Hamish said. "It's very kind of you, though. And now I'd better get going if I want to make it back to White Briars to grab a bottle of wine

to take with me.”

“I see you got that path through the woods clear again.” Arthur inserted himself back in the conversation. Hamish had the feeling that little that happened in and around the village escaped Arthur’s notice. Once he had Hamish’s attention, Arthur enquired, “Seen anythin’ interesting in that garden yet?”

“Yes, I have cleared the path. I’m already finding it useful ...feel free to walk that way if you’re not driving.” Hamish answered, preferring to concentrate on Arthur’s statement rather than the question. He didn’t know quite what to make of Arthur’s line of inquiry ...then remembered their somewhat odd conversation the day they’d met.

“No, nothing so far,” he fibbed, finding himself reluctant to mention the presence or absence of his mystery house guest her to Arthur just yet.

Arthur looked at him as if he knew he’d just been fed a lie. “Hmmpf ...well, there’s still time for that. We’d best be on our way and let you get on,” he replied a little curtly. “We’ll say goodbye and go and get our dinner.”

“Who’s getting the dinner Dad?” Sara questioned.

“Well, I always help.” her father said, testily. Hamish bid them both a quick goodbye and left the two bickering, he hoped, good-naturedly. He would race home and dig out a bottle of wine but if he was going to make it back to the vicarage in time he might be better to use his car on the return journey.

It was as he was passing by the marble sculpture, prettily perched on her rock at the pool’s edge ...he’d already done another couple of circuits around his own sculptures just to reassure himself that the flowers were for real, going so far as to pick one off and check the petals –they were, ...when it suddenly struck him ...his mystery woman ...she was the spitting image of the woman on the rock. Even malnourished and ill-kempt, the proportions and planes of her face, the shape of her jawline, and especially her eyes ...he remembered lamenting that those same eyes in the marble sculpture by the pool were a little lifeless, but he never forgot the shape of someone’s eyes. It was unmistakable ...it had to be her ...but how? That statue must be at least sixty years old ...and the woman who had turned up outside the house two nights ago would have been in her mid to late twenties at the most.

But it was her ...he was sure of it...

Arthur’s recent query came back to him and he was reminded of the stories the old man had passed on about the flower-loving sprite at the bottom of the garden. Suddenly it didn’t seem such a flight of fancy after all ...but surely not? Hamish shook his head as if to dispel the ridiculous notion of it all and left the poolside.

He took the shortest route back to the house. And there, by the

doorstep to the conservatory, for the second time this week, he found flowers left for him to find. This time it was a large bunch of white lilies and crimson-red roses, interspersed with green branches of holly and fir. The heady fragrance of the lilies and fir hung in the air all around the doorway. He sniffed appreciatively murmuring, “Mmmm ... the scent of Christmas.” Picking up the flowers and taking them inside, he filled the kitchen sink with water and left them to soak while he got ready to go.

While Hamish was hunting in the kitchen pantry for a suitable bottle of wine to take to the vicarage, he noticed the packet of cereal he had opened for breakfast had disappeared. Opening the fridge he found that a carton of milk had been taken as well. Now he knew what the bunch of flowers on the doorstep was ...payment. He smiled to himself ...he was going to need more groceries if this kept up. He wondered how she had got in again. The house had been locked when he had left that morning.

Just in case, he took some cheese rolls from the freezer and left them sitting on the bench before he went out.



Christmas at the vicarage was thoroughly enjoyable. Hamish took the latest flowers as an additional gift for his host, though he knew it was as much to show David as anything else. They had been immediately seized, amid exclamations of delight by one of David’s daughters and arranged into a festive floral arrangement around a fat white candle to form the centrepiece for the Christmas table, their fragrance filling the vicarage dining room.

The meal was as noisy and boisterous as promised. David’s four grandchildren, with ages ranging from a babe in arms to five years contributed to the organised bedlam of the traditional Christmas lunch of roast and puddings and his youngest daughter had brought her current boyfriend, filling the long dining table with eight adults and the children.

Hamish had little opportunity to speak privately with David until later, when they shared the task of washing a small mountain of pots and pans used during the day. David, elbow-deep in sudsy dishwater, listened in fascination while Hamish told him about his discoveries by the pool that morning and his nascent theory about the missing woman.

“I know it sounds more than a little far-fetched. I don’t really expect you to believe me -in fact, I’m not too sure that I believe myself...” he trailed off, turning away to add the latest dish to a considerable pile on the kitchen table.

“...Wait a moment,” David interjected. “You forget who you’re talking to. Any more far-fetched, you think, than, oh, I don’t know ...walking on water, raising the dead or controlling the wind? Hmm,” he continued, “Just

for arguments sake, you don't seem to have considered the possibility that this woman might be a direct descendant of whoever modelled for that statue? It may be that the explanation is more prosaic than otherworldly."

"You are quite right." Hamish conceded. "I'm sorry, but I guess it's just that after finding random bunches of out-of-season flowers and seeing my own sculptures transformed like they were this morning, then realising that my mystery guest was the spitting image of the statue by the pool, I put two and two together and made ten. Before all that I was never inclined to believe Arthur's story. Just forget I mentioned it."

"No, no, no ...that's not what I said." David waved the soapy dish brush around like a conductor's baton, emphasising his point, "I'm not *discounting* your version ...just offering another perspective. Until we see her again, neither theory should be disregarded. Now, you say that food has been taken, so that supposes that she is still somewhere nearby. Hopefully it's just a matter of time before you encounter her again, then you will be able to speak to her yourself. Although how one goes about asking someone if they are some sort of immortal flower fairy is quite beyond me." He thought for a moment, "In the meantime, we can do a little detective work of our own. The parish records here are quite extensive, ...that is to say, they cover a lot more than baptisms, deaths and marriages and they go back a very long way. If what you say is true, we'd be looking for records prior to world war two, but surely if this woman, fairy, whatever has been popping up through time we ought to be able to find some indication in the older records. Mmmm, let's see, ...I'm busy with my family tomorrow, then there's the service Sunday morning, ...but I'm free pretty much straight after that so why don't you meet me at the church, say eleven a.m. and we'll see if we can find anything. There, that's the last one," he dumped a large roasting dish on the draining board; "I'll just wipe this bench and then let's go and have a restorative brandy. Much as I love these family get-togethers, since I'm not permitted to cook I tend to get the cleaning-up jobs and it does get rather tiresome after several days."

The brandy was excellent -and followed by several more. Hamish arrived home late to find that the cheese rolls had not been touched. It was chilly in the kitchen, so he left them where they were and went on up to bed.

HAMISH

*White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
 Fast-fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
 And mid-May's eldest child,
 The coming musk-rose, full of deny wine,*
 John Keats

When he came downstairs the next morning the rolls had gone. In their place was a tiny bunch of sweetly scented purple violets tied with grass. Hamish held the posy up to his nose, breathing in the soft fragrance, before searching for something small enough to put them in; ...if this kept up, he thought, he was going to need more vases.

After eating toast and a boiled egg for breakfast, -cereal no longer an option- he thought he might go outside and wander around the garden. Looking at the fernlike Jack Frost patterns on the kitchen windows, there had been an overnight freeze. He wandered through to the study, lighting the fire he'd already set, and scrubbed at patch of the front bay window until he could see outside to the terrace -the snow on the top lawn sparkling in the morning sunlight, beckoned him out- he was sitting on the bottom step of the stairs in the foyer, pulling on his boots, when there was a knock at the front door. Opening the door, with one boot on, the other dangling from his hand, he found Sara and Matthew standing in the portico, looking as if they should be expected. Behind them, sitting on the snow-covered terrace were two animal cages of the sort that might be used to transport a dog to the vet.

Oh dear, Hamish thought, the anti-social swans; he had forgotten they

were arriving today. Through the mesh covered ends of the cages he could see two long white necks writhing backwards and forwards as the occupants attempted to free themselves. The largest of the pair was alternating between clattering its beak across the metal of the cage door and pecking at the lock. Hamish wasn't feeling sure at all that the behaviour boded well for their occupancy in the garden. Next to the cages sat a bulging burlap sack.

"Good morning. You're up bright and early birds, aren't you?" Hamish greeted. "Those cages look heavy. If you'd have come and got me I would have helped."

"Morning," Sara returned cheerfully, adding a trifle smugly, "We parked the van as close as we could and we managed, didn't we, Matthew?" she ruffled her son's hair.

"Yep, told you I'm strong, didn't I, Mr McAllister?" Matthew quipped, striking a pose that hinted he'd been watching bodybuilding contests.

"You did too," Hamish said, laughing at his antics. "And hey, as the sea turtle said to the fish, '*Mr McAllister is my father,*' just call me Hamish." He turned back to Sara, "Well now that you're here, shall we take these two down to the pool and set them free? They don't sound too happy to be pent up in those cages." He pulled on his other boot and closed the door, reaching down to grab the carry handle of the larger of the two, presumably the male. The bird let out a loud hiss as Hamish bent to pick up its cage. He put out a hand to take the sack as well but Matthew had already hefted it into his arms, grinning despite visibly sagging under the weight. Almost imperceptibly, Sara shook her head at Hamish as she picked up the second cage with its vociferously complaining occupant and they headed down the garden in the direction of the pool, so Hamish let the boy handle the bag himself; keeping a watchful eye in case the weight should get too much for the youngster.

"I'm not too knowledgeable about swans," Hamish admitted. "What's to stop them taking off once we set them free?" He pointed to the cage in Sara's hand, flapping his free hand in a parody of flying.

"Shouldn't be a problem," Sara replied airily. "That's what the sack's for ...grain. It's pretty simple -as long as you feed them, they should stay around ...if they know what's good for them, and they usually do. And they've been such a nuisance in the village that if they do turn up there again I'm sure someone will bring them back. Dad's next door neighbour purchased them but they've been getting out of their garden and terrorizing the local children on their way to school as well as ruining more than one flower garden and several vege patches last summer, so nobody will be too keen to see them back in the village. If you see what I mean."

"I think I do." Hamish countered dryly, pondering if it was too late to back out. "I'm starting to wonder what I've got myself into."

"You shouldn't have a problem," she repeated. "They just need a bit

more space. Your pool will be perfect ...it's lovely and quiet, and well away from any other houses and gardens."

"And what happens when I want to go down there myself?" Hamish enquired.

"Just let them know who's boss," Sara said, smiling glibly across at him. "That shouldn't be too much of a problem, should it?"

They were nearing the bottom of the flight of steps to the yew lawn and Hamish was saved from making a reply by Matthew stumbling under his too heavy load. He quickly put a hand to grab the boy's arm to stop him from tumbling, suggesting, "How about we share the load? We could take a corner each." Matthew, by now red in the face from exertion, agreed. Hamish was rewarded by a small smile of gratitude and a nod of approval for the face-saving suggestion from Sara.

When they arrived by the pool, Sara directed Matthew to spread several handfuls of grain on the snowy ground beside the water. "We'll let them both go together," she instructed Hamish. "Matthew, you stand out of the way over there." She pointed to the left, "You have the male, Hamish. He's a little riled up with the move and all -so you might want to be prepared in case he takes exception to you."

"Yeah," Matthew trilled from the safety of the side-lines. "His name's Attila."

"Great," Hamish said in dry tones. "With a name like that ...now I'm feeling really confident of liking him." He bent and opened the cage door.

Attila exited in a rush of ruffled feathers and beak but, fortunately for Hamish, headed straight for his mate, as Sara released the female. She and Hamish stepped back to give the birds room to explore their new surroundings. After a few minutes of general grumbling and checking that each other was still alive the two settled to feeding. Sara, Hamish and Matthew stood watching as Attila left the grain -launching himself into the weedy pond like an ice-breaker cleaving a path through the pack-ice, to paddle afloat in the middle of the water, neck weaving to and fro as he gobbled up the green pond weed.

"See. I told you they'd be happy here," Sara said gleefully.

"You did at that," Hamish admitted. "So if he's Attila, who's she?" He pointed at the female, who hesitated a minute or so before joining her mate on the water. Soon, she too was feeding contentedly.

"Oh, that's Nefertiti." Matthew said.

"On account of her elegant neck," Sara added helpfully. Seeing Hamish's raised eyebrows she added defensively, "Don't blame us, the neighbours named them." She looked around the glade. "Things look different here. I always loved how beautiful the marble lady was and how peaceful and serene it is around this pool," she indicated the marble figure, "but I don't recall those two statues on the other side of the water. They

look like a mother and her little child ...how lovely.”

“They’re new,” Hamish spoke curtly, making it clear that he didn’t wish to discuss the two sculptures. “We should go and leave these birds to settle in. I’ll come down later this evening to feed and check on them.” Stony-faced, he strode across to the summerhouse, leaving the grain sack against the summerhouse wall with a rock sitting on top of it to stop the birds getting into the feed and returned to pick up both of the empty cages. Sara and Matthew had little choice but to trail along in his wake, back up the steps to the yew walk.

Half way along the yews, Hamish stopped abruptly and faced Sara. His expression had lost some of its grimness. “I’m sorry, I was rude back there,” he apologised. “The sculptures are of my wife and dau..., I mean, my late-wife and daughter. They died nearly two years ago in a car accident. But it’s not your fault, and clearly, I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

“I’m really sorry,” Sara was aghast. “I didn’t know. ...I really didn’t mean to be so insensitive. And there I was blathering on ...I always talk too much when I get nervous. I mean,” she trailed off ... “Oh, heck, we don’t get a lot of single, good-looking men round here and I, I’m, ...I’m not used to...” she stopped, “I think I’ll just shut up now.” She pantomimed zipping her mouth shut.

The gesture reminded Hamish of the first day they’d met when she had done something similar in almost this same spot, insisting that she couldn’t tell him about who had clipped the yews. He remembered too, that he would have quite probably departed the garden unaware of the cottage’s presence if it hadn’t been for Sara telling him to look harder.

“Please don’t stop on my account,” he said. “I enjoy blathering ...it’s a little known fact that I come from a long line of Scottish blatherers –only we call it *blethering* in Scotland. It’s something of a time-honoured family tradition.” He smiled conspiratorially, attempting to lessen her discomfort. “Would you and Matthew like to come up for coffee or hot chocolate? I may even have mini marshmallows and chocolate biscuits ...with a bit of luck.” Hamish, a little reticent to mention his house guest-cum food thief; thought that perhaps he should be careful of offering food that might no longer be in the pantry.

“Yes ...please!” Matthew yelled from behind a large yew shaped like a peacock. He had wandered a little way from the adults and had been weaving his way in and out of the towering rows of yews but was obviously still keeping half an ear on the conversation. “I’m starving!”

“You should know better than offer food to a growing twelve year old.” Sara warned. “He’s always ‘starving’, even when he’s just eaten,” she looked fondly towards her son.

Back at the doorstep, as they were removing boots, Hamish inquired, “I forgot to ask; do the swans need a shelter or anything? It’s pretty cold out

here at the moment.”

“No,” said Sara, “They should be fine; after all, they have the woods for shelter if the weather worsens. I’d just leave them to settle in.”

They went inside and through to the kitchen. As Sara passed through the sitting room she exclaimed over the house, craning her neck to peer at the intricate patterns of the sitting room ceiling. “Wow, Its really beautiful, isn’t it? All this lovely plasterwork ...I’ve never been inside before, this place has been shut up for as long as I can remember; I used to come here with my dad sometimes when he worked in the garden but he’d tell me off if I tried to look in the windows and I always imagined it as dark and a bit scary. I never knew it was this pretty, it’s like something straight out of a fairy tale, isn’t it?”

“Maybe -that’s what I’d like to know,” Hamish retorted cryptically. Sara was a little surprised at his odd comment but when he didn’t elaborate she elected not to ask what he meant.

The kitchen was warm; thanks to the fire that Hamish had left burning in the study hearth. He heated milk -relieved to find that the chocolate biscuits he had half-promised and a nearly full packet of marshmallows were still to be found in the pantry. He placed the hot drinks onto the small kitchen table and invited Matthew to slide into the bench seat while he and Sara took chairs. The winter sun was still too low, but Hamish hoped that by spring, with some careful pruning of the trees closest to the house, this would become a sunny breakfast spot.

The first thing Sara noticed as she sat at the table was the vase full of tiny violets which Hamish had placed in the centre of the glossy Formica. She leant over and picked them up, holding them to her nose and breathing deeply.

“Oh, I’ve missed that scent. *Viola odorata*, it always makes me think that spring is just around the corner. But it’s too early for these yet ...where on earth did you get them from at this time of year?”

“They were a gift,” Hamish replied, not wanting to reveal his suppositions about the giver but equally not wanting to lie to Sara.

“I expect they must have come from a florist,” she mused.

Hamish doubted that, but didn’t say so.

“Someone must like you a lot,” she said. “It’s expensive to buy things like this when they are out of season.” Satisfied with her own explanation, Sara sat the flowers back. “You know, I sell some flowers through the nursery shop if you’re ever looking for floral gifts.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind. Speaking of sales ...what do I owe you for the swans?”

“Oh, nothing -they’re gratis. In fact, their former owners are so pleased to be rid of them they even said that they’d be happy to keep supplying you with feed for the pair. There had been some threats from the neighbours of

‘roast swan’ if something wasn’t done about them,” she grinned. “You’d be amazed how much mess those two can create when they put their minds to it. And like I said, the village children were terrified of Attila, so removing them’s a sort of a service to the local public as well.”

“I love them more and more. Not.” Hamish grimaced. “If this is marketing them to me, I wouldn’t give up your day job,” he said, shaking his head.

“You wouldn’t back out on me, would you?” She looked a little concerned at the prospect.

“No,” he sighed. “I’m sure they’ll settle just fine. This house seems to attract unhappy waifs and outcasts so they should fit right in.”

“Unhappy waifs and outcasts?” she mused. “That’s an interesting combination. Mind you, that would have described Matthew and me when we came back to the village, so maybe it’s not just White Briars that attracts the type.”

“And which were you, a waif or an outcast?” Hamish asked, curious. Then, “no, I’m sorry, I take that back. I have no right to ask ...especially as I was insisting on my own right to privacy earlier ...so don’t feel you have to answer.”

“No, its fine,” Sara replied, brushing her hand through the air. “I don’t have a problem with telling you and my story is pretty well known round these parts. You’ll find out, if you stay for any length of time, that most people in the village will know more about you than you probably know yourself.” She spoke across the table, “erm, Matthew, why don’t you take another biscuit and go into the sitting room? I’m sure Hamish won’t mind if you have a look around.” Then, as an afterthought, “don’t touch anything.”

“He’ll be fine,” Hamish said. “You can watch TV or play on the Xbox if you like, Matthew. I’ll give you the upstairs tour when we’ve finished our drinks. There’s a room right up the top that I’m sure you’d love to see. It has secret stairs and all.”

“Cool.” Matthew said. “Anyway, I can tell when mum wants to have a ‘not-for-my-ears’ talk with someone. I’ll go. You won’t be long will you?”

“Get away with ya.” his mother said, giving him a friendly push. “You’re too clever by half.” Matthew went through the door. His mother closed it behind him.

She turned to Hamish. “I might as well tell you this ...before you hear it from someone else. To keep a long story short, I’ll give you the Cliffs Notes version.” She took a deep breath before launching into a hurried explanation ...“My mum died when I was born. I grew up a bit of a rebel, hated school, discipline and all that stuff. Ran away to London when I was in my teens and lived rough and hard on the streets; begging mostly to survive; ended up with a few badly drawn tattoos, a drinking problem and

pregnant with Matthew. Came back home with my tail between my legs when I was seventeen and six months into the pregnancy; the thought of becoming a mother on the streets brought me to my senses. At least I never did drugs and I quit cold turkey, on the drinking the minute I found out I was pregnant ...it wasn't easy, and coming back wasn't exactly a picnic, but I had incentive. Apart from Matthew, it's not a story I'm proud of, but it's my and to some extent his, history -so these days I tend to acknowledge it and get on with my life. People here take me as they find me ...I don't pretend and I don't wallow in it. There, that's it, the end." The look in Sara's eye said 'take it or leave it'.

"All I see is someone who has made a good life for herself and her son," observed Hamish, thoughtfully. "We all have stories to tell, don't we? It's just that some people, like you, are more honest with theirs than others. I'll tell you mine sometime ...but not just yet." he took a sip of his drink. "Your dad said you'd studied horticulture and had taken over the family business. That must have been a challenge with a small child."

"You're dead right it was. There was just my dad and me. He helped by babysitting some, but I still had to do most of it myself. He's of the 'you make your bed, you lie on it' school, so I didn't get too much sympathy, or sleep, -not in those early days, anyway. I took over the business after dad retired. It's doing okay, we're not in any danger of becoming millionaires yet, but I've made some changes in the way I run it and it's ticking over nicely."

"I'm going to need to buy plants sometime soon. A lot of the old shrubs close to the house have grown too big and leggy to prune and I think they'd be better to be replaced with new stock. I'd appreciate some advice if you could spare the time to have a look around, before spring sets in."

"I'd love to. With a garden this size, I can see you're going to be good for business," Sara rubbed her hands in glee. She turned her head towards the kitchen door, listening, "I don't want to change the subject, but perhaps I'd better check on what my beautiful boy is up to. I haven't heard any noise from in there, and that's never a good sign."

"I'm sure he's fine, but it's probably time we went and showed him the tower anyway."

Hamish rose from his chair, "I hope you've a good head for heights."

"Lead on, Macduff" Sara said, waving her arm in a gesture that indicated that Hamish precede her.

As acting tour guide, Hamish showed Sara and Matthew the rest of the house, finishing with the tower. Both mother and son scrambled nimbly up the ladder as if born to it. From the chilly heights of the widow's walk they could see the swans as specks, still contentedly floating in the pool.

Matthew and Sara were preoccupied with trying to spot their own house beyond the covered bridge, when Hamish spied a thin spiral of smoke

drifting barely above the trees to the south-east. Having a private theory as to whom might be responsible for the plume he noted the location, but, not wanting to draw the others attention, said nothing. They descended the tower, Matthew having extracted a promise from Hamish to show him the telescope on the next available clear night. Sara and Matthew left shortly after and Hamish lost no time donning his outdoor clothes and heading towards the source of the smoke.

He took the path that led through the woods to the white stone bridge, promising himself that clearing this overgrown track would be his next task, before striking out through the trees in the general direction of the smoke. There was little chance of him losing his way back as his trail was clearly marked by his own footprints in the snow.

It took some time before he found the cause of the smoke as the stream had taken a big loop to the east, forcing him to flounder in deep drifts some distance out of his way. He knew he was close when he smelled wood-smoke ...but by the time he arrived the fire was nothing more than a few fizzling embers. Someone must have thrown water over the hot ashes even as he approached, because, instead of smoke; clouds of steam were now rising from where the fire had been burning only moments before.

He looked around; the fire had been built at the edge of a small clearing in the woods, close to a rocky bank that rose to triple his own height. He clambered up to the bank for a closer look ...to find when he checked around the back of a large boulder that the bank was cleft ...he stuck his head into a narrow opening that widened to a cave of sorts. The space was barely big enough for a tall person like himself, but someone smaller, and very thin, he thought, might just fit in here. Disappointed to see no real evidence of occupation, he backed out slowly, still managing to bang his head on an overhanging outcrop. He stood, ruefully rubbing the sore spot, while peering out into the woods. Trees, some stark and leafless, others still green with needles surrounded the clearing, making it impossible to see any distance.

She was out there, though, he could feel it ...quite probably watching him searching.

“I won’t hurt you, I only want to help!” he shouted to the trees. No reply. He tried again. “Please come back to the house, you can’t stay warm out here, you might die!” Still nothing, except a tiny echo, bouncing from tree to tree, “might die..., might die..., might die...” The words faded away, until he was sure he’d just imagined the repeated echoes.

There was no point staying, she could be anywhere in the trees and he wouldn’t see her. This was something he knew at the level of pure gut instinct.

Frustrated, he turned on his heel and followed his trail of footprints back to the bridge and the house, to spend the rest of the day fretting about

her, out there, alone, in the cold. His night was restless and he was glad to see the dawn.

He would attend the Sunday service and hope that David could find some information among the church records that might help.

JACK

Jack's green eyes sparked with lively interest. He shadowed the man back to the bridge, all the while mulling over this latest revelation. So, she was cold, was she? And she might die if she stayed out in the woods?

This was news to him.

He gave a short barking laugh. A pair of foxes and the feral cat appeared out of the trees, ranging either side of him in an uneasy alliance as he went in search of Liana himself.

HAMISH

*What's in a name? That which we call a rose
by any other name would smell as sweet*
William Shakespeare

Sunday morning, Hamish found the drinking chocolate, the marshmallows, the remaining chocolate biscuits and his last container of milk from the fridge had disappeared overnight. Sitting on the bench top was a large, beautifully-wrought wreath of ivy and fir, with dozens of *Helleborus niger* or Christmas roses woven into the ring. Tiny red apples peeped out here and there, brightly contrasting amongst the profusion of white flowers. Hamish turned the heavy wreath over in his hands, trying to see how the whole had been put together, but it was impossible to see any how anything was interconnected without pulling it all apart. There was even a stoutly fashioned ring woven at the back for hanging.

As he ate breakfast and drank black coffee, he mused. The borrowing of these latest items made him wonder if she had been watching him making the hot drinks the day before. He glanced at the windows, frowning. Well, he thought, she wouldn't get far with the hot chocolate unless she had a pot to heat the milk in.

He carried a slightly dented but serviceable pot outside the front door before hanging the wreath.

The day had dawned clear and bright and with the snow still lying about the doorway the door-surrounds now looked like a scene he'd expect to see on a Hallmark Christmas card. He shot some photos and was tempted to take his camera with him and walk to church again today but aware that

he'd really need to shop for groceries later in the day, he drove his car around the paved roadway instead.

Mercifully for an impatient Hamish, the church service was short. He was keen to start looking through the parish records and hoped David wouldn't have to hang about after the service for too long with his parishioners. He stood waiting in the cold, swinging his arms and huffing on his frozen fingers until David had said goodbye to the last of the stragglers. As the final group wandered along the cleared church path to the lych-gate David turned to him, "You're in luck today; normally its tea, coffee and half an hour of parish chit-chat in the vicarage after church, but so many people are still away or have their families staying over the long weekend that we decided not to bother. Now, I'm fairly sure that those records we want are stored at the vicarage, so let's go and have a hot drink and we can get started."

They spent the next two hours sifting through a small mountain of documents, loose papers and registers that must have been collected by generations of parishioners and vicars over several centuries. The search revealed much that was interesting but nothing salient to Hamish's theory, until David, looking for the second time through the parish wedding register for the years 1940-45 dislodged a single loose sheet of parchment tucked between the blank end papers of the book. There were several entries on the page, written in scrawling India ink, but it was the last that had caught his eye.

"I say, look at this," he said in excited tones; immediately capturing Hamish's full attention. "Jonathan Patrick Kendal, artist, of White Briars married Virginia. -Odd, isn't it? She has no last name. It's dated July 5th, 1944. ...Kendal, that's the name, isn't it of the man you said was the last occupant of White Briars before yourself? I thought you said they hadn't married?"

"That's what Arthur told me," Hamish said. "But he was just passing on unsubstantiated hearsay that was little more than village gossip from when he was young. Perhaps they were married secretly and no one else knew?"

"Hmmm, possible," David acknowledged. "The war years saw a number of last-minute weddings spawned by the imminent departure of loved ones to the front." He held the page up, inspecting it more closely, as he mused. "I wonder why this page is loose. It's a different paper-stock than the rest of the register. It looks a lot older and it's been torn down one side as if it's been ripped out of another register." As he was speaking he scanned the other entries; there was silence for a moment, then, as understanding set in; "...Oh my goodness, you might want to see this." Wordlessly, he handed the yellowed paper to Hamish.

Hamish ran his eye over the page. There were eight marriages recorded, each in a different hand. At first the significance of these eluded him -he

went through the short list once more, wondering what he had missed. It took him several readings to fully comprehend what the vicar had seen.

Realisation sank in. “Whew, I get what you mean,” whistled, “Jackpot.” He looked over at David. “Do you think they could *all* be her?” David shrugged noncommittally, as if to say his jury was still undecided. “Look,” Hamish said wonderingly, “...these entries start from 1498 and she’s changed her name each time, just enough, presumably, to allay suspicion. I suppose people round here could have long memories for someone like her but still, she hasn’t tried terribly hard, has she?” He read out the brides’ names, “Leigh Ann, Ivy, Julianne, Bryony, Rose, Briar, Jasmine, and, of course, Virginia, they’re almost exclusively floral names, and all with no last name. Let’s see,” he thought aloud, “...Ivy, Bryony, Jasmine, all clinging vines; and Julianne, isn’t *‘liane’* the French word for a vine or a climber?”

David nodded his agreement, adding, “And that would explain Leigh Ann; merely another variation ...so they are all botanical in origin.”

“So, five climbers, Rosa and Briar ...” Hamish pondered for a moment. “Hmmm, ...that’s a bit odd, ...no its not; ...rambling roses are climbers of sorts, ...and Arthur said the house used to be swathed in white rambling roses, ...and;” the picture of the house he had seen that first day, shrouded in vine and lit by the morning sun leapt into his mind, “...and now its covered in Virginia creeper.”

“...Virginia!” they spoke together.

“And look,” Hamish waved the page in front of David, pointing to an entry, “Briar married James Earle in February, 1839. The house as it is dates from 1841, I know that much, and its name, White Briars, -you must start to see a connection here?”

“Could be,” David replied cautiously, “or, to paraphrase a quote I believe I once read by Pierre Tailhard de Chardin, you could be trying too hard to make these few facts fit your hypothesis. Not that I want to rain on your parade, Hamish, but you do realise what you are saying, don’t you? You’re blithely suggesting that this, this,...” he waved his hand in the air, lost for words, “... being, ...has been living in the parish and has married eight times in this church since, ..” he leaned over to reread the first date written on the page, “...since April, 1498.” After a moment’s calculation, “so that would make her age somewhere in the region of five hundred plus, years old?”

“Erm. Yes. That would be pretty much it. In a nutshell.” agreed Hamish, wincing somewhat in embarrassment but not yet ready to back down. He’d fully expected David to pooh-pooh his hypothesis, which made David’s next words all the more surprising.

“Then may I suggest that we keep this just between ourselves for the moment, -until we can either prove it more conclusively or disprove it, -if that’s okay with you?” David exhaled explosively.

"I'm not exactly planning on shouting it from the rooftops," Hamish said, relieved that someone he considered sane would at least entertain the idea that there might be a kernel of truth in the idea.

"Good," David took an equally deep breath, "What to do now? ...I can check through the register for any christenings in case there were children from any of these unions but for the present I've thought of one other little thing that we can do right now to check the provenance of this page." David pulled a pair of white gloves out of a drawer and opened a cupboard in the corner of the room. He opened one of a series of wide flat drawers that, he explained to Hamish, contained the oldest parish registers. "Here's the one I'm looking for," he said, as he unwrapped a leather-bound tome from acid-free tissue. He carefully placed the book on the cloth-covered table next to the page they had found. "This is the marriage register that should cover that period around that first date." Saying this, he turned pages until he found what he was hoping for. "See," he held the torn page next to a ragged edge on the inside of the thick bound pages; "it fits. ...If this woman was not," he chose his next words carefully, "of the same realm as say, you or I, I could understand why someone might have chosen to remove or perhaps felt the need to hide the evidence of one or more of these marriages. There have, after all, been some very troubled times in the life of the church." He raised an eyebrow in speculation, "honestly, if any of this is true, I'm quite amazed that it was recorded at all."

"Speaking of recording, may I take a copy of that page before I go?"

"Of course you may, by all means. I don't run to a scanner here in the house but I'll go and find you some paper and a pen..." David left and was back in a moment with the necessary items. He left Hamish to copy out the names and dates on the page, sticking his head back around the door a few minutes later just as Hamish was finishing. "Would you like to stay for a late lunch? I have a selection of Christmas leftovers that my daughters were kind enough to leave behind when they went home, so we shouldn't starve."

They feasted on cold turkey and ham sandwiches, garnished with cranberry sauce and salad. While they ate, Hamish recapped on the events of the past twenty four hours for David's benefit.

"So," David reiterated thoughtfully, brandishing his fork much as he had the dish brush on Christmas day, "she takes food and she leaves you floral tributes? A fair trade, I suppose, as long as you are content with her bartering? But I think the sooner you find her the better, though ...the weather forecast is slightly improved for the next few days, but it's predicted that we may get another fall of snow towards the end of the week and this is not the best time of year to be living outside. Interesting, isn't it, that 'global warming' has resulted in us getting these extended cold periods and heavier falls of snow?" he mused. "I bet whoever thought up that

phrase is wishing they'd called it something else." He chortled, "...And you've ended up with the village swans? Good on you. You'll no doubt be lauded by the villagers for that. Poor old Attila had become something of a nuisance, but I think he's just misunderstood, Robyn and Grant Watson - the couple responsible for purchasing the swans-retired down here from London a couple of years ago and thought it would be picturesque to have swans in their garden, but there's more than one person in the village that will be happy to see the back-end of those birds. You know, last summer Attila took it into his little bird-brain head to commandeer the pond on the green and wouldn't let anyone near it for weeks. Some of the children sail their boats and play around in the water and they were too terrified to go anywhere near. Then old Arthur Blaine, who likes to sit on the bench under the yew on sunny days threatened to shoot Attila if he wasn't moved, so it all created a bit of a stir ...I think the Watsons were at their wits end. Like a lot of city-dwellers, they came to the countryside with some rather unrealistic ideals of what life should be like and got themselves into hot water with the locals. And let's be honest, Arthur can be a bit of a curmudgeon at times, I've had a few run-ins with him myself in the years I've been vicar here. You've met his daughter Sara?" Hamish nodded and David continued, "She was always a delightful child, full of youthful high spirits and energy ...but she seemed like a round peg in a very square hole, if you know what I mean."

"She's already filled me in on some of her 'history' -about leaving home and all," Hamish was reticent to say more. Although Sara had said she was quite open about her past he didn't feel that it was his right to divulge any of her private life to others. But from David's next statement it was clear that he knew all the details and had his own opinions about them.

"Yes, it was a sad time all round ...by the time I arrived, she was already in some minor trouble and I don't think Arthur was the most enlightened father on this earth. He could be pretty repressive at times, and she didn't respond well to it. She fought back by wagging school and hanging out with the worst crowd she could find. Then, a year after I got here she just disappeared; no note, no forwarding address, nothing. Arthur was gutted. She was his only child and he had no idea where she'd gone. He had an idea she might have taken off for London, but how do you find a person who doesn't want to be found in a city of over ten million souls?"

"Yes ...I know how easy it is to be anonymous in the city, even when you're not trying to disappear. I almost got lost in the crowds myself." said Hamish. "And I, for one, am mighty glad to be out of it."

"Ah, you sound like a proponent of '*God made the country, and man made the town*'." David said. He leaned forward, "Those are William Cowper's words, not mine. I understand the sentiment, Hamish, but the English countryside is, I would say, a far cry from what it was when God made it.

You haven't exactly transported yourself to Eden, you know? We're not exempt from any of the problems that plague our current age ...broken relationships, abused children, theft, murder ...they all happen in the country as well as the town.

Hamish paused and thought briefly before replying, "I understand what you mean David, ...the countryside as it is may not be perfection personified; but it's still better, as far as I'm concerned, than where I came from." The truth came to him in a moment of clarity. "It's not that I hate London or *any* city for that matter. I just needed space to get away from people ...it may sound a bit trite, but I needed to find myself again.

He rose, "thanks for your help and for lunch ...I've got to go and shop to restock the shelves then I think I'll go home and check out the cottage's bookshelves to see if I can find anything on Virginia, Julianna, Briar, ...whatever her name is."

David said goodbye and Hamish left to run his errands. Returning home, the rest of the afternoon was spent indoors, fruitlessly searching the bookshelves for anything that might tell him more about Briar; ...since the house had probably been named after her he opted to settle on that one name for the time being.

By six o'clock, he'd had enough.



The sky remained clear into the gathering dusk of evening. After-dark Hamish rang Sara with an invitation for her and Matthew to come over to try out the telescope. While speaking to Sara, he could hear Matthew in the background, shouting, "Say yes, mum! Say yes. ...Please, please, please!"

"It's pitch black outside, the air is still and there's no moon so conditions are ideal. I'm here all evening," Hamish added, "though you might want to remember to wear something warm as we'll take the telescope outside and it's a pretty nippy. Oh, and if you'd like drinking chocolate, I'm afraid you'll need to BYO ...I forgot to buy some and I've run out."

"Wee-ell," Sara said, laughter in her voice, "Matthew's not all that keen, but..." Hamish could hardly miss the indignantly loud, "Mu...um!" She continued, laughing outright now, "looks like I'm gonna get lynched if I keep that up. We'll be over in, say, half an hour? We're just finishing up the dinner dishes."

True to her word, Sara and Matthew arrived thirty five minutes later. Hamish had lit the fire in the sitting room and was spreading a large star chart out on the floor. He and Matthew knelt to look at it, Sara peering over their shoulders.

"Do you know any of the constellations?" he asked Matthew. The boy

shrugged. Hamish took that as a 'no', "Okay then, maybe it would be best if we concentrate on just two or three of the more easily recognised ones this time. I think if you learn a few at a time you can build on that, otherwise it all gets horribly confusing. Hopefully, this way you'll remember them." He pointed to the star chart. "See here, this is Polaris, the North Pole star. It's an important star because it's almost directly in a line above the North Pole and all the other stars appear to revolve around it. It used to really important for navigation before everyone got GPS," he smiled wryly, continuing "it's a star in a constellation called Ursa Minor, -that means 'little bear'- a good one to start with. Then, ...we can work our way over to Draco, the dragon, here," he traced the line of the constellation with his finger, "see, there's his head and see how his body wraps around Ursa minor, ...and from there we'll be able to find Ursa major, over here."

"Dragons and bears –cool. So if Ursa Minor is the little bear ...Ursa Major must be the 'big bear!'" Matthew trumpeted.

"Dead right," Hamish said encouragingly. "I can see you're going to be easy to teach. What you have to remember, though, is that when you're looking up at the night sky, there's none of these convenient lines joining the stars together to make shapes like there are on this chart. It can all look pretty confusing when you first start to try and work it out. That's why we'll begin with some of the brightest stars ...like these," he pointed to seven, "This is called the plough, or the big dipper, see," he pointed again, "there's the handle and there's the ploughshare or the cup. Or, you can think of it as the saddles on the bear ...see." Hamish sat back "That's enough of looking at the chart. Let's go and check out the real thing. Okay?"

"Yeah, you bet ...are we going back up to that cool tower again?" Matthew enthused.

"Yes, I leave the telescope up there. But we'll take it out onto the widows walk, so you'll need your warm hat and coat and scarf ...and gloves, because it's freezing up on the roof."

"It's alright," Sara said, gathering up clothing, "Your Sherpa's got all the necessary gear." Her arms were full of both her and Matthew's extra clothing that he had thrown off when they had come into the house. "You can put these back on before you climb the ladder," she said to her son. "I don't want to be trying to climb up that thing with all this stuff in my arms."

"I may be easier for him to climb without being encumbered by bulky clothes," Hamish advised. "How about you give the jackets and I'll give you this torch to carry," he suggested to Sara. "I've been up and down the ladder more often and I'm used to it." Without waiting for Sara to refuse, he took the pile of jackets and woollens out of her arms, handing her a small torch with a red filter over the lens. "We'll need that. There's no electric light up in the tower and anything else will just confuse our eyes."

Sara narrowed her eyes but said nothing, slipping the torch in a pocket.

In no time they were all assembled in the small tower room, warm gear on and ready to brave the outdoors. “Just watch that hole,” Hamish warned, pointing to the gaping black gap in the floor, “I’ve got plans to build a railing around it, but in the meantime I don’t want to lose anyone down the hole.”

“This place isn’t really designed with children in mind is it?” Sara commented.

“You’re the second woman who’s pointed that out to me.” Hamish was reminded of Linda saying something similar. “I hadn’t really noticed, but I suppose not.” He replied. “But now you mention it, there’s only one bedroom really, if you discount the alcove. Maybe there have never been children in the house? Jonathan Kendal didn’t appear to have any offspring and so far I can’t find any written histories on the place before then; believe me, I’ve been looking.”

“Has my dad been telling tales about White Briars?” Sara queried.

“Perhaps, but how about we talk about that later?” Hamish prevaricated, “Right now we have some star gazing to do. Right, Matthew?”

“Right, Hamish!”

“That’s Right, Mr McAllister to you.” interrupted his mother. “Manners matter.”

“Right mum!” Matthew saluted smartly. Sara cuffed him gently round the head. “Get outside you two.” She followed them through the low door.

Hamish had the telescope set up within minutes then began pointing out the constellations that he and Matthew had looked at on the chart.

“Phew, you’re right,” Matthew looked up at the clear night sky, a new-found note of respect in his voice. “There’s gazillions of them. How can you ever tell which one is which?”

“It’s like I said, start with one that you can always recognise and work from there. Follow my finger, see ...there’s Polaris ...got it?” after a moment, Matthew nodded. They spent the next minutes, completely absorbed in finding Draco, Ursa Minor and then Ursa Major; until Hamish was satisfied that Matthew could spot them for himself.

Sara, standing quietly in the background enjoyed the scene of her son being patiently instructed by Hamish.

“Okay, now that we’ve found the constellations, how would you like to take a closer look at them?” Hamish asked.

“Yeah -Where’s the space ship?” Matthew grinned and looked around at his mother, pleased with his own joke.

“Ha-ha ...I meant through the telescope,” Hamish said, “but if you don’t want to?”

“Oh no, please...” Matthew was at his winsome best.

“Come over here then ...stand here and put your eye up to this,”

Hamish pointed to the eyepiece. Matthew quickly did as he was instructed.

“What you’re seeing is a double star,” Hamish said. “I’ve stayed with Ursa Major for tonight ...that’s a star called Mizar ...it’s in the bend of the dipper’s handle. The reason it’s so bright is that it’s really two stars very close to another star called Alcor -and they’re only eighty-eight light years away.”

“What do you mean, eighty-eight light years away?” Matthew asked, not taking his eye from the telescope.

“A light year is the distance that light travels in one year ...without getting too technical, that’s a *very* long way. What it means to us, looking at that star, is that the light from it has taken eighty-eight years to get here ...so in reality, we’re looking at something that happened eighty-eight years ago, tonight. Get it?”

“Wow ...so you mean it’s like we’re looking at the past?” Matthew said.

“Sort of, I guess. Except all these stars are different distances away from us.” Hamish swept his hand to include the whole night sky. That’s why some look brighter than others ...hang on a minute and I’ll set up the telescope to show you something else. You ever heard of a nebula? No? Well, see that star at the base of the pot? That’s Merak. It’s a beta star ...that means it’s the second brightest star in that particular constellation, the alpha stars are usually the brightest ...but we won’t get into that right now or I might just start to confuse you. Anyway, have a look through this now...” while he had been talking Hamish had adjusted the telescope. He moved aside to allow Matthew to see where he had trained the ‘scope.

“What’s this?” Matthew asked, intrigued, “It looks like two black blobs in a fuzzy white blob.”

“That’s a perfectly accurate description,” Hamish said. “It’s called the owl nebula ...those two black blobs are supposed to be the owl’s eyes. Nebula is just the Latin name for a cloud ...it’s a new star forming.”

“You mean, like a baby star?” Matthew was intrigued.

“That’s right ...and next to it, between the owl and Merak there is another galaxy, probably a lot like ours, called M108. Not a very exciting name is it? You know what our galaxy is called?” Matthew shook his head. “No? Well it’s the Milky Way. You know ...like the chocolate bar. Every star you can see up there without a telescope is in the Milky Way. But that galaxy with the boring name is thirty five million light years away ...imagine that. And there are supposed to be billions of galaxies out there, Matthew ...there’s so much going on above our heads ...comets, black holes, planetary nebulae ...it’s a regular three-ringed circus out there...”

“Wow!” Matthew was awestruck.

“I think we should call it a night now, before you too cold.” Hamish didn’t want to overload the boy with too much information and he could see Matthew shivering. “Let’s go down and make a hot drink. It’s a good

thing you brought the drinking chocolate, otherwise we might have to have coffee or tea ...or hot jelly.”

“Hot jelly sounds yum!” Matthew wasn’t put off by the idea but his mother made a face.



Downstairs, Hamish made the drinks; hot chocolates for Sara and himself and hot lime-green jelly for Matthew, who said it looked like goblin snot. Hamish laughed, and Sara retorted that she was sending their next dentist bill his way. Hamish and Sara sat with theirs in front of the small study fireplace while Matthew stretched out on the banquette seat behind the kitchen table, pulling out an iPod from his jacket pocket and plugging headphones into his ears.

“Thanks very much for tonight,” Sara said, hugging her warm mug in her clasped hands while staring into the flames. “You were great with him, patiently explaining all that stuff. I really appreciate that ...I know he can be a bit of a handful sometimes.” Her brow furrowed in a worried frown as she watched the dancing flames.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Hamish objected. He thought privately that Sara needed to learn to take it easy but kept that thought to himself, saying instead, “He’s a perfectly nice normal boy...and he’s a pleasure to teach. He’s bright too; he picked up a lot of information in a very short time tonight.” He prodded her lightly on the shoulder closest to him. “It’s you who’s doing a great job. You should be proud of him.”

“I am, believe me ...but I do worry. I don’t want him to make the same horrible mistakes that I did when I wasn’t much older than he is now.” She sighed heavily, “Please don’t take this the wrong way and think I’m hitting on you, ‘cos I’m not.” She sighed again, “What he needs is a man’s influence. My dad tries to help, bless him, but he’s getting old and his natural inclinations are to be as hard on Matthew as he was on me, ...and that doesn’t sit at all well with me.”

“Well, I’m happy to help anyhow I can. Matthew’s welcome to come over here as often as he likes ...I’m not painting at the moment but I have to get back to it soon. I’m starting to miss it and that’s always a sure sign that I need to get the paint brushes and palette knives out –so I won’t be able to spend as much time as I have been in the garden ...perhaps he could help around outside if he wants. And there are a LOT more constellations to find if he’s interested, not to mention the moon and a few planets we could look at. I’d forgotten how much I used to enjoy looking at the stars; London had too many bright lights to make star gazing much of a possibility. It was hopeless. I had an old telescope but I gave it away after the first year. One of my cousin’s children up in Scotland has been making

good use of it. This new one is much fancier though ...we'll be able to see a lot more, and there's a small private observatory down near Tenterden that I know of that I'm sure I could arrange to take Matthew to. If you think he'd like that?"

"That would be absolutely brilliant, Hamish. Thank you." Sara looked noticeably relieved and sat back in the armchair, smiling and looking more relaxed than Hamish seen her. She was wearing what appeared to be her uniform, when not in running gear; jeans and a leather jacket, and when she pulled her stockinged feet up under her, cradling the hot drink between her hands she looked like little more than a teenager. Hamish couldn't help but notice how vulnerable a picture she made, her small form engulfed by the wings of the chair. It would make a great photograph and without the worried frown that he'd seen on her face most of time since he'd met her she really was quite pretty.

"Whoa there, steady on," he thought. He was already hunting high and low for one damsel in distress and he didn't need another.

He steered the conversation to safer ground; discussing with Sara the plans he had to resurrect the herb garden and plants he might need. They talked for a while before Sara said it was time she got Matthew home to bed. As they were leaving, Matthew reminded Hamish about the pigeons, asking how many he wanted. Hamish replied that he'd leave the numbers to him and Sara, as they knew the size of the dovecote. Matthew let out a whoop of pleasure ...no doubt, Hamish thought, already counting the proceeds towards his new BMX.

Hamish rinsed the cups and went up to his bed under the eaves ...the tester reminded him too much of something made for two and he wasn't ready to sleep there yet. Before going upstairs, he left a selection of foodstuffs in a cardboard carton on the kitchen table.

For a moment, he considered waiting up and keeping watch to try and catch out his night-time visitor but thought better of it. After all, he reasoned, he didn't want to frighten her off completely and at least this way he knew she was eating.

HAMISH

*Green beads and red beads
Threaded on a vine:
Is there any handiwork
Prettier than mine?
Cicely Mary Barker*

Overnight, the food had disappeared.

On Monday morning, Hamish opened the laundry door to discover a loose collection of plants lying on the doorstep, all bound together with ivy and Virginia creeper. He carried the odd bouquet inside to the kitchen table; the creeper was as richly coloured as he had first seen it in the autumn, all of the plants were in full bloom and some bore small berries. He didn't wonder at this anymore as by now he was becoming accustomed to these out-of-season offerings. Though there was something about this selection of flowers that was unlike any of her previous efforts; although some of the individual flowers were pretty enough, the bunch lacked both that sense of harmony and meticulous presentation of her previous efforts. The odd combination of flowers set his senses tingling -but it wasn't until he was downing his second cup of coffee that he started to grasp the significance of her choice of plants.

Aside from the ivy and creeper, he had immediately recognised a white rose similar to that she had left when she first disappeared and then there were those fragrant starry-white flowers of jasmine, but some of the others eluded him.

He took the bunch into his study and pulled out a couple of his own

plant books ...now it dawned on him that he had a fair idea of what at least one of the other plants was. It took little time before he verified his theory; the deep glossy green heart-shaped leaves with their slender racemes of greenish yellow flowers were those of *Tamus communis*, better known as Black Bryony. He turned straight to the page reference for White Bryony, *Brionia dioica*, and saw a coloured drawing of the other ...the description said 'dull green palmate leaves and tendrils with pale green flowers in small clusters'. And yes, it was there too in the bunch.

He grunted; she couldn't have told him more clearly if she had shouted at him ...here, sitting in front of him were her names ...with Ivy and Virginia creeper, wrapped around a Briar rose, Jasmine and Bryony.

But there was still one last leaf and a flower that had he hadn't yet identified and he couldn't connect it with any name he had read in the church register. He reached again for the book, ...if they were from the same plant it would be easy enough to find; ...a fairly distinctive leaf with blue-grey serrated leaflets and a brownish red tubular flower, the process took a little longer because he had no idea what this plant was and had to start from first principles. Picking up the leaf, he found that it had a strongly unpleasant smell "Pffew," ...he hurriedly put it down again. Ah, but the distinctive scent gave him somewhere to start; and soon he'd found a name that matched the plant ...*Melianthus major*. When he spied the common name he realised that here again she was sending him a message, ...the flower seemed innocuous enough as it went under the title 'honey flower' but he didn't suppose that it was coincidental that *Melianthus major's* other common name was '*Touch-Me-Not*'.

"Ouch," he murmured softly. Well, there it was; ...message delivered, loud and clear. ...And so much for her previous expressions of appreciation for his help.

He thought for a moment -before choosing to take this as a positive sign. At least these symbols meant that she knew he had found out about her past. Though how she had discovered that was more than he could work out ... it wasn't as if she had been there when he and David had been searching the church records ...or had she? Yes, she could have been outside the vicarage study door while they had been talking, but the walls of David's house were thick stone and they would have undoubtedly noticed had she been peeking through the windows. Or so he thought.

Looking at the flowers strewn across his table he came to the conclusion that there was little point in him searching for her. She was obviously aware he'd been looking and he'd most likely be wasting his time continuing to hunt blindly for her; ...she would have to come to him ...the choice was hers.

Meanwhile, he didn't want to just sit around waiting; so he decided instead to spend the day outside clearing the paths around the old herb

garden.



After gathering together the tools he thought he'd need he wheeled them round to the narrow gap in the overgrown hedges that surrounded what was left of the one-time garden.



Arthur had given him some idea of what to look for, but after years of neglect the paving had all but vanished beneath a layer of intertwined grass and weeds. Using the garden fork as a prod Hamish fossicked around until he struck the solid path; from there he worked systematically with a spade and an adze, uncovering an intricate layout of narrow brick paths with the pavers set on their edges in a herringbone pattern. He found himself humming snatches of a song throughout the morning as he worked. He didn't think much about it at first, except to acknowledge that he hadn't felt like singing for a long time and it felt good to be glad enough to want to sing.

The melody kept coming back to him at odd moments throughout the morning until he stopped and tried to work out what it was. "Ta ta tum, da daaa dum, doodle dum dum. It was there on the tip of his tongue ...he knew it. What was the silly song?! "Ah-ha," he thought ...That was it ...he still couldn't get all the words but some of the music was coming back to him. He could hear oboes thrumming ...He began;

"*I love to pick you flowers in the morning* ...pum, pum, puuum." He filled in the orchestral accompaniment -in his mind there was a small ensemble of wind instruments and strings, hmmm, maybe cellos, he pictured;

"*White roses when the stars begin to shine* ...pum, pum, puuum," he sang. No, that couldn't be right ...unless it was very early in the morning, the stars wouldn't be shining. He dug around some more in his brain for the lyrics.

"White something," ...there it was, "...*White briars as the sun begins to climb...*" No wonder his subconscious had been thinking of it with the White Briars reference.

He sang with growing confidence; ...before it occurred to him that he might have an audience. He heard a tiny chirp from the section of path behind that was already cleared, turned to look; it was the robin, pulling at a fat worm Hamish had uncovered in clearing the paving. He stopping singing, suddenly feeling self-conscious, and looked around. "I don't care if you hear me but I hope she's not listening," he muttered to the bird. Singing, as Maud had pointed out to him on several occasions, was not one of his better talents. He normally reserved it for the shower or those drunken karaoke evenings with Steve. But here, on such a fine day, well

...who gave a rat's arse!

He continued digging and singing, searching his memory for the words; they surfaced in snatches...

"*I'd take you where there's fairy music playing,*" ...well, that certainly wasn't here, not with him singing. "Don't care," he spoke nonchalantly. "If you don't like it, bugger off and don't listen." He directed his comments to the bushes nearest him. He'd had enough of all her drama for the moment and didn't need an ethereal music critic. For now he was enjoying the uncomplicated solitude of the garden. "Hmmpf," he thought, she was probably more the harps and flowers type anyway ...from what he'd seen so far. She was certainly into flowers when it came to sending messages.

..."*Read you tales that no one can believe.*" Yeah, well, this was starting to read like some tale out of the Brothers Grimm. Five hundred years old and not looking a day over twenty-five. He'd need to see a shrink if this kept up. He swept the thought aside and sang on lustily as he dug,

"*I wanna plant you roses that you'll gather,*" Yeah, maybe he'd plant some really nice fragrant roses in the garden among the herbs when it was done ...but for now he needed to keep digging. "...*And vines that twine your heart around with mine,*" sounded painful; who wrote these lyrics? "*Sweet perfume from the petals that you'll harvest; sweet scent of jasmine and of columbine,*" Yeah, well jasmine was scented, but was columbine? He bet they were just running out flowers that rhymed with mine.

Then there was, "something, something ...*If you'd only try to open up your mind.*"

She certainly needed to open her bloody mind if she wanted his help.

"*If flowers are the gifts that make you happy ...they're all wrapped and bound with a yellow bow.*" Well, they could both do with some happiness—he didn't mind if it came bound with a yellow bow or not. He laughed a little; this was starting to sound like that song with the yellow ribbons round the old oak tree. Bit country for his taste, he thought. Still, what was digging in the dirt, if not 'country'?

..."*Watered with the rain the seasons send us,* and ... Oh ...I dunno," he sang, extemporising and making up in volume what he lacked in lyrical accuracy, "...*CO-OM-POST...to make your veges grow!*, PUM. PUM, PUUM!" Now he was really getting into it, enjoying himself,

"...*And in the winter's snow,* ...Pum, Pum, ...*my fire will keep you from the cow,* OOW, OOOO, -OLD, I STILL DO-ON'T KNOW!..." he sang at the top of his voice, sounding more like a dog in pain. ...Well, he mused sourly; he'd already kept her from the cold once—for look at all the thanks he'd got for saving her pathetically scrawny arse from the winter snow? A few flowers and a floral warning to '*Touch-Me-Not,*' ...He'd give her a right '*Touch-me-Not*' piece of his mind the next time he saw her.

He started up again, but he'd lost his train of thought and the rest of the

song just wouldn't come ...and he knew that the next time he saw her all he would be was relieved that she was still alive. His momentary annoyance melted away like the winter snow in the song. He concentrated for a moment more, wanting to finish the refrain.

Hmmm ...There was something about...

"...*What's the use are flowers if you're dying?*" Oh dear, it sounded as if things in the song hadn't worked out too well. It ended on a bit of a low note ...like those dismal-ending Nicholas Sparks' novels that Maud had been fond of. No matter ...the '*Flowers in the Morning*' certainly reminded him of Briar, or whatever name she was currently calling herself.

Now that he'd unleashed it, the song wouldn't go away, and teased him with its half-remembered lyrics for the rest of the day. Hamish hummed the tune and sang his version of the lyrics as he worked. The robin stayed, feasting on the bugs and worms that he uncovered as the paths were slowly revealed and singing along with Hamish; only flying off to the woods towards the end of the day.



Hamish had finished clearing the paths by the late afternoon and made a good start on digging over the beds. Driving the fork tines into the ground for the last time, he leaned his backside on the handle; physically tired but satisfied, taking to stand back, arms clasped across his chest as he admired his day's work.

The exposed paths now made a shape of four interlinked, overlapping hearts that reminded him of Celtic patterns –similar to the symbol that represented the four elements in perfect balance. He had even discovered an old sundial lying under leaf letter deep beneath the hedge. Thinking it an odd place for it to end up, he'd replaced the plate back on its stone plinth in the centre of the garden. The bronze sundial plate was in the form of a leafy face with a floral-inspired gnomon, the style of which reminded Hamish of the gate which had first led him to the discovery of the garden and the cottage. Unlike the gate, he resisted the urge to clean the sundial up as the bronze had weathered to a particularly intense shade of green. He thought it went well with the mask's identity although the face did have a rather severe, unflinchingly-sombre quality about it that made Hamish not want to meet whoever might have modelled for the plate.

He looked around at his day's work. True, the hedges were every bit as unruly as they'd been and there was still a lot of hard graft to be done to get the herb garden back to its former glory but he would leave those tasks for another day; maybe tomorrow if the weather held.

The work outdoors had contributed much to his sense of wellbeing since arriving at White Briars, and for that he was thankful. He stowed the

IRENE DAVIDSON

tools and went inside to clean up and eat before climbing the stairs to bed; falling asleep quickly and sleeping soundly -more the norm these days than the exception.

HAMISH

*A Bird came down the Walk -
 He did not know I saw -
 He bit an Angle Worm in halves
 And ate the fellow, raw
 Emily Dickinson*

It took another day of back-breaking digging and soil preparation; appreciated vociferously by the robin, before the beds were ready for planting.

A lengthy phone call to Sara resulted in the delivery of several hundred small box plants for hedging and four larger pre-trimmed topiary balls that, by the finish of day two of the knot-garden restoration, were gracing the corners of the paved area. The herbs, Hamish thought, could wait until the springtime. Sara had warned against the use of Buxus, citing the spread of box blight, but Hamish had prevailed. He hadn't wanted to explain to Sara but he had an inkling that blight would not be an issue in this garden.

The weather closed in again during the night and by the next morning another snow storm was threatening the Kent countryside. Glad of a forced rest-day from digging, Hamish knew that he had been putting off a certain phone call for too long; so, first thing, before he allowed himself to get side-tracked on anything else, he rang Rosetta.

It was a call that necessitated holding the phone well away from his ear for several minutes while she calmed down sufficiently to speak reasonably to him. After multiple apologies from Hamish and a promise, that she said she would like a copy of, preferably written in his own blood, that he would

never again go off the reservation and leave her in the lurch without a contact phone number; ... “Did he have *any* idea how many people had been calling her looking for him?!!!” she screeched, before setting off on another lengthy tirade.

“No,” he said, “he hadn’t,” -as Hamish waited patiently while Rosetta vented; he thought of his real reason for calling. Eventually, she consented to answer his questions about Karl Van Eeden.

“Yes,” she said, with a note of undisguised curiosity in her tone, “he had been a printmaker. He’d done most of his work in the latter part of the nineteenth century and he’d lived somewhere down there in that Godforsaken wilderness where Hamish was currently residing. ...that was,” she couldn’t resist adding, ire in every syllable, “now that she knew *where* he was currently residing.”

Hamish, bit his tongue, resisting any retort, including the temptation to tell Rosetta that Kent was hardly at the ends of earth.

“Anyway,” she continued, “Van Eeden died in his early thirties in a horse-riding accident. Such a shame to lose a gifted artist just when he was just coming into his prime; art-wise, of course,” she said baldly.

“Of course,” Hamish thanked her for the information and promised he would get back to his ‘real’ work forthwith; painting that was, (after all - what other ‘prime’ could there be?) and not wasting his time in a garden that he could employ someone else to manage -Rosetta’s sentiments, not his. He cut the call.

That was Rosetta; a veritable mine of information when it pertained to anything concerning art and artists, but not overly sympathetic when it came to their personal lives. Hamish knew Van Eeden’s surname from the parish marriage register but had wanted verification that he was artist who had done the etching of the carriage house and dovecote. So, he’d died young, ...and Kendal had died long before his time too in the beginnings of the post WW2 cold war, ...he knew now that the ‘John’ whom he had supposed she had been crying for when she had been rambling in her sleep must have been ‘Jon’ -short for Jonathan Kendal. What had happened, he wondered, to make her feel the pain of grief so intensely in spite of it being more than sixty years after his death?

Well, he thought, the answer wasn’t going to come out of thin air while he stood around waiting, so he might as well be doing something useful. He showered and dressed warmly, pulling two pairs of thick woollen socks on his feet, ate breakfast, then went upstairs, intending to strip the tester bed and wash the sheets that had been left on it since the disappearance of its last occupant.

The bed was wider than his reach and he was leaning awkwardly, stretching across to pull up the soiled linen from the far side when he lost his footing on the polished wooden floor. His feet suddenly slid out from

under him and he tumbled, in a less than controlled way. His left arm flailed out in a reflex action to try and grab something to halt his fall ...striking one of fretwork panels of the headboard with a hard painful thud that reverberated up his arm all the way to his shoulder. His head narrowly missed hitting the very solid end post and he ended sprawled like a beached whale on this stomach.

“Ouch,” he muttered. Taking in a deep breath he rolled over and lay on his back inspecting his throbbing hand for damage ...he appeared to have sustained nothing worse than a few grazed knuckles. Then -as he looked overhead, he saw that the bed had been built with more than one hidden catch. In falling, he must have unwittingly hit the release mechanism and it had caused one of the panels to burst ajar.

Grazes forgotten, excited at the prospect of finding a secret compartment, he clambered to his knees to peer into the space revealed by the door’s opening. What he found might have disappointed a treasure-hunter but the contents were exactly what Hamish had been seeking.

He reached into the space with a hand and carefully extracted four leather-bound journals of varying sizes and thicknesses; all written with similar intent, he deduced, from quickly leafing through each. They were personal diaries, belonging, -if he guessed correctly- to the former occupants of White Briars. Two were in languages other than English.

Disappointingly, Jonathan Kendal didn’t appear to have been the author of any of the diaries ...though hardly surprising, reasoned Hamish, if he worked for military intelligence at a time when secrecy was paramount. If any line of work would make a man less likely to leave a written record of his life at White Briars, it would be that.

Still, there were enough books here to be going on with.

Setting the four diaries in front of him, he picked them up one by one up for closer inspection. He guessed that the first might have been the work of Karl Van Eeden ...Hamish couldn’t translate much of the text, but could easily recognise Dutch; and the writing in the volume was interspersed with beautifully drawn pen and wash sketches that were recognisably similar to the artist’s style. He knew Rosetta would give her eye teeth to possess something like this. He doubted somehow that he would be allowing her the opportunity to find out about it. The cramped writing was in such an idiosyncratic style that it was going to be difficult to translate, even if Hamish could find the right person to do the job.

The second volume was written in floridly stylised French, -not such a problem, he thought, as he was reasonably fluent in that language. Although it wasn’t dated, among the entries he could read the name, Julianne, so going by the church records that would put it in the 1600’s. Of the other two, one was written in such incomprehensible *Ye Olde English* that it would require translation as well. It put Hamish in mind of trying to read Chaucer.

The easiest to follow, as far as Hamish could tell, on such a cursory examination, was a diary written in the 1800's. The first entry in it was dated January first, 1837 ...the last, September 1843 ...these dates indicated that it was presumably the work of the builder of White Briars, Jeremy Shaw and it at least, was written in passably legible English.

"There goes work for the day," he thought happily, plumping up the pillows and leaning back against the headboard -drawing his legs up to make a sort of living lectern for the open diary. He clipped the panel above his head closed after checking that he knew how to reopen it and settled in to read.



By mid-afternoon, when he was still only two-thirds of the way through the diary, the phone rang.

Hamish had left his mobile sitting on the bedclothes of his own bed in the alcove after calling Rosetta that morning and was so absorbed in the journal that it took several rings before he realised what the intrusively shrill sound was.

He dived off the bed and skidded across the room to snatch up the phone and answer the call before it went to voicemail.

It was Miss Kendal, phoning from her rest home residence. They chatted politely for some time; on the surface, she questioned Hamish about the progress he had made in cleaning up the house and garden at White Briars but it took Hamish no time at all to work out from the tenor of the questions that she was insistently quizzing him about whether or not he had seen Briar.

"Miss Kendal," he said, irritated with the continuous subterfuge, "Why don't we quit this game of pretence and come to the point? Yes, I've seen her, but I didn't know who she was at the time and partly due to my ignorance of the situation here, she's gone again. I think she's still around somewhere but she's not exactly making herself visible. You know," he chided, "since you appear to have known about her all along, it might have been of some help to me if you'd given me a hint or two of her existence beforehand."

"I'm sorry about that, Mr McAllister," she said, a hint of iron in the plummy vowels of her crackled voice, "but just how does one go about telling someone else that there may be an overgrown *fairy* in their garden? I certainly didn't believe it when Jonathan first told me." She sighed, "So, she is still there, after all these years? ...You know I tried to convince myself that she would just go away after Jonathan died ...he told me she couldn't leave and that if anything ever happened to him I was to use his money to care for the place." There was silence for a minute; Hamish was starting to

wonder if the call had been cut, when she spoke again, “I never met her myself and I have to admit that I didn’t like the idea that *my* dear brother was mixed up with some fey creature from the woods. It was rather easy ...as the years went by and there was no sign of her, to let the place slide. Of course, I never went so far as to sell it, but I didn’t do as he had asked either. Now, I’m an old lady and I, perhaps, wanted to atone for my sins before I go ...so when you came knocking, and seemed so keen ...I decided that you would do admirably. I suppose you think that I need to apologise for that as well now.” Her distinctly acerbic tone somewhat negated the apology.

“As it turns out ...no, I don’t. Not in the slightest. There is no need for you to feel remorse for what you got me into,” repeated Hamish, happy to let her off the hook. “This place has been exactly what I needed. So, in fact, it is I who owe you a debt of gratitude. I just would have liked to have been forewarned about her. I may have handled things differently, had I known. That’s all.” He wondered how much his ham-fisted efforts to help Briar had contributed to her running off.

“So you’re happy there?” Miss Kendal spoke with evident satisfaction. It was more of a statement than a question. “Well, in that case you will be overjoyed to hear that I have instructed my lawyers to sign the property over to you, lock stock and incumbent-fairy, so to speak? The documents should arrive for your signature this week.”

“What?!” Hamish was incredulous.

“Well,” Miss Kendal said with some of her familiar asperity, “What am I supposed to do with it? You said you were happy there and you’ve obviously put considerable effort into restoring the grounds and house since your arrival, without even delving into the funds I left with the law firm. ...It’s alright, Mr McAllister, I haven’t just taken your word for it. I do still have my spies in the village and they have reported admirable things back to me this month past.”

“That wouldn’t happen to be a certain spy by the name of Arthur Blaine, would it?” he asked.

“I am not at liberty to say. My late brother did at least teach me that one should never reveal one’s sources. Suffice to say that I know that your heart is in the right place. Now Mr McAllister,” she said briskly, “I’m already late for my afternoon game of Canasta with the other old biddies here, so if there is nothing more you wish to ask me, I’ll say good afternoon and wish you well. I hope to have nothing else to do with White Briars from this point onwards.”

The line disconnected even as Hamish was saying good bye. It seemed a day for revelations ...first the diaries and now Miss Kendal’s personal confirmation of his theory. So, she had resented her brother’s involvement with Virginia, Jasmine, Briar; whatever-her-name. The conversation had

finally explained some things that had been niggling in his subconscious since his first meeting with the elderly lady. While he had the phone in his hand, Hamish put a call through to David, hoping to tell him of his discoveries, but the only reply he got was a politely worded answerphone message of the standard variety, requesting that he *'leave a message after the tone and I will return your call as soon as possible'*. He left a short message, asking David to call as soon as he was able but omitted any mention as to why; this wasn't the sort of thing he wanted on record, especially on the vicar's answerphone, so he pushed the button to cut the call, planning to try again later in the day if he didn't hear back from David.

He couldn't concentrate on reading now; not even the diary could hold his attention -as fascinating as it was. Miss Kendal's latest offer had blown him from the water.

Wow! White Briars; his ...well, his in name anyway. He was well aware by now who the real owner was -or at least the sitting tenant- ...of the ethereal variety. The sooner he found her the better; *'Touch-me-not'* ...well; too bad ...he didn't plan to touch her but he did need to talk to her.

It was all very well to have made the decision to find her; but doing it was a different matter. Hamish spent the rest of the afternoon searching out-of-the-way corners of the garden; trudging through thickening flurries of wind-driven snow, calling any and all of her names at regular intervals, only to find nothing that indicated she had been anywhere he looked. The only living creatures that he stumbled upon was a pair of foxes, slinking silently through the woods ...they regarded him from across the other side of a ring of tall pine trees for a few seconds; the foxes apparently not overly concerned, as they stood their ground, before turning and disappearing back into the green shadows of the shrubbery.

When Hamish returned to the house for food late in the afternoon, he climbed up to the tower, hoping perhaps for some glimpse of her or signs of another campfire, -but the air over the woods was annoyingly smoke-free. Frustrated, he climbed down and left food out for her again in the kitchen then banked the sitting room fire ...determined to stay up all night in a sort of stakeout, keeping watch and reading Shaw's diary, one ear listening for sounds of an intruder in the kitchen.

Not surprisingly, she didn't appear; and by dawn, after he'd finished the informative diary he crawled up to bed for a few hours of restless sleep, feeling exhausted and grumpy at his lack of success in locating her.

HAMISH AND LIANA

*How well the skillful gard'ner drew
 Of flow'rs and herbs this dial new,
 Where from above the milder sun
 Does through a fragrant zodiac run;
 And as it works, th' industrious bee
 Computes its time as well as we.*

Andrew Marvell

He was rudely awakened by a phone call at lunchtime. Dazed and still semi-comatose, Hamish picked up the receiver. It was Sara, calling about the delivery of the pigeons. He mumbled a greeting.

“Okay if Matthew and I bring them first thing tomorrow morning?” Sara spoke briskly, not seeming to notice his state of half-wakefulness.

Hamish was too stupefied from sleep to ask her for a later delivery time and agreed to her request without too much consideration. It wasn't until after the call that he wondered how many birds would be arriving -but he supposed Sara knew the dovecote and would only bring enough for the space. Sara had also suggested that he should make sure the pigeons could not get out of the dovecote for at least a week, to give them time to settle in and identify with their new home. Still groggy from sleep, Hamish promised that he would bird-proof the dovecote that afternoon. Satisfied, Sara rang off with a promise to be there after breakfast the next morning and Hamish sat back against the pillows, looking up at the sky through the branches of the beech tree while he got his thoughts in order. His head felt muzzy from sleeping late so he went to take a shower in the hope it would help. While

he was under the stream of water he remembered that one of the mesh screens that he would need to cover the louvres in the dovecote needed some repairs, so he decided that he'd have something to eat then go and collect it to fix.

Once outside, his head felt clearer. He paced along the garden path then bounded up the steep steps to the dovecote entrance. The screens, he recalled had been in the central storage space when he had cleaned it out just before Christmas -but once inside, he did a double-take; there they were, sitting outside in the main room, leaning up against the nesting boxes. That was odd? It had to be the same screens; one had that rent in the mesh that he'd remembered.

He walked around the perimeter of the nesting space; there was little else that *could* be out of place -but he was sure that he had left the solid shutters open to allow the space some fresh air. Now they were firmly shut, making it dark in the small space.

"Hmmm," he laughed quietly, while chiding himself for making assumptions.

He had been so sure that she wouldn't hide somewhere obvious.

He walked back around and pulled open the door to the storage area. "Bingo!" he wanted to shout. So this was where she had been hiding out?

The space that he had left swept and empty, aside from the screens, was now lined with a thick layer of dried moss, leaves and straw, and in the middle of it all, there was the purloined blanket, neatly folded. The cupboard would have looked like a rather untidy birds nest were it not for the flowers, ...lavender, camomile and rosemary were strewn among the bedding, filling the small room with their soft scents, and the shelves now looked more like the hanging gardens of Babylon than the pedestrian things he had left swept clean.

On the topmost shelf, Hamish could see the cardboard packet that had contained the hot chocolate powder and the pot that he had left outside, along with one or two other items that he recognised from his pantry. But they didn't interest him at all; it was the cascade of flowers and ferns that flowed from top shelf to floor, woven into a living waterfall of colours and textures that mesmerised his attention. He stood gaping, open mouthed at the sight, wondering what kind of creature was capable of producing such beauty; then, like a dousing of cold water, reasoned thought returned.

What to do now? She wasn't here; that much was obvious, but it looked as if she intended to return, ...so, he backed out of the space without disturbing anything and moved to sit in the far corner of the dovecote, quietly mending the ripped screen with some fine wire he'd brought from the cottage. Once that small job was complete, he sat with his back to the wall, his eyes on the outer door.

It was late and cold was setting in -Hamish was starting to wish that he

had borrowed back the blanket from her bower to sit on, when the door suddenly swung open and closed. Hamish strained his eyes against the growing dark but could see nothing. He was leaning back, and putting the opening of the door down to an errant gust of wind, -which was somewhat strange, he was thinking, because he hadn't felt any breeze from the doorway, when a voice close to his right ear announced, so quietly he barely caught the whispered words, "If I chose to continue hiding,there would be little chance of your ever finding me. I have eluded far more determined men than you." He sat still, schooling himself not to move too quickly or over-react, turning his head slowly towards the disembodied voice.

"I know that now," he spoke to the air.

"Then why, pray tell, have you been so *very* persistent." The dryly quiet voice sounded accusing and more than a little cross.

"I'm not completely sure." He decided that honesty might be his best defence. "Perhaps I recognised someone whom I thought needed help ...and I hoped ...well, I don't know exactly what I hoped -maybe that if I could find you, that you might accept whatever aid I could give?" He leaned forward slightly, staring into the space where he assumed she must be.

As if to prove her point about how well she could hide; she materialised in the opposite corner of the room, close to the door.

Hamish's eyes widened in wonder -at first she was so misty and insubstantial that he could see right through her to the darkened wall behind. He watched, spellbound, as she gradually solidified until she reappeared, her general appearance much as he had seen her that first night, though now clad in his old pyjamas and the thick pullover that she had taken with her on her flight from the house. Even in the fast-fading light, he could see that her hair was as wild and tangled as ever but she had, at least, lost that pinched look of imminent starvation that had concerned him so much. He also noticed that her bare feet, sticking out from the rolled-up pyjama trousers, looked blue with cold, and found himself wishing that she had borrowed some footwear as well as the clothes and blanket.

"How very noble of you ...it fair warms my heart to know that chivalry is not dead." That she wasn't sincere in her choice of words was quite obvious from her tone, so he chose to adopt a different approach.

"We haven't been properly introduced," he said, clambering to his feet and swiftly crossing the short distance between them to stick out his right hand, in what he hoped she would interpret as a peaceful gesture. "Hi, I'm Hamish Alexander McAllister, latterly from London, but originally hailing from Scotland."

Flinching visibly at his approach, she ignored the hand. He left it there. By now it was getting so dark that he could barely see her eyes.

Though he knew they were narrowed -warily watching him, as if deciding whether to stay or flee.

It was a close-call but she stayed. "Scotland you say?Well, with a name like yours I hardly assumed you were French." He was heartened that at least he could detect the merest hint of some good humour in her voice. "And undoubtedly, you wish to know my name?"

"Well," he replied frankly, "I have eight possibilities, but it would be nice if we could narrow it down to just one?"

"Eight? You *have* been a busybody, Mr McAllister, haven't you? Very well. I'll give what you ask. My first and true name is *Liana* ...not so very different from some of those titles that your prying nature has unearthed, I think?"

He ignored her criticism of his sleuthing. "Liana." The name was elegant and rolled off his tongue with a musical lilt. "It suits you, and well, it's good to know. I was getting confused calling you so by many different names. By the way, Liana," he continued, "my hand's still out there and it's getting kind of tired just hanging about."

This raised the ghost of a smile from her; he felt her cool slender hand take his, applying the briefest pressure before she broke the contact.

She stood, silently gazing at him so he decided that now was the time to wade right in. He had an idea he wanted to share with her; and he supposed the worst she could do was refuse -at least he hoped that was the worst she could do- he wasn't sure what abilities she might have that he knew nothing of. "I've been thinking about you a lot since you left so suddenly and I wanted to talk with you -but it's freezing out here, and I don't know about you, but my rear end feels like it's turned to ice. Would you like to come back to the house and talk some more over a coffee, or a hot chocolate - since you seem to prefer that? That is, if there's any drinking chocolate left in the container?"

She laughed -a short musical cadence cut off too soon, "a little remains," she replied, "though I've run out of that watery pap you call 'milk', so you shall need to provide another vessel of the stuff -although it looks and tastes like no milk I recall." She raised an eyebrow, "I don't suppose you have any more of those tiny marshmallows? I ate the last of mine yesterday. I rather like the pink ones," she paused. Again there was the hint of a smile tugging at her full lips, "I fear I may be developing something of a sweet tooth." Then, with a note of ire in her lovely voice, "But don't mention coffee to me. Ever!" she said emphatically. "I detest the stuff -I've had more than enough of it, of late, to last me an aeon." Upon waking, she had banished the *Coffea* plants to the farthest edge of the woods, not willing to destroy them but equally, not unhappy that they languished in the cold.

He had no idea what she was on about; but smiled at her passionate expression over something as banal as a cup of coffee, "I've run out of marshmallows as well ...but I expect we'll manage. As an alternative for your sweet tooth, I still have one packet of mint chocolate biscuits in the

pantry that you may like to try instead.”

“Hmmpf,” she sounded a little sheepish. “Don’t be so sure,” from behind her back she produced the aforementioned biscuits. Laughing openly now, he accepted the packet, retrieved the drink mix from the shelf in her bower then held the door open for her as they exited. He would have put out a hand to steady her on the steps, but she shrugged off his assistance, gracefully descending the steep steps.

They walked to the house, scrunching along the gravelled pathway in silence, not particularly companionably, but at least, he thought, together. As they paced side by side between the clipped hedges Hamish noted that she seemed taller than he remembered from their last meeting, -but then, his experience was limited to seeing her either collapsed in his arms or prone, in the large bed.

Once inside, he struck a match to the sitting room fire, glad that he’d set it before venturing outside, and went into the kitchen to make their drinks. He threw milk into the microwave to heat as quickly as possible, concerned that she might change her mind again and disappear, literally; -and how had she done that? - before his return. He set the drinks and biscuits on a tray, along with a nosegay of bright jonquils and snowdrops that she must have left behind when she had taken the biscuits, and returned to the sitting room. As he came through the door he let out a sigh of relief. She was still sitting on the sofa -he chortled quietly, thinking, so far, so good.

She sat quietly, both hands around the warm mug, with her feet curled up under her body, staring fixedly down at the patterned rug that lay between the sofas. Even as he watched, Hamish got the impression that she was shrinking away from him and withdrawing further into herself and he sensed he would have to say something soon that would draw her out, or risk losing her again.

That was all very well, he thought, but it suddenly seemed much harder to say out loud what he had rehearsed in his mind on the walk back from the dovecote. As he had earlier, he decided, sticking to the truth seemed best. Whatever he said was fraught with the risk that she might take it badly and vanish again -this time for good. He knew that he didn’t want that to happen but how to stop it?

Before he had a chance to overthink his delivery he spoke, “I found some old diaries hidden in a compartment in the tester bed.” Well, that certainly got her attention. Her head came up and she regarded him guardedly, remaining silent. He continued, “...they appear to have been written by Karl Van Eeden, Jean-Marc de Joux, Nicholas Scott and Jeremy Shaw. I read Shaw’s, -I realise now that I was probably prying into things that were no business of mine, but I had an idea about who you might be and it seemed an ideal way to find out if my theory was truth or fiction.”

“And what decision did you arrive at Mr McAllister?” She did not sound

at all pleased. "Am I now ...Truth or ...Fiction?" she questioned, eyes flashing with something close to contempt.

He ignored the question for the moment, countering, "It's Hamish," before continuing, "Isabella Kendal called this morning ...as it turns out, she could have enlightened me about what I was trying to confirm without my having to read Shaw's diary."

"Ah, Isabella ...so she is still alive?" Liana did not appear particularly thrilled with this news. "I never met Jon's sister face to face and yet she disliked me so -she was Jon's only sister- they were very close. I think she would have resented any woman 'taking' her little brother and when he insisted upon telling her about me, well; he never said as much, but I guessed her reaction from what he didn't say. You know how it is?" Hamish nodded, and she went on, "So, now you think you know the 'truth' about me presumably? But you had already found the church records -were they not truth enough for you?"

"The records suggested that you may have been here for a very long time ...nothing more or less than that," he said. "I have to admit, it piqued my curiosity, and I felt I wanted to know more about you. It was difficult to believe that you were real, despite what I was seeing, and hearing, from people like Arthur Blaine."

"*Who I am?*" she straightened her spine and pulled her legs from under her body. Hamish could almost see hackles rise.

"And would 'defining' me make me more ...or less, real?" Her unhappiness at his comment was so apparent that he could tell she would get up and leave soon if he didn't steer this conversation onto safer ground. She was talking as much to herself now, as to him; "Hmmpf, little Arthur Blaine. I remember him and his father in the Garden ...he was just a little boy and I frightened him once. I didn't mean to -he ran away, scared..."

Hamish tried a softer approach, "Look, Liana, I'm sorry, I'm not putting this well and I seem to be eternally tripping over my own big feet here -but even before I found the diaries, I had an idea of who you were and that this place was really more yours than mine. I really wanted to find you to suggest that you either live here in the cottage and I," he swallowed with difficulty, "...leave," -this was not his favoured plan but he felt honour-bound to suggest it as an option, "or, if you didn't like that idea that you might prefer to make the summer house yours." He leaned forward, anxious that she should not take what he said the wrong way, "you made it fairly clear by leaving that you didn't want to stay in the main house with me and I thought perhaps that the summer house might be a better alternative if it was fixed up with kitchen and bathroom facilities. But as far as I'm concerned White Briars is yours anyway ...so I'm possibly only offering you what is rightfully your own to take?"

Well at least, now, she was looking at him again. Though his words

didn't seem to have had the desired effect -if anything, her face had darkened with a greater degree of annoyance.

"White Briars, as you call it," she spoke in clipped tones, "belongs to no one," she stated with some force. "Including you or me and any role that you might have here would be purely custodial ...for the duration of your mortal life, that is. This, in my considerable experience, is not terribly long."

"I've been told as much as that already -about the ownership of the house, that is, not about how long I might or might not live," he replied. "But it would look odd, wouldn't it, to have a patch of jolly olde England not owned by anyone at all? There has to be someone's name on the deeds surely, or people might start asking questions?"

She didn't reply. He could see her closing him out again. Exasperated, he declared, "Could you help me out a little please? This is unknown territory for me, -and I'm not exactly accustomed to dealing with ...um," he was at a loss to describe her, "...a person like yourself."

"A *person* like me? ...and what exactly is '*a person like me*'?" She shook her head in disgust.

Hamish could see that she wasn't trying to help at all ...that much was patently obvious, but she was talking and he figured that was better than nothing.

He could also see that this conversation was going down a dead-end street. "Liana, we're not going to get anywhere if you continually look for mistakes in what I'm saying ...because they won't be hard to find," he admitted. "I may not know a great deal about you, but I do know something of what it feels like, to be in that dark place that I believe you're in at the moment. I can only imagine what it would feel like to have that compounded; I don't know how many times over ...it must be terrible. I'm no psychoanalyst ... I don't know the exact right words to say." He was growing impatient at her belligerent attitude. "I just want to help you and would it kill you to be a little more co-operative?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth he was wishing them back.

"Kill me?" she gave a short derisive laugh, "If only you knew..."

"What?" he replied, raising his eyebrows quizzically. "That you wanted to harm yourself? But I do know ...I've considered taking that road myself, and if nothing else, it helps me recognise it in others." He was surgeon-like in his honesty this time, cutting straight to the truth. "Why did you think I was so determined to find you?"

"You have *no* understanding of what my existence has been like." Her latent anger that had been quietly simmering away rose swiftly to boiling point, and he, interfering mortal that he was, was going bear the brunt of it. Rising out of her seat, she started to pace to and fro in front of him. She didn't raise her voice a great deal, but there was a quality to tone that made him want to back away -though he held his ground and remained sitting,

watching her angry stalk. She was passionate in her fury, eyes flashing and arms flailing to make her points. “I have been awakened, when I chose not to be awake. I do not want to be here, but I seem to have no say in the matter. This place, this Garden ...White Briars as you call it, made that decision for me. It would seem that I can’t even decide upon my own destiny any more. I don’t know what has happened to me ...and since waking, I have felt cold and hunger in a way that I have *never* experienced. In past times I could run barefoot in snow and not feel a thing and if I ate, it was because I wanted to, not out of necessity.” She halted her pacing to face him, hands on hips, “Yes, perhaps if I could choose death, I would ...but that path is denied me ...on so many levels.” Her anguished voice showed the strain she felt, “...Even the spirits of this place have taken away the one solace that I had; Sleep ...and now there is no escape left for me.” The last was spoken in barely a whisper. She turned away from him, but not before he caught sight of the silent tears welling up and overflowing down her cheeks.

Hamish rose and went to her, gently turning her body to face him. Now she was sobbing in earnest, given over to a mixture of grief and self-pity that he found absolutely heart-wrenching. He put his arms around her and she held on to him like a drowning person clinging to a passing lifeline. Speaking softly to her all the while as she cried ...a mixture of endearments, clichés and a sharing of the knowledge he had acquired, borne of his own experience with grief.

Once she calmed he led her to back to the wide sofa, sitting companionably alongside her but not too close, not wanting to crowd her. She accepted the box of tissues that he offered, wiping tear-reddened eyes.

When she finally spoke, it was to apologise for her outburst but he held up a hand, forestalling her, “please never feel that you must excuse yourself to me for tears ...if the past eighteen months has taught me nothing else, it has at least taught me that we all need to cry occasionally.”

It seemed that the floodgates had been opened by her tears. She talked more freely, sharing some of her history with him. Hamish listened, offering sympathy and tissues as needed. After a time, he got up to replenish the fire, then later, to collect cheese and crackers, a bottle of red wine and glasses from the kitchen.

They sat by the fire until it was embers, drinking, eating, and talking, for hours. He heated soup and brought it to her, in the hope that if he kept plying her with food she would continue to speak. That she needed the catharsis of sharing her grief was obvious to him ...he knew something about her already from reading Shaw’s diary, but that was negligible, compared to the tales she was telling him.

It was late by the time she had finished her saga. Hamish had long given up any pretence of talking, preferring to listen. Her stories were made all

the more fascinating by the knowledge that she had lived them, and wasn't merely relating history. Eventually, spent and quiet, she sat still at last, only half visible in the light of the dying fire and a pair of candles on the mantle that he had lit earlier. Hamish had not wanted to switch the lights on, her narrative seemed more suited to the soft glow of the candles than the harshness of modern electrics. The silence was broken only by the muted chiming from the grandfather clock in the foyer, muffled by the closed door but loud enough to bring Hamish from his reverie. He counted the chimes ...10, 11, 12 ...midnight.

"It's the New Year," he announced, not wanting to be as trite as to wish her a Happy New Year, but thinking, privately, that a little happiness would do her a power of good..."Will you stay?" When she looked askance at him, he continued, "The big bed is yours if you want it, I have my own bed under the eaves in the corner of the studio."

She thought for a moment before replying, reluctant to agree to his offer but aware that she hadn't been faring well outdoors, "The dovecote was adequate, but a bed would be warmer and I find I have need of more comfort than tree roots and cold, hard ground can offer, so I'll accept,' she added a proviso, "...for now."

"Just as well," he laughed quietly. "Tomorrow you would have had company in the dovecote that you might not have planned on." he added, smiling. He would broach the idea of the summer house again, he thought, but not tonight.

He filled hot water bottles and carried clean sheets upstairs. She helped change the bed ...finishing the job he had started the morning before. He plugged a reading light into a nearby socket, stuffed one of the hot water bottles in the bed and handed over the four diaries -after showing her where they had been hidden.

She expressed surprise at the secret compartment. "I slept for years in this bed and never known of its existence," she said. The bed, she told him, dated from a much earlier cottage that had stood on the same foundations, both built by Jean-Marc de Joux. He'd been a trickster who liked to build secret spaces into his woodwork. She thought that she'd been privy to all his secret hiding places. To prove this she showed Hamish another small drawer-like compartment in the bed-base that opened when she twisted a carved rosebud. The drawer contained a single dried rosebud, so desiccated that Hamish dared not touch it for fear it would crumble to dust. Liana shook her head sadly at the sight of the flower but did not mention how it came to be where it was. She looked close to tears once more and Hamish took the hint to leave her.

Wishing her good night, he left her tucked up under the covers with the oldest of the diaries.

Despite his weary state, Hamish remained awake for some time. He lay

staring up at the night sky through the window above his head, or, other times, looking across at the thin slivers of light that were visible between the drapes surrounding big tester bed -where she lay reading her former lover's diaries.

He tried to imagine what that might be like ...living on, long after all those that you loved had died, but decided, in the end, that it was beyond anything his mind could conceive. His thoughts turned to Liana herself ...she was undeniably beautiful to look at, despite the wild-child-cum-wood-nymph hairdo, and obviously intelligent. He could see how men would be drawn to her. But, he thought, any moves on his part to let her know that would be pretty sure to set her running in the opposite direction.

Instead, he lay there, formulating a plan that he hoped might help her come to terms with her present-day existence. Eventually, he slept, but the light was still peeking from behind the tester-bed's drapes for the rest of the night.

JACK

Jack had been hanging around the cottage all day growing increasingly annoyed that his efforts in finding Liana had been no more successful than the mortal's -it irritated him that she was as good, if not better at concealment than he.

He had been stretched out on the flat section of the kitchen roof, hidden among the vines when the two had returned. Agile as a monkey, he climbed down to listen at the downstairs windows but could only catch snippets of their conversation. Now he was back on the roof, formulating a plan -he stopped for a minute to skitter across the tiles to peer at her through the high dormers before going back to his position above the kitchen.

He hunkered down among the vines considering his options. If he could get rid of Liana, his plans to gain power and influence beyond the boundaries of the Garden might come to fruition. As she lay comfortably in the big bed, reading her lovers' journals and thoughts, he sat on the roof, scheming long into the early hours of the new morning.

HAMISH AND LIANA

*“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -
Emily Dickinson*

Hamish woke later than he'd planned to find the curtains that had screened the tester bed the night before pulled back and the bed empty, the covers smoothed as if she had never slept in it.

“Don't panic, don't panic,” he muttered under his breath, turning to survey the room. It felt like a bad case of *déjà vu* as he quickly checked the upstairs bathroom before running downstairs. He searched the lower rooms then went out the front door to peer around into the garden closest the house. This latest fall of snow had been mercifully brief and little more than a few patches remained upon the ground. It didn't take long to confirm his suspicions that she wasn't in the house or anywhere near it. Well, he thought, there's no point running after her ...she was either coming back of her own accord or ...or what? He wasn't sure, so he went slowly back upstairs to shower and dress, returning to the kitchen to make fresh coffee and set the fires.

As he carried the coffee pot to the stove he caught himself throwing frequent glances outside. It was rather pointless, he thought, as there was little to be seen out there other than the thick morning mist. The delicious smells of coffee and frying bacon were just starting to filter throughout the warm room when he caught sight of Liana through the bay window. She

had appeared like some wraith out of the mist, her bare feet leaving a trail across the dew-soaked grass and drifted around the corner of the house, heading towards the laundry door.

Instant relief was his foremost emotion -but she'd looked completely unconcerned. He decided to play it cool. Going to open the door for her, he noticed, as he grasped the door knob that the lock had been snibbed back in the open position. If he hadn't been in such a panic to find her, he thought ruefully, he might have noticed that small detail a trifle earlier and saved himself some trauma.

He pulled the door open wide as she approached and stood back to let her in; her arms were full of a riotous display of fresh blooms, -Hamish could see the rich lavender-blue and white of irises, tall stems of delphiniums and foxgloves, salmon pink Albertine roses and peonies, all nestled among the delicate 'granny's' bonnets of columbines and tangled ferny fronds of blue-flowering love-in-a-mist, *Nigella damascena*.

"Wow, they're so beautiful," he marvelled at the flowers, all in full flower and all of them out-of-season. "But where, I've got to ask, do you get these blooms at this time of year?"

"You ask *me* that?" She stood looking at him with an expression which suggested he was closely related to the village idiot. "I thought you had read the diaries."

"My apologies, Madame," he said contritely. "To clarify, what I meant was, do you conjure them out of thin air, or do they grow in some special part of garden that I don't know of?"

"It's very simple really," she replied, half-smiling in a mischievous manner, "...I walk up to the plants, and I ask them, extremely politely, of course, if they would be kind enough to provide me with some blooms." She paused, "they have never refused me yet."

Hamish wasn't sure, from the tone of her reply, if she was teasing him, or telling the truth. He let it go for now.

"And you are obviously accustomed to using the laundry entrance, aren't you?" he asked. "How did you get in here all those times to take the food?"

"You are full of questions this morning, aren't you Hamish? Come with me and I'll show you." She placed the bouquet in the deep laundry washbowl and filled it with water before gesturing for him to follow her outside. Moving along the brick wall that ran from the laundry to the woods, she ducked behind a low bush and came back a moment later, brandishing a key which she handed to Hamish. "Mystery solved -I can't walk through solid walls, you know, but the key has been there, behind a loose brick in this wall for as long as the house has been here. I remembered -and it came in very handy that no one had discovered or moved it."

They returned indoors. As they re-entered the kitchen Hamish looked down to see that she was leaving a trail of wet puddles on the floor. "Sit down," he instructed. "I'll dry your feet." Pulling the hand towel from where it had been drying in front of the stove, he proceeded to rub her feet. The pyjama pants were completely sodden from below her knees where she must have been wandering through the long grass. Her feet, though now dry, were blue with cold. He couldn't believe that she had gone outside in the chilly morning temperatures.

"Would you take offence if I was to suggest a fresh change of clothes?" he asked, as he leant back on his heels, looking up at her. Her hair was, if anything, wilder than it had been when he had first encountered her in the garden. She appeared unconcerned that there were still bits of twigs and leaves randomly caught in the matted locks. It was strange, he thought, even though she appeared unkempt and unwashed she didn't smell at all bad ...in fact, from where he was kneeling, he caught the pleasant drifting scent of sweet peas from her, as if fragrant from the heat of summer's sun."

"Do I offend you?" she regarded him, eyes wide. She appeared a little taken-aback by his suggestion.

"No. Not at all," he spluttered. "I merely thought you might prefer clean, dry clothes and some warm socks." He took the bull by the horns,...hoping not to be gored by her anger if she chose to be affronted, "But, while we're on the subject ...if you don't do something about that hair soon, you'll be in danger of having small birds attempting to make their nests in it, come springtime." Her hair reminded him of a Helena Bonham-Carter up-do gone feral -he went on quickly, giving her no time to respond to his suggestion before he spoke again. "Now, would you like some tea and something to eat before you give me a piece of your mind for being so forward and rude?"

At that, she threw back her head and laughed. It was the first time he had heard real laughter from her and it sounded delightful.

They ate his cooked breakfast then went upstairs where Hamish dug around in the chest of drawers until he found some garments suitable for her to wear. Digging under a mound of too-big pullovers, he eventually unearthed a midnight-blue merino polo neck pullover that he had managed to shrink in the wash and that was now several sizes too small for him, and a pair of black cotton tracksuit pants with an elasticised waistband and ankles. He handed them to her, saying, "If you pull the draw-cord in tight on those, hopefully they should stay up. I'm sorry, they're not exactly high fashion, but it's the best I can do for now." He had nothing that would do her for underwear, but, if memory served him correctly, that hadn't seemed to be a high priority where she was concerned. He ran the upstairs bath and after checking that she had an ample supply of soap, shampoo and dry towels, left her standing watching the steam rising gently from the deep,

warm tub. He closed the door on her and returned downstairs.

Soon after, as he'd expected, Matthew rang the doorbell, saying that Sara was parked next to the dovecote with the birds. Hamish donned a jacket and his outdoor footwear and walked through the serpentine hedges, with Matthew skipping excitedly beside him. All around, in the trees was the sound of dripping water. The sun had come out with warmth that had quickly burned away the mist and was now rapidly melting the remaining snow. Sara and Matthew had arrived in the same van they'd used to deliver the swans, with 'Blaine's Nursery' emblazoned on its side -in the same font and colour Hamish had already seen on her business cards. She had parked in front of the carriage house and opened the back doors to remove the bird cages from the rear. As they came along the path, all Hamish could see of her was a view of her trim jeans-clad backside as she reached for the last cage. At their approaching footsteps, she turned, cage in hand. Two others were sitting with their cooing occupants on the gravel at her feet so Hamish picked up one and a sack of grain, similar to that which Sara had provided for the swans. He gestured for Matthew to take the other cage. "Good morning, Sara. A Happy New Year to you. Looks as if it's going to be a great day, doesn't it?"

Sara returned his cheerful greeting, adding, "You look like the cat that swallowed the canary this morning. What's made you so merry?"

"Oh, this and that," he replied, not wanting to give away too much information about his returned house guest. "Shall we take the birds up to the dovecote and get them settled? I imagine they'd probably like to be out of these cages."

"And then you can pay me!" Matthew crowed jubilantly.

His mother laughed, "ever the businessman."

"I wonder where he gets that from." Hamish questioned with a wide smile on his face.

"It's not that obvious, is it?" Sara feigned an expression of mock-shock, before adding, in a more seriously tone, "It's not such a bad thing, I think, for children to learn the value of money and how to earn it. It's been a struggle for me to get the business back on its feet. Dad was getting a bit past it by the time I took over and things were run down, so Matthew knows that if he wants extra toys and gear that he has to contribute something towards them. The pigeons are his responsibility to feed and care for -so it's fair enough that he gets any profits from sales."

They carried the three cages up the steps to the dovecote. Matthew helped Hamish to put the screens in place before releasing the pigeons into their new home. Unlike the swans these birds were well used to being handled so it was a much less traumatic experience for all involved. The nine pigeons fluttered gracefully out of their cages and instantly made themselves at home, strutting around exploring the space and cooing to one

another. They were dainty turtle doves, slightly larger than a blackbird. Their upperparts were distinctively mottled with chestnut and black and their black tails had a white edge. Sara explained that they had started breeding the birds in response to their numbers dropping so much in the wild that they were now considered endangered. Hamish spread feed, and made sure there was a shallow bowl filled with fresh water before they left them to settle. As they retreated down the stairs he invited Sara and Matthew back to the house for coffee.

There was no sign of Liana as they entered the hall and sitting room. Hamish assumed she must still be upstairs bathing and took the others through to the kitchen. He boiled water for fresh coffee for himself and Sara and gave Matthew the last of the hot chocolate.

“I thought you’d said that you had run out of that?” Sara pointed to Matthew’s drink.

“Well, I have now. It’s a rather long story. I’ll tell you sometime.” Hamish demurred.

“And where on earth are you getting these amazing flowers?” Sara had spied the flowers in the laundry, still sitting in the basin. “They’d have to be imported at this time of year ...and some of them aren’t even florist’s flowers. Granny’s bonnets don’t generally last long enough for most florists to bother with. And this *Aquilegia vulgaris* ‘Nora Barlow’; she held up a stem with spurless pink, cream and green double flowers, ...it’s sooo gorgeous -I could do with some of this in the shop.”

“I’m afraid those are part of the long story as well.” Hamish felt bad not sharing his source with her, but he knew that Liana’s trust in him was still in its infancy and would be severely shaken, to say the least, if he betrayed her confidences.

“Which you, obviously don’t want to tell me. Yet. Well, that’s your business. I can respect that.” If Sara was somewhat disappointed, she did her best to hide it. She changed the subject, filling Hamish in on what care the doves would require. When she had finished, Hamish excused himself to go through to study and get Matthew payment for the birds and feed. He was coming back through the connecting doors when Liana appeared at the same time through the door from the sitting room.

She moved with such a sense of poise and grace that she had turned even his baggy clothes into runway garments. The sleeves of the top had been too long for her and she had rolled them up to her elbows, but it was her hair that had altered her appearance the most. The forest litter and almost-dreadlocks had gone and her long Titian locks were now loosely braided over one shoulder in a style that reminded Hamish even more strongly of the statue by the pool. The change was a vast improvement, thought Hamish. What he said was, “I trust that you enjoyed the bath?”

“My scalp is still smarting from all the combing and I left a considerable

amount of my hair in your bathroom bin, but yes, it feels good to be clean and leaf-free,” she replied.

“These are my friends, Sara and Matthew,” he indicated the pair sitting at the table, smiling, “they’ve brought the pigeons for the dovecote.”

Liana frowned and looked for a moment as if she might turn and flee back up the stairs. Hamish put a hand on her arm in gentle restraint. “I’m hoping that Sara might be able to help you choose some new clothes.”

“New clothes you say?” that piqued her interest. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate these,” she paused as if searching for words, “um, garments,” she indicated the loose dark-coloured pants and top, “but black is not really my best colour.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t run to a very colourful wardrobe. I’m sure Sara will be able to find something better suited to you.” He moved to the counter to make more coffee.

Sara twisted in her chair and with a raised questioning eyebrow said, “I didn’t realise that you had a guest staying, Hamish?”

“Liana came to stay, late yesterday.” Hamish didn’t elaborate any further. “And now that I’ve offered your shopping expertise before asking, would you mind assisting her to buy some clothes?”

Sara looked even more intrigued, and was obviously dying to ask questions. She looked Liana over.

“You’re at least six inches taller than me ...so that would put you at around five eight or nine, right? Liana nodded, “And you’re what, a size six? Eight?” she turned to Hamish, grinning “I assume you’ll be paying?” When he nodded assent, “good, this should be fun then”

“No black, please,” Hamish said, eyeing Sara’s dark leather jacket and black jeans, “Liana says she likes colour.”

“I heard that -shouldn’t be a problem,” Sara replied. “Though it’s not my thing for clothes –I tend to concentrate my colour on my hair and accessories, “as if to prove her point, today the tips of her hair were an-eye-watering shade of bright iridescent green, which contrasted with hot pink Doc Martens, “...but don’t worry, I have a good eye for colours when I need to ...comes from all that training in floristry.” She turned back to Liana, “the shops are all shut today obviously, being a national holiday and all ...but I could go first thing tomorrow since, if that’s all you’ve got to wear, it looks like it’s a bit urgent,” then back to Hamish, “It’s as quiet as the grave at the nursery ...everyone’s away on vacation still and it hasn’t exactly been great gardening weather these past few days, so I could take a few hours off, no trouble. I’m sure Dad will keep an eye on things till I get back.”

“I need to shop for groceries again too,” Hamish remembered. “It’s starting to look like Old Mother Hubbard’s in my pantry, so I’ll drive if you like.”

“Is there room for Matthew in that sardine can that you call a car?” Sara asked.

“Absolutely. I’m sure I can squeeze him in the back.”

“...Clothes shopping and grocery shopping,” Matthew interjected, wailing. “Yuk. No thank you!” His tone was filled with distaste for such boring activities.

“You’ll have to stay with Granddad if you don’t come,” Sara retorted.

“You don’t want to come? But, I thought we might leave your mum to get on with the clothes shopping while we checked out the bike shops,” Hamish countered. “I figured, maybe that you could show me this mega-cool bike and the skateboard that you want? But, if you’re not interested...” he left the invitation hanging.

“...Yay! That’d be cool!” Matthew enthused, now seeing the shopping expedition in an entirely new light. “And we’d get to go in your car too. It’s way cooler than mum’s lame old nursery van. I bet it can go fast!”

“Great,” Hamish said, “I’ll be at the nursery to pick you both up at eight-thirty in the morning. “O.K.?” he looked over Matthew’s head to Sara, who was smiling appreciatively at the way he had handled her son.

“What about you, Liana? Wouldn’t you like to come with us?” Sara turned again, questioning Liana. “I’m sure we could buy something fairly quickly for you to change into. Then you’d be fine for the rest of the shopping. That way you would be able to make your own choices.”

“No,” Liana was adamant, “I dare not leave here.”

Before Sara had a chance to ask anything else, Hamish broke in, “Liana has not been well, and she is still recovering, so it would be better if she was to stay here. With your good taste and my credit card, I’m sure we’ll manage quite admirably.”

Sara was happy enough with his explanation and she and Matthew left shortly afterwards.

Liana retired upstairs for the remainder of the day –reading and re-reading the diaries in solitude. If she found anything of import in their pages she didn’t appear inclined to share it with Hamish and he retreated outside to continue with the work of resurrecting the herb garden beds and trimming the hedges surrounding the knot garden paths. The previous night’s confidences were not repeated and he went up to bed frustrated at Liana’s apparent need for solitude and secrecy.

HAMISH AND LIANA

Ob rose thou art sick.
William Blake

The shopping expedition was fun. That in itself was something of a surprise to Hamish, who had more in common with Matthew than he would have admitted, -never being a great fan of clothes shopping. At Sara's suggestion, they drove to the Shopping Centre in Tunbridge Wells. Hamish parked and Sara pointed to Laura Ashley, intuitively guessing that Liana would like the fresh and flowery look.

Hamish agreed, thinking that would be truer than Sara could know. He and Matthew followed her through the shop door, prepared to be bored witless. But Sara was a decisive shopper, picking and discarding clothes with awe-inspiring speed, so that within twenty minutes they'd left the shop, already well-laden with bags. They made lightning-fast stops in a couple of popular clothing chain-stores, where she added trousers, pullovers and skirts, then hit a shoe shop, buying pairs of soft canvas and leather shoes, and boots -using a template she'd traced of Liana's foot to help chose sizes.

Next, a short, somewhat awkward conversation regarding underwear - Sara had spotted an Ann Summers store in the shopping centre but Hamish when said he thought Liana had a rather old-fashioned sensibility and might possibly find some of the items a tad risqué. But then, what did he know, he thought -as far as he knew, she didn't bother with undergarments of any kind.

They made a short stop for morning tea, where Matthew devoured two large iced chocolate muffins and a cheese roll, before separating for the

next hour, Sara had announced that she would sooner shop for the underwear and nightwear without male assistance. So while she headed to BHS, Hamish and Matthew spent an enjoyable time in the sports stores looking at bikes and skateboards. They were wandering past the Waterstones window when Hamish noticed a display on planets and stars that coincided with the launch of a new book, so the two went in to have a look.

“Look Matthew, a moon globe...” he turned the globe in his hands, pointed, “that’s the Sea of Tranquillity where the first moon landing was made in nineteen sixty nine -long before you were born. You know, I’ve wanted one of these for ages, but there was never enough space for stuff like this in my London house. Maybe I’ll buy it now then we can take it back and look at it properly at our leisure.” He picked up a boxed globe and carried it to the counter, tucking a new star chart under his arm as he went. After he had paid, he handed the star chart to Matthew, saying, “I thought you might like one of these for your own. There are lots of stars and constellations that you can see without the telescope and you could use it at your place.”

Matthew was pleased with the gift and walked jauntily along beside Hamish, showing it to Sara as soon as they rejoined her.

“I’m all done!” she announced happily.

Hamish suggested stowing their purchases in his car and walking the short distance to the colonnaded Pantiles for lunch, before they went shopping for his groceries. A fifteen minute downhill jaunt and they were seated and ordering a hot lunch at The Ragged Trousers. Hamish’s roast lamb arrived served inside a huge Yorkshire pudding. Sara’s chose baked Camembert and Matthew made short work of a croque monsieur. Thinking that a post-lunch walk back up the hill was more than anyone wanted, they opted to take the bus on the way back.

Hamish bought as much as he dared fit in the small car at the supermarket. They filled the boot with supplies, and Matthew rode home in the back, his small figure surrounded by bags of groceries new clothes. It was with some difficulty that Hamish extricated him from the mass of carrier bags when he dropped Sara and Matthew off at their home before driving on to White Briars.



Laden with bags of groceries, Hamish let himself into the cottage, calling Liana’s name to let her know he was back. He was met with silence. He continued unloading the rest of the shopping before heading upstairs to check for her -all the while chiding himself that he couldn’t start worrying every time she was out of his sight. Like yesterday, there was probably a

perfectly reasonable explanation for her absence.

But the cottage was awfully quiet.

He was rounding the top of the stairs, when the silence was broken by a loud sneeze. Despite his resolution not to worry, he found it hard to contain his relief. The sound had come from behind the closed drapes of the tester so he headed over to greet her, coughing politely before he popped his head around the curtains.

Liana was lying on the bed and Hamish had just opened his mouth to say a cheery “hello”, when he noticed that she didn’t look at all well. Her eyes were red and puffy and she appeared to be having some difficulty breathing.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, immediately concerned. He dropped to sit on the bed at her side.

“I... don...dhow,” she replied, with considerable effort.

She looked flushed -and when Hamish put a hand to her brow it was unnaturally hot. Her breath was coming in short, wheezy gasps like some asthmatic-sufferer struggling for air. Making a quick trip to the bathroom cabinet, he returned with a digital thermometer. A minute later he knew for sure that her temperature was dangerously high.

“Has anything like this ever happened to you before?” First the starvation and hypothermia and now this -for someone who was supposedly ageless, she seemed to be developing a disturbing propensity for illness, he thought.

“Dhow ...dhever.” She had difficulty forming the words, between wheezes.

“Never! As in Never-Ever?” he asked, horrified.

She shook her head, trying to sit up -but even that small movement seemed beyond her strength and she subsided back into the pillows.

This was definitely not good.

Hamish got to his feet. “I’ll find you some paracetamol for the fever,” He raced back to the bathroom and was back in moments with tablets, a tumbler of water and a cool cloth. She swallowed the pills then lay back exhausted. Hamish placed the compress on her forehead, frowning.

“I think it might be time I called our friendly neighbourhood doctor again,” he said. “If you’ve *never* been sick before, I’ve no idea how much worse you’re going to get. You need professional help.” At his words, she frowned, and was about to try and speak. “It’s okay, I’ll make sure he understands that you can’t leave White Briars, no matter what,” he reassured her, turning from the bed to find his phone. “Though how I’m going to do that, if the doctor insists you need to go to hospital is more than I can work out right now,” he muttered as he punched numbers.

Fortunately, Doctor McLean was in, and able to make an immediate house call.

He spent some time examining his patient -checking Liana's pulse, temperature, lungs, ears and throat before turning to Hamish. "If I didn't know better, I'd say that this young lady simply has a very bad cold, complicated by a raging throat infection and incipient lung problems ...she shows all the classic symptoms ...only, much worse than I've ever seen in all my years of practice here. It reminds me of natives in New Guinea, when I was a young man practising out there, ...they hadn't been exposed to western diseases -you know, some of the things we take for granted can kill if you've no immunity. Is there any chance that she's never been exposed to a cold before?" he asked Hamish.

"Could be," Hamish replied cagily.

"Well," mused the doctor, "strange as that may seem, let's make that assumption for now and I'll treat her accordingly." He looked back at Liana, "And I assume that you still have this hospital phobia that I was told of last time." She nodded, barely moving her head.

"She's petrified of hospitals," added Hamish, "It's as much as I can do to get her to see you." Needs-must, he thought. The half-truth would have to do.

The doctor pursed his lips thoughtfully -Hamish wasn't sure just how convincing his white-lie had been. Dr McLean turned to Liana. "In that case, I'm going to give you a dose of antibiotics, the old-fashioned way. He dug in his bag for a syringe and needle. You might want to leave Mr McAllister," he said as he filled the syringe, gently tapping the barrel to remove air bubbles.

Hamish exited room promptly, relieved to leave someone else in charge.

A few minutes later, the doctor came downstairs to join him. "She's sleeping," he said, "I've given her a hefty dose of antibiotic and instructed her on how to use an inhaler to help her breathing, -but you'll need to keep a close eye on her, ...don't be mistaken about this,...colds can kill, if they strike the wrong person at the wrong time. She'll need more antibiotics, so I'll check in on her again tomorrow ...but, if she starts to go downhill, phobia, or no phobia, I want you to get her to a hospital, stat. And she'll require round-the-clock watching. Do you understand?"

"Absolutely," said Hamish, wishing it was that easy.

"I'm glad to see that she's put on some weight since I last saw her. That's in her favour. She young and looks fairly healthy, aside from this latest set-back, so if there are no further complications, it should be fairly plain sailing." He gave Hamish a few more instructions concerning Liana's care, then left, saying that he could see himself out. Hamish went back upstairs ...Liana was sleeping, supported by the pillows. The doctor had covered her with a light-weight quilt so Hamish left her just long enough to go down and put away the remaining shopping. For the rest of the evening he checked on her frequently, but aside from taking some tiny sips of water

she wanted nothing more. When she protested rather feebly at having to take more medication, Hamish insisted and she relented, too weak to object.



Liana's recovery took the better part of three weeks.

During the early days of her illness, David visited daily to assist Hamish with her care. On his first visit he had listened, open-mouthed to Hamish's tale of Liana's background and history. Hamish recounted his discovery of the diaries and some of Liana's story that she had revealed the night she had returned to the cottage.

"It is one thing to allow that someone like this might exist," David pronounced apologetically, after Hamish had finished speaking, "but quite another to have the irrefutable evidence in front of your own eyes. Now I know what Thomas felt like when Our Lord showed him his wounds from Calvary and insisted on him placing his fingers in the wound to allay his doubts. I admit now that I did have some serious reservations that she was who you said." He brightened, "there are actual hand-written diaries, you say? I'd very much like to see those accounts sometime, if ...Liana, you say her name is? ...If Liana will permit me."

"Your scepticism was quite understandable," Hamish replied. "I still find it hard to believe myself. What I don't understand, is why she should be so ill, now, when she has lived for centuries without any apparent physical weakness?"

"You say that she could wander around, wearing very little in the way of clothing and she didn't feel cold or heat previously? And she only ate when she felt like it? ...and never ill?" David counted the points on his fingers, "goodness me ...well, something has changed pretty radically for her, hasn't it? If she's only just, as you said, awakened again, and she's already suffered near-starvation from lack of food, hypothermia from the cold and now this. Well, when it comes down to it, there doesn't appear to be too much difference between her and us, does there?"

"That's precisely what I've been wondering."

The two were lounging in front of the sitting room fire and Hamish lifted his whiskey glass to his lips, sipping thoughtfully before continuing, "You know David, she told me that it's the garden that is the source of her immortality, and that's why she insists that she can't ever leave here. What if something has affected, or even taken away that immortality? That would certainly be a game-changer and leave her open to the kinds of problems that trouble the rest of us mere mortals."

"For what reason?" David questioned. "I mean, why should her state change now? Is there anything that you know, that I don't?"

“No. At least nothing concrete -only that she as much as admitted to me that this time she’d tried to sleep in a way that she’d never wake up again. She wasn’t able take her own life ...she says that the garden wouldn’t allow her to do that ...but she came as close to death as she dared. Maybe that was too close and it’s resulted in her becoming vulnerable?”

“Let’s get her back to health first,” David spoke in the practical tones of one who was accustomed to dealing with the day-to-day crises within his parish, “once we’ve achieved that, I may have a suggestion as to how you might test your theory. In the meantime, I think it’s high time I beat you at chess again -where’s that board?” He rubbed his hands together in gleeful anticipation.



David was not the only one gleeful.

Outside the sitting room window Jack was euphoric with elation. She was sick! Oh how wonderful.

He did a little happy dance, prancing around on his stick-like limbs in some *danse-macabre* parody of joy. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone of the garden folk had succumbed to illness or death –himself excluded of course.

But then his demise had hardly been of natural origins and was something that he held the garden entirely to blame for. If he could get rid of Liana, the Garden’s favourite, he might at last get his own back for that indignity.

HAMISH AND LIANA

*There be none of beauty's daughters
With a magic like thee;*
Lord Byron

Ironically, it was Liana's illness and enforced bed-rest that gave Hamish the push to restart painting. In the first days after she fell ill, he couldn't go far from her side so he's set his big easel up in the light from the oriel windows near the stairwell, far enough from her bed to let her sleep while still close enough to keep an eye on her.

After digging out his painting equipment from the studio cupboard where he had stashed it after moving house he went in search of subjects to paint. Thanks to Liana's bounty, there was an abundance of flowers to choose from.

Hamish decided to use those that she had most recently gathered, thinking that they would be freshest, but when he went downstairs to collect them, it struck him that any of the bouquets that she had left for him would have done just as well, -flowers were now dotted around the house, in his study, the sitting room and kitchen- not including the white lilies that he'd taken to David's on Christmas day and the wreath which was still hanging on the front door. And none showed any signs of aging or wilting ...the petals all looked as vibrant and beautiful as they had been when he had first discovered them and the downstairs rooms of the cottage were filled with their delightful fragrance.

He was reminded of Liana's floral bower in the dovecote, with its cascading flowers -thinking that she might like to have flowers nearby he

carried one of the bouquets upstairs and sat them on a low table next to the tester. Their presence was short lived, though; as soon as Mclean laid eyes on the flowers he ordered them out of the room, saying that his patient was having enough trouble breathing without adding pollen to her already overtaxed lungs.

Following the doctor's orders in part, Hamish relocated the massive bouquet atop the flat stone newel at the head of the stair. He rearranged the flowers until he was happy with the composition and began sketching on an enormous canvas that featured the flowers as a still-life ...only not the Old Masters version of dimly-lit flowers, dead waterfowl and dreary fruit; these flowers were brash, bright, bold and proud of it.

As he began applying paint, Hamish could feel the creative power flowing between his brush and the canvas until it seemed as if the flowers were painting themselves. It was all he could do to keep some level of control over the whole process ...he made decisions on the fly -working wet-on-wet with a palette knife and brushes, adding here, taking away- until he was so completely absorbed in his work he ceased to be aware of his surroundings.

He was so involved that the world could have ended and still he would have painted on. The first canvas was complete within an hour -setting it to one side, he reached for another and by the end of day he had multiple canvases of hugely-exuberant flower-paintings that celebrated life and beauty in a way that only great art can.

He had taken the bare minimum of breaks to minister to Liana and hadn't stopped to eat or drink. He was now consuming a biscuit and a cup of coffee, drinking so quickly that he scalded himself -and as he stood back to contemplate the final completed canvas a wave of tiredness and deep hunger hit him,time, he thought, to go and find some real food and rest.



Over the next days, Hamish continued to paint at a feverish rate -by the end of the first week he had completed ten huge canvases, all in the same vein as the first, using the flowers, leaves and vines that Liana had provided. He worked upstairs, setting up the compositions each morning and dragging himself, spent but contented, to bed, each evening.

One fine morning in the third week he took the easel down to the garden and set himself up outside to begin a smaller painting, laying the Christmas wreath on the ground near the front portico of White Briars. The snow had disappeared with the warming weather, but he wanted a winter scene so used some artistic licence to include the snow drifts he remembered. Hamish was applying the last touches to the canvas when Liana emerged from the house and was so absorbed in completing the final

details of the wreath that he didn't hear her footsteps as she crept up behind to peer over his shoulder at the painting.

Concentrating deeply, all Hamish saw was a movement in his painting. As he applied the last daubs of paint with the brush he could have sworn the white petals of the hellebores shook, as if a slight breeze was playing across the surface of the canvas.

He must be more tired than he'd known -now his eyes were playing tricks on him- he rubbed his temples with the back of one paint-splattered hand and stepped back, colliding with Liana, who had been right behind him and almost sending her flying.

Hamish grabbed for her and apologised for his clumsiness, "Whoa there!" he exclaimed.

Without thinking, he'd put out a hand to steady her and had left a multi-coloured handprint on the sleeve of the new pyjamas that had been part of Sara's shopping spree. He reached for a turpentine-soaked cloth to remove the worst of the paint, but only succeeding in spreading the colours further. "Oops -now I've made it worse. We'll have to wash that before the paint sets." About to berate her for being outside, he took a moment to look closer -noting her improved colour. Her skin was no longer feverish-pink or sick-room green but a paler shade of English rose -which he guessed might be nearer her normal colouring.

"I wasn't expecting to see you out of bed ...you surprised me," he explained. He glanced downwards -she was barefoot, as usual, "I didn't stand on your foot, did I?" She shook her head. "In that case ...what were you thinking, coming out here without slippers ...or a dressing gown?" he tried to look stern, "The sun might be warm, but there's a cool breeze about. You'll catch a chill if you don't take more care -here, take my jacket." He unzipped his warm fleece jacket and shrugged out of it to put it around her. It hung sizes too big over her shoulders, thin again from this latest illness, but would keep her warm.

She crossed her arms in front of her body to hold the edges of the jacket together and looked so abashed that he immediately regretted chastising her, "I didn't think -I mean, I'm not used to having to think about footwear and warm clothing," she looked at him, obviously confused. "...I've never felt like this before. I've no idea what's happening to me?"

"I may have a theory about that. Or at least, David and I do ...but we'll talk about it later." He stared quizzically at her, "was that my eyes playing tricks just before, or was that something *you* did?"

"Who, me?" head to one side, she didn't quite resort to fluttering her eyelashes, but the look of innocence was smugly coy.

"You know perfectly well what I mean -you made the flowers in the painting move, didn't you?"

"Maybe. Maybe not," she wasn't admitting anything.

“Do it again. Please.” The effect had been entrancing.

Inhaling, she leaned forward and breathed gently across the surface of his painting. Once again the petals and leaves on the painted wreath moved as if stirred by an errant breeze.

Hamish was dumbfounded for a moment, “Wow, you’d be an instant success in the art world. Just imagine ...Monet’s garden ...or Van Gogh’s Cornfield ... if you breathed on them they’d give the paintings a whole new life!”

“I can hardly wait,” Liana retorted dryly. “Spending eternity puffing on paintings for people...”

“Okay -maybe not, -I see what you mean,” Hamish agreed. “Still, it’s a pretty good party trick.” he paused, “If you don’t mind me asking, what else can you do?”

“I don’t do tricks,” she sighed, more resigned than affronted, “well, since you ask, there is this...” as she spoke, she slowly faded from sight, reminding him of their encounter of several weeks before in the dovecote. If it hadn’t been for the sound of her voice emanating from the same spot where she had been standing moments before, he wouldn’t have known where she’d gone. She stopped speaking for a moment, and when she reappeared, she was some distance away, sitting on the cottage stoop. “Quite useful for evading unwanted attention,” she said dryly, as she came fully back into view, “and for creeping around undetected,” she added, with a knowing smile. As he’d already experienced how good she was at that, Hamish was inclined to agree.

“How do you do it though?” He was curious to know.

“I don’t disappear into thin air, if that’s what you’re thinking ...I’m just exceptionally good at disguising myself. She got up and walked over until she was standing directly in front of him, spinning slowly and fading from view as she turned. Chastily, she continued, “I’m still right here in front of you -but you mortals have a tendency to see only what you expect to see. You need to look more carefully; and think, camouflage. It’s more of a disguise than anything magical...”

Hamish strained his eyes towards the sound of her voice, but still could not make out any visible form. “Here, put your hand out and I’ll show you,” her disembodied voice said. He did as she had suggested, starting slightly when his hand touched warm flesh. “Watch it there, you nearly poked out my eye!” she remonstrated, then, as he moved his hand over her cheek and down the line of her neck, he felt his hand’s motion halted by hers, “That’s quite far enough, I think. Now, watch carefully, she said.”

Yes, he could see, faintly, the outline of her head and neck, but the rest was like some three-dimensional painting that blended seamlessly with the background of the house and shrubs.

“And you can do that so it’s a perfect camouflage from any angle?” he

asked, walking carefully around where he surmised she was standing, his hand gently circling her neck as he moved. Try as he might, he still wasn't able to make out any more than the faint outline she had allowed him to see.

"Hmmm," he was back to where he had started. She reformed into a solid shape, lightly batting away his hand.

"An even better party trick," he tried for nonchalance but was mightily impressed. "Is there anything more?"

"Just the flowers," she moved to a rather untidy-looking shrub. It was taller than her and leafless, but Hamish could see new buds, so knew it wasn't dead but deciduous.

Liana placed her fingertips on the bare stems and began whispering words that were too low for Hamish to hear. As she continued whispering, heart-shaped leaves on one of the branches started to unfurl, then the unmistakable pyramidal flowers of a lilac formed with a speed that Hamish found hard to believe -even as he watched it with his own eyes. Before he could react, she had clipped the small branch and carried it over to him. "It's too early in the season to ask more of the lilac, but it has been kind enough to offer us this." She handed him the branchlet, which was adrift with fresh green leaves and powerfully-scented mauve flowers.

"What were you saying? Were you chanting a spell?" he asked.

"Not at all!" she replied, annoyed by his assumption. "What do you take me for? Are you saying that I'm some kind of witch? I am not, and never have been involved in witchcraft. What I do is no more magic than the first new flowers of spring or the changing leaves in autumn. It is simply as I told you that day in the kitchen -I ask politely, and the plants respond. We are, after all, both parts of the same creation and I am as much a part of this place as they are -we understand one another." From her words, it was obvious that he, Hamish, was outside that understanding.

"Mostly, I am here to give aid ...I can heal hurts when they are damaged, but if the hurt goes too far, I cannot bring them back from the dead -there is only one who can do that."

She turned away from him then, and ran her hands over a group of small plants that had been flattened and damaged by the snow. Under her ministrations they stood up tall and plump, looking better than they had before the snow.

"I'm sorry," Hamish apologised again, feeling that he was doing a lot of that where Liana was concerned. In future, he thought, he would think before he spoke. But, between her longevity and her special talents, she was so far outside his experience that he had a feeling he would most likely be apologising many more times before he got to know her well enough not to make, what she considered basic errors.

Still, he thought, she could unbend a little. And there was the matter of

her longevity ...he would have to talk about that with her soon ... now, in fact -but how to broach the subject? He noticed her shiver, despite the jacket, "Time you were back inside. Are you hungry?" She nodded, "Good, in that case we'll go and have brunch -how does bacon and eggs sound to you? You must be ready for some solid food after all that watery broth that David and I have been spooning into you."

"I'd like to meet this David," she said, as they walked to the kitchen, "He seems to be privy to rather a lot of knowledge for someone I've yet to be introduced. How do I know I can trust him?"

"Well, would it help if I were to say that his full title is Reverend Doctor David Cowley?" Hamish hunted for the frying pan and removed eggs and bacon from the fridge. "He's the vicar over at Saint Michael's in Thornden. And as for him being trustworthy -well, I trust him -he helped a lot in the first week, knowing that you couldn't be taken to hospital ...he spent hours sitting with you while I took breaks. And as far I know, he hasn't told anyone else -in fact, it was he who suggested we should keep quiet about your ...erm, origins. He'll be very keen to meet you, too, now you're up."

"A Vicar -I didn't know- well, if I can't trust a man of God, then whom can I trust? I'm sorry, I shouldn't have doubted your judgement -you have, after all, done nothing but good for me since the night you found me on the lawn."

Perhaps he wasn't the only one apologising, Hamish thought ruefully.

"Forget it," he said, "I imagine you've had to be careful who you told the truth about yourself."

"I chose my friends carefully, -and the garden tends to attract those who would wish me no harm," she replied, "that's all-. I've never lied about myself. I decided long ago that it was tedious pretending to be something I wasn't."

The delicious aroma of frying bacon filled the kitchen.

Hamish broke eggs into the pan before asking his next question. "What exactly is it that you are? Technically speaking, I mean ...are you a fairy? A sprite? A wood nymph? Or something else?"

"Do I look like a nymph?" Her scathing tone spoke volumes.

"O-kay, I'm guessing, not a nymph?" He held the spatula defensively in front of his face, peering around one side of it, "pardon me, but what's so wrong with nymphs?" He was curious enough to forget that he was asking about the character of creatures he had, until very recently, thought to be entirely fictional. "I thought they were just beautiful woodland maidens."

"If you'd ever met one, you wouldn't need to ask that," she replied caustically. "They're silly, vacuous, totally immoral creatures ...and as for maidens. Pah!" She made a derisive noise. "Just where did you think the word '*nymphomania*' came from?"

"Huh? I see your point. So ...flower fairy?" Her regally elfin features

and finely boned limbs did rather put him in mind of the Queen of the Meadows.

“That might be fine for Cicely Mary Barker -but not for me.” She pointed over her shoulders with both forefingers, “No wings. Can’t fly.”

“Oops ...Slash through Fairy,” he made a sideways cutting motion with the spatula. “I’m running out of options here -there’s just ‘sprite’ left ...unless you’re something else.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint your need to classify me -but I’m not exactly a sprite either. You said you spoke French ...well, ‘sprite’ is from the French ‘*esprit*’ ...spirit,...so you’re right back to elves, goblins, pixies and fairies with that notion -and don’t even try me with ‘naiads’ ...those watery wenches are worse than the forest nymphs. You’d do well to stay away from the deep pool near the falls.”

His eyes widened -there were others like her out there? “Very well,” he said, “scratch all known varieties of supernatural beings,” he was wishing, now, that he hadn’t started the conversation, and adopted a more placatory tone, “still, it doesn’t really matter what you are I suppose ...it’s enough that you are you.”

“Yes -I’m unique,” ...her voice trembled with emotion -as if she was trying to reassure herself. “My beginnings are lost in the mists of bygone times -even I can’t remember back that far and it’s not as if there’s anyone around that I can ask. Well, no one that will tell me anything, anyway. I’m not supernatural. I’m not super-anything. I do what I do and I exist, that’s all.” She shook her head as if to dispel her thoughts, abruptly changing the subject. “Are those eggs ready yet, I’m starving.”



After they had eaten ...three rashers of bacon, four eggs and toast in Liana’s case ...requiring Hamish to go back to the frying pan to cook more; he made tea for her and coffee for himself, then felt compelled to mention David’s suggestion, not wanting to leave it any longer.

“Have you given any thought, Liana, as to why things have changed so much for you since you woke? he asked, as he placed the hot drinks on the table. Then, “Whoa ...you might want to ease up on the sugar there,” as he watched her spoon four heaped teaspoons of crystals into her cup.

“Why? Is it a problem?” she looked at him. “I told you I had a bit of a sweet tooth.”

“Well, if you want to keep any of those aforementioned sweet teeth, it might be,” he replied cryptically.

“But I’ve never had any problems with my teeth, see,” she smiled and tapped perfectly formed white teeth with one finger nail.

“Very nice, but I see major dental care looming in your future if you

don't take better care of them from now on."

"Why? What do you know that I don't?" the frown returned.

"I'm not sure how to put this, but David and I have developed a theory that goes like this, um ...we think. That is, I think and David agrees ...that, erm..."

"Oh, get on with it, please!" she thumped her tea mug down on the table with a force that resulted in the hot liquid spilling over the sides and onto her hand. "Ouch!" she pulled her fingers back to suck the scalded flesh, sounding surprised as much as hurt.

"Precisely my point," Hamish expounded as he pulled her up out of the seat and led her to the sink. He turned on the cold tap and held her hand under the flow of chilly water. When she tried to pull her hand away he held it tighter. "It needs to stay under there for a few minutes or you may blister from being scalded."

Liana started to deny this but Hamish interjected, raising his voice to be heard over the noise. "That's what I've been trying to tell you." At her puzzled frown, he explained "Okay, here it is. Mortality .101 ...It's possible ... No. ... Make that, more likely, probable ... that your immortality is on the wane ...on the way out, so to speak." This last came out in a rush, his Scots accent even more pronounced than usual in his anxiety to get the words spoken. "Now, if my theory's right ...if we hadn't done something about that hand, pronto, you'd have ended up with a nasty burn that may have turned septic."

She looked at him, opened her mouth to say something but closed it again and didn't speak for some time. There was a red mark already forming where the liquid had burnt her flesh. They didn't continue the conversation until after she had pulled her hand from the cold flow, dabbed it dry on the hand towel and they'd both sat down again at the kitchen table.

"Well?" he prompted, wanting to know her thoughts on his idea. She sat, staring at her hand, turning it this way and that to look at the red weal left by the hot fluid.

"I've never been burnt by anything before," she said, conversationally. "I should make some calendula ointment ...that will help it heal." She appeared to be talking more to herself than him now, staring off into space. "Nicholas burnt himself badly in the summer of 1760. It was around the time that all those poor Frenchmen were being held at Sissinghurst Manor ...before they started calling it a castle, you know. The burns never really healed ...they always marred his beautiful skin..."

"Liana," Hamish felt he was losing her into the past and wanted her attention back in the here and now.

"Yes, I have heard what you said ...it's alright; I'm not turning into a rambling lunatic ...not yet," she smiled slightly and refocused her gaze to look directly at Hamish. "I suppose it is one answer that explains all these

changes ...though if it is, I hope I shall not be ill again as violently as I've been in these past weeks." She pursed her lips to look at him across the width of the table with a knowing stare, "And I suppose you have thought of some way to *prove* or *disprove* your theory?"

Hamish played with a fork while marshalling his argument. "Well, actually, that's what I was hoping to discuss with you. You told me you could never leave the garden, that it was the source of your immortality and that any time you tried to go far beyond its confines you felt weak." He was attempting to sound upbeat but felt he was missing by a country mile.

"...Weak?" she broke in, "That's something of an understatement. Let's see ...I vomit. I faint. I have convulsions. In short ...I become very very ill. You are not, are you, suggesting that I experiment to test your theory by leaving the garden? Because I won't! I haven't attempted that for hundreds of years and I'm not about to start now!"

"But don't you think it would be a great way to prove, conclusively, that you are now as mortal as the rest of us?" he countered.

"Are you not listening? The answer is no, No. Categorically NO!" She shouted -adamant.

"So you'll think about it then?" Hamish countered, deciding it best to completely ignore her outburst. "There's no great rush, we can wait until the weather improves and maybe go for a tour of Sissinghurst Castle, since you mentioned it. As you know, it's not that far away but you'll find it's altered a lot since those days you were talking of. The gardens are quite spectacular."

"You are quite impossible."

"Possibly" he grinned lopsidedly. "You'd be surprised how many people have told me that ...even in my relatively short lifetime."

She was not amused.

JACK

In the past weeks, since hearing of Liana's illness, Jack had taken to listening in on every conversation he could. This one was a doozy! Finally he had found the means of ousting Liana from the Garden and taking his rightful place as guardian of the secrets that lay hidden within its boundaries. She was weak now –a mere shadow of the being she'd once been.

He'd simply get her to leave.

One way or another, she had to go.

HAMISH AND LIANA

*For beauty with sorrow
Is a burden hard to be borne:
The evening light on the foam, and the swans, there;
That music, remote, forlorn.*
Walter De La Mare

Given Liana's negative reaction to his idea, Hamish put the excursion to Sissinghurst on hold. As he had told her, there was no imminent need to test his theory -plus he wanted to give her time to recuperate fully before attempting anything that might place an added strain upon her fragile health. But he wasn't willing to let it go indefinitely ...she would, he thought, benefit from knowing whether she could leave the confines of White Briars' walls. Beautiful as the garden was, there was much more to the world than just this small part of Kent and for someone so long confined it surely couldn't be a bad thing to get out and see a little more of it.

After reading all he could on the subject, -both online and off- Hamish had come to the conclusion that Liana was closest to something between a flower-fairy and a sylph, -an idea that he was at pains not to share with her, well aware as he was by now of her biases towards definition.

He could understand her dislike of being categorised by mortals when much of the terminology for someone such as her had been fabricated, in all probability, long after she came to be.

Cicely Mary-Barker's flower fairies were relatively recent creatures - products of the twentieth century and purely imaginary- as far as Hamish knew ...and even the much older word *syph* had passed into general

language as a term for spirits, elementals, or faeries of the air in the time of Alexander Pope, the famous English poet born in the late seventeenth century. Pope had penned a poem, in which women who were, supposedly, full of *spleen* and *vanity*; turned into sylphs when they died because their spirits were too full of *dark vapors* to ascend to the skies -as descriptions went, Hamish could quite understand why Liana was less than thrilled with the comparison ...although the idea of Sylphs had actually originated with another man who went by the name, Paracelsus.

Paracelsus, born with the unlikely moniker of *Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim*, he had been a Swiss-German physician of the 15th and 16th centuries with interests in botany, alchemy, astrology, and the general occult. He had been man of some learning who had shunned much of his own contemporaries' thinking.

Finding nothing more conclusive on the subject, Hamish had given up his research in favour of more useful pursuits.



January was wet, cold and dreary.

During the odd fine hours, Hamish did what he could outside, but with the almost incessantly damp weather, he spent much of his time indoors, painting. Thanks to Liana's constant supply of fresh blooms he had no shortage of perfect blossoms as subjects for his canvases.



In the early weeks of February, at Liana's suggestion, they tidied out the glasshouse. Over dinner one evening, she had described to Hamish the plants that she had once tended there -the sort of things that would have succumbed to England's harsh winters if they hadn't been grown indoors-like orchids, hibiscus, bromeliads and pitcher plants. Hamish was keen on the idea of growing such exotic plants, with the added bonus that they would be wonderful as subjects for him to paint.

It took days to clean the thick green lichen and mildew from every pane of glass, inside and out. Hamish bought and installed scaffolding to allow him to reach the apex of the glazed roof. The outside panes were mostly reachable with the aid of the tall garden ladder, an extending mop and some precarious balancing. It was arduous work but by the time they had finished the glass sparkled.

All this had the unfortunate side-effect of showing up the poor state of the paintwork. The once white-painted timbers were cracked, peeling and grey; the metalwork was sorely in need of attention and the plasterwork around the base of the building needed redoing, not to mention several broken and cracked panes of glass that had been damaged before the clean-

up.

In its former state -full of weeds and with its glass obscured by the viscous green coating of mildew- Hamish had ignored the forlorn little building, walking by without giving it more than a glance. There had been more pressing things to attend to in the garden, but now, weed-free and with clean panes, he could see potential. He made a call to a local carpenter and soon a small team of tradesmen were industriously sanding, plastering and repainting the structure.

By the finish of a second week it was back to its former glory, with all the glass intact -a pretty little jewel-case of a building awaiting new plants.

The builders also rebuilt the small trellised shade-house alongside; which had filled the space between the glasshouse and the tool shed; its white-painted timbers mirroring the delicate outline of the glasshouse. Liana said that she had grown clematis, honeysuckle and roses over the trelliswork and it was Hamish's hope that, by rebuilding, he would encourage her to become more involved with the garden's restoration.

Liana's physical health improved steadily, though, when not thinking herself observed, Hamish noted with concern, the tired drooping of her shoulders and world-weary demeanour that enveloped her. She had taken to spending long periods out in the garden and woods alone, warmly dressed at least -at Hamish's insistence.

He wished he could do more to help her overcome her grief, but knew that there was little he could do that would ease her pain.

While the builders were about, Hamish suggested again the idea of converting the summerhouse for her ...and she agreed. She was already, he knew, spending considerable amounts of time down in the lower garden with the swans. Attila had accepted her with an ease that Hamish found himself envying. He had discovered her, more than once, seated on the stones alongside the pool with her arm companionably around the swan, staring into the waters of the now weed-free pond. Both Attila and his mate appeared to treat her as one of their own, happily sitting with her for hours on end and occasionally planting gentle swan kisses on her hands and face. It was only when Hamish approached that the birds hissed and adopted their more usual threatening posturing.

When the builders left, three weeks later, the summer house had been transformed. The weather had turned unseasonably warm and calm, -so much so that spring buds opened earlier than normal. All around the garden, plants were bursting into fresh vibrant green and bright swathes of bluebells, primroses and anemones carpeted the woods.

Liana had absented herself from the glade while the builders were working; abandoning the noise-filled space for the quieter outer reaches of the woods. Attila and Nefertiti hovered around the edges of the construction work, frustrated at not having sole use of their pool and

hissing malevolently at anyone foolish enough to venture too close. The builders soon learnt to confine themselves to the path from the driveway and the close environs of the summerhouse after a couple of nasty nips from Attila's beak taught the more venturesome of the construction team that Attila's bite was, in fact, worse than his bark. From then on, the building team and the swan set up an uneasy truce that lasted until the work was complete.



The day after the builders had gone Hamish carefully led Liana down the steps alongside the rill. While still in the upper garden, he had insisted on placing a makeshift blindfold around her eyes. She protested at first, batting away the silk scarf as he attempted to tie it around her head.

"Oh, come on," he cajoled, "you'll ruin my surprise if you don't." Sighing heavily, she acquiesced and he deftly tied the bandana before guiding her, one hand at her back, the other firmly holding hers until they were alongside the marble statue. He removed the blindfold, saying, "Ta Da! I hope you like it."

Despite her insisting over the past weeks that she was not interested, Liana could not resist moving forward to inspect the renovation. Hamish had left the summerhouse doors ajar, -the cherry trees either side of the summerhouse had burst into bloom and their delicate pink blossoms framed the building- the effect was welcoming and the bloom's fresh spring scent infused the warm morning air.

"I like the colour well enough," was all she said as she approached the doors.

Hamish wasn't sure if she was referring to the cherry trees or the freshly painted lavender window and door frames.

Liana pushed the doors further wide open -they filled one complete side of the eight facets that made up the original octagonal structure; to either side of these there were expansive windows with sills at knee-height, the glass divided into smaller panes that looked out to the flowering cherry trees and the pool in front, and the woods behind.

The solid oak construction of the summerhouse meant that little had needed done to the walls or supporting roof timbers, though the timber roof shingles -worse the wear for half a centuries' neglect, had needed replaced. Hamish had used the opportunity to add layers of insulation to the ceiling ...now with the refurbished wood stove and a new wall-mounted radiator the space should be cosy on even the coldest winter's day. He had been surprised to find, under the dirt and rubbish on the floors, a beautiful flower-themed tile, in white, green and lavender and had used this as a starting point for the decoration.

When Liana stepped into the room, her sudden indrawn breath was the only indication that she might be impressed with what she saw.

Hamish followed quietly, allowing her to take everything in.

The octagonal summerhouse was now transformed into a sort of kitchen-sitting-bedroom, but there the similarity to an ordinary bedsit abruptly ended. The wall on the left-hand side now housed a small but perfectly-formed kitchenette. On the far side of the kitchen was a tall armoire, painted a faded white with tole-work birds and flowers decorating the drawers and cupboard doors and a comfortably large covered armchair -big enough to curl up in, sat next to the front entrance. It was the bed, however, that took up the majority of the floor-space.

Hamish had returned to Tunbridge Wells and had spent an entire day hunting for the furniture; discovering this bed in the last antique shop he had planned to visit -he'd known instantly that it was the one he was looking for. The white-painted metalwork was chipped and worn in places with age and use and he had elected to leave it that way. From four cast iron bedposts the metalwork arched upwards to meet in a pretty coronet of flowers and vines. No other piece of furniture that he'd seen would have been more suited in the setting. Sara had helped him choose bed linen, again with the lavender, green and white theme and with a new bedcover, pillowslips, feather-filled cushions, and a soft, moss-green chenille throw, it looked inviting. The bed sat angled into the centre of the space in front of windows identical to those near the doors, enabling Liana to wake surrounded by the scene of her beloved garden and woods. Thinking of her need for privacy, Hamish had asked the builders to add internal white-painted louvered shutters to the many windows.

Liana was speechless. When she found her voice it was to say, "thank you seems a little inadequate for all this." She gazed around, looking somewhat dazed, as she turned to take in the altered summerhouse.

"No thanks are required," Hamish countered. "I'm just happy that you like it. Or, if you'd prefer, you could consider this my 'thankyou' for what you did with my sculptures at Christmastime."

Liana's wide-eyed expression of surprise told him that he'd guessed correctly about her involvement in the daisy-covered forms.

"But you haven't seen everything yet," he added, pointing to a newly installed set of French doors in the wall opposite the entrance. "After you,"

Liana crossed the room and turned the brass handle -going through the doors to find a glass-roofed addition to the original summerhouse. This room was smaller than the first and of almost monastic simplicity -with plain polished concrete flooring. A stone dividing wall that ended just above head-height gave privacy from the original summerhouse with a toilet and hand basin behind. An elegantly tall ladder-like towel rail that doubled as a heater climbed one outer wall -thick Egyptian-cotton lavender bath

towels provided the only splash of colour in the room other than that of the trees coming into leaf beyond the windows. A deep sleek bathtub sat before folding doors that could open up the space entirely to the woods. The tub was filled; with pink camellia blooms and lavender-scented candles floating on the water.

“I thought it was my turn to provide the flowers this time,” Hamish spoke quietly behind Liana. The room had a serene quality and a sense of being among the trees, though still indoors.

Liana was entranced, “I can be indoors, yet outdoors -it’s perfect,” she breathed.

“Glad you think so,” Hamish felt relief. He had applied for permission for this addition straight after Christmas -the local planners had taken a bit of convincing, but they finally came round to the idea. “I don’t think the planners were too keen on concrete at first, but when I explained that I wanted nothing that would compete with the floor in there,” he pointed back to the ornately tiled main room, “and that there were heating cables running through the flooring, they eventually -no pun intended- warmed to the idea.”

Liana smiled, as Hamish had hoped she would. It was an expression he had seen little of, of late.

Liana opened the bi-fold doors and stood looking out at the woods; she crossed her arms, hugging herself as if cold, though the morning was warming nicely.

“I’ve filled the fridge and cupboards with food for nowif you let me know of anything else you need, I’ll buy it,” saying this, Hamish hesitated awkwardly, “well, I suppose I should leave you to settle in,” ...he waited a moment more, but when she didn’t say otherwise, he left. He turned back for a last look from the steps near the top of the rill, frowning; hoping he had done the right thing in refurbishing the summerhouse. He heard a bird singing -then noticed the robin sitting on the edge of the spouting above the summer house doorway, “look after her for me,” he said.

The robin stopped singing and stared at him with its dark beady eyes. Hamish nodded at the tiny bird and carried on his way, feeling somehow comforted.



The house felt empty without Liana’s presence and by that evening Hamish was wondering if he had done himself a disservice by renovating the summerhouse so completely. By adding the kitchen he’d made it that she didn’t need to return to the cottage for meals.

He was tempted to a wander down through the garden for an evening stroll, then thought, no; he would allow her time to settle in properly to her

new surroundings. Perhaps then, he might issue a dinner invite. But he found his thoughts continually wending back to her and how she was faring, and spent a restless evening prowling along the library shelves in search of something to read that might take his mind off this train of thought. Eventually, running out of distractions he rang Rosetta -informing her of the new paintings.

“Wonderful!” she cried joyously when he gave her the numbers, “Oh happy day! How many did you say?” When Hamish repeated the number, “lovely, lovely, lovely,” she’d almost sung.

Hamish could all but see her calculating the commission. He liked and respected Rosetta, but she was, above all things a business-woman. “You left such a lot of buyers panting for your art after the last exhibition that I’ll have them all sold within the week without ever having to show them. If this work is up to your usual high standard, which I’m absolutely sure it is, then all your previous sins are forgiven.”

She handed out absolution as if she was some Catholic priest, Hamish thought sourly, although, he couldn’t quite see Rosetta, in her snappy little London suits, hidden away in a confessional. Still, if it meant he didn’t need to involve himself in another exhibition, with all its attendant hand-shaking and small-talk that was fine by him. Rosetta was in a chatty mood, so they talked for a few minutes more.

Hamish mentioned that he was planning a visit to Sissinghurst Castle.

“The nuisance is,” he said, in mild complaint, “that the gardens aren’t open to the public until closer to the end of March, and I imagine, that when they do open the gates, there will be a tide of visitors wanting in, since it’s pretty much the most-visited garden in Britain. I have someone that I wanted to take there, but it won’t be nearly as pleasant if the place is full of tourists.”

“Hamish, my sweetheart, you’re talking to the right person!” Rosetta crowed. “I have some friends in, if not high, at least very interesting, places. You’re lucky that I’m feeling so pleased with you tonight,...now, I’m going to hang up,...I’ll phone you back as soon as I can. It shouldn’t take long, so keep that phone with you!” With that command, she was gone before Hamish could question what she was up to.

True to her word, in less than ten minutes, his phone trilled its insistent ring. “I’ve done it!” she said, triumphantly. “Auntie Rosetta has fixed it so that you and your friend can go and see the garden, and the castle, if you want ...though I hear it’s all in bits, not a real castle at all,” she couldn’t resist adding. “Anyway, how does March fifteenth sound? That’s just a few days away; now, my friend says you can turn up any time during the day. I’ve given him your name ...he adores your work, by the way and has insisted on first refusal of these latest paintings, so I didn’t have to work very hard to get you in. So, just turn up and say who you are ...he won’t be

there, but someone should let you in. He did say, please, please don't disturb the gardeners, as they'll all be frantically working to get things ready for the public opening on the following weekend,...oh, and there's some fashion shoot for a magazine, Vogue, Marie-Claire, one of those glossy publications,...it'll be going on in the grounds somewhere or other that day as well, so you'll have to stay out of their way too, but that shouldn't be an insurmountable problem; apparently it's almost impossible to find a time when the place is completely empty of people,...unless, of course, you wanted to visit in the dead of winter?"

"No, thank you, the fifteenth will do just fine," Hamish replied. He thanked Rosetta again for her kindness, said goodbye and ended the call. Trust Rosetta to know the right person, he thought. That woman had more connections than a phone company. Then it hit him; only five days to get Liana to agree to his and David's trial-by-fire experiment!

He spent the rest of the evening thinking about how she could be convinced to attempt something that had proved so unhealthy for her in the past.

As it turned out, he had wasted his time on forming all his arguments as to why Liana should try to prove the theory right or wrong. She had, he found, when he broached the subject the next morning been giving it a lot of thought herself and had come to her own conclusions.

"Yes, I'll go," was her instant reply to his first mention of Rosetta's organisational abilities. Liana was sitting in the sunshine on the doorstep to her small house, arms hugging her knees and her head down, as if surveying her bare feet. They peeked out from under the hem of one of the pretty flower-sprigged dresses Sara had chosen for her. Hamish couldn't help thinking that she should be wearing socks or slippers but guessed that he should be thankful that she'd at least donned a warm mohair cardigan.

"But, you have to, otherwise you'll never kn...," he had already launched into his argument before what she had said sank in. "...You'll *what?*" He was incredulous.

"I'll go." She looked up at him. "I'll go," she repeated. "Okay?"

"Why the change of heart?" he couldn't stop himself asking.

She looked away, then back and he stared more closely at her face noticing that she was looking pale and unwell again.

"Has something happened? You're not ill again?"

"Not just one thing." She shrugged. "Several things ...and they've made me wonder if what you said about me changing might not be true, after all."

"Like what?" he asked curiously.

"Well, like ...last week, I scratched my arm on a sharp branch and it bled a little. Well, a little blood is no big deal ...but my body used to stop things like that pretty much instantly, and I'd heal like that," she snapped her fingers to indicate the speed. "However, this time it took longer and the

scratch became infected,” she saw his face tighten with concern, “no, it’s all right now. I washed the wound with an agrimony tea and poulticed it with plantain and comfrey to help the healing.” She paused before adding, “But that’s not all.”

“And?” He gestured for her to go on.

“Well, I haven’t been feeling particularly well.” For some reason he couldn’t fathom, she looked a little embarrassed. “I don’t believe I’m ill but I’ve experienced cramps and an aching lower back for the last day or so and I’m sore here,” she didn’t point specifically but simply stretched one arm across her breasts.

“What?” His worried look returned ...then the penny dropped, “Oh ...and you’ve never had symptoms like these before?”

“No. Never,” she echoed the same sentiment she’d expressed when she had caught the cold. “I’m not sure what to make of it.” She didn’t sound too thrilled. “I could certainly do without the pain ...and my herbal teas don’t seem to help.”

“I’m going supermarket shopping later this morning, I’ll see what I can find in the pharmacy,” he answered, trying to remember what Maud had used to help calm her PMS symptoms. “Meantime, a hot water bottle against your tummy might help. I’m sorry, there’s not much else I can suggest right now. Would you like me to fill one for you?”

“No, I’ll be alright, I’m not dying ...I just feel like I am.” A trace of a smile showed that her wry humour hadn’t completely deserted her. “How do women stand this every month?”

Hamish had no answer for that.

He left her to go shopping. First stop was a Boots pharmacy. When he’d explained what he was looking for, the grey-haired chemist, a motherly sort and a Scot like himself, was most helpful, suggesting several remedies, some of them herb-based that might help. “It’s a bit of an individual thing...she might need to try several before she finds one that works for her,” she explained kindly, “The first few periods can be a bit traumatic sometimes for the wee dears,...is it your daughter then?” She rambled on, not waiting for a reply, “you know, I find it helps to make a bit of a celebration out of the first time; pop open a bottle of champagne and offer her a wee drink, or something special, to mark the occasion ...then she might regard it all in a more positive light. After all, as I explained to my eldest daughter when she started ...you’ll never have babies if you don’t have periods.” She smiled happily. “I have three lovely grand-children now.”

Sound thinking, thought Hamish; not bothering to explain that he was shopping for a grown woman who was having her first brush with menstruation in ...who knew how many, centuries? Still, he took the chemist’s advice and stopped by a wine shop to add a bottle of Taittinger to his shopping. The chemist’s comment about babies set him thinking. The

first night they had talked, one of the painful memories that Liana had shared had been her inability to conceive a child, despite her marriages. Perhaps, now, things could be different? He didn't think he would bring that subject up just yet, though. She had too many ghosts in her past to let go of before she could possibly contemplate a future with anyone else.

But in these last weeks, Hamish had found his thoughts turning more and more towards his unusual guest. For now, he decided that he would continue to keep a low profile, hoping that she would allow happiness to creep back into her own life, as he had into his.

When he arrived home, she was appreciative of the remedies. Hamish left her to read instructions and sort out the dosages of the various treatments; he also took the opportunity to issue a dinner invitation for that evening, should she feel up to it. When she appeared in the kitchen of the 'big' house, as she now described it, it was obvious that she felt more in control. ...Hamish had put the bottle of champagne on ice and opened it, ostensibly in celebration of Liana moving into her new home, rather than for the reason suggested by the chemist.

JACK

In those weeks Hamish and the builders had been so busily at work, so had Jack.

One day, while Liana had been absenting herself from the glade, he had reacquainted himself with her. Like the proverbial serpent in Eden he had slithered up one sunny afternoon, approaching while she sat atop the stone wall overlooking the churchyard -where her beloveds were buried in their cold graves and tombs. As Liana had perched, thoughtfully staring into the quiet churchyard with its century's worth of grave markers, many of which marked the burial sites of generations of friends and acquaintances she had once known, he had been in the act of furtively advancing, the foxes and the feral cat slinking along by his side.

"You may as well approach more brazenly, Jack," turning her head she spoke over her right shoulder. "For I know you are there ...and stealth will serve you not at all, should I take offence at your unbidden reappearance in this garden."

"I was merely showing a modicum of caution," he candidly replied. "Hardly surprising, taking into account our last encounter."

"You did a grievous wrong to the villagers once," she reminded gently. "Your punishment was decided upon by powers higher than me and undoubtedly, richly-deserved."

His ire was swift. "Since when is death, dismemberment and decay richly deserved by such as us?" he questioned.

Liana swung her feet over the wall to face him squarely, eyes narrowed as she surveyed what he had become. “I imagine that you brought about your own demise by some despicable behaviour? Am I right?”

He shook his head at that, sending a crown of leaves shaking. While Jack could appear almost human to mortals, to her his true form was apparent. Where he had once been covered from head to toe in oak, elder and rowan leaves interspersed with sweetly fragrant wild meadow flowers, now he was clad in the rancid leaves of the vine that had knit him back together. The overall effect was not pleasant to behold.

“Well, I didn’t ask to be brought back any more than you,” he shot back at her.

“No. I suppose you did not,” she acknowledged. “And yet, here we both are.”

“An interesting turn of events, wouldn’t you say?” his tone turned oily. “I hear on the breeze that things have changed for you.”

“None of your business Jack,” she spoke abruptly.

“If not mine, then whose?” he asked, his hands held wide, palms upwards. “Are we to be nothing more than pawns in someone else’s game?” as he spoke he twirled a single finger in the air to indicate higher powers. Seeing that his question had hit its intended mark he left her with that thought, slinking back into the woods with his companions but returning at regular intervals in the following days to continue the conversation he’d started.

Now that he had planted the seed of doubt regarding their mutual benefactor ...well, truth be told, more hers than his ...he wanted to keep it watered, fed and growing.

HAMISH AND LIANA

*Among the groves, the fountains, and the flowers
That open now their choicest bosomed smells*
John Milton

The fifteenth came around all too quickly. The sun had come up as if it was a perfectly normal day. Hamish prayed it would be still by mid-morning.

Although he knew Sissinghurst was perfectly located for what he wanted to try -conveniently close to White Briars should anything go amiss- he still felt his stomach churn as he drove the Austin-Healey up the driveway towards the road gate. It did him no good to know that Liana, who was sitting belted into the passenger seat at his side, with her gorgeous locks confined under a silk head scarf looked every bit as tense.

“You will tell me the moment you feel anything wrong, won’t you?” he asked, for what had to be at least the tenth time that morning, as he accelerated cautiously away from the gate.

“My, my, aren’t you the positive one?” she replied acerbically. Her smile held more than a hint of mischievousness, “it’s like I told you,” she said, “if nothing’s changed, you’ll know as soon as I do.” She glanced around the car “fortunate you have leather upholstery in this car -at least it will wipe clean.”

Hamish chose to ignore the jibe, putting it down to a bad case of nerves. He found it difficult to concentrate on driving. He had no wish to see Liana fail at this experiment, especially since the idea had been his and he kept stealing quick glances across at his passenger, checking for any signs of discomfort or impending illness. It wasn’t until he had parked the car in the

Sissinghurst Castle car park, they had got out and were strolling in the early morning sunshine towards the entrance to the castle garden that he allowed himself to take a deep breath and relax his tense shoulder muscles.

Liana was quick to notice, commenting dryly, "I was starting to wonder how long you could hold your breath." She added, "You know, if anything was going to happen, it would have happened in the first ten or twenty minutes ...at least, that's the way it's always been."

"Thanks for telling me that," he regarded her with a narrowed gaze, "...though you might have told me sooner."

"I was enjoying watching you suffer far too much to say."

"Fair enough. I guess I deserved that for nagging you into trying." He thought for a moment; trying to imagine what it must have been like for her trapped within the confines of White Briar's stone walls for so long. Thinking about the boundary walls, a question occurred, "So tell me, how were you able to attend the church at Thornden?" he asked, "It is, after all, outside the garden walls."

"The churchyard wasn't always outside the garden. That land was gifted to the church centuries ago. Originally, the hallowed ground that both the churchyard and the vicarage now occupy was part of the garden. So I was still within its boundaries. Simple really," she replied, her voice wavering as her attention was diverted by the row of oast houses and assorted farm buildings that they were walking past. Her smile broadened, "it is interesting to see things and places that I've only ever known about second-hand from books, or heard of from other people."

Hamish thought ...if she found old oast houses interesting, she was going to have a lot to look forward to when she saw what else the wide wide world had to offer.



Approaching the castle forecourt, they saw no one. A sandwich board in front of the arched entrance stated that the garden was closed and the wide timbered outer door that was normally opened for the public was shut, with only a smaller door let into its expanse left ajar.

The scent of hyacinths, planted in the urns near the door, was heavy in the air. Liana sniffed. "Hmmm, how lovely."

"I suppose we might as well go in," said Hamish, still a little too nervous to stop and smell the flowers. "We can explain who we are to whomever we meet first."

They ducked through the narrow doorway and walked under the entrance into the top courtyard. Liana was immediately entranced by the sight of the rose-red tower, rising in its solitary splendour at the end of a wide pathway of Yorkstone pavers. Beyond, early daffodils provided a

splash of bright colour through the tower's arch.

"I didn't realise it would be so beautiful," she exclaimed. "With all the grim stories I'd heard I expected something far more grey and forbidding than this."

"You're right; it is considerably more Sleeping Beauty than Colditz Castle these days. Though maybe, if we're talking fairy stories, the tower would be more Rapunzel than Sleeping Beauty, so perhaps it hasn't lost all its associations with being a prison? And come to think of it, what was Sleeping Beauty's castle, if not a prison of sorts?" Hamish mused quietly.

Liana looked at him with pursed lips. "Why do I feel like you're talking about me? Just because you can't leave somewhere, doesn't necessarily make it a prison, you know. I've never looked upon my garden that way; it has always been my home, my protector ...and has," she corrected slightly, "*had*, my best interests at heart." Was there was an underlying note of defensiveness in her voice?

"You mean like some sort of symbiotic relationship? You look after it, it looks after you?" he asked doubtfully.

"You're still trying too hard to categorise my life," she chided crossly. "Some things just are, Hamish ...they don't have to be put in neat boxes in order for them to exist." It was the same point she'd tried to impress upon him in their earlier conversation.

"Okay, I'll stop attempting to define you ...if you'll stop being so defensive about it. Deal?" He held out a hand for her to shake and after a moments' hesitation, she took it, intending a brief shake.

Instead, Hamish grasped hers and transferred it to the crook of his arm, saying, "Come on, this is too special a day to waste time arguing. Let's go look at the garden." He led her along the front of the main house in the direction of a set of Prussian-blue iron gates that let into a high brick wall between the courtyard and the rose garden.

They had only just passed through when they encountered someone. It was one of the gardeners, barrelling towards them at some speed with a laden wheelbarrow. He stopped short -startled at finding people on a path he expected to be visitor-free. Hamish was about to open his mouth to explain who they were when the gardener spoke first. "Running a bit late, aren't you?" he enquired, then, eyes only for Liana and giving Hamish no time to answer. "Aren't we all, though? I know what that's like ...two of the staff off with spring 'flu' and we're opening to the public this weekend." He drew a quick breath. "Anyway, you'll be looking for the photo crew?" He barely drew breath, once again giving no time for interruptions, "They're busy setting up to shoot among those tall yews in the cottage garden. See them there over the top of the Rondel ...the yews that is, not the crew. If you take that path you'll be there in a jiffy." He pointed to another stone path that ran along the far side of the rose garden, before he disappeared

out the gate that led to the nursery, pushing his barrow with its unwieldy load as fast as he dared.

“He must have thought you were one of the fashion models,” Hamish raised his eyebrows at Liana, “I can see how he might make that assumption.” Then, as he noted the rose-tinted colour flushing her cheeks, “Look at that, you can blush,” he teased playfully. “I thought at your age you’d be able to handle a compliment.” He took her hand again to pull her in the general direction the gardener had indicated they should go. “Let’s get on our way before he comes back ...it’ll save us explaining.” They stepped carefully over a large sheet of plastic strewn with trimmings from the low box hedge that the gardener had obviously been clipping. He had set up a string line along the top of the hedge and had been using an electric trimmer for the job. This and a pair of ear muffs lay on the ground, awaiting his return. As he walked along the path, Hamish admired the precisely neat workmanship, wishing he had help of this quality in his own garden.

There was little to see in the Rose garden ...so early in the season none of the roses were yet flowering, though a profusion of small green buds on several clematis trained over hazel structures and a cheerful combination of yellow *Mabonia* and lavender-blue *Pulmonaria* flowers gave hope of things to come. Hamish frowned, “I hope you won’t be disappointed with the lack of flowers,” he said, turning to Liana, “It’s still too early to expect much of the garden here, but that wasn’t, after all, the main purpose of our excursion, was it?”

Instead of following the gardener’s specific directions, they veered off along the central path that led to the Rondel.

“I’ve always liked this space,” Hamish said as they skirted the edge of the circular lawn to head towards the exit that led to the Lime Walk. “I’d like to do something like this at White Briars ...that’s another reason why I brought you here ...to show you something different and get your opinion for improvements to the garden. What do you think?” he asked.

“I haven’t seen that much yet,” Liana replied, “but I’m not sure that this,” she indicated the surgeon-like precision of the rondel hedges, “isn’t perhaps a little too planned and precise for White Briars. It’s beautiful in its way, but the level of control here is high ...maybe too high, I’d say for our garden. If you were to try something like this at White Briars, I think you’d meet resistance ...the Garden will handle a certain amount of formality -but it has a tendency to put curves back in when people try to get too clever with taming plants into straight formal lines.”

Hamish nodded his agreement. “I see what you mean ...true -I couldn’t quite see the serpentine hedge here, far too crazy an outline. I’ll keep that in mind.”

They’d stepped onto the Lime walk. Here, the spring floral display was

well started, although the pleached lime trees were still to come into leaf. Without the shade of the leaves, sun shone brightly on clumps of plump purple grape hyacinths and bulbs in bright primary colours that crowded together along either side of the broad stone walk. These were interspersed, here, with a group of white tulips, contrasting perfectly with the smaller heads of snowflakes and yellow jonquils and there, with blue and white anemones, forget-me-nots and rich red polyanthus. Hamish and Liana strolled the length of the allée, from the Bacchante statue to the Nuttery, stopping briefly to peek through a gap in the hedges into the Cottage Garden.

As the gardener had said, there, it was all a hive of activity. A photographer was taking shots of an impossibly-tall, thin model; her russet-toned hair bound into an elaborately-plaited bouffant style studded with flowers and dressed in a voluminous gown of green tulle. A second model stood ready, out of camera range, talking to someone behind the tall conical-shaped Irish yews, her back to Hamish and Liana. She was clad in a strapless red gown -bright red and teamed with black tights and high heels - her auburn hair caught up under an enormous red and black floral head-dress. As they watched, a third waif-thin girl emerged from the open cottage door to sit on the bench outside; her outfit was a short white shift dress covered in blue poppies -teamed with vertiginous heeled white leather boots, which she was tugging on her feet.

Given the styling, Hamish could understand why they had chosen this location and, why the gardener had mistaken Liana for one of the models. With her titian hair and slender body, she could have easily taken the place of any one of the women.

Without disturbing the group and before they were noticed, Liana and Hamish moved on.

Reaching the end of the Lime walk, they circumnavigated a small triangular bed and walked through a gap in yet more clipped hedges, to find themselves at the head of the moat walk.

From the crescent, a path to their left, lined with rose-tinted hellebores could have taken them straight to the orchard but he and Liana ignored it, choosing instead to continue down the steps and along the wide grassed walk that ran towards what was left of a moat that had once protected the original manor house. A statue of Dionysus on the far bank stared across at them as they approached.

Azalea's, all along the right-hand side of the walk on the bank that separated them from the nuttury would be spectacular in another week or two, but for now, early-flowering wallflowers and small ferns decorated the medieval wall, their mauve petals toning beautifully with the wall's ancient brickwork. At the end of the walk, Hamish led Liana, her hand still firmly in his own, back to the western entrance to the herb garden, half-hidden in its

corner site at the end of the nuttery.

Many of the plants that would grace the herb garden were still being on-grown in the greenhouses and nursery; the remainder were little more than green shoots, peeking out from their winter's bed and waiting for more sun before they would burst back into life. Liana watched as a bee flew lazy circles over the bloomless plants, as if on reconnaissance for an open flower.

Although, with or without flowers it was a charming and serene space, Hamish and Liana did not linger -instead they sauntered through a break in the yew that led through the centre of the small thyme lawns, then back around the end of the moat. The path disappeared around the end of the old wall in a series of shallow flagstone steps. On the far side of the moat, old oak trees raised still bare branches to the blue sky as a reminder that winter was not far gone.

Then, as they rounded the end of the wall, spring suddenly arrived again with sweet vengeance; the stone paving giving way to paths of close-mown grass, where they were met by the sight of thousands of nodding daffodils, in drifts of every colour a daffodil can be, bright in the morning sun and stirred by a slight breeze that came out of nowhere and left as quickly as it had come.

"This is more White Briars' style," Liana said enthusiastically, waving a hand to encompass the flowering orchard trees and carpets of narcissi.

"Yes, this is about as informal as Sissinghurst gets," Hamish agreed. "And there's a dovecote over there, but no inhabitants that I've ever seen." They continued past the gazebo, Liana as uninhibited as Hamish had ever seen, dancing alongside the daffodils. They cut their way, this way and that, with little regard for direction, along the paths that crisscrossed between the trees until Hamish once again caught Liana's outstretched hand and led her off to the opposite corner of the orchard. Here was another gateway in the double line of yews that defined the orchard's western boundary.

Liana stopped to peer down the narrow gap between the hedges, and then stepped through into the white garden, with its beds defined by low box hedges. She immediately wandered off down the southern end of the garden to gaze at the statue of the little virgin while Hamish walked to the opposite end. Looking at the precisely clipped box hedges and the planting they contained, he could see the promise of a profusion of flowers, ...but right now the garden was more promise than fulfilment; the Regal lilies that would fill the air with their sweet scent later in the summer were only just appearing as soft green tufts through the ground and the garden was still more shades of green than the exquisite whites and silvers for which it was renowned. Feeling sorry that Liana wasn't seeing Sissinghurst at its best, Hamish turned, thinking to say that they would have to come back, in the early summer -but the words died stillborn on his lips.

He stood there ...dumb-struck and open-mouthed ...transfixed by the scene unfolding before him.

Liana had moved from where she had been standing, looking down the short vista to the statue under its weeping silver pear tree and was now at the edge of the arbour, facing Hamish. She was about to speak when something in his look caused her to turn and glance back the way she had just come.

“Whoopsie Daisy,” she said, putting her hands up to cover her mouth in consternation. For behind her, all along the edges of the path, a profusion of flowers were forming and opening; the tall spikes of white lupins and irises, budding roses, *Artemisia*, *Nicotiana*, the delicate bonnets of aquilegias, snapdragons, cosmos, hostas -all of them leafing and flowering at once, putting Hamish in mind of time-lapse films he’d seen in nature documentaries.

It all happened so quickly -now, those blooms farthest away were fully formed and opened to the morning light, their scent filling the air, while the closest were still growing and unfurling even as Hamish and Liana watched.

Hamish had just found his voice again and was about to ask Liana to halt the out-of-season display when the *Rosa mulligianii* which covered the arbour started to flower like some Mexican wave; first, closest to Liana and quickly spreading across the entire surface of the arbour until it was completely covered in pretty blooms.

They were quite simply gorgeous. He didn’t know if he should stand transfixed by the magical display or act to halt it.

He made a decision. “I think you’d better do something. Fast!” he said, in an urgent tone. In response to his request, Liana ran back along the path, talking quickly and quietly ...so that by the time she returned to the arbour the effect had slowed and stopped.

“Well, there goes my suggestion that we come back to see the garden when it’s at its best,” Hamish said, uncertain whether he should laugh or remonstrate.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen,” Liana said, a tremulous expression on her own face. “I was just standing there looking at the statue and sort of daydreaming that with the tower over there and the garden still half asleep that it reminded me of sleeping beauty *before* the prince arrived -and I’d like to see the *after*. I was just thinking how nice it would be to see everything in flower. It must be that these plants are more receptive to my thoughts than those at White Briars. Anyway, you must admit,” she shrugged artlessly, smiling ingenuously; “...it does look prettier now.”

“Yes, but what happens when someone else wanders in here?” Hamish waved his hand to indicate the band of fully flowering plants either side of the path and the rose-covered bower above them. “I don’t want to be the one who tries to explain my way out of this. Do you?”

“Well, I can’t undo it, but it will fade back to what it was over the next day or so. I am sorry -well, sort of,” she half-smiled. “I meant no harm.” Her smile was fading. “This whole thing of being away from White Briars is too strange. I want to go back. Right now,” saying this, she looked so woebegone that Hamish felt his heart melt.

He put his arms around her and pulled her close.

“It’s all right. You didn’t know it was going to happen -at least now you know that in the future you’ll have to be a wee bit more careful with your thoughts when you’re outside the garden.” He alluded to her earlier comment, “if anyone knows about sleeping beauty it would be you. You’re still the closest thing I’ve ever seen to that fairy story.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, sleeping flower fairy at the bottom of my garden,” at her look of protest he held up a hand, “I know, I know. You’re not a fairy. No wings ...I remember.” He looked down at her, “It’s a pity you weren’t sleeping beauty though, you’re certainly beautiful enough ...and since I was first on the scene, I could have made like Prince Charming and kissed you awake.”

At this, she stepped backwards out of his arms, but at least, he thought, she was smiling again. She raised her chin slightly, “I think you’ve got your fairy tales a little mixed up mister. Prince Charming wasn’t part of Sleeping Beauty; he was the prince in Cinderella. And that tale was very chaste, with no kissing at all until after the wedding.”

That could be arranged; he considered mutely thinking it wiser no to voice his thoughts right there and then. Instead he looked once more towards the tower, standing tall in the centre of the gardens. “Speaking of sleeping beauty’s tower, let’s hope no one opens a window and looks out that one while we’re down here. I think maybe we should cut this visit short and get back to the car before someone comes,” he glanced around. “With a bit of luck we’ll get out without being seen, then, if I’m asked, I’ll say that something came up and we didn’t make it here today, after all. We’ve only seen one gardener and he thought we were part of the fashion crew. So come on, let’s hightail it out of here.”

He took her hand again to lead her back down the avenue of newly opened flowers towards the Bishops gate. The lower courtyard was empty of any signs of life aside from a wheelbarrow left on the far side so they walked quickly around the flagstone paths and out under first the tower and then the entranceway to the forecourt and the car park.

Luckily, they encountered no-one and within minutes were back on the road heading away from the castle.



“It’s really much too early to head back to White Briars yet,” said

Hamish as they drove along. “We could be at Tunbridge Wells in time for lunch ...then we would be absolutely sure that you can spend any amount of time away from the garden without any ill effects. If you like, as long as you can damp down that thing you’ve got going between you and flowers, we should be able to walk around and do some shopping, incognito.”

“Very well then, if it means I can shop for my own clothes, I’ll do it.”

Expecting resistance, her acquiescence surprised him.

“Spoken like a true female,” said Hamish. “I shop, therefore I am,” he intoned ecclesiastically.

“You would do well to remember that this ‘girl’ is old enough to be your great-great grandmother and more; so show a little respect for your elders.” she chided, chin in the air.

“Hah.” He glanced sideways at her as he drove. With her unmarred skin and air of naivety, she could easily pass as a twenty year-old. Although ageless, she was still child-like in many respects, but, he reminded himself for the umpteenth time, she had probably been around when the Saxons had invaded Britain. True, her experiences were limited to second-hand information passed on to her by those who could move beyond the boundaries of White Briars, but she had still lived through a lot of history. Certainly, a lot more than he, he thought.

He was musing on how he might encourage her to open up more to him, before heavier traffic forced him to drag his thoughts back to the road and the present.

The rest of the day was spent enjoyably, lunching, shopping and wandering the streets of Tunbridge Wells. Once Liana recovered from an initial anxiety at being out among so many people she quickly found her feet. She found everything fascinating and needed little coaxing to stay out for the remainder of the day. So that it was dark by the time they returned to White Briars. Liana, tired from the nervousness and excitement of the day, had fallen asleep on the journey home and only woke as Hamish switched off the car’s motor. He helped her carry her shopping bags down to the summerhouse then left her and continued, alone, back up through the garden to the house.

The weather turned cool again by late evening. Sitting with a drink in front of the fire, Hamish fell to thinking, again, what life could hold for Liana, now that she was not bound by the garden’s borders and her altered status in relation to mortality.

JACK

Seeing Liana leaving the Garden with his own eyes had been a revelation for Green Jack.

Pleasantly surprised at seeing her departure, he had waited near the road gate; sure that she would return within minutes of departing. When that had not happened he had climbed over the wall himself, reasoning that if she could leave then surely so could he.

But unlike Liana, Jack barely made it to the top of the wall before a force far stronger than he had shoved him back into the woods on the White Briars side. Narrow eyed with anger, he'd picked himself up, shaken his vine-covered shoulders and gone off to make mischief elsewhere.

Jack was tired of watching through windows. While Liana and the human were gone, he had let himself into the cottage and searched for anything that might help his cause. He didn't particularly enjoy being indoors; finding the confining spaces of the cottage's walls and floors offensive ...to his way of thinking these mortal hovels wasted precious trees and stone. If he had his way, he'd level the place.

He flicked angry green eyes over the human's paintings, tempted to inflict damage -these daubs were nothing but poor imitations of nature's magnificent bounty; but he decided that it would serve him better not to show his hand, for now.

It would have been a different story if Liana had shown any interest in the man but so far Jack had seen no signs of any burgeoning romance that might encourage her to stay. And that was his main goal -getting her to leave.

Finding nothing of real import, Jack left, having pilfered a pretty bauble from a jewellery box left sitting atop the upstairs dresser. The same box had contained a tiny Teddy bear and photographs that he leafed through but left behind. Jack had always been something of a magpie regard to shiny objects and was no respecter of the property rights of others. Not wishing his impromptu tour of the cottage to be discovered he returned Liana's key to the hole in the high brick wall.

She was not the only one who knew secrets about White Briars ...he had a few of his own.

HAMISH AND LIANA

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.*

William Shakespeare

The uncertainty of spring weather turned into predictably sunny days of a stiflingly hot summer and before long, the pretty blossoms of the cherry trees had given way to a verdant cover of bright green leaves.

In advance of the drier summer weather taking hold and inspired by the visit to Sissinghurst, Hamish decided to replant the herb garden beds with a combination of herbs and perennials. Wanting to find excuses for Liana to take time away from the confines of White Briars he asked her to accompany him to Sara's nursery to choose the plants.

It was a short five-minute drive. Motoring in the misty morning sunshine along the narrow hedgerow-lined country lanes, Hamish spotted the white-washed and thatched-roofed cottage on the road-edge that Sara had told him was the nursery shop. A discrete sign hanging from the front of the building in the same green and gold colours of Sara's business card confirmed that they were in the right place. The car park, also signposted, was located on the opposite side of the lane and several vehicles were parked there under trees surrounded by a colourful flowering meadow where bees and butterflies were making the most of the warm weather. Sara, however, had told Hamish she would keep him a park free at the rear of the shop so he turned instead through a white-painted picket gate at the

end of the building.

On its far end, the gate was let into the stone wall that was the continuation of the same wall that surrounded the woods of White Briars and Hamish could see the treeline directly beyond the confines of the nursery -as if the woods were only biding their time before taking back this corner of the original woodland.

As Hamish pulled up, Matthew appeared out a rear door of the shop, waving to him while removing a portly red-hatted garden gnome that was serving as a reserved-parking traffic cone. He dumped it with several others of its kind; all sitting on a wide band of Yorkstone paving that separated the parking from the shop.

Alighting from the car, Hamish briefly watched a chess match that was in play on a paved board let into the stonework -the chess pieces were all variations on the gnome that Matthew had just relocated. A woman and young girl were standing as onlookers and giving advice to the two combatants. Hamish smiled at the sight; he particularly liked the gnome with an upturned bucket on his head and riding a hobby horse that represented the knight and wondered where Sara had found the pieces.

Beyond this tableau, to one side of the shop's rear entrance, was an artfully arranged display of spring plants in clay pots on an old wooden table ...nestled among pots of blue Muscari, pink, blue and cream hyacinths, paperwhites and bright yellow narcissi was the bust of a pretty tousle-haired child. A tall bay tree trimmed into a ball sat in a large basket-weave pot and several smaller conical topiary box plants had been placed in the midst of pots of red tulips at the table's side. As he and Liana approached the doorway the sweet scent of the hyacinths and daffodils lingered in the morning air.

"I think I'll stay outside in the sunshine and watch the game," Liana took a seat on a weathered grey-timbered garden bench that abutted the display table. Matthew plopped himself beside her.

"Okay, I'll just go find Sara. I'll be back in a minute." Ducking under the low lintel, Hamish went inside. He spied Sara behind a counter that looked as if it was a re-purposed potting bench, placed in front of central stairs accessing the upper floor. She was busy binding a large bunch of grape hyacinths and paperwhites for a customer. Sara was wearing her usual attire of boots, close-fitting jeans and a black knit with a green apron over the top on which the gold Blaine's Nursery logo was embroidered. She looked up momentarily and mouthed a 'hello' to Hamish but was obviously occupied so he turned to look around the store until she was free.

Someone -presumably Sara- was a dab hand at displays. Old-fashioned garden lamps were set on tables piled with interesting garden-themed knick-knacks; some lit with incandescent bulbs, others with candles flickering safely behind glass. At each window patches of bright sunlight shone

through the thick mullioned glass; in the nearest more pots of spring flowering plants were grouped on an old mint-green tiered plant stand. With the potted flowers set amongst shallow willow-woven trugs filled with linens and floral-scented candles, lotions and giftware, the overall effect was one of ordered disorder and the kind of serenity that hinted at a bygone era.

The old-world charm of the shop was further-enhanced by some pretty piano music; albeit emanating from a very contemporary iPod dock set on the wall behind the counter, but all things charming stopped abruptly where an expanse of plastic sheeting hung across the end of the room. Walking over and lifting the plastic with one hand Hamish could see that renovation work was in progress; the floor boards had been taken up and someone had cut channels into the walls below an existing double casement window that let onto the end of the building. There was a second outline in the end wall.

Sara had finished with her customer and strolled up behind Hamish. "I saw you peeking," she said. "How do you like my new tearooms?" She laughed at his bemused expression. "Not quite there yet, I know, but if you use your imagination I'm sure you can see my eclectic assortment of old ironwork garden tables and chairs full of happy customers and the new doors wide open to the outdoor paving on a sunny day. Just think ; bees buzzing, birds singing, herbs in a big planter and pretty scented things on the tables, couple of mop-top Robinias in ginormous pots there;" she pointed to a location out the window. "New kitchen with a window you can open to grab the delicious fresh herbs here," now she indicated the portion of the extension that jutted towards the rear car park, "servery right here," now flicking a finger just to their left." She waved her hands in front of her body like a magician conjuring a trick. "Ta da!" with a disappointment expression, she dropped her arms back at her sides. "Bother, can't get the magic to work today ...so I guess I'll just have to do it the hard way, like everyone else."

"I guess so." Hamish wondered what Sara would say if she knew how close she was to someone who could conjure real magic. Not that Liana could help her with the building work, unless Sara wanted a nice vine or a climbing rose growing up the café walls.

"The builders did all this yesterday but they've scarpered off to another job today." She added. "I'm really looking forward to the dust storm when they come to cut the walls through. Not." She pursed her lips thoughtfully, "I'll probably have to close up the shop for a day."

Hamish turned to look at all the ephemera in the shop. "I could loan you the dust sheets from White Briars if you'd like."

"I like," Sara grinned up at him. "I hate dusting more than I hate running."

"And we all know just how much you hate running." Hamish raised an eyebrow in question, "I said it was okay back at Christmastime, but I

haven't seen you jogging merrily through the garden of late?"

"Merrily? Huh; like that describes me running." She shrugged. "I did jog through once, not long ago ...but I saw Liana had taken up residence in the summerhouse and I felt like too much of an interloper, so I've found a new route through the woods. All those paths you've cleared come in handy, especially the link back to the nursery ...so I don't really need to cut through the garden to get back home anymore."

"Glad someone find them useful." Hamish had kept busy while the work was being done on the summerhouse, labouring to re-establish the old pathway network through the woods. Now the tracks from the garden to the humpback bridge and road, the nursery and the circuit that led back via the waterfall were all usable once more. He didn't mention that his incentive for spending so much of his time over those weeks out among the trees was that Liana had taken to the woods herself, although he'd seen little enough of her; given that she enjoyed the sound of the chainsaw even less than the intrusion of the building team.

"Shall we go and find lots of lovely plants so I can make squillions of profit out of you?" it was more of a statement than a question.

"By all means," Hamish gestured towards the doorway with a courtly bow and wave of his arm, "after you, milady."

"I could get used to this polite crap," Sara laughed, striding for the door.

Hamish followed her outside where Liana and Matthew had been waiting. As they walked through the door, Hamish could hear Matthew explaining the intricacies of online gaming to Liana.

"Watch the shop, Matthew," his mother instructed.

"Okay Mum," Matthew wandered inside, his attention more on the portable PlayStation in his hands than on any prospective customers.

"And don't change the music!"

"Yeah, yeah," he waved a hand negligently as he disappeared through the doorway.

"If I don't watch him, we go from the discretely-played theme music to 'Secret Garden' to full-volume heavy metal in less time than it can take to say 'Metallica'," she complained.

"Nothing wrong with a good loud dose of Metallica, I say," retorted Hamish, "though probably not what you'd expect in a garden shop."

"No. Besides, I have a strict policy of only playing music that has some association with gardening."

"Is there much of that about?"

"You'd be amazed. I've got everything from '*Red roses for a blue lady*' to '*Greensleeves*' -the association can be a bit 'loose' at times but it's there."

"No wonder, Matthew loves helping out so much."

"Hmmm, I've really got to get some more help." Sara screwed up her nose in frustration, "We're getting too busy for just Matthew and me. I'm

thinking about renting the upstairs rooms to someone who can help me in the shop and nursery, but I haven't gotten round to it yet," she commented, before pointing towards a long greenhouse, "The herbs and perennials are this way."

They walked past neat lines of labelled seedlings, root trainers and pots. Sara called a greeting to a couple who were being assisted by a teen wearing an apron similar to hers, before she led them out the far door to a sheltered gravel-paved area where plants were sitting either in root-trainer frames or in biodegradable pots on low benches. After some discussion about suitable species and sizes, mainly between Sara and Liana, plants were chosen and transported in several flat barrows to the car, where they completely filled the passenger foot-wells, rear seats and boot space. Hamish paid and helped Liana into the car before handing her a potted bush rose to nurse on her lap.

"My car looks like a mobile nursery," he laughed.

Sara leaned her backside against the car briefly then straightened, "I'd love to have given you more of a tour but I'd better get back to the shop. Matthew's not entirely good for business if I leave him for too long on his own." She blew out a breath tiredly. Twisting to place both hands on the car door, Sara looked speculatively at Liana for a moment, "you obviously know your plants Liana. Do you want a job?"

"Liana gave a start, "I. I," she stuttered.

Hamish interjected, seeing that Liana had no idea what to reply, "Perhaps she could get back to you once she's thought it over?"

"Fair enough," Sara nodded amiably. "I'll deliver those benches straight after closing, if that's okay?" Hamish had ordered two smaller Lutyens-styled white garden seats for the herb garden.

"See you later then." Hamish and Liana drove off.



By the time Sara and Matthew rolled up in the nursery van it was late in the afternoon, the shadows were lengthening and most of the planting had been completed. Hamish had dug and placed the biodegradable pots where Liana had indicated; at times not entirely sure just what he was planting. Now all but one of the beds were full of culinary and healing herb plants. Interspersed among these were bush roses and pretty perennials like lupins and foxgloves.

Reversing carefully, Sara had been able to back her van down the curved serpentine path, lessening the distance needed to carry the heavy benches. As she opened the van's rear doors she said, "I brought a little something else." Balanced across the top of the two timber benches was a third seat; a pretty ironwork rectory bench with scrolled ends. "It's Matthew's and my

belated housewarming gift for you,” Sara grinned, before adding, “so now you can replace that accident waiting to happen outside the conservatory.”

“Hmmm,” Hamish was rueful, “You’re right about that -every time I sit down I expect to find myself on the ground, but so far the old timberwork has hung in there. Anyway, thanks. That’s very kind of you.” Hamish lifted the seat out and set it on the gravel path. It was heavier than it looked with its delicate appearance.

“Don’t worry, I’m making a small fortune out of you,” Sara couldn’t resist adding. “Now let’s carry one of these others to the garden and have a look at what you’ve been up to.”

Supporting one end of the bench, Hamish backed his way between the tall hedges into the herb garden. “It’s all you and Liana here,” he said, “I’ve just provided the muscle to get what seems like five hundred plants that you’ve chosen into the earth.”

“That’s the way I like it. Me brains, you brawn,” Sara ribbed, though for someone of her small stature, she seemed to have no problem carrying her end of the heavy bench. They set the bench in place in the first niche in the hedge. Matthew and Liana were placing the second bench in its final location, across the far side of the garden.

“For that, if you want supper, you can dig the last ones in,” Hamish laughed.

“Ok. You’re on. ...oh give me that spade,” Sara made a grab for the implement, which Hamish held out of reach above his head.

“So ‘brains’ can’t reach the spade?” He laughed again and Matthew guffawed from across the opposite side of the knot gardens to see his mother acting like a school-kid.

“No, but she can kick you in the shins if you don’t hand it here this instant.” Sara made an ineffectual jump for the spade’s handle, which was still well out of her reach.

Hamish lowered the tool and she snatched it. “Little and mean; there’s a winning combination,” he continued, “We’ve put everything where you said Ma’am ...sun lovers to the centre and the shade-tolerant closer to the hedges.

Sara was already digging holes for the last few plants, placing the biodegradable pots directly in the dark soil. “I can’t wait to see this when it’s mature and flowering. It’ll be lovely. And Dad’ll be so chuffed.”

“Tell Arthur he’s welcome any time,” Hamish was heading for the exit. “I’ve made Shepherd’s pie for supper, I hope you like eating country-simple. I left it warming in the oven so I’ll go and get some veg on while you finish up here.”

“See you in ten. We’ve brought dessert.” Sara’s voice was muffled as she continued planting.

“Yahoo, chocolate cake ...I’ll get it!” Matthew enthusiastically offered,

following Hamish out the hedge-gate closest to the van.

“Just make sure you don’t sample any of it on the way to the kitchen,” his mother pre-empted, speaking to Matthew’s back as he skipped out behind Hamish’s tall frame.

After they had gone, Sara sat back on her heels for a moment, surveying the new box hedges and planted beds before turning to Liana who was beside her, collecting empty planters and tools and placing them in the wheelbarrow.

“Hamish is great, isn’t he,” she said. Then, “It’s a bit of shame that he’s not interested in me the way he’s interested in you. He’d make a great stand-in Dad for Matthew,” she made a wry face.

If Liana was shocked at Sara’s forthrightness she gave no sign that it had affected her in any way. She calmly continued picking up trowels and a rake that had been resting against the hedge.

“Forgive me for being nosy but I’m just wondering how you feel about him?” Sara asked bluntly.

“I am not interested in Hamish in the least. So I suppose I don’t ‘feel’ anything about him.” Now Sara could see that Liana had been more shaken by her comment than she had let on. Deflated as a sail without a breeze, she sat slumped on one of the new benches, frowning at Sara.

“Well he’s certainly ‘interested’ in you and I’d say that he ‘feels’ more than you appear to realise ...I’ve seen the way he looks at you when he thinks no one is watching ...and a man surely doesn’t go to the trouble and expense of fixing up that pretty little bower in the summerhouse for someone that he doesn’t care about. Does he?” she asked.

“That’s not something I asked for,” Liana’s brow furrowed more, “And I am sure you are mistaking kindness for ‘interest’. I have a,” she hesitated before continuing, “...a history with this place that Hamish has acknowledged and that is why he is so accommodating to me.”

Sara wasn’t fooled. She could hear by the tone of her voice that Liana was less than certain of what she was saying.

“Well I hope I can get someone to be that ‘disinterested’ in me some day,” she replied tartly, wagging her head. “You sure you’re not feeling more than you’re letting on ...’cos I thought I caught more than a few vibes between you two.”

Liana stood. “Absolutely not. You couldn’t be more wrong. I don’t feel that way ...and I have no intention of feeling ‘that’ way.” She smiled thinly, “The only thing I feel right at this moment is hungry.” She pulled back her shoulders and straightened her back, “Now, shall we finish this and go in and see how the cooks are progressing with our supper?”

“Fair enough.” Sara could see that the conversation was over. “Then help me get this planting done before we go,” she suggested.

“Yes, let’s,” Liana agreed. Kneeling and leaning forwards to heel in the

little plant she was holding in one hand she gave an irritated flick of other hand to her long hair, which was both brushing the ground and obscuring her vision.

Sara glanced over. "You know, I could trim that a little after supper if you'd like me to."

Liana grabbed a hank of her hair and looked at it for a moment before deciding, "Yes, I'd like that, thank you." She sat back on her haunches and shook out her long tresses before twining them into a rough plait. "Though I think, if you're willing, it may be time for more than just a little trim."

Sara grinned back. "C'mon, let's get this finished then."

The two women worked companionably, side by side, putting the last of the plants into the ground before wheeling the barrow full of tools out onto the path and making their way into the cheery warmth of the cottage kitchen for supper.

JACK

Jack, eavesdropping on the woodland leese of the tall yew hedge, could feel his ire rising like sap in the spring. If the human made a play for Liana and she decided to reciprocate, all his plans might come to nought.

Well, that couldn't happen. He'd make sure of it.

HAMISH AND LIANA

*'Tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes!*
William Wordsworth

Dawn was arriving earlier with each passing day. Hamish wandered outside just as the sun was peeking over the trees; holding a cup of fresh coffee in his hand, intending to inspect the freshly planted herb beds before starting work on a new painting.

He stopped for a moment outside the conservatory doors to sip the strong brew and listen before moving on. The blackbirds were in fine form this morning, voicing their languidly fluted song in shorts bursts to greet the new dawn.

He carried on the short distance from the cottage to the herb garden - but as he entered it became rapidly apparent, bird's notwithstanding, that he was not the first to wander the garden that morning. He gaped open-mouthed at the scene - what had been beds of small nursery transplants with much bare soil still evident was now, this morning, a lushly flowering display full to the brim of herbs and perennials, many near-ripe for picking. The purple-blue flowers of the sage, lavender and borage he'd laboured to plant looked wonderful set against the bright yellow of the rue, the frothy creamy-white clusters of meadowsweet and the tall spikes of marsh mellow.

He turned to Liana, sitting on the new bench nearest the entrance, with 'his' robin (he was fairly sure) hopping along the seat back.

"Turncoat," Hamish muttered to the tiny bird as he walked up to the pair. The robin looked unrepentant and flew across to preen on the sundial

gnomon.

Hamish thought how the image of Liana sitting as she was reminded him of the old pre-World War Two photographs of her sitting in this same garden, that Arthur had given him. The only points of difference were the outfit she was wearing; her new dark purple trousers, worn with black pumps and a lavender-shaded short-sleeved cotton top gave her an air of contemporary poise; and her hair. After Sara's ministrations the evening before, Liana's red tresses were bobbed just below shoulder-length. The style suited her fine patrician features.

"Good morning," he greeted with a wryly raised eyebrow. "I see you've been busy. Kind of like time-lapse photography, isn't it?"

"I couldn't resist," she look slightly abashed. She then echoed the sentiment that Hamish had felt moments before. "I wanted to see the garden again as I remembered it. Before..." she paused as if she might say more before tightening her lips in silence.

Hamish picked a leaf of lemon verbena and crushed it between his fingers to release the scent as he contemplated the abundant display of kitchen herbs; mint, parsley, chives, basil, tarragon, oregano and rosemary and more besides. "Well, on the up-side, I can stop buying those expensive fresh herbs from the supermarket." He laughed as he sat next to her.

"You're not annoyed that I meddled with your garden?"

"It's your garden too," he reminded her.

"Not so much anymore," she puffed out her cheeks, sighing. "I'd like to go away."

"Good idea ...we could take day trips to some of the other National Trust properties around here if you'd like; good chance to use my annual membership, there's Knole ...where Vita Sackville-West grew up, or Scotney or Bodium castles –they're both great places. Or how about Ightham Mote? -It's a moated manor house that dates from the fourteenth century."

"Yes, I remember when it was built."

"Seriously?" he stared at her incredulously, slack-jawed in wonder.

"No. I just wanted to see your reaction," she smiled up at him a little tauntingly.

He closed his mouth.

"I have heard of it though and I was around when it was new but I've never taken much of an interest in events outside of the garden. They come, they go...I stay." She shrugged philosophically as if to say, "So what."

"You want to go and see it or not?" he asked.

"Why not? I've nothing better to do." She held out her hand and the robin flew over to perch on her fingertips, trilling prettily. "He likes you. He particularly likes that you are always digging the soil over and exposing lots

of lovely yummy treats for him.” She gave the bird a stern look, “he thinks of his stomach a lot more than any self-respecting bird should.” The robin chirruped once, looking unconcerned. “Oh, and he’d like you to know his name is Robin.”

“Robin. Really? Robin the robin ...I’d have never thought of that.” Robin trilled a last short song, fluttered from Liana’s fingertips onto Hamish’s head then took off into the trees in the direction of the summerhouse. Hamish sat beside Liana on the bench, casually adding, “you didn’t mention that you could talk to birds ...or were you just making all that up?”

“No. I can communicate with him ...he has a somewhat limited vocabulary but we understand one another well enough. I didn’t think to include it at the time when I was doing my show-and-tell of my abilities for you.”

“Hmmm. What about the other animals; can you talk to them too?” He couldn’t believe that he was having such a casual conversation with a sort of feminine Dr Doolittle, but given the revelations of the past months it was not so surprising.

“All of the garden inhabitants can,” she added.

Now this was a revelation worthy of his attention. “*All* of the gardens inhabitants? You’re not the only one? How many are we talking about?” He had explored most of the woodland and had seen no indications there were more of her kind within White Briar’s walls.

“I haven’t exactly done a census.”

“Ball-park will suffice. You know ...to the closest five ...or ten, if there are ten?” How many could there be?

“...Hmmm,” she counted, “Twenty ... thirty ... perhaps fifty in all.” She raised her hands, palms up, “It’s been many years since I’ve seen or spoken with most of them,” then she placed her hands on her knees, her arms held straight, “and not long enough since I’ve spoken with others.” She was referring to Green Jack, whom she’d seen more frequently than she’d like of late. She knew she should stop conversing with him but felt, in her current changed circumstances, unable to do otherwise. There had been nothing forthcoming from the Garden since the day she’d awoke and some days it felt as if her hold on her sanity was more precarious than others. Jack, at least, understood how she had suffered. He had been in the garden almost as long as she.

“Whoa, stop right there. Fifty? Really?” You mean to say the place is riddl...,” he stopped, “I mean, fit to burst with *‘forest folk’* and I’ve never seen hide nor hair of even one of them since I arrived. How’s that?”

“Firstly, you have seen me. And you would do well to remember that I am one of them...a *‘forest folk’* ...and they are a lot better at hiding than you’d think. Why do you think I mentioned the naiads when you

questioned me about my ‘provenance?’”

“I don’t know ...I thought you were just making a comparison, I guess.”

“I wasn’t. Three, no, four naiads -last I knew- live in the pool under the waterfall.”

“Oh. Kay.” It was starting to sound as if he’d taken on a lot more than he’d ever realised when he had accepted guardianship for White Briars. “And who else?”

She rubbed the side of her nose with a finger, “I’m not too sure how many dryads in the woods,” she paused, before explaining, “they spend most of their time in their trees so aren’t often seen.”

“Understandable. Not a lot to do when you’re a tree.”

She gave him a look intended to silence, adding, “there are several rock-dwellers near the caves along the escarpment ...and, fern-fairies, you know, the kind *with* wings,” somewhat scathingly, “a pair of elves came over with the Germans and never left and apart from one or two others that’s about it.” She had no intention of giving him knowledge of the Garden’s underlying power, the force that had kept them all safe and had, until recently, kept her bound within the stone walls that encircled the woods.

“What. No little goat-people? No centaurs? No Aslan?” He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. It was, he thought, starting to sound as if he was living in Narnia.

“No,” she said shortly, not ready to share, “but there is one that would do you harm, could he, so do not go looking for *folk*.”

“Really? I’ve never had any spidey-senses go off when I’ve been trotting round the woods. It always seems so benign and I’ve felt nothing but safe wandering around.”

“You would do well to heed my warning. There are things in this garden that you would be best not to disturb,” she repeated.

“Pit of vipers stuff, aye?” He wasn’t convinced.

“Yes,” she nodded, “something like that.” She hoped Jack was eavesdropping and could hear himself being likened to a viper. People who listen at metaphorical doors deserved to hear bad things about themselves, she thought.

“So how would I know him if I saw him?”

“He’s green and covered in leaves. It’s a bit of a dead give-away.” And when she said ‘dead’ she meant ‘dead’. Which was what Jack should be. But the Garden had not been informative on what she should do about his reincarnation and in her present frame of mind she could not be bothered to enquire.

“But he sounds like Jack-in-the-Green. He’s supposed to be a good guy, isn’t he? All about springtime and rampant growth and that kind of stuff; they have him at lots of the folk festivals round here.”

“Believe me when I tell you, this is not that kind of Jack-in-the-Green.

You do not want to make his acquaintance.”

“Ahh, I get it, more ‘Poison Ivy’ than Jolly Green Giant?”

“Poison Ivy?” How did he know the vine that knit together Green Jack these days?

At her uncomprehending look, “Bad-ass female arch-nemesis type character from Batman,” she shook her head, not getting the reference, “don’t worry, she’s a sort of eco-terrorist from a comic book ...made into a movie.”

“Ahh.” Eco-terrorist. She had watched a documentary about such happenings on Hamish’s television. That was an apt descriptor for Jack. He had a predilection for all things natural and an unnaturally vitriolic dislike for anything man-made ...including man.

“Stay away from the dark, damp regions of the woods,” she warned, “I think he has taken up residence in the low-lying marshy ground above the falls and the small cave,” the one where his corpse had lain for so long, “the others will watch out for you in the woods, but you would be advised to stick to the beaten paths for now.”

“He’s that bad?”

“Yes, he is,” she said, shortly. “Do not under-estimate Jack’s hatred of humans. I doubt that he will come seeking you but he would be like a cornered fox should you find him.”

“Okay,” Hamish figured that some chap made of green leafy stuff couldn’t be that scary but didn’t say. “So, are we on for this trip to Ightham Mote today?”

“Very well,” she rephrased her earlier comment, “I may as well.” The truth was, now that she knew she could leave the garden; Liana couldn’t wait to be free of its confines. At least, outside its borders the memories, if not left behind, could be displaced for a while with new experiences.

“Fine, let’s go then.” Hamish jumped to his feet and held out a hand for her, all thoughts of what his garden might hold, -good or bad- banished for the day.

HAMISH AND LIANA

*The wind blows out of the gates of the day,
The wind blows over the lonely of heart,
And the lonely of heart is withered away,
While the faeries dance in a place apart,*

W B Yeats

Looking back, Hamish would remember that it had all started with a children's picture book he'd found that day at Tunbridge Wells.

He had unearthed a copy of *Linnea in Monet's Garden* in a second hand book store. Illustrated with photographs and watercolours, it was a tale about a little girl who had been introduced to Monet's art and his garden at Giverny by an old friend. He had given the book to Liana, which (Hamish thought) had sparked her interest to travel beyond Kent, beyond England, to Giverny and Paris. Unaware of the real direction her thoughts were taking, Hamish had been pleasantly at her suggestion that they travel abroad.

The day at Ightham Mote had gone well enough, despite stumbling across a local folk festival. Spying a cohort of costumed Morris dancers, Hamish had admitted; as they'd watched the beribboned and jingling dancers hop and skip their way through their display, that he did not understand the penchant of certain people to dress up and prance about, making horse's-arses of themselves. But the dancers didn't seem to care what he thought, applauding one another's performances and appearing to have a jolly good time of it -and neither did Liana. She merely smiled at their antics.

The remainder of the day was uneventful. After touring the manor and garden, and watching groups of excitable children being taught to dance around Maypoles, they'd elected to leave the crowds behind and had stopped at a quiet pub on the way home for a cider and pie lunch.

On the back of that day's success they'd graduated to day-trips to Scotney and Bodium Castles, then Knole; discovering in the process that visiting National Trust properties in May came with a wealth of fairs, festivals and springtime celebrations –so that by the end of the month Hamish and Liana felt they had had more than their fill of re-enacted tournaments, displays and even a longbow archery competition. Though Hamish *had* enjoyed the falconry display they'd chanced upon at Knole and Liana had proven to have excellent hand-eye co-ordination when it came to throwing wooden balls at coconuts, they were both ready for a change.

That change came as a suggestion from Liana -a visit to Giverny.

Hamish, unsuspecting her real motive, suggested they include Paris in the itinerary and Liana agreed.

As the balmy weather continued into early June, they opted to travel by car, eschewing the train and Eurotunnel; instead driving down to the Ferry at Dover, crossing to Calais and motoring to Paris via Giverny. They hadn't been in a rush, stopping anyplace that caught their fancy -Hamish found a delightful *chambres d'hôte* in Giverny and they visited Monet's garden the following morning.

It was another bright sun-shiny morning; Liana had thought the garden pretty, although overcrowded with tourists. There was certainly no need for her particular talents here as the garden's plants were blooming in a glorious display of colours.

The two were been standing on the Japanese bridge, sheltering from the incandescent heat under the blossoms of the wisteria and admiring the view over the lily pond, when an enthusiastic amateur photographer asked them to pose for a photograph. They'd been happy enough to oblige and were about to walk off, when the photographer asked for a shot of them kissing.

Hamish raised an eyebrow and glanced down at Liana, seeking her approval or otherwise. She gave a somewhat Gallic shrug of indifference so he gathered her into his arms and lowered his lips to hers, expecting they would give the photographer what he wanted and quickly move on.

Not so.

The kiss lengthened, deepened and became exquisitely intense in a way neither of them had envisioned. Unthinking of the watching crowd, Hamish gathered her so close that she was all but plastered to his body, -as for Liana- her arms twined around his head and neck in imitation of the tendrils of the climber, all others forgotten. It wasn't until a growing crowd of onlookers clapped their approval that the two broke apart. A red-faced Hamish led a now-bashful Liana off the bridge to the sighs of several

female tourists.

“Way to go honey, Ah’d swap places with you any day.” drawled an admiring American tourist.

The pair scurried away, hurrying through the underpass back to the main garden and a tour of the house. They studiously avoided one another’s eyes for the next half hour then quit the garden for a nearby café. If Hamish privately thought that *Les Nymphéas*, Water Lilies, seemed an entirely appropriate name for somewhere to stop, he didn’t say, but he certainly wasn’t about to forget their moment overlooking the lilies. For her part, Liana spent an inordinate amount of time studying the menu before ordering and offered little in the way of conversation throughout the meal.

Quitting Giverny, they headed on towards Paris, detouring at Versailles to tour the gardens. As they walked along the long allées; Liana holding a white lace-edged parasol bought at Giverny to keep the sun’s rays at bay, it became apparent she was also determined to keep him at bay. Although outwardly companionable for the remainder of the day, she refused to take his arm or hand when offered, preferring, it seemed to Hamish to keep an arm’s length of distance between them. It was late afternoon, creeping into evening by the time they departed Versailles.

There was, of course, only one hotel they could stay in Paris; Hotel Esmeralda -where Linnea and Mr Bloom had stayed in the book. It proved to be every bit as quaint and charming as described. Hamish was pleased to have a room with unadorned stone walls and a plain red and cream décor while Liana had been given pretty sprigged wallpaper and a view over the leafy trees of the adjacent park and the church of Saint Julien le Pauvre.

Paris was stiflingly hot, baking under a heat-wave that made being outdoors quite uncomfortable during daylight hours. The two ventured out to visit a few local focal points; Notre Dame’s souring bulk was practically across the road from the hotel, so it was impossible not to visit there and then take in the sights of the Ile de la Cité, including an evening organ recital at the cathedral.

After the following day spent touring galleries Liana was tiring of being indoors, so that after a visit to see the vast circular canvases of Monet’s water lily paintings at the Musée de L’Orangerie they decided to brave the elements and wander back to the hotel through the Tuileries Gardens and the Louvre. They walked slowly along the finely gravelled pathways, not wanting to hurry in the sweltering heat –Liana hiding under her parasol and still maintaining her distance from Hamish.

But as they sauntered along the allées of Tuileries manicured gardens, the skies grew darker.

There was ominous rumbling overhead.

They hurried to cross the Place du Carrousel, with its inverted pyramid; made infamous by Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*, when the heavens opened.

Occasional spits of rain turned into the driving torrents of a full-force Parisian thunderstorm; Hamish, ignoring Liana's reversion to *touch-me-not*, reached out to grab her free hand as they ran across the rough cobbled pavement. Claspng her hand tightly they bounded together up the few steps to the sheltering porticos surrounding the Louvre's central courtyard. The long line of the tourists who had been queuing patiently for entry into the museum were deserting their posts to run helter-skelter in all directions, seeking refuge wherever they could find; so that soon Hamish and Liana were surrounded by damp, loudly exclaiming people speaking in a multitude of tongues like some modern-day Babylon, shaking themselves off like so many dogs after a drenching.

The downpour and accompanying lightening display was spectacular in its intensity. Booming peals of thunder hard on the heels of sharp shards of lightning as the storm passed almost directly overhead.

This stormy display was nothing new to Hamish, -typical of Paris in the summer, he knew it would pass by and they'd be on their way again; but Liana was shaking, holding her arms across her body as she stood by his side in her thin cotton dress and strappy sandals. Could it be, he wondered, that she was not so fond of thunder and lightning in her new mortal state? He put an arm around her and pulled her, unprotesting, to his side; holding her there until the storm abated.

Within minutes the tempest had moved on and the rain eased to light droplets.

People quickly dispersed, back to their queues or wherever they had been heading before the squall. Hamish and Liana carried on their way, splashing through puddles on the pavement and stepping around flooded road drains struggling to accommodate the inundation.

By the time they made it back across the Ile de la Cité, the cafés around the corner from the hotel had dried seats and tables and were open for business as usual. Hamish smiled; At the height of tourist season it would take more than an afternoon cloudburst to halt trading in this Paris arrondissement. Thirsty, he and Liana opted to stop for a cool drink at Café le Petit Pont, where they were protected from the weather and the busy road.

Finishing their drinks, they popped into Shakespeare and Co., an eccentrically- quaint bookstore tucked back slightly from the road. The books were mainly in English and they enjoyed a few minutes of fossicking among the closely-packed shelves for something to read. Liana read the inscription on the arch above her head "BE NOT INHOSPITABLE TO STRANGERS LEST THEY BE ANGELS IN DISGUISE," and was charmed by the wonderfully cluttered space with its worn wooden stairs leading to the upper floors and eclectic mix of seating.

Hamish read the sign and silently wondered what the bookstore's staff

would think if they knew the kind of being they had in their store at this moment.

They plopped themselves down on one of the shop's beds, tucked away in a quiet backwater where they stayed reading for some time amid the laid-back atmosphere of the bookshop. Hamish knew from previous visits that the beds were for the largely American ex-pats who worked the store, affectionately called tumbleweeds, and who dossed down amongst the books at night in return for a few hours of employment in the shop during the day.

As they read, a blond-haired girl sat at the piano stool of a rickety old piano and started playing Yann Tiersen, the Breton composer and musician. The tinkling notes of the piano wafted gently among the stacks; Engrossed in her book and tired from the day's excursions, Liana relaxed enough to flick her sandals off, tuck her feet up on the bed and prop her back against Hamish's shoulder as she read. Having her in such close proximity once more, his concentration on his own book suffered but when next he glanced at his watch, he was surprised to find that an hour had passed and they needed to leave if they wanted time to shower and dress for the dinner reservations he'd made. He tapped Liana on the shoulder and showed her the time.

Reluctantly, they gathered their things and made their way downstairs, purchasing the books before heading round the corner to the hotel.

A little later, they ventured out again to a city cooled by the rain. Steam rose from still-warm asphalt as they made their way back across the Ile to *Au Chien Qui Fume*, a restaurant known for its quirky artworks featuring dogs where human heads had been in the originals. They chose to sit outdoors and Hamish was amused to spy a large elegant greyhound sprawled beside a table alongside two diners. Knowing the French attitude to pets was generally more tolerant than that of the English, it seemed in keeping with the décor.

He and Liana ordered a platter of fresh seafood to share. This arrived bedded on ice -with an extensive array of utensils designed to either coax or batter the meat from shells. What followed was an interesting hour of deciding which tools to use for what delicacy.

Fortunately, dessert and coffee were less strenuous to consume than the main course.

"I'd like to get a dog," Hamish commented quietly. He's been watching the animal, lying for the most part quietly prone while its owners dined but raising its head every so often to accept some morsel offered under the table by the woman. I think I'll look into it when we get home."

"Hmm," Liana's response was non-committal. He could hear her humming a tune under her breath but couldn't make out the song.

"I might get a cat as well."

“Mmmm-hmm,” She continued humming.

“Might cut down the woods and turn the place into an animal sanctuary,” he watched to see how long his words would take to sink, if at all. It took a full minute or more.

“What?” She stared across the table at him, shocked, then noticing his broad grin calmed her expression of horror. “You’re joking, aren’t you?”

“Just wanted to see how long it took to get your attention.”

“I’m sorry, I was thinking of something else.”

“Anything you want to share?”

“No,” but her expression told him everything. The sadness that was never more than a finger-snap away was back in her eyes.

He signalled the waiter. “I’ll get the check and we’ll go.”

She nodded, already drifting back to her thoughts of how little she wanted to return to England’s shores and the unhappy memories that awaited her at White Briars. While they walked the lamp-lit streets with others enjoying the Parisian nightlife, he could hear the low humming once more, but still wasn’t able to discern the melody.

Passing by the open door of Shakespeare and Company once more, music beckoned and they stopped to listen to a performance by Lail Arad, who was sharing songs from a current album, as well as one or two previous numbers. Hamish particularly liked the self-deprecatingly witty lyrics to *Winter*, a song about the inconvenience of taking a break from a relationship once the colder weather set in. As they stood listening, for a brief moment, Liana forgot herself again, leaning back against him as they stood in the press of the audience enjoying the music. His arms linked loosely around her slim waist, Hamish couldn’t help but wish that this was the way it was all the time, and not just for occasional intervals. He strengthened his resolve to speak to her about his growing feelings for her - but not tonight, perhaps tomorrow.



His sleep that night was broken and ragged, with thoughts of what he might say to her dominating his dreams; and when he woke to the sounds of early morning bird calls through his open windows, he felt as if he had fallen asleep mere moments before.

HAMISH AND LIANA

*Or when the lawn
Is pressed by unseen feet, and ghosts return
Gently at twilight, gently go at dawn,
The sad intangible who grieve and yearn...*
T.S. Eliot, To Walter de la Mare

Liana surveyed Hamish's tired face over a pot of Darjeeling they were sharing; *The Tea Caddy*, just half a dozen doors from their hotel, was a perfect little English-French hybrid tea shop that they had discovered the day before. Having a proper tea shop so close was a rare find as tea wasn't exactly the beverage of choice for most Parisians.

She might have wondered what it was that had made him look so weary if she hadn't been so deeply self-involved in her thoughts. Sipping sweet hot liquid from an elegant blue and white cup, she watched silently from across the table as Hamish picked at a thick slice of raisin toast. Sitting at one of three tables-for-two set in a wide booth at the front of the store, his back was to the open casement windows and she could see over his broad shoulders to the leafy-green trees of the Square René Viviani across the lane. It was pleasant enough to see these city trees, but they had little in common with their country counterparts and made her feel that it was high time she quit the city.

"Let's get out of here and go somewhere we can talk," Hamish spoke suddenly. He pulled money from his wallet and left it on the table, to cover their food, beverages and a tip.

"As you wish," she drained her cup before setting it back on its saucer

and arising from the table.

Vacating the darkened atmosphere of the tea room they exited into bright sunshine; crossing the cobbled pavement to mount the kerb and a second low step that bordered the park opposite. As they strolled along to an open gate set in the railings near the end wall of the church of Saint Julien le Pauvre, Liana could hear music coming from inside the church. Recognising the opening strains of a Chopin piece being played on piano -a superior model than that in the bookshop the day before- she was tempted to wander inside to listen but she wasn't to have that opportunity. Before she could pull away, Hamish took her hand and led her through the gate to the park.

The garden was quiet; it was too early for the tourists to be out in force and few Parisians had time to stop at this hour. They walked up to one of the square's landmarks, a *Robinia pseudoacacia* purported to be the oldest tree in Paris. The tree leaned drunkenly -missing its upper branches compliments of a WW1 shell- and was now supported by some rather utilitarian concrete buttresses. Planted around 1601 by one Jean Robin, whose name the tree had immortalised, it was blessed with a piece of urban mythology that suggested those who touched its bark gently would have years of good luck.

Liana had discovered the tree the first day of their arrival in Paris, but had resisted touching it, mindful of what affect her caress might have on such an ancient tree. Notwithstanding, it had also been a very long time since she had believed in something as fickle as luck -so there was little desire in her to lay a hand on the bark. She was glad, for the tree's sake, that the myth stated a gentle touch was required; the tree was vulnerable enough in this central city location without thousands of tourist's rough-handling it's tender bark. Added to this, it was somewhat protected from over-eager hands by a circlet of woven timbers and seating that ringed its base.

"Please sit," She caught more than a hint of nervousness in Hamish's usually calm tones. "I have something to say that I'm fairly sure you won't want to hear, but I can't keep it to myself any longer," Hamish did not sound happy about whatever it was he was about to announce.

Liana perched on the edge of a slatted bench.

Hamish was momentarily distracted by her humming the tune he'd heard the evening before.

"What is that you're humming?"

"I don't know," she frowned, pursing her lips thoughtfully; "it's just something I heard - On the radio perhaps?"

"Hmm, its familiar but I can't remember the name either," he expelled a sharp breath, before steeling himself and continuing to speak softly, as if not wanting to frighten her, "anyway, I wanted to say," he angled his body to look directly at her, "...what I want, no, what I need to tell you is that

my feelings for you have grown in these past weeks -that is to say ...grown more." The next words were drawn out twice their length, "As in," he closed his eyelids and took a deep breath, opening them to look candidly into her preoccupied gaze, "as in I've fallen in love with you."

Her sea-coloured eyes turned instantly stormy, reminding him of yesterday's tempest. "No!" she put her hands over her ears as if to block his declaration.

Bit late, he thought, he'd already said it. "Excuse me?" He tugged at his earlobe in frustration, a habit he found he'd developed over the summer in response to being near Liana. "If you don't mind, I think I'll be the judge of whom I can or cannot fall in love with."

"Well, you can't," she was adamant. "I won't have it!"

He spread his hands in a gesture of surrender, "okay then; tell me you feel nothing for me." He saw by her deer-in-the-headlights expression that she felt more than she was letting on. "Why does it have to be such a problem?" he asked gently. "I'm not asking you to marry me, well, not just yet. Not today anyway."

"Obviously you still don't understand. I. Will. Never. Fall. In. Love." Each word was enunciated with knife-edge precision.

"We don't always get what we want Liana."

Whoa -from her thunderous expression, he guessed that little morsel of wisdom missed its mark by a country mile.

She hunched her shoulders, drawing in on herself. "I wanted to be friends. Nothing more."

"I have been a friend for months now. I'd like to be more."

"No. You can't feel like this. I won't allow it. Not again." There was such pain in her voice.

"Again, you do not get to choose how I feel." ...it seemed this conversation was going round in ever-widening circles. "I asked you how you felt. I'm waiting for an answer."

"About what?"

"Don't be so obtuse. About your feelings for me, of course." That came out shorter than he'd intended but he did not want to sit here playing games.

She spoke slowly, as if explaining to someone incapable of understanding. "Whether I feel any stirrings of love for you or not is not the point. I will not become involved with another mortal."

"But that's ridiculous; things have changed -we've pretty much proven you are as mortal as I am now."

"Not relevant," she said shortly, looking down at her feet, avoiding his eyes. "You will die." There was a note of tremulous sorrow in her voice.

"Yes, more than likely," he tried for a lighter tone, "In the words of Lana Del Rey '*We were born to die*'" -they had been listening to her CD in the

car- "...but hopefully that won't happen for some time." He strove to be understanding of her fears. "The thing is, I will die but you will too. And I don't get to choose who goes first anymore than you do." How could she forego any chance of happiness for fear of what might happen? "It's what we do *before* we die that matters."

"You forget how many times I've been through this." Her voice rose, "Not again! I will not give my heart to some man of flesh and bone who will one day die and leave me."

"Ahh, sounds like your needles' stuck in a groove there." He'd been listening to this theme song since not long after the day they'd met and was running out of patience for it. "That was then. This is now." It was high time, he thought, that she started to recover from husbands dead a minimum of sixty years or more. "Stop wallowing in self-pity," he said tersely, wishing almost immediately that he could snatch the words back.

"I don't care if you think its self-pity, or not. I'm not ready and I don't know that I'll ever be ready."

None of this was going as Hamish had hoped. Sensing the conversation turning to custard, he made a last stand. "Why on God's green earth not?" He was astounded that she could be so obstinate when it came to allowing herself to be happy.

He remembered Linda's emboldening words when he had balked at signing up for White Briars persuading him to grab the opportunity and '*Carpe diem*' -seize the day ...so he opted for total honesty, "I love you. It's the simple truth, and I've been waiting to tell you for months now ...and I do want to marry you. God willing, I want to have children with you and grow old with you. I'd get down on one knee and propose right now if I thought you'd say yes." He ploughed on, wanting to say all he felt now that he had started, "In this world there are no promises, no assurances of an endless life ...for anyone ...not in this realm, anyway. That's the burden we're all born with and must share ...that one day, sooner or later, we'll die. And for you to deny love because you can't have a written contract that I won't kick the bucket before my time is not a good enough reason not to love."

Liana wasn't listening to any of what he said.

Like Hamish, she had had a moment of clarity when everything she had been thinking through the spring and summer distilled into one simple idea -just coming to a completely different conclusion to his. All those conversations with Green Jack about how she would never be free of her memories, her grief and her pain until she was physically freed from White Briars.

...He'd been right all along. She had to leave.

And here was as good a place as any to do it.

The first hint Hamish had of her intentions was seeing her begin to fade

into mist.

“Liana, what are you doing?” There was a note of concern in his voice. “We’re in the middle of a public park in Paris. Someone might see you. Stop!”

But she was fast disappearing from sight.

“Liana!” Now concern had been supplanted with panic. He made a futile grab for her, hoping to catch her before she was lost to his gaze -but he was too late.

“Don’t look for me, you won’t succeed,” whispered on the air. “I told you before, better men than you have tried and failed. Just let me go.” Even in her anguish, she did not wish him more harm than she had already inflicted.

And then she was gone. Irretrievably. Irrevocably. Gone.

He knew in that moment that she had no intention of returning. His gut twisted in despair.

Still, he sat in the park for hours that day, hoping against hope that she might change her mind. He waited in the city another three days, extending his stay at the hotel. The hotel owner, who could plainly see his anguish at the loss of his companion, decided it was a simple lover’s tiff. She was French -they understood that kind of thing and she hoped he would be reunited with his inamourata.

Hamish had never felt so helpless in his life. He couldn’t go to the police; telling the gendarmes his story would be useless. He couldn’t call Interpol either -What would he say to them? I’ve lost my flower fairy?

The likely outcome of that conversation would be a small padded cell.



The three days passed and she did not reappear.

Resigned, Hamish packed and retraced his journey home. Half way to Calais he flicked a CD on -in hopes of banishing the looping replay in his mind of recent events.

Listening to the Lana Del Rey CD that had been the last thing they’d played while in the car, he suddenly recalled the tune Liana had been humming all those hours before she’d disappeared. It was one of Del Rey’s numbers, ‘*Summertime Sadness*’. Thinking of the lyrics, Hamish berated himself for having not been more aware; perhaps if he’d picked up on its significance earlier he might have headed off this madness that had led her to disappear from his life, literally and figuratively speaking.

It took several more hours of driving before he acknowledged there was little he could have done to alter the outcome.

Sitting waiting for the car ferry to dock at Dover all he could think was: Ironic, ...I taught her that she could safely leave the garden and bolstered

her confidence so that she could handle the world beyond; thinking that it would add interest to her life and help her to find happiness once more; and instead she used that knowledge to flee the garden and me.

He dropped his head on his hands and cried.

JACK

Spying the small green car arriving back at White Briars with one less occupant, Jack was exultant that his clever campaign had come to fruition.

He spent three full days celebrating Liana's disappearance, -after thoroughly checking the Austin to make absolutely certain that she hadn't hitched a ride home unbeknown to the human.

As a welcome by-product of this search he held aloft a fragmentary tendril of *Fallopia japonica*, Japanese Knotweed that he had found caught in the car's undercarriage -possibly picked up on one of Hamish and Liana's roadside stops as they had travelled the quieter back-roads on their way to Paris.

He carried the vine fragment to a place in the woods where few ventured and planted it.

In the weeks following Liana's departure, with care and Jack's unique brand of encouragement, the vine sprouted and began to spread. See! He crowed, cavorting around the growing infestation, she wasn't the only one who could persuade plants to sprout. Although chances were he knew, she would not approve his choice of species -it being on Europe's 'most invasive' plant list and all.

He had planted the knotweed as something of an experiment, and he acknowledged, just because he could now that she wasn't around to censure. His new philosophy was 'start small; plan big'...and he had big plans for his future.

Granted -he'd still had no success when it came to leaving the garden, but he was looking for a way around that irritating limitation.

HAMISH

*I watched my time, and summer passed,
And autumn waning fled by,
And doleful winter night at last
In cloudy morning clothed the sky.*
Emily Bronte

Autumn segued into winter. Determined that he would not retreat into despondency over Liana's choice Hamish elected to fill his days with meaningful work.

He trimmed all the hedges and the figures on the yew terrace -with Arthur's assistance; which in reality meant Hamish scaling up and down the ladder while listening to much advice given from the ground by the old gardener. Afterwards, he put the garden to bed for the winter.

This winter was not the cold, crisp snowy season of the previous year, but full of damp dreary days of interminable grey skies and pitiless rain.

Finally, heartsick, tired and frustrated with everything from the weather to his latest half-complete paintings, Hamish took a break away, spending the better part of a month touring in the French Alps. Here, at least, the cold weather produced something enjoyable. He sped down twisting mountain routes, revelling in his new high-tech skis and only stopping long enough to refuel at out-of-the-way mountain restaurants; making a conscious effort to keep his mind busy with thoughts other than White Briars and Liana.

He arriving home, fit, tanned and enthusiastic to begin a new series of paintings. If his thoughts sometimes drifted to her he let them, comfortable

now with the hope that she might one day return but acknowledging that she quite possibly would not. He felt in no hurry to issue himself ultimatums as to how long he would remain hopeful, preferring to take things day by day. He hoped and prayed that she had found solace and healing, wherever she was.

He made good on his promise to himself to get a dog, thinking of the couple in Paris, he adopted a rescued ex-racing greyhound named Doug. Doug the dog was a big mellow, laid-back brindle; who seemed inclined to do as little as possible now his racing days were over.

With the advent of spring, Hamish opened up the summer house as a retreat, spending hours with Doug doing what Doug did best; napping at his master's feet while Hamish occupied himself painting, reading or just sitting on the doorstep watching the swans -much like Liana had done the preceding spring. The swans got along surprisingly well with the hound; after one long inquiring look Doug gave the birds a wide berth and they, perhaps seeing themselves as Swans-a-la-carte never so much as hissed at the big dog. From that point on, they were firm, if not bosom buddies.

The blossom on the cherry trees came and went; lawns needed mowing and Matthew -grown bigger and stronger after a winter growth-spurt, started to spend more time in the garden assisting Hamish with maintenance and new projects. With Arthur's help they got the rill flowing and mended the orchard's brick wall and gate, after which Hamish installed half a dozen bee hives.



Towards the end of a busy summer, Hamish admitted to himself that Liana was gone forever. There had been no word, not even the briefest of postcards, and hope had faded into the realisation that he may have lost her for good.

Attempts at being philosophical about this state of affairs were, varyingly, successful or a dismal failure, depending on the day and the hour, especially when the leaves in the garden turned that exact shade of rich russet-red that reminded him of her hair.

Sometimes in the evenings he would take out the bunch of flowers that represented Liana's names, -he'd eventually pressed them under the weight of some of the heavier books in the library. He turned the flattened flowers this way and that, wondering where she might be and what she might be doing. The petals, like all the flowers she'd gathered -which he'd also pressed- had retained their bright hues long after ordinary flowers would have become dulled.

Sara had been curious as to why Liana had not returned with Hamish from the trip to France. In the first weeks, she'd peppered Hamish with

FLOWERS IN THE MORNING

questions about what had happened to cause Liana to leave in such a way. Hearing her, Arthur had remonstrated -then, after a few too many draughts in the pub, had let slip one too many of the garden's secrets to his daughter. She came knocking at White Briar's door the next morning, apologetic but full of more questions and it became necessary to let her in on the tale of Liana's origins and the reasons behind her sudden decision to flee.

Unsurprisingly, Sara had taken this all in stride, professing that she had been putting two and two together herself. More to the point -she had her own secrets to hide.

She brought over pies and plants in equal quantities and proved a fast friend to talk to.



Steve, Linda and the children came down several weekends over the summer and autumn, even managing to persuade Hamish to venture up to London once for a reciprocal visit. Steve still grumbled at his friend's continual absence from the city but given Linda, Jamie and Alice's love of visiting White Briars, had little support from his wife or children. It took considerable time, but finally came round to the notion that the move southwards might have been the best choice for his friend.

HAMISH AND LIANA

*She is coming, my dove, my dear;
 She is coming, my life, my fate;
 The red rose cries, "She is near, she is near;"
 And the white rose weeps, "She is late;"
 The larkspur listens, "I hear, I hear;"
 And the lily whispers, "I wait."
 Alfred, Lord Tennyson*

The trees in the garden were at the pinnacle of their autumnal beauty when, opening the front door early one dewy morning, Hamish found something lying on the stoop that sent him flying; boots forgotten and stocking soles getting soaked, down towards the lower garden and the pool.

He hurled himself down the terrace steps, bounded headlong as he dashed between the rows of yews at a speed that would have qualified him for the next Olympics, (though still easily beaten by Doug, who thought this new game was excellent fun) and practically flew down the final flights of stairs to the swan's pool.

Arriving at the pool glade completely out of breath and gasping like a landed fish, he took in the sight before his eyes, while Doug, curious as ever, walked up to her, wagging his tail and sniffing appreciatively. He was told off by Robin-the-robin, who chattered non-stop; flitting just above the dog's head in an acrobatic display of precision flying. Doug was unconcerned at the little's bird's antics -it being a favourite game they had been practising all summer.

She, on the other hand, was sitting on the doorstep of the summerhouse

in just the same spot where she had often sat through the spring and the summer of the previous year; looking for all the world as frozen and composed as the statue she so resembled; though a closer inspection would have noted the hands held tightly in her lap, for fear they would betray her with their shaking.

By the time he was near enough to notice, he was in control of his breathing sufficiently to speak -but no words would come. He stood in front of her, mute like the swans, the silence stretching uncomfortably.

She broke it; "You knew where I'd be? I wasn't sure." Her smile was uncertain.

"I planted those flowers last spring and this is the only place in the garden that they grow. Besides, they finished flowering months ago," he replied, his breathlessness not entirely due to the running, careful eyes watching her for some sign of a changed heart.

The silence grew again until she spoke, clambering to her feet with far less grace than was normal for her; while the words tumbled over each other in her rush to get them said.

"I wanted to come back ...but I wasn't sure if you'd want me. I'm sorry, it was an awful thing to do but when I left you there in Paris I was in a horrible muddle -I felt as if I was trapped in the land of grief I couldn't get out, no matter how hard I tried. In the end, the only thing I could do was leave. Can you forgive me?" Then she said the only line he wanted to hear, so quietly, "I love you."

He had imagined this moment so many times. He blinked as if waking, "Whatever else you just said, it's only the last that's important to me."

"Can you forgive me?" she repeated.

"Forgive what?" he grinned.

She narrowed her gaze, not quite ready to be forgiven so easily.

"Water under the bridge," he said, picturing the day he'd parked by the stream.

"Nothing to forgive," he stepped closer, narrowing the gap between them to a hair's breadth.

"If you knew how I've longed to see you sitting right there," he said, so quietly that she barely heard the words. "But, why the flowers?" he asked, "Why didn't you just come and see me yourself?" he asked

"I wanted to allow you time to think of some way to tell me you no longer cared -if that was how you felt. Time has passed and I wasn't sure what the reception would be."

"Don't you remember that day in Paris -I said I wanted to marry you." He dropped his forehead to rest on hers, "Did you think I'd change my mind?"

"What I recalled was you telling me that I was wallowing in self-pity. I didn't like it at the time but now I know it was the truth. Tell me

something, are you always right? It could get to be rather annoying long-term.”

“Oh no, occasionally, very occasionally, I make a wrong call,” he was smiling broadly now.

“Good, that should make you less insufferable to live with,” she said.

“Does that mean what I hope it means?” the words were more tentative that he would have liked, but he was almost afraid to ask.

“Well, last time we were together you did ask me to marry you, didn’t you just say so?”

“And you just said that you didn’t remember; but, I may have uttered something to that effect,” he replied.

“Well, if the offer still stands; I do. I will. I’d like to.”

“Yes!” his ecstatic bellow could be heard all around the garden, if not as far away as Thornden. Despite her height, he picked her up and swung her around as if she were as light as a small child, only putting her down so he could pull her closer to kiss.

The kiss threatened to last so long that Doug, Robin and Attila combined forces to interrupt, one pecking not ungently at Hamish’s shins another bumping his opposite thigh and the third dive-bombing Liana’s head. Undeterred, Hamish batted the irritating swan away with one hand while maintaining the kiss, but Attila persisted, not sure he liked this large male consorting with his Liana. Eventually Liana herself noticed just what it was that was distracting Hamish. She broke away long enough to remonstrate the circling robin and pecking swan. Attila back away, ruffled his feathers and stalked off to the pond.

“I’ve taken care of the birds,” she said with a merry laugh, “the large dog is your responsibility. But I feel you should introduce us first.”

“Liana, Doug, Doug, Liana.” In response to his name the big greyhound stretched his forelegs outwards into a perfect downward-facing-dog, bowing towards Liana.

“I see that he is an adept yoga devotee.” She laughed as she reached out to pat the dog’s head, which resulted in an enthusiastically animated whip-lashing of his tail.

“Quit it Doug,” Hamish was laughing at the dog’s antics as well, “if you rotate that tail any faster, you’ll take off like a helicopter.”

He turned back to Liana, “C’mon, I think we should go up to the house before we upset Attila’s sensibilities any more than we have already. But first, I have something I want to show you.” He tugged at her hand, gently leading her to a gap in hip-height yew hedges that had been recently planted off to one side of the summerhouse, the dog shadowing close behind.

As he was speaking he led her along a pathway through concentric hedging, meandering this way and that to reach a central stone feature.

“Oh how wonderful!” Liana exclaimed, “A hedge maze.” As she walked,

she absentmindedly ran her hand along the crests of the hedges.

“Hmmm, eventually, you won’t be able to see the stones until you walk through the final gate. The trees around the outside will take a few years before they are mature enough to flower, but they’ll look good when they do.”

Liana looked beyond the hedging, “Dove trees. A circle of them ...they’ll be beautiful.”

“It seemed right to plant them.”

As they approached the centre feature, Liana understood his words. To one side of the large central feature, tucked up snugly against the hedge was a stone seat with bronze figures seated. “Your wife and daughter,” her fingers holding his hand tightened a little in understanding.

Mother and child sat comfortably in the morning sun, Lucy’s short stubby legs dangling over the edge of the seat as she leaned up against her mother. Maud was holding a swaddled baby in the crook of one arm, the other wrapped around her daughter. The bronzed folds of a summer dress cascaded around her calves and her feet were bare, as if the trio had just sat down after an impromptu tour of the garden. The little girl was dressed in shorts and tee, sandals lying discarded on the bench beside her. The two looked at one another as if they were sharing some special secret. “I sculpted them as I imagined they would be after the baby was born. I felt he needed to be included and I wanted a more lasting memorial,” he explained. The Christmas sculptures had stayed fresh for months but had eventually faded and the clay had returned to earth.

Liana reached out a hand to stroke the bronze cheek of the child. “They were beautiful.”

“They were,” agreed Hamish, “and I never want to forget them, but they’re gone, and I’m here, and I need to remember that as well.”

Liana turned her attention to the central feature of the space –four massively large blocks of solid stone fashioned into the interlocking trefoil knots long-associated with Celtic symbolism. Again, Liana reached a hand to touch the roughly hewn stone.

“I used red Scottish sandstone. Useful thing, having contacts up north of the border,” Hamish explained.

Liana read the inscription carved into the stonework of the red stone as she walked around the outside of the four trefoils, “Don’t come here to sleep or slumber ...” she recited, she turned to Hamish with wryly raised eyebrows,

“That’s a quote from a garden I visited while you were gone ...it was left by gardeners in a garden in Cornwall that was a little like White Briars, in as much as it was lost for a long time, but has since been restored. They wrote that way back in August of 1914 and they all signed it ...seemed appropriate here,” he said, hoping she wouldn’t take offence. “I added the last bit

myself.

“...but instead, to remember,” she continued.

She smiled gently, “I do like it, and you’re right, it is very ...appropriate.” She had reached the heart of the four blocks; inset into the sculpture’s core, were relief carvings of the generations of men she had loved and lost, each one bearing a bronze casting of a tool they had used in their lifetime. This one a chisel, that one a brush, another a quill pen, a mallet ...and so on. And arching over the centre, twining them all together was a metalwork vine, modelled off the one Hamish had first seen on the gate that day he had found the house. Liana gazed wordlessly at the gift that had been bestowed upon her, without knowing if she might return to see it.

She was stunned. “Their faces look so life-like; it’s as if they could speak to me from the stone. But you never knew them or saw them. How did you accomplish this?”

“That’s artists’ magic ...and not mine,” he admitted with humility. “I commissioned an excellent sculptor who worked from material that I provided. There were some old photos and drawings in the library, but mostly, it was from research done elsewhere. Rosetta was very helpful and I even went up to London and sifted through material there in the museums, galleries and private collections,” he explained.

“It’s absolutely wonderful. Thank you.” she said simply, leaning forward and intending to kiss his cheek. But he turned his head, so that the kiss ended on his lips instead. He closed his eyes to better savour the sensation and it was minutes before they surfaced once more. When he opened his eyes, it was to a different scene than before; the circle of immature dove trees were now glowing white with wavering bracts like the wings of giant white butterflies, fluttering on the edges of the glade.

Before Hamish could speak Liana exclaimed, “It wasn’t me! Honestly ...I would have felt it happen, at least, I think I would have. It must have been the Garden,” she smiled tremulously, “Giving you its seal of approval.”

“Perhaps, giving ‘us’ its seal of approval?” he suggested.

“Yes, us,” she agreed.

“I like that. Hey, let’s go and have breakfast.” Hamish tugged off his wet socks, laughing, “This makes a change, usually it’s you in bare feet.”

“Oh yes, lets! I’m starving,” she bent and undid her shoes, toed them off. She picked them up. “There, now we’re even. Bacon and eggs, please.”

With Doug dancing delighted circles around the pair, they exited the maze and walked back towards the cottage.

HAMISH AND LIANA

*For winter's rains and ruins are over,
And all the season of snows and sins;
The days dividing lover and lover,
The light that loses, the night that wins;
And time remembered is grief forgotten,
And frosts are slain and flowers begotten,
And in green underwood and cover
Blossom by blossom the spring begins.
Algernon Charles Swinburne*

Spring, and the day had dawned bright and sunny, leaves unfurled, flowers opened, bees buzzed and birds sang; all of which should have been auspicious for the day.

Somehow, all this auspiciousness was completely lost on Hamish; unusually anxious, he fidgeted with his tie then his cufflinks, then straightened his already straight sporran before surreptitiously checking his watch for what seemed like the hundredth time.

“What on earth could be keeping her this long?” he hissed quietly out of the side of his mouth to Steve, who was lounging to his right, one arm stretched at full length along the back of the pew and looking irritatingly relaxed.

“Oh I wouldn’t worry, mate. She’ll get here -unless she’s done a runner, that is. She probably heard you’re wearing a skirt and thought twice about getting hitched,” he joked, in what Hamish thought was ill-timed bad taste. Seeing Hamish’s sick look, Steve quickly added, “Come on mate, I was only

giving you a bit of stick. Shoot, twenty minutes is nothing; Linda kept me waiting an hour and a quarter. They had a ruddy flat tire and by the time she arrived they just about needed to give me tranquilisers. It might be the best day of their lives, but I reckon it takes ten years off ours.”

Steve looked more intently at his best friend’s face, frowning worriedly, “in fact, isn’t that a new wrinkle, right there,” he flicked his index finger at a point midway between Hamish’s eyebrows.

Hamish, batting the hand away, relaxed enough to smile at his friend’s antics, thankful for Steve’ clowning and relieved that someone else appreciated what he was going through. Still, he wouldn’t feel completely happy, until he saw Liana walking towards him down that aisle. He pulled his dark green waistcoat back into place and was about to take another nervous look over his shoulder when the music suddenly changed from muted background chords to a louder rendition of the music which he and Liana had chosen for her to enter the church,...the not entirely traditional but jaunty Irish tune, ‘*All for Mairi’s Wedding.*’ He felt his heart leap in joy and no small amount of relief at the opening bars.

As one, the guests arose to greet the bride-to-be...



...Alighting from the bridal car -a 1948 green and black Bentley- just outside the church lych-gate, Sara was trailing behind Liana and David, who, at his own request had opted to break from tradition and accompany the bride into the church.

Acting as Liana’s solo bridal attendant Sara had her head down, checking that Liana’s gown wasn’t catching on anything along the path. Speaking of things on the path; Sara’s eyes opened wide in shocked amazement as tiny clumps of snowdrops, violets and white primulas burst forth from the cracks between the paving slabs as Liana passed by, spreading quickly to fill all of the nooks and crannies between the flagstones from the lych-gate all the way to the church door. After her initial surprise, Sara simply lifted the hem of her gown sufficiently to clear the floral carpet and stepped carefully in a pair of heels that would have set Rosetta’s heart pumping.

As they arrived at the porch door she did wonder if she shouldn’t mention what was happening in the wake of the bride, but decided not to bother. The church, after all, had a solidly thick stone floor that she fervently hoped would be enough to discourage flowers from suddenly popping out of the stonework as they progressed indoors. Well, she thought mischievously, if it didn’t, it would certainly give some of the guests something to talk about!

She gazed about; the flower display sure beat randomly-flung rose petals

and anyway, the guests' eyes were supposed to be on the bride, not the floor behind her. At least she hoped.

And they were.

Entering the church, Liana looked as ethereal as any modern-day flower-fairy should, albeit sans wings but with more than a touch of her own brand of feminine lustre and an alluring style that was uniquely her own.

All eyes, particularly those of her husband-to-be were drawn to her. She wore a full-skirted, sleeveless gown of deep lavender silk with an overskirt of fine white tulle, prettily scalloped along the bottom edge and hand-embroidered with silken sprigs of lavender, tiny lemon-and-white stars of Bethlehem and violets. The close-fitting boned bodice was sewn with a design of vines running from her slim waist to a square neckline that was décolleté enough to be interesting whilst sufficiently demure -satisfying her own somewhat old-world sensibilities. Satin shoes, peeping from below the hem of the dress had the same point de chainette embroidery as the dress and her hair was bound down her back with fine satin ribbons and seed pearls; a delicate coronet of amethyst-coloured glass and copper perched around her brow.

The flowers in her hand were simple; a posy of lavender and champagne-coloured roses, bound with a satin ribbon that complemented rather than competed with her gown.

Behind her, Sara, as maid-of-honour looked unaccustomly elegant in a form-fitting gown that matched the bride's roses in colour, her short spring-green dyed hair slicked back over her ears and holding a posy of mauve and white freesias, rosebuds, white hyacinths and lavender.

Noticing Hamish's eyes flick upwards momentarily, Sara followed his line of sight. It appeared that a tiny robin had followed the bridal party into the church to land high up in the ceiling rafters. It hopped from foot to foot before fluffing its feathers and settling, appearing to be prepared to stay for the service.

Sara frowned -she hoped the small bird wouldn't take flight or poop on the wedding guests below. Unsure what to do, she glanced at Hamish, -she was rewarded with a bright cheery smile of unconcern and a slight shoulder shrug. She returned her attention to the bride.

Once Liana reached the front of the church the little bird's antics were soon forgotten. David handed the bride's hand to Hamish and wedding service got under way.



As they walked silently together, holding Liana's hand in his, Hamish fidgeted nervously with the band on his left ring finger with his thumb, turning the metal to feel the deep inscription that he knew read '*is ann le mo*

ghraidh mise agus is leamsa mo ghraidh’. Gaelic, translated it read ‘I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine’. He hadn’t expected to feel wedding-night jitters but he didn’t think that the slightly sick feeling in the pit of his stomach had anything to do with the excellent wedding feast he’d eaten or the sparing amount of alcohol he’d consumed so had to conclude that it was a case of nerves.

The cottage was full of guests for the night; Hamish and Liana had elected to stay in the summerhouse for their first night as man and wife.

Walking in the still of the moonlit night, Hamish couldn’t help but remember the night he’d found Liana lying unconscious on his lawn and of all that had changed for them since that time. It had taken time for them both to overcome their grief and to accept that they could have a future together that was more than their separate lonely existences.

He was searching for something to say when the path ended and they entered the summerhouse glade just as the moon peeped from behind a bank of clouds, reminding Hamish, too of the evening he had first seen the statue that would later come to life in the form of Liana. In the soft moonlight he noticed the swans at the pool edge, nesting close to one another, their necks entwined as they slept.

Liana set the lantern down at the flagstone outside the doorway, intending to open the doors. “Uh, uh,” Hamish chided gently, stopping her before she could lay a finger on the door handle. “I believe that’s my job”. Laying his hand over hers he could feel her pulse racing and realized that she was feeling as nervous as he. It helped.

He took her hand more firmly and placed it on his shoulder, intending to lift and carry her over the threshold. She turned her head and lightly touched her lips to his ...the kiss deepened.

And in that moment as they kissed, all thoughts of past and future, his or hers, went right out of his mind ...there was only now, this present, this precious gift of shared love given back to them.

He gathered her into his arms and crossed the threshold into their new existence.

EPILOGUE - TWELVE MONTHS LATER

BETONY ROSE

*The sweetest flowers in all the world-
A baby's hands.*

Algernon Charles Swinburne

Betony Rose McAllister arrived boldly and bravely into the world complements of one last almighty push from her mother, to be cradled safely in the capable hands of Doctor McLean.

Having argued his case valiantly against the local midwife for the privilege of delivering this baby, the good doctor took the utmost care not to drop his precious bundle. He held her for a moment, satisfying himself that all was well before placing the babe gently on her mother's stomach.

"Here Hamish," he said, offering surgical scissors to Hamish, "You'll be wanting to cut the cord I presume?" He noted too that Hamish had recovered a healthier skin tone than the pale green he'd sported during the worst of his wife's labour.

Satisfied all was well with mother and baby, he suggested to the midwife that they might adjourn for a well-deserved cup of tea; leaving the new family a few minutes to begin getting to know one another. Taking the hint, the midwife followed him to the stairs.

Hamish, to whom the birth had seemed to take days rather than a trouble-free sixteen hours, sat gingerly on the edge of the tester bed, watching his wife and daughter, relief and wonder written in his gaze.

He reached out a finger to his new daughter's tiny hand, marvelling at her perfection. She grasped his in that automatic response that was automatic to new-borns but wondrous to new-parents, all the while

nuzzling around her mother's breast, searching for milk that wasn't quite there yet. As Hamish watched, she opened her eyelids briefly; her piercing blue gaze directed towards her mother's loving face. Though the room was adequately warmed by the recently-installed heating system, Hamish dropped a soft pale primrose-yellow cot blanket over their small oh-so-precious bundle, concerned that she might start to chill.

"Are you going to one of those helicopter daddies that hover over their children, checking up on them and worrying about them all the time?" questioned Liana, who achieved the near-impossible by looking dog-tired and radiantly beautiful at the same time.

"I should think so, quite possibly, in fact, absolutely," he replied. "But only until she's twenty-five or so," he replied; now softly stroking his daughter's downy head. Then he rethought, adding, "Or maybe, thirty-five. You don't think she'll mind me tagging along on dates, do you?"

"Oh dear," Liana chortled, "You've got it bad, haven't you? Seriously though ...Are you anxious that she might be taken from you?" She searched his face, become so familiar and so dear to her in this past year of marriage.

"No," he replied, "At least, no more than any other father would be. I want nothing more than to see her grow up, but, if all this has taught me anything, it's to take happiness where I find it, and not to presume anything of the future ...and right now, I couldn't be happier." He leaned over to give Liana a lingering kiss then sat back, admiring the view of mother and daughter. "You did wonderfully ...though I'm not sure if my hand will ever be the same again." Ruefully, he turned his right hand over to survey the damage; red tooth-marks in one finger where she had forgotten herself in her pain at one stage during the labour and had bitten down on the thing nearest her mouth.

"Oops, sorry," she laughed unrepentantly, "And just so that you know; I shouldn't think it will be safe to even mention the likelihood of having another baby, for, oh ...at least another ten years or so."

It was his turn to laugh; "I'll try to remember that, Mrs McAllister, when you are insisting, in a year or two, that Betony needs a little brother or sister."

He looked at their beautiful daughter, drifting off to sleep at her mother's breast. "You know something Liana this is as close as we mortals get to experience immortality, in this existence, anyway ...seeing ourselves in our children. I hope you never feel disappointed ...I mean, that you never wish you could go back to..." his words were stopped by Liana's hand across his mouth.

"Shhh," she whispered, "You'll wake our beautiful baby."

They both looked down at their daughter, her face dissolving into a picture of peace and contentment as she relaxed into repose. Enfolded in her mother's protective arms, as deep sleep took hold of her completely

with the speed that only babies seem able to achieve, her other fist, which had so far remained tightly closed, unfurled ... revealing something that had so far remained hidden from her parent's sight.

A tiny pink rosebud, exquisitely perfect, nestled in her open palm.



GREEN JACK

Green with envy.

Well, Jack thought, from his vantage point up on the roof ...green is such a good colour on me. She had everything her heart desired while he had nothing. He had thought that while Liana remained in the garden and held sway over the powers he so desired that his hands were tied, and that when she was gone he would gain power, but that had proven false ...for even without her he hadn't been able to make much progress on the domination he sought.

Still, he was a determined sort of fellow and time meant little to him. He was more than able to hunker down for the long haul ...and what he wanted he would eventually find a way to obtain.

THE END

Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be, the last of life, for which the first was made. Our times are in his hand who saith, 'A whole I planned, youth shows but half; Trust God: See all, nor be afraid!

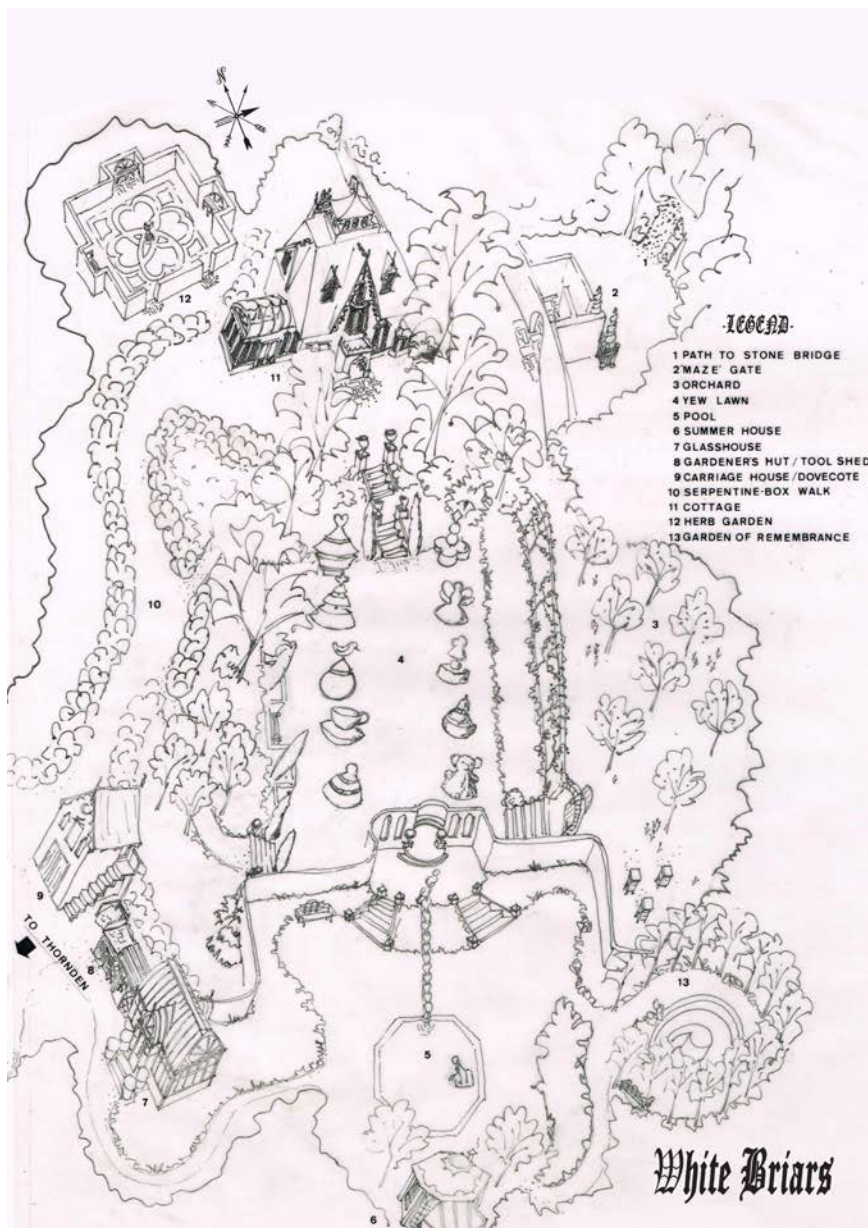
Robert Browning

This series continues with Sara's story, *Leaf on a Breeze*, available from Smashwords and other ebook retailers.



ACEB:

- 1. White Priars
- 2. Thornden Village
- 3. Gypsy Camp
- 4. Escarpment Path
- 5. Cave
- 6. Blaine's Farmery
- 7. White Priars wood's boundary



A sample from Leaf on a Breeze, Book 2 of the White Briars series

PROLOGUE

JACK-IN-THE-GREEN

*Leaflets five,
Let them thrive!
Leaflets three,
Turn and flee!*

Children's rhyme, various

In the wee small hours of the morning, Jack was busy in the garden. Sleep was for pansies and weaklings and he was neither.

He stopped at the entrance to the orchard and took a moment to glance down at his hands, marvelling at his rejuvenated appearance. Having grown accustomed to his changed state these past years, he found this new self so much better than his previous form. It was a convenient bonus that his body required little rest as he felt that some of his best work was done under cover of darkness and while others were abed.

Where once he had been flesh and blood, in outward looks if not innermost attitude much like all the other folk in the woods, since his reincarnation, he was more plant than man. Should he cut himself now, green sap would run from his veins and instead of skin, he was covered with a tightly woven thatch of vines and leaves.

He did not mind the constant wakefulness, believing that it set him apart as someone special, someone different from the others -particularly that useless sleeping sylph, Liana. She who had frittered away lifetime after lifetime, dozing when she should have been establishing her kingdom. Well, he was better than she was. Much better. More exalted and of greater

importance than any of the beings that dwelt either in the woods or beyond its fringes. As an added advantage, while Liana and the woodland folk dreamed, he could get up to all sorts of mischief unnoticed.

This was precisely what he was doing.

He had been looking forward to an opportunity to show off his skills - and tonight was his night to perform a little trick that he had been practicing and perfecting for weeks.

Laying a hand on a branch of one of the most venerable of the orchard's roses, he concentrated all his energy on encouraging the growth of the vine, willing the poison ivy that made up much of his torso and limbs to creep along and around the barbed stalk of the old rose. The thorns did not bother him at all and as the tendrils twined round each successive twiglet, he could feel his grip on the rambler growing, slowly choking life out of the stem. He applied greater pressure, squeezing incrementally until the one shoot was all but severed from the rest of the bush.

He took a deep breath, enjoying the moment. It was an undeniably heady feeling, extinguishing life, even at this level. Not that this was the first time he had taken a life, but that had been many, many years ago when he'd had an altogether different form. Watching the healthy green leaves of the rosebush turn to sickly yellow he felt a spasm akin to something exquisitely orgasmic, the waves of unadulterated pleasure increasing in amplitude as the silky petals from the flowering blooms dropped lifelessly to the ground.

Jack was well pleased ...he reluctantly acknowledged that he could not yet kill the entire plant but his abilities were growing. Slower than he'd like but nevertheless improving with each passing day. The time was growing nearer, he was sure, when he could usurp control from Liana and take up the mantle as Master over the Garden.

Much like a certain serpent in Eden, he was intent on spreading his particular brand of evil and malice with whatever authority he could obtain, sure that once he held sway in the stead of Liana and her cohorts that he would be able to move beyond the garden's boundaries to bloom to his full deadly potential.

His thirst to hurt and harm quenched, Green Jack unconcernedly strode away from the sickly plant. He allowed himself the remainder of the night to indulge in his favourite activity of sneaking around and spying on others as they dozed. Then spent the day happily hidden in his lair -a huge old behemoth of an oak that grew on the western periphery of the garden's borders, close by a field that had once been set aside for travelling folk. These days it was a spot seldom visited by humans or the woodland fey and since his reawakening, he had made it his own. That the once-healthy tree was dying by degrees from his constant ministrations was of little consequence to Jack. To him it was nothing more than a convenient place to perch and practice his sinister skills.



Venturing out the next evening, he was distraught when he returned to the moonlit orchard - intent on gloating over his small victory- to find to his extreme displeasure that Liana must have passed by during the daylight hours. It had to be her ...she was the only being in the garden with the power to undo his work. It appeared that the interfering sylph had healed the ancient bush, putting to rights his hard-won display of prowess and the old rose now stood whole and healthy once more.

Aggravated, Jack kicked the thorny bush with his ivy-bound foot, doing little damage to either, before he turned and stalked off into the shadows of the trees that edged the orchard. Knowing that he had greater power towards the margins of the garden's domain than here in the centre he thought that perhaps he would head to the nursery on the far fringes of the woods where he could do harm that might stand a chance of remaining beyond the morrow. The nursery was a later addition that had been cultivated within the confines of the garden's old walls during the years he had been ...indisposed. It was the one place, besides the church and White Briars cottage that he could venture, as he was still unable to cross beyond the walls. His last attempt to scale the stone barrier that marked the garden's boundary had ended with the usual embarrassing failure of him catapulting back into the garden.

He refused to think about that. He shrugged, causing the leaves across his shoulders to rustle. He liked the sound so much that he shook his head a few times, creating a rippling effect in the green mantle that made up his head and torso.

Instead, he decided, he would have some fun and continue practising out of Liana's sight. No point wasting his precious efforts working here in the heart of the garden if there was the likelihood that she would stumble upon his little displays. He had thought her too busy with that little brat she had borne to the human to notice his handiwork but it appeared she was still maintaining a level of vigilance in the garden spaces closest to the cottage.

Smiling meanly, he decided that this small reversal was of little import, he had plenty with which to keep himself occupied.

Whistling impatiently for his lieutenants to follow, he disappeared into the shadows of the woods.

The pair of foxes that were his most constant companions slunk along, obediently if not happily, in his wake.

SARA

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

As she panted her way along the quiet lane, Sara was pleased to see the hawthorn was in full-flower and hear the rhythmic song of a yellowhammer trilling its familiar '*a little bit of bread with no cheeeese*' call. The warm spring morning had brought out all manner of birds, butterflies and flying insects to flit among the hedgerow blooms. Turning her head in the direction of the bursts of sound, she spotted the bright feathers of the songster perched in the top branches of the bushes as she ambled by.

Although the lane was edged with trees in full leaf, they were doing little to alleviate the heat reflecting off the black asphalt surface of the roadway. Feeling both the warmth and the effects of every single day that she had put off jogging for the past three weeks, Sara unzipped her long-sleeved top, pulled it off and tied it around her waist. Barely breaking stride, she puffed her way up the bends of the quiet lane that twisted its way out of the village up towards White Briars' main entranceway. Having run this way countless times over the years the route was as familiar to her as her own back yard, but familiarity, she thought wryly, did nothing to alleviate the symptoms of weeks without regular exercise. She felt sure that some malign deity had visited the hill in her absence and made the gradient steeper. It certainly felt that way.

As she approached the final and steepest bend of the incline, she could feel her lungs burning and her energy levels sapping. Only fierce determination and iron willpower were keeping her from slowing to a walk.

Following her usual self-motivational routine she had started at the base of hill with “I know I can, I know I can.” This chant normally got her all the way up to the final bend but today, at no more than a third of the way, the words had changed into “...I think I can, I think I can,” altering around half-way to a breathless “...I hope I can, I hope I can,” which had taken her to the final third. Now the hopeful words of *The Little Engine That Could* became slower and more laboured with each passing footfall. She could barely get the short syllables out at all now, “I’m gonna die, I’m Gonna. Die,” each sound was uttered in rasping gasps as her breathing became increasingly ragged.

Head drooping tiredly, she spied the recognisable slight hump in the cracked asphalt that signified her torture was nearing an end. Heartened by the sight, she put on a last brave spurt to arrive triumphantly at the grassy knoll of the top of the rise, like a long-distance runner crossing the final tape ...before collapsing in an untidy heap upon the fragrant primrose-strewn grass growing outside the gateway to what Thornden villagers had always referred to as the gypsy encampment. Growing up and living nearby most of her life, Sara had yet to see any gypsies ‘encamped’ in the space, but the field still retained the title as a remnant from some bygone era when she supposed people were less attached to their homes and mortgages, roaming the countryside more freely. A nice romantic notion, she’d thought, but not for real people like her.

The light changed abruptly. The sun must have gone behind a cloud – without its heat, she felt instantly cooler. Breathing hard and semi-alert, Sara opened her eyes to narrow slits, wiping sweat away from her brow using the hem of her sports top before shielding her eyes with the back of one hand. It was not a cloud that had blocked the sun; instead, long faded blue jeans-clad legs and sturdy boots that obviously belonged to the male of the species now obstructed her view.

Oh yay, she thought sourly, always good to have an audience at moments like this. Adding to her mortification, especially when she had just bared her stomach and her brightly coloured sports bra to whoever was standing over her. “Oh please let that be Hamish or someone I know and not some total stranger,” she moaned quietly between gasps, her chest heaving in efforts to regain a tolerable level of oxygen.

“Sorry to disappoint,” the low, amused tones of the male voice that responded did not sound at all like that of her next-door-neighbour. “I heard you coming up the lane. Couldn’t help but, with the almighty din you were making.” The voice stopped -Sara wished he would have the decency to leave but moments later he continued, “So, what are you then? The little engine that ran out of steam?”

“Oh, *verry* funny,” she said between gasps, thinking, trust me to find the joker in the pack in my wakened state. “No, I’m the infrequent jogger that’s

dying here,” she wheezed. “So. Kindly. Go. Away. ...and let me croak in peace.” She managed the last on one breath, before another deeply indrawn gulp of air. Her lungs still not filling with sufficient oxygen to make any headway.

“That bad, aye? Well, it’s like this ...sorry for the inconvenience but I was here first so if anyone’s leaving, it should be you.” He looked her over, liking what he saw. Her petite body was clad in little more than brief form-fitting shorts and a tiny tank. A light-weight, long-sleeved top she’d obviously jettisoned that was now tied low on her hips and a neon green sports bra -which she’d given him a good eyeful of when she had pulled up the thin-strapped cotton tank to mop her brow. The entire outfit, obviously intended for exercise, had the additional benefit, in his humble opinion, of leaving exposed lithe limbs lightly tanned from the unseasonal sun.

He completed his perusal as she opened her eyes. “You don’t look in *that* bad a shape to me but if you’re really dying, as you say you are, perhaps I should offer you your final rites before you go.” From the rattling sounds he’d heard coming up the rise, he’d been a smidgeon concerned that she might have suffered from asthma but it seemed his concern wasn’t warranted. She was merely, although quite badly, out of breath. He was considerably relieved.

“Gee thanks,” she responded dryly. Recovering a little, chest still heaving (he noted appreciatively) she sat up and leaned back on her outstretched arms. Even through half-closed lashes she’d seen him brazenly checking her out and now openly returned the gesture.

Not too shabby, she thought. Bit over average height. Late twenties, early thirties tops. Built. Buff. That much was abundantly obvious even at first glance. He must have removed his shirt in the heat, as he was bare from the waist up. Now, faded jeans rode low on narrow hips exposing very respectable abs. He was holding what looked a lot like a horse brush in one hand. She briefly wondered why until, belatedly, she noticed a sturdy piebald-coloured horse tethered and cropping on the roadside grass behind him.

Her eyes travelled upwards, continuing her inspection. Untidy ash-blond hair that could stand trim, sunglasses pushed up over his brow, perched among his tousled locks. Despite the bright light haloing his head he didn’t look particularly ecclesiastical to her and she couldn’t make out his eyes or any other facial details that might have given her a feel for whether he might be a danger to her or not. Still, other than using the horse-brush as a potential weapon, he appeared harmless enough so she made an uncharacteristically spontaneous decision to play along with his offer. It certainly made for an interesting change in pick-up lines, assuming that’s what he’d intended.

“Might not be such a bad idea, the way I feel right now,” she replied,

matching his lightly flippant tone and adopting a cringingly bad Irish accent. “Okay, here goes nuttin’ ...Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It’s been way too many weeks since me last run and I’m terribly worried I’m about to expire right here, unpardoned for not exercising regularly.”

He couldn’t help but laugh, as he made the sign of the cross with his right hand. “I’m sure your sins are forgiven, my child. Go ...and jog in peace.” Absolution complete, he stood there, contemplating her still-prone form, “There, that wasn’t so bad, was it? Now, are you heading towards the light?” he questioned drolly.

“No, but if you’d move out of my sunlight, I might improve my tan,” her tart reply was accompanied by a wave of her hand as she signalled for him to step aside. “And I’m fairly sure that the sign of the cross is not given with two fingers making the peace sign,” she added drolly.

He shrugged. “That’s what you get worshipping at the Church of the Winded Hippy.”

She groaned and fell back.

He laughed again.

It was a nice sound, she thought. Not that she was planning to tell him that anytime soon.

“How about I give you a hand up instead,” he held out the hand holding the brush, “oops, forgot I was grooming Cara when you came along doing your Puffing Billy impression,” he dropped the hand and proffered his other.

Taking affront, Sara ignored his offer and heaved herself to her feet. “I did *not* sound like Puffing Billy. ...whoever he is,” she declared hotly.

“Alright then ...perhaps it’s Panting Patty? Gasping Gertie? Winded Wilma?” he retorted, abruptly turning his back on her, as he picked up where he’d left off when she came huffing and puffing into view. “Take your pick. I don’t mind whichever you choose.” He unconcernedly continued brushing the horse’s back in long strokes from withers to tail. “When we heard you coming up the hill, Cara and me were thinking we’d have to throw you over her back and get you to the closest emergency room and an oxygen mask.” From his comment, Sara assumed Cara must have been the mare’s name. She could see Cara’s soft black ears twitching back and forth, seemingly listening in on the conversation as she grazed contentedly.

Sara was in two minds whether to walk away, –she’d have run, but her legs didn’t feel quite up to it yet and she didn’t need the added embarrassment of an incipient case of rubber-legs-, or accept the down-thrown gauntlet of this stranger’s insults. So much for thinking he might be a danger to her and she’d have to fight him off, she thought sourly, though somewhere among those self-same thoughts was the acknowledgement that he had a very nicely toned back to go with those ripped abs. Not that she

was looking, much.

She strolled over and laid a hand on the horse's neck, patting her smooth, warm coat before finger combing the long strands of mane. "It's none of those. I'm short-of-breath Sara, if you must know. And you?" she tilted her head to one side, as if considering, "Belligerent Bertie? Grumpy Greg? Insulting Ivan?"

"Ha, ha. Good return. You should be on centre court at Wimbledon." He stopped brushing and looked over the mare's wide back at her, "You're surprisingly close. Though I'd watch the adjectives if I were you. I'd much prefer *Gypsy* Greg to grumpy, if you don't mind." His tone altered to one of gentle remonstrance, "And, for your information, if you must know, I wasn't so much 'grumpy' as I was a tad worried you might have been having an asthma attack or something similar. I have a sister who almost died once when she left her inhaler at home and we were out in the middle of nowhere, trekking in the Kimberleys a few years ago. So the grumpy was more relief that you were merely out of breath and nothing worse."

"Okay," she nodded in understanding. If she was feeling a mite sorry she'd taken umbrage she wasn't letting on. Instead, she picked up on his earlier statement. "Gypsy Greg?"

"Horse," he spoke succinctly, indicating the solid mare he'd been brushing. "Caravan," he twisted slightly and pointed across to far side of the field where a brightly painted barrel-topped wagon was nestled in the shade under a huge old oak abutting the woodland margin, "Me," he tapped his chest, "equals gypsy. Well, for this summer at least. I'm sort of trying the lifestyle on for size to see how well it fits."

Sara had turned in the direction of his outstretched hand, taking in the sight of the wagon. At long last there was a bona vide gypsy wagon in the gypsy camp.

"Wow," she muttered. She wasn't too sure whether she was impressed or not and could think of nothing better to say.

So he was 'trying on' the gypsy lifestyle. Nice work if you could get it, she supposed.

There had been a time in her life, years ago, when she would have liked nothing more than taking off from what she had thought of as her humdrum existence and living free, travelling the road and flitting wherever whimsy might take her. But that time was long gone and nothing more than a dim distant memory. These days, she was a responsible mother and a successful businesswoman, with multiple demands on her time and a gypsy life was the stuff of daydreams. Still not entirely sure how to respond, she decided to steer the conversation into smoother waters, "You said something about the Kimberleys. That's in Australia isn't it? Way out west, so to speak? So are you from there? Australia? You don't sound particularly Australian, if you don't mind me saying so."

“Don’t mind at all. I’ve spent a number of years in Asia and Europe so the accent has worn off some around the edges. But I can do ‘*strine*’ when I want to, mate.” He added a strongly nasal twang and a high rising terminal to the last words as if to prove his point.

She flinched, rubbing one ear. “Ouch. That’s okay. I believe you. You’re Australian.”

“Yep, Aussie through and through, mate, but thrilled to bits that a bonzer sheila like you believes me,” he laid it on thick, but his wide grin took the sting off the words.

“So what made you leave home and come half way round the world to ye olde southern England?” She was curious. It seemed these days that a substantial portion of the population of the British Isles was keen to fly in the opposite direction, drawn by the promise of long hot summers and intent on re-creating their version of Summer Bay or Ramsay Street.

His reply showed her that he was aware of the British penchant for Aussie soaps. “Well, it’s like this. I got turned down for lead roles in *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* and I was a mite tired of checking for Redbacks on the toilet seat.” At her taken-aback expression, he snorted with laughter, causing Cara to raise her head and flick her ears in response. He laid a hand on the mare’s neck to calm her and she went back to grazing. “Nah, not really. Can’t stand soapy dramas and I was brought up in suburban Perth where you’re more likely to be in danger from someone driving their big-ass SUV through your front garden than you are from the local wildlife.” He shrugged nonchalantly, “I guess I left home and ventured over here to earn my fame and fortune as a musician. Haven’t quite managed either yet, but I’m enjoying the journey and the scenery on my way.”

He did not add just how much he had enjoyed the scenery of her lounging on the grass at his front gate. Instead, he quit brushing to inspect a hoof, running his hand down the mare’s feathered leg and clicking his tongue to signal that he wanted Cara to pick up her foot. He tugged a hoof pick out of his back pocket and cleaned the underside with practised skill. Once done, he replaced the hoof on the ground to pick up and clean the next.

Sara admired the speed and ease with which he accomplished this. As someone with considerably more affinity with plants than animals, she had always admired those who had expertise with the animal kingdom. Generally, she drew the line at the pigeons she bred for sale at the nursery but having acquainted herself with Liana and Hamish’s greyhound, Doug these past two years, she and her son, Matthew had been discussing choosing a dog for themselves. So far, they’d not progressed beyond debating breed and gender. They were still undecided but had plans to visit the local rescue kennels in the coming fortnight to check out likely

candidates.

Greg patted the horse's wide rump. He pulled a metal tether peg from the ground and started making for the open field gate. "Don't suppose you want to come over and see the place for yourself?" he asked, nodding in the direction of the wagon.



"Ahh," Sara prevaricated, "rain check ...perhaps another time," she glanced at her watch, "I have to be back at work in half an hour and I'm barely going to make it as it is." She knew she would have to forego a post-run shower until later in the evening and make do with a hurried wash if she wanted to be back behind the counter in time to let her newest staff member take a lunch break.

"Working for the man," Greg commiserated.

Sara didn't bother to enlighten him that being self-employed; the only 'man' she worked for was herself. However, in the words of the song, and leaning more towards Tina Turner than Roy Orbison, she acknowledged that she laboured every daylight hour that was available to her and often long into the night. This was the reason that she'd gone so many weeks without running. There just weren't enough hours in a day for exercise when an infinite number of things were constantly vying for her finite time and attention.

She sighed, "Yeah, something like that." Reluctantly, she turned back to the road.

"Perhaps I'll see you around," Greg said by way of farewell, his tone hopeful.

"Guess it depends how long you stay." Gypsies, by nature, she thought did not remain in any one place for long. She was prepared to be unsurprised should the field be empty the next time she ran past its gate, whenever that might be.

"I'm not going anywhere. Not just yet, anyway." He smiled, showing a nice set of deep dimples either side of his lips, as he slipped the sunglasses down over eyes, which she had noticed on closer inspection were a shade of what she had instantly christened 'wolf grey'. The effect was emphasised even more by tiny flecks of gold glinting around the irises. His nose, she'd also noted looked as if it had been broken at some earlier time and set rather badly; it had a slight kink along the bridge that gave him a devil-may-care appearance. Not a bad thing on that face, she had decided. Excessive perfection got a bit stale after a while and he might have been too pretty without the added fault.

"I have some gigs nearby so might be around a week or two, or more. Depends how things work out."

He seemed unconcerned that his life was not planned any more than

two weeks in advance. Sara couldn't imagine how that might feel. Her planning calendar was packed full to the brim from now until mid-autumn, when things might, or might not quieten down a little before the Christmas rush.

"Oh well, it was nice to meet you, gypsy Greg. But I've really gotta go," there seemed little point in continuing the conversation. It was unlikely their world's would collide again unless she ran this way in the coming fortnight and the way things were at the nursery she doubted there would another hour free in that time to allow her to get away for exercise. She was also so late now that she would have to clamber over the wall at White Briars main gate and take the shorter woodland route back to work instead of the longer way around the lanes. She turned back to the road.

He watched as she trotted off down the gently sloping asphalt, set between high hedgerows, half wishing he'd asked for her phone number. She had a smooth running style, he noted, with long strides for such a petite woman ...and a very watchable backside in those tiny shorts, he thought appreciatively.

Well, Cara mia, what do you think? She wasn't too ugly, girl, aye what? But no worries babe, you're still my first love," he chatted amiably to the horse, his arm looped comfortably over her neck as they ambled back in the direction of the van.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Irene Davidson is the writing pseudonym of Adrienne Oaks.

Born and bred in the far south of New Zealand, Irene rapidly came to the conclusion that her native home was a long way from anywhere and unless she wanted to spend all her holidays on Stewart Island she'd need to fly away from home.

With this in mind, she jetted off to school in Tennessee, university in Palmerston North (that's in the North Island), living in London, France and Australia, and now the USA, gathering material for writing along the way.

Following a degree in biology, she studied post-grad in Landscape Architecture before producing two beautiful babies; both of whom are now well on their way to being grown-ups.

She currently lives in Washington State, with her husband Tim and an adopted greyhound called Smudge -who sleeps in Seattle while she writes.

OTHER TITLES BY IRENE DAVIDSON

Flowers in the Morning, (Book 1 in the White Briars series)

Leaf on a Breeze, (Book 2 in the White Briars series)

A Good Read (Book 1 in the Athenaeum Library series)

CONNECT WITH IRENE DAVIDSON

Friend me on Facebook

Website: <http://irene-davidson.com>

Smashwords Interview: <https://www.smashwords.com/interview/AOaks>

Smashwords profile: <https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/AOaks>