



Abbi...
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Published: 2009

Categorie(s): Fiction, Romance

Tag(s): romance fiction novel

Chapter 1

First Sight

Prologue

When I was nineteen years old, one summer changed my life completely. I mean it, my world was turned totally on its head. I had finally finished school having got barely a handful of GCSE's and I had well and truly failed my A-levels. I was so glad to leave. I hated learning, Maths and Science and all that rubbish. I couldn't wait to get away from it all. I left that building not a moment too soon.

The village that I had lived and worked in my entire life was called Kings Bridge and I loved living there. I couldn't imagine being anywhere else. Kings Bridge was right by the ocean and I had never known anywhere else. I suppose I took it for granted. The beach, the countryside and the scenery. It had always been so close to me and my life that I was simply used to it.

That summer I spent working as a waitress at The Sunset Hotel. It was a big hotel considering that it was situated in a village, with seven rooms. The hotel was very busy during the season, which lasted from about April until October. The Sunset Hotel was positioned by the beach. It couldn't be any closer to the sea without actually being in it. It was ideal for tourists to sit and sunbathe- and do little else all day everyday, I should know. It was my job to keep them happy.

During my last year of school I got the job at the hotel because I was desperate. I needed money to help my mother out with bills and rent and it was as good a job as any. The tourist season was starting to pick up and they needed more staff over the summer. It had turned into quite a good job and it was easy

money for me. Plus it was right on my doorstep. I had simply kept the job for the next year.

I lived in a bungalow with my mother. For as long as I could remember it had always been just the two of us. It was quite a small sized place with two bedrooms, a small kitchen, a living room and a bathroom. My room was dedicated to clothes and CD's. I had a few acquaintances but no close friends in my little bubble of a world.

It was quite a simple life. At nineteen I thought that things would carry on the way they always had. Nothing substantial would ever change in my life. Then one day someone did change my life. Everything was normal and mundane. Until I met Mark. Then it all started to move irrevocably in a new direction that I couldn't stop.

Looking back would I change it all if I could? I honestly don't know. The last year has given me the best of times and the worst of times. So would I change it? Probably not. If all the bad times were erased I almost certainly wouldn't have had the good times either. I thought and I suppose I still do think that it is much better to live with the bad things that happen in life than a heart filled with regrets and missed opportunities. Otherwise what is the point of it all? What is the point of life?

Another question I ask is whether or not it was all worth it. I don't know.

This was the summer that things started to change. This is where my story truly starts.

Chapter One

The bubbling of the river made her oblivious to anyone approaching. Not many people came this way and she was rarely interrupted from her solitude. She was laying back on a tree, which was overhanging a river, reading her magazine. It was a very peaceful place, which she was to be found quite often during nice weather in the summer months. The sky was a crystal blue and the sun was quite hot that day. However she was under the shade of the trees so it was quite cool with a pleasant light breeze.

The girl didn't realise that anyone else was there. She was being watched by a tall man of about twenty-one or so who had dark hair and was dressed casually in jeans and a T-shirt. He was standing on the riverbank watching her in silence.

Suddenly he spoke. "I'm Mark." She nearly jumped out of her skin, her magazine fell out of her grasp and splashed into the river where it was carried off by the speeding current. "I'm sorry," he said stepping out of the shadows of the trees. "I didn't mean to startle you. What's your name?" He added.

"Don't worry about it," she said smiling while sitting up. "How long have you been there by the way?" she asked suspiciously.

"Not very long," he lied quickly. "How did you get up there?" There was water all around the tree that she was on and there didn't seem to be an easy access to get there. Not to mention the fast current.

"Oh," she said and smiled, looking at the surface of the water. "I got wet feet. It's not that deep."

"Are you going to tell me your name or not?" he said smiling too.

"At the present I think I won't. I think it would be more interesting if I didn't tell you for the moment." She smiled mischievously again. She was very beautiful with long, blonde, almost waist length hair and hazel eyes and she was wearing a yellow top and jeans.

"Alright then," he said. "Will you take a walk with me?"

She seemed to consider it for a moment while looking at him. Apparently she liked what she saw and said, "alright then." Before he could say anything she jumped down from her perch

and splashed in the river, walking to the bank. The water level was up to her knees and soon enough she was out on the other side of the riverbank.

Without saying anything else she fell into step beside him. They walked in companionable silence for a while, following the short footpath in to the village. Her jeans were now two toned by the water and were dripping every few seconds.

"I think I saw you in the village yesterday," he said to break the silence.

"Yes you probably did. I bet I looked awful. I must have just finished work and we have these terrible red uniforms. I'm a waitress at the Sunset Hotel by the beach," she said in answer to the unasked question. "It's very busy at this time of year. Where are you from?" she asked.

Mark raised his eyebrows. "How do you know I'm not a local?" he asked.

She actually laughed at that "Oh please. I've lived here for nineteen years. My entire life. I know everyone who actually lives here doesn't just holiday here. Besides you don't have the look of a local."

"I'm from London," he said after a moment in response to this.

"Ah," she said and they both lapsed into silence again. "How long are you staying here for?" she asked. By this time they had walked into Rosewood village, on the small main street with the only two shops in the village, a Post Office and a second hand shop. The village was very piecemeal. It seemed as if extra houses and side streets had been added at random until it spread out a little way in several directions. It didn't have enough people to be bigger than a village though.

"I'm staying at the Sunset hotel for two weeks while my families holiday home is made ready. Then we are staying on for another couple of months for our summer holiday."

"We?" she questioned.

"Yes me, my parents and my younger brother," he said.

"You're rich parents," she added. He glanced at her and realised that she wasn't being spiteful or belittling she was just stating a fact.

"Yes my rich parents," he agreed. They were heading in the direction of the beach now, beyond the main street. "Where do you live?"

She had a split second hesitation then said, "in a small bungalow about a five-minute walk from here with my mum. God it's hot today." They sat down on the sand. It was a glorious mid June day and the sky was perfectly clear. Even the clouds had vanished for a while. The beach was a small bay that curved around itself and there were a lot of people for its size milling around and sunbathing taking advantage of the good weather. There were several buildings very near the sand, mostly houses but that was where the Sunset hotel was so tourists were given the beach straight away. "I hate the beach at this time of year," she said. "Too many people around. Its much better in winter."

Mark looked completely incredulous. "You can't be serious. The weather can't be half as nice." He nodded at the sky to imply the heat of the sun and the general picturesque atmosphere around them.

"No it isn't but there aren't half as many people either," she said. "It's usually me on my own in the winter with a couple of walkers thrown in for good measure."

Mark thought for a moment. "I tell you what, come and meet me here tonight at nine o'clock."

"I can't. Not tonight," she said immediately. "I'm serving dinner all night at the hotel tonight but I can do tomorrow night instead."

"Yeah that would be great," Mark said. As she got up and started to walk away he had a sudden brainwave. "Hey wait! Aren't you going to tell me your name?" he shouted out.

She stopped walking and paused. "Abigail Wilkins but I like being called Abbi. With an I," she said and with that, she dashed away across the sand of the beach.

"Bye then," Mark said to himself watching her figure disappear out of view.

The blue front door banged shut. Abbi yelled, "Hi Mum. It's only me," as soon as she entered her house.

Her mother, Eleanor, was sitting on the sofa reading a book as Abbi raced around the kitchen. "Hi Abbi. Hey, what time are

you working tonight?" She asked without looking up from her novel. Abbi went into the living room and stood in the doorway to chat to her mother.

"I start at six and I'll probably finish at about eleven-ish okay?" Abbi said. She then went into her room and had a look around. It was a complete mess. The floor was completely strewn with clothes, shoes, make up, CD's, a couple of single earrings and other general debris. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was 5:30 already. "Oh no!" She quickly tore about the room looking for her horrible maroon skirt and matching shirt and found them buried under her new handbag and her old worn black leather jacket, which she adored.

When she was dressed she took her jumper off of the mirror where she had flung it earlier in the morning. She had a quick look at herself while she was doing her hair and was smiling to herself. I really quite like him, she thought to herself as she tied her hair back. Well if nothing else he was definitely a distraction and that, as she grabbed her bag with her phone and house keys, could only be a good thing.

Mark was laying on his bed in his shared hotel room while his brother Stephen was sitting on a chair. It was quite a light airy room and it had a fabulous view of the ocean. There was even a tiny balcony with two plastic chairs. Mark was thinking about the girl he had met today. He was seeing her again tomorrow. He may even see her tonight. She was working. Though it was true that none of his family were booked in to have dinner that night. He could still imagine how she looked.

Stephen had been talking for the last five minutes while sprawled across his bed and Mark hadn't been paying him the slightest bit of attention. "Sorry what are you saying?" Mark said regaining his sense of the present situation.

"I guess my conversation really *is* enough to send someone into a coma," Steve said. "I always wondered you see."

"All right I'm listening now," Mark said.

"No go on tell me what you're thinking about." Steve said. "Or should I say who you are thinking about? What's her name?"

"How did you know it was a girl I was thinking about?" Mark said incredulously.

"It always is with you," Steve replied. Both brothers were grinning now. "Oh, and the other tip off was that I saw you with a gorgeous blonde girl on the beach."

"Spy," Mark said without any anger. Mark stared at his brother who was a year and a half younger than himself. Mark was very dark and had a tan from the summer. Steve was blonde pale and slight and five inches shorter. He was also a quiet easygoing person. Despite the physical differences there was a similarity between both boys and they got on very well together.

"It's none of your business who she is or what's going on," Mark said.

"All right then." Steve went back to unpacking his crumpled clothes from his crammed suitcase and rummaging for the T-shirt he was after. "I will say though that you have great taste. She was absolutely stunning," and with that Steve gave up searching for his T-shirt and left the room leaving a mess of clothes on his bed and his brother deep in thought.

"Right, "two salad, two soup, three lamb, one small Bass no mussels, no sauce and four chocolate soufflés" okay?" Abbi was handing over the order to Bill who was the head chef. On busy nights another guy came in to help but there was only twelve people booked in which meant more waitressing staff but not more chefs needed. The kitchen was a mixture of steaming saucepans and a blaring radio at every time of the day or night and Abbi liked the combination. Organised chaos and madness every day. It was a nice change from the general boredom of hotel work and the mundane routine of life at home.

"Oh for God's sake," Bill muttered to himself. "Small bass, no mussels, no sauce", he repeated. "Why have a main course at all?" Abbi liked Bill. He was in his mid twenties and was very good tempered. Abbi had already left the kitchen by the time these remarks started up. She went over to the wine rack and picked up a bottle Merlot and a Pinot Grigio and went to uncork them while thinking to herself.

The problem with waitressing was that about eighty five per cent of the work was very repetitive and dull so your thoughts were free to stray wherever they wanted to. Abbi's were focusing on the handsome stranger that she had met by the river.

She wasn't hooked on him. Yet. At the moment he was a very pleasant distraction from the regularity and repetitive hum of her life. She went into the dining room to pour the Merlot for an elderly couple sitting at the table. They were a pleasant couple and they asked how her day had gone as she put the wine on their table.

"Not bad," she said, smiling slightly as her thoughts ran away from herself again. Not bad at all. She was looking forward to tomorrow night.

Bbbbzzzzzzzzzz!!! Abbi's alarm clock was buzzing seven o'clock, an unpleasant way to wake up no matter what the time of day. Abbi hit the clock so the alarm would shut up and stop ringing through her head. She waited until her heart rate had slowed down then she swung her legs out of bed and glanced at the clock with a groan. Only half an hour before she needed to be at the hotel for the breakfast shift.

Officially breakfast at the Sunset hotel lasted from seven thirty until eleven but no one ever bothered to get out of bed on holiday before eight o'clock no matter what their circumstances so it wouldn't matter if Abbi was a few minutes later than usual.

Yawning she went into the kitchen where her annoyingly perky mother had already put a load of washing on, made herself a cup of tea, done the washing up, had some cereal and was sitting down at the table munching on her corn flakes while reading her book again. "You are not seriously sitting eating breakfast at seven in the morning on a Sunday, are you?" Abbi said incredulously making herself some coffee.

"No I'm a hologram," her mother said without looking up. "Good morning darling."

"Is it?" Abbi said. "Have you never heard of a lie in?" she asked stifling another yawn.

"Sweetie, when you become a mother you realise that lie in's don't really get the priority they did when you were a teenager," she said turning the page. The best way to describe the kitchen was organised. All down to Abbi's mother. If it were left to Abbi it would be a complete tip, near to a junkyard.

"Why are you up so early. It's not as if you have work to go to is it?" Abbi said.

"What are your hours like next week?" Abbi's mother asked choosing to ignore her daughter's last comment.

"Oh," Abbi said thinking. "Friday pretty much all day, same Saturday and Sunday. Oh I'm also doing Wednesday night at the moment. They've got a new girl. Clara or Cara something like that and she needs a lot of shifts this week to train her up so I don't get as many morning shifts. How is your week shaping up?"

Abbi's mother ran an ironing business, which varied, hugely in amounts of work needed but was otherwise very successful. "Oh medium to heavy looking like this week. Everyone gets changed three times a day in this weather so people have a lot more washing." She shrugged. Everything in this location was completely seasonal even down to mundane things like the washing and ironing. But that was what you got when you lived in a coastal village, which relied on tourism.

As Abbi rushed out of the door twenty minutes later Eleanor, Abbi's mum was in deep contemplation. Something wasn't quite right with her daughter. Abbi didn't do well on mornings no matter what day of the week. She was much too chirpy than usual. It was not her normal daughter who had just left here barely five minutes before. Eleanor had a shrewd inkling of what was making her daughter a bit happier than normal but she wasn't going to voice it until she was a bit surer. Just a vague suspicion would do no one any good because her daughter would shut up like a clam. Eleanor would just have to wait and see. That's all.

Eleanor finished her breakfast and made herself some tea. She went through to her tiny utility room and had a look at several piles of creased laundry. She sighed and started organising all of the clothes that she had to do.

"Coffee please," said Mark sitting down at the breakfast table. The dining room of the hotel was quite small but it was nicely furnished. A couple of minutes later Abbi came over with a café tier of freshly brewed coffee and took their order. She hurried away quite quickly because it was evident that she hated what she was wearing and was not best pleased that Mark had seen her in it. He was slightly cheered by the fact that she cared what he thought of what she was wearing.

“What are you doing today?” Mark’s mother asked trying plainly to make some sort of conversation to try to avert the silence that had descended on the table. She was trying in vain. After a joint mumble silence fell.

“George, what are you doing today?” she asked her husband. George Hammond at that moment answered his mobile phone as it rang and left the table to speak in privacy. “Well that’s cleared that up” she said tartly and went on with her breakfast.

Chapter 2

Moonlit Ocean

Abbi was picking out an outfit to wear for tonight. She had pulled out five dresses, two pairs of jeans, six skirts and eight different tops and they were all laid out on her bed. She was trying different combinations on. Eventually after about an hour of choosing she had decided on a blue halter neck top and jeans and some flat sandals.

She turned up on the beach at five to nine wearing a light green patterned summer dress and her blonde hair down. Abbi sat down on the sand staring at the ocean. It was still daylight-just. It was at that moment between day and night, when it looked like both but it wasn't either. There were only a few people out on the beach. No one was particularly near her. She was staring into the crashing waves when she heard footsteps behind her. Abbi got up and turned around to find Mark watching her. He was wearing jeans and a brown T-shirt. He looked better than she had remembered. He also had a white rose in his hand.

"Hi," Mark said. "You look beautiful." She could see the look in his eyes and knew it wasn't just a line but that he actually meant it. She took a few steps nearer him and without either of them knowing quite how it had happened he bent his head and set his lips on hers. They were perfectly soft. His hands were going through her hair. It was beautifully long and thick. She was kissing him back too, enthusiastically now, her hands settling lightly on his back. Suddenly Mark stopped.

"What's wrong?" she asked her face puzzled. She looked so beautiful at that moment with her blonde tresses framing her face that he kissed her lightly again. "What is it?" Abbi repeated

"Nothing. Nothing at all," he said. "It's just you don't know anything about me at all besides my name."

"So What?" Abbi asked lightly and smiled. She kissed him again. He handed her the rose and she took a few moments to look at it. The flower was really pretty.

"I wanted to take you somewhere tonight," Mark said.

"Oh Yeah," Abbi said smiling slightly. "Where would that be then?"

"It's a surprise," Mark said. He reached out and grabbed her hand. "Come on!" Mark and Abbi ran along the beach. He was leading the way and they were still holding hands. They came to the tiny harbour, which had four or five small sailboats gently bobbing up and down with the tide.

Mark jumped onto the furthest boat and started to make the boat ready and putting the sail up. "Whose boat is this?" Abbi asked gingerly stepping onto the boat. She looked around. It had only one sail and a small engine attached to it but it was an okay size though.

"It's mine actually," Mark said without looking up as he was tying the sail into place. "She's new. I haven't actually taken her out yet."

"But you know what you're doing don't you?" Abbi said anxiously as the gentle wind had gently started them moving away from the harbour. She looked back at the slowly shrinking shore.

"Don't worry," Mark said grinning. "I've been doing this since I was about eight years old."

Abbi sat down on the wooden beams slightly relieved by the knowledge he had done this for years. After a minute Mark came and sat next to her. "How on earth can you afford all this? I mean going on two-month holidays and buying sailboats. How do you manage it?"

Mark took a deep breath and sat back against the side looking at Abbi. "Well, the money comes from my parents really. My mother, Julia was an heiress. She had inherited quite a substantial amount of money from her own parents. She was an only child and inherited everything when her father died. She was seventeen when she got everything. Houses, cars, servants, the lot. My father, George Hammond, came from a middle class family and he got into property development. He

then started his own business doing that. You know, buying, renovating then selling them on. He made a lot of good money and he invested some of it. When my parents met it was a good match."

"A good match. That sounds terribly romantic," Abbi said sarcastically.

"Yeah." Mark said matching her tone. "You know what I mean. Money-to-Money and they did really like each other as well. They met and got married within a year. Together they have been stinking rich since that day forward. They have more money than they could ever spend. I now go to Oxford University. I've got one year left and then I will leave to help my father in his property business.

Silence fell for a moment. "Future all set up then," Abbi said.

"Yes something like that," Mark said. By now the shore was only a vague line and they were far away enough that they couldn't see any of the few people who were on the beach. "I'm forgetting the reason we're here. Go and lie back and look at the sky." Abbi said nothing and she laid back so that she was flat on the boat. Mark lay next to her looking at the sky.

"Wow," she said softly. It was practically dark by now and the stars were all shining through the sky. They were far enough away from land that the lights from the houses had faded away and weren't disturbing the view. There was no cloud around at all and it was a full moon. They spent a long time just staring at the boundless sky. There was one bird flying above them slowly.

*In the boundless sky the bird is soaring
Above, one lonely gull is cawing
For her loved one that was left behind
The one that she can no longer find.*

"Sorry," Abbi said briefly. She was blushing a little. "It's a verse. I read a while ago." She was still blushing.

"Tell me about your family history then," Mark said.

"There isn't much to tell really," she said but she carried on. "Certainly not as grand as yours. My mother lived in this area all her life since she was born. She met my father and they got

married. It's just me and my mother in the house now. My father died in a car crash when I was six years old."

"I'm sorry," Mark said.

"It was a long time ago," she said simply. "I don't really like talking about him." They were both now looking at each other. He softly kissed her once more. They were still laying on the floor of the boat. "We should be getting back," she said.

Mark got up reluctantly away from Abbi and went to the little engine. He started it off to go back the way they had come. Eventually they reached the harbour and they both got out of the boat. "I want to see you again," Mark said quietly.

"So do I," Abbi whispered. "I've got to go. My mum's going to be worried. You'll see me at work anyway." She said with a little grin. "I'll give you my number," She got a scrap of paper out of her pocket and Mark gave her a pen. "I'll see you soon." She gave him a lingering kiss goodbye and walked away up the beach. He watched her go and stayed where he was for a good while longer. It had been a good night.

Abbi rushed into her room as soon as she got home. The bungalow was quiet and all the lights were off when she came in. Her mother had gone to bed before she got in. Abbi started getting undressed while thinking about the evening she had had. It had been a very good evening she thought as she put her pyjamas on. She placed her earrings on her dressing table and was brushing her hair out when her mother suddenly came into her room.

"Had a fun night?" She asked serenely.

"God you made me jump!" Abbi was breathing hard.

"Who is he?"

"Are you sure your career isn't reading peoples minds. You would make a fortune!" Her mother didn't say anything, she just looked at Abbi. "There is absolutely no point in hiding anything from you is there?"

"No," her mother agreed. "Go on tell me who he is I've been dying to know!"

"How did you know?"

"Abbi it's a Sunday night. Nothing here is open on a Sunday night and you never even work on Sunday evenings either. You

haven't mentioned any friends recently that you are meeting so I just assumed." Her mother shrugged.

"You are the most astute person that lives within a fifty mile radius. You know that?"

"Yes I do." Her mother said. "Go on I'm dying to know," she repeated.

"His name is Mark and you are not getting anymore out of me," Abbi said smirking slightly. Now can I go to sleep?"

"Fine! Goodnight," and her mother left the room leaving Abbi to her (very contented) thoughts.

Mark was lying on his bed staring into space thinking hard. God he couldn't wait to see her again. She was just so beautiful and fascinating. He had thought that seeing her again would make her seem somewhat less than what memory was showing him. He had never really met someone like her before. She was completely complicated while being straightforward in her manner. It had felt wonderful to kiss her and hold her. He was definitely going to call her tomorrow. He had to see her again. As he drifted off into sleep Mark wondered if she was thinking about him as much as Abbi was on his own mind.

The next morning Abbi woke up very happy. She got dressed and tied up her hair and hurriedly ate breakfast. She then went out for a walk along the beach. She was walking by the edge of the ocean when she bumped straight into someone without even noticing where she was going.

"Oh God I'm sorry," Abbi said.

"Don't worry about it." Abbi had bumped right into Rosalyn. Rosalyn was a waitress that Abbi worked with about once or twice a week. She was a nice quite plain brunette girl around the same age as Abbi.

"How are you doing?" Rosalyn asked cheerfully. They started walking together along the coastline.

"I'm fine. How are you doing?" Abbi asked. They fell into friendly conversation. Rosalyn told Abbi about her family arguments and her on off and on again relationship with her boyfriend Roger.

"How is your love life going then?" Roselyn asked. "I can tell something has happened because you have a huge smile on your face."

They worked together but they were only half friends so Abbi was careful of what she said. "I have met someone," she said smiling. "He is really good looking too."

"Always a plus," said Rosalyn grinning. They passed the next half an hour or so speaking of nothing in particular except general gossip while each of their thoughts ran in their own direction.

Chapter 3

Second Date

Mark had programmed Abbi's number into his mobile phone as soon as he had got up in the morning. He decided he couldn't wait any longer to call her no matter how desperate it might look. It was eleven o'clock the following morning. He grabbed his phone and speed dialled her mobile number. One ring. Would she pick up? Two rings. She wasn't going to answer. Three rings. God please pick up. Four rings. Click. "Hello?" Abbi's voice brought her image clearly to Mark's mind.

"It's Mark here."

"Oh Hi!" She sounded more cheerful already. He felt better by the thought that he had that effect on her. "How are you?"

"I'm good," he replied. Silence descended on the phone line.

"This may be too early to say but I can't stand the silence anymore," Mark said. "I can't stop thinking about you." It was very early in their relationship but it was true.

He heard her smile in her voice. "I'm really glad to hear you say that." Abbi said. "It is completely crazy," Abbi said nervously.

Mark was internally breathing a sigh of relief. She seemed as interested as he was. She was right too. It felt insane to be thinking about her as much as he was. "When can I see you again?"

"Well tonight is a possibility", she said. "A strong possibility"

"Okay then. Where do you want to go?"

"No it's my turn to pick. You took me out on the sailboat. I have somewhere I want to go," Abbi said.

"Right I won't argue with you," Mark said. "Where shall we meet?"

"Where we did last night would be good at about half six. Is that okay?"

"Yeah. Sure. That's fine."

"Oh one more thing," Abbi said. "Wear comfy shoes." With that Mark heard the click of his mobile telling him that she had hung up.

At quarter past six Mark went down to the beach wondering where she was going to take him. He was wearing comfy clothes as Abbi had suggested but he had made sure that he looked good before leaving his hotel room. He was early he knew but he simply couldn't wait to see Abbi again. He paced up and down the beach waiting for her. He looked at his watch and was startled to see that it was twenty to seven. She was late. He decided he would wait a little while longer to see what was holding her up. At five to seven when Mark was really starting to worry Abbi came racing into view. He was very relieved to see her. Half of him was beginning to think that she wasn't going to show up.

He gave her a kiss in greeting.

"Where are we going?" Mark asked with a grin.

Abbi had been rushing around her house trying to grab everything she needed in her rucksack. Right she had her mobile phone, her water bottle, her keys and a lot of other little things she needed. Abbi grabbed her camera and then picked up her watch. It already six thirty! She chucked everything into her bag and immediately dashed for the door, shouting a goodbye to her mother in the process.

By the time she got down to the beach she saw Mark waiting for her. He looked a little upset now. She was hidden from sight by a small shed. Mark did look worried she realised. He wasn't merely upset, he was concerned that she hadn't showed up. Abbi wondered how long he would wait for her before he gave up and left. She stayed hidden for a little while longer and was very pleased to see that he hadn't left. Mark obviously quite liked her.

Abbi ran into view, her blonde hair streaming behind her and opened her mouth to apologise for being so desperately late but before she could say anything he had kissed her tenderly.

"Hi," she smiled. "We're going for a walk okay?" Abbi asked.

"Lead the way." They both smiled at each other and left the beach.

Abbi was leading Mark on a footpath up a steep hill. "Why were you so late?" He asked her, not unkindly.

She smiled. "I was getting ready for our date and then I realised I couldn't find everything that I wanted to take with me like my phone and my keys. Before I knew it I looked at my watch and it was already twenty to seven." Abbi smiled apologetically at Mark. "It took me ages to find my keys and then find you." She paused. "Am I forgiven for being so horribly late?" She had a cheeky twinkle in her eyes.

He looked at her intently. "Yes you are." He looked deeply into her eyes and she didn't look away from his gaze. Abbi had a small smile on her face.

"Where are you taking me anyway?" Mark asked her.

"Don't worry we're nearly there," she said. They had been walking over identical green fields for the past twenty minutes, mostly in silence. Mark was not at all sorry to hear they were near the end of their journey.

"Here we are," she said finally. Abbi was about ten feet ahead of him and had already reached the crest of the hill and was sitting down. About thirty seconds later Mark could see why.

They were looking down into a valley. However the sun was starting to sink down and turning all the clouds beautiful oranges, reds, pinks and yellows. You could see fields and villages for miles around and the sun was casting everything into a beautiful light.

"Was it worth the walk?" Abbi asked teasingly. As Mark sat down staring at the view he said. "Yes, absolutely."

After he overcame the shock of the sight he asked. "How long from now will it take for the sun to set?"

"Well it's about an hour from now." Abbi said checking her watch. "The sun won't actually have set then but you won't be able to see it from here anymore and it comes over all dusky here."

"Okay."

Mark sat and watched Abbi as she watched the landscape and the beautiful colours of the sky. It was about ten minutes before she realised he was watching her.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Looking," he said.

"Yeah," she said. "But the sunset is that way." She pointed at the valley.

"But I am looking at something far more beautiful," he whispered. He leaned towards her and kissed her deeply. He felt her start. She had not been expecting that he would kiss her that quickly. Abbi closed her eyes and returned his kiss. Her hands wrapped around his neck to bring him closer.

He slid his hands around her waist. He felt he couldn't get enough of her and it was making him slightly dizzy. Her arms slid down from his neck to his shoulders as he kissed her neck. She gasped slightly and his hands moved to her hair. He delighted in the feel of her.

She was eager to be kissed and their next kiss was slow and satisfying. He drew away from her with his hands still in her hair smiling.

"I couldn't help myself." He seemed to be trying to apologize to her she thought.

"Neither can I," she said and with a playful grin kissed him back. The sunset behind them going on unnoticed by either of them as they delighted in each other.

Abbi suddenly noticed it was dark. Funny she hadn't noticed the light dying. She and Mark had been kissing each other passionately for the last hour or more. She just couldn't seem to bring herself to stop. Or to keep her hands off him. They had ended up laying down on the grass and they were now looking at each other, their eyes alight with passion for each other.

"I have to get home," Abbi said making no effort to move. She was too comfy.

"What time is it?" Mark asked.

"Ten thirty. Why?"

"The hotel locks at eleven." He sighed. "With a half an hour walk I'll never make it back before they lock the front door and I left my key in my hotel room."

Abbi just laughed. Mark was getting irritated now. "I have nowhere to go tonight. I am locked out. Why is that funny!"

"It's not funny." Abbi assured him. "It's just lucky that I have a spare key that's all."

"You're joking!" Mark seemed astounded. Abbi just smiled at him.

"You could stay out as long as you wanted and it wouldn't matter." Abbi seemed a little more alert. There was a definite implication behind her words.

"How come you have an extra key?"

"Well, I have worked there for a few years so the owners feel I am trustworthy enough to have my own key. Just in case there are any problems and they aren't around or need some help," Abbi answered. They were both quiet for a moment looking at the stars.

Suddenly Abbi heard her phone beep. She sighed and went to check who it was. A text message envelope was flashing on the screen. It was from her mum.

Its late r u on ur way home? Xxx

She replied: I'll b home soon xoxo

She put her phone back into her bag.

"Who was that?" Mark asked.

"Just my mum," she said with a sigh. "We really should be getting back." They both got up from the ground and stood up.

"Do you know where we're going in the dark?" Mark asked. He was a little worried as it was completely dark and he had no idea where to go. Even though his eyes were adjusted he couldn't see more than a few feet ahead of himself. The moon was hidden by clouds.

"Of course I know where we're going," she assured him. "I've walked this way about a thousand times. I could do it blindfolded."

They walked back together in a friendly silence. Mark reached out for her hand and they walked the footpath back while holding hands. The way looked very eerie to Mark's eyes. In the darkness you couldn't see much and it was rather like walking into the unknown.

Suddenly the road that ran through the village appeared and Mark knew exactly where he was now. She had been right he realised. Abbi could walk that footpath blindfolded if she had too.

No one was around on the beach. They were quite alone with the lapping of the waves. All too soon they were at the door of the hotel.

"I hope you have your key," he said. Abbi was digging around in her bag for the keys.

Without looking at him she said, "give it a try. People sometimes forget to lock it." Mark obligingly gave the door handle a turn but the door wouldn't budge. He gave her a knowing look. Abbi shrugged and continued looking.

"No matter what you are looking for," she said, "it is always at the bottom of your bag. Aha! Got them." She pulled a huge ring of keys out of her bag. There must have been twenty or so keys on the ring.

She was sorting through them, looking for the one to the hotel door. He couldn't believe how many keys she had. He looked at her face, which was concentrating and finding the key. She looked absolutely stunning.

"Right. It's that one." Abbi stood up and put the key in the lock. Sure enough it unlocked the door.

"Why have you got so many keys?" Mark asked her. "What are they all for?"

"Two are house keys," she started. "Front and back door. I've got two for the hotel doors and I have spares for all the rooms. The amount of times people leave when they can't find their keys is unbelievable. Or pack them by mistake. Plus I have one for my mum's car. We use that as kind of a storage space so I occasionally have to go and get stuff from it." Abbi hesitated. "I also have a key for the cemetery." Abbi finished.

Mark was slightly taken aback by the uses of her keys. "Why do you have one for the cemetery?"

She stiffened. "My dad." She looked slightly uncomfortable. "I just like going there when no one else is there so the warden gave me a key. He knew my dad you see."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I ... forgot", he said lamely.

"It's alright," she said quickly. He instinctively put his arms around her in a hug. After a moment he felt her hugging him back.

"I should go," Abbi said as he let her go. "My mother is probably getting worried by now."

"Okay." He kissed her once more. "I'll call you okay?"

"Sure" she said. He left and went upstairs. She locked the door up again and went home with a smile on her face.

"Where have you been?" Abbi's mother demanded the second she had closed the door. Abbi followed her mother back into the kitchen where she had obviously waiting up for her daughter.

"Relax, mum." Abbi said. "I've just been out."

"Yeah "I'll be home soon" is really informative Abbi!" Abbi looked at her mother. She had been really worried about her she realised.

"What's the problem?" Abbi asked. "I was out late on Sunday. You weren't mad about that so what is the issue exactly?"

Her mother breathed hard. "I didn't know where you were and you've been gone ages. Since six thirty and it's almost midnight."

Abbi said mischievously, "Well I didn't overstep magic midnight barrier so Cinderella is home in plenty of time to turn back into a pumpkin."

"Abbi," her mother said warningly. "Don't push it or I might stop you going out with him."

"Mum! I am nineteen. Its not like I stayed out until four in the morning, clubbing, drinking and taking drugs! I went for an evening walk."

"I notice you didn't deny going out with him." Her mother was looking very grim. Silence descended on them. Abbi didn't know what to say to that so she looked at her mother trying to decide what to say next.

"No. I am not going to deny it because I am going out with Mark." Abbi said. Adding, "Where did all this concerned parent come from? You were fine with the situation on Sunday."

"I know that it's your business", Eleanor started slowly. "But I am still your mother and I want to be kept in the loop. I need

to know what is going on when you don't come home. You usually tell me when you are going to stay out later. Also you rarely stay out this late if you aren't at work."

After a pause Abbi said, "Okay. I'll keep you involved in what's going on. Can we drop this now?"

"Okay." Abbi looked at her mother. A beep from her bag distracted her.

"Goodnight," Abbi said. She went in her bedroom and closed the door before her mother could call her back. She checked her phone. A text message had come through.

I had fun tonite xxx M

She smiled and started a text conversation with him

So did I. I love that sight. Abbi

Yes. It was beautiful xxx M

Yeah. The sunsets always r frm there Abbi

I wasn't just talking bout the sunset xxx M. Abbi smiled to herself and kept texting him until much later into the night.

Mark quietly opened his hotel room door, wondering if Steve was asleep or not. He wasn't. "Had fun?"

Steve was laying on his bed concentrating on his game boy. "Yeah it was fine," Mark said.

"Hmm "Fine" doesn't have you out until quarter to twelve" he said without looking up. "How was she doing then? Oh and you still haven't told me what her name is."

Mark took a deep breath and thought that he should have known. Steve liked to know what was going on with his brother. "If you are going to talk to me at least switch that thing off." Mark pointed at the game-boy.

"Fine it's off," Steve said and put it on the table in the room.

"Her name is Abbi. Satisfied?"

Steve stared at his brother. "Christ, you have got it bad." he said quietly. "You usually tell me about whatever her name is before I even have a chance to ask. I often have to beg you to

shut up about the latest girl. You don't even want to talk about her. It must be serious." Mark simply shrugged and sat down on his bed. He took his phone out of his pocket and wondered how long he could wait before he text her.

"Mark, don't text her now. You left her barely five minutes ago. How desperate do you want to come off?" Mark didn't say anything but he personally thought that Steve had a point. She probably hadn't even got home yet. He actually had no idea where she lived he thought with a small shock.

Mark quickly got undressed and went to bed. He waited about five minutes until he heard the quiet regular breathing that meant that Steve had gone to sleep. It never did take him long to go to sleep. Mark got out his phone and texted her. He carried on this conversation long into the night until

I have to get some sleep Abbi

Ok nite xxx M

Goodnite

Eleanor was left looking in the darkness in the kitchen when her daughter left. She was thinking to herself. This was going to get serious. She could feel it in her bones. This would be her daughter's first serious relationship. Abbi had gone out with a few guys. Nothing serious had ever come of it. Two dates in as many days. That showed her that Abbi was serious about him. Mark? Was that his name. She would check in the morning with her daughter.

Well, it had to happen sometime she thought to herself. As Eleanor turned off the light and went to bed, her comforting thought was that it would all happen in good time. She would see what happened as and when it did.

Chapter 4

Lily's

Abbi woke up late the next morning- at half past ten. She had no plans today and she didn't even have to go to work so she could relax all day. As soon as she woke up she grabbed her mobile phone and checked. No messages or missed calls. Mind you she thought they had only seen each other eleven hours ago. Plenty of time yet. She went into the kitchen to make herself some toast for breakfast.

Her mother had set up her ironing board and was doing stacks of other peoples ironing.

"Morning mum." Abbi said as she popped down two slices of brown bread in the toaster.

"Hi sweetie." Her mother looked in a much better mood this morning than she had been in last night. "Any plans today?" her mother asked pointedly.

"No not yet," Abbi said. "I'm not working today. Mark said he would call," she added to the undertone of her mother's question.

"Okay then," her mother said smiling at the shirts she was ironing. At that moment Abbi's toast popped up and she went back to her room. Before eating her toast she checked her phone again. No message. Yet.

Mark glanced at his phone. It was nearly eleven. Surely he could call. It wouldn't seem desperate. Would it?

This is stupid Abbi thought. "Staring at my phone won't make it ring," she said to herself. She got dressed and when he still hadn't called when it had gone eleven she decided to take the initiative and phone him herself.

Mark glanced down. Abbi was phoning him. He answered the call as quickly as he could.

"Hi," he said

"Hi," she answered. There was an awkward pause on the phone.

"I had a great time last night," Mark said.

"Really? Good." Abbi sounded relieved on the phone.

"Do you want to get together and do something tonight?" Mark asked praying that she did.

"Yeah that sounds great." Abbi really did sound enthusiastic.

"What do you want to do?" Mark asked.

"Oh, I'm not picky. You choose." Abbi said. "Anyway it's your turn to pick something to do isn't it?"

"Yeah it is." Mark had no idea where he wanted to take her. "Right let me think about where I want to take you and then I will call you back okay?"

"That's great," she said. "Talk to you later."

"Bye." Mark rang off leaving Abbi holding her phone to her ear smiling to herself.

"Right I need help Steve," Mark said to his brother.

"What is it now?" Steve asked. He was lounging in a chair while Mark was pacing the room, racking his brains on where to take Abbi.

"I want to take Abbi somewhere special tonight and I am stuck for ideas," he said quickly.

"Oh Mark," Steve said grinning. "How sad it is that you had to come and ask your little brother this question," he said laughing.

"Ha ha," Mark said irritably. "I am serious. I need to take her somewhere really nice. And my brain has gone blank."

"What have you got so far?" Steve asked rolling his eyes slightly.

"I thought I would take her out for a meal but then I have a problem of where." Mark said sitting down opposite Steve. "The problem is that anywhere half decent will be booked for tonight. I mean its barely ten hours notice."

They both fell into silence. After a while Steve said, "what about Lily's restaurant? I mean that's very exclusive."

"That's true," Mark said. "But it will have been booked up for ages though. It's such a fabulous restaurant."

"That is where our name becomes extremely useful." Mark looked quizzically at his brother. "You never have learnt the full potential of being the son of one of the richest men in the country have you?" When Mark shrugged his shoulders Steve went on. "Book it under last name Hammond with dad's initial or something like that. They are bound to find room for someone like that. Dad's been going there for years. You know with clients and things like that."

Mark smiled when he realised that his brother had a very valid point. "You've done that before then?" Mark asked cynically

"Yeah," Steve admitted. "And its worked like a dream let me tell you."

"Okay, but it's a drive over thirty minutes away." Mark said.

"Since when is that a problem?" Mark had to agree that he had a point.

"Thanks for your help Steve."

Half an hour later Abbi got a call from Mark.

"Hi. So what are we doing tonight then?" she asked.

"Have you heard of Lily's restaurant?"

"We are never booked in there? Come on it's so exclusive and it's always booked up to the masses. I know that because a lot of people from the hotel go there to dine out." Abbi could barely believe it.

"We are definitely booked in there for eight o'clock." he told her.

"You must have pulled some strings," she said impressed.

"Only Pinocchio sized strings," he said. She could hear him smiling over the line.

"What time will you pick me up?"

"Seven at the beach because you haven't told me where you live yet." Mark was teasing her. She could tell.

"Well if we have a good time maybe you'll find out tonight." She teased.

"See you at seven then." Mark rang off

"Bye," Abbi whispered to the dialling tone.

Abbi rushed into the kitchen where her mother had just finished doing all off her clients ironing. "I'm going out tonight," Abbi blurted out.

"Oh Yeah," her mother looked sceptical. "Where are you going then?"

"Lily's," Abbi said quickly. Her mother looked completely stunned by that piece of information. Abbi herself still couldn't quite believe it.

"So your going out with a very rich guy then aren't you?" she said quietly.

"Apparently so." Abbi was grinning from ear to ear. "I am so excited. I can't wait to eat there. Everyone who is anyone goes there to eat." Her mother remained in silence. That silence was slightly disconcerting.

"It is alright if I go isn't it?" Abbi asked chewing her nail. She would be so disappointed if she missed out and couldn't go simply because her mother said so.

"Of course you can go." Abbi looked so pleased at that. "I will want to meet him at some point Abbi."

"Yeah that's fine," Abbi said indifferently. She dashed off to wash her hair. She couldn't wait for the rest of the day to go by.

It was just before Mark was about to leave when he just checked his reflection one more time. He was wearing a dark jacket and shirt. He didn't want to look too smart but he definitely wanted to look good. Especially going to Lily's. He looked into the mirror and thought that he had got just the right look.

Mark left his room, making sure to pick up his key this time and bumped straight into his father. "Sorry dad," he wanted to get away quickly. He didn't want to be asked a series of questions about who he was going out with. Not tonight.

His father surprised him by saying, "You look perfect son. I might just add a tie to it though. You want to make a good impression don't you."

Mark felt like he had missed a crucial point. "What are you talking about?"

"Our business meeting." Mark felt his heart sink faster than the Titanic. Oh yes that meeting. The only reason they had

come out a week earlier than normal while the holiday home wasn't ready.

"Actually dad I have other plans tonight. Can't you take Steve with you instead of me?" He knew before he had go half way with his sentence that it was no good. His fathers face was like thunder.

"Of course I am taking you. One day all of this will be yours. You are the eldest. You are the heir to all of this fortune. This is the most important meeting that you will have had in months. You have to meet all these important people in my enterprise. All their wives and families will be there too. I can't show up without you. You have to be there."

He paused. "You are coming. That is final. Even if I have to drag you there."

After a seconds pause that lasted a lifetime Mark said, "Fine. I have to make a call first okay?"

"Alright but hurry up. I'll be waiting downstairs," and his father stormed down into the hotel lounge.

Mark looked at his phone. He was dreading calling Abbi. Just do it he told himself.

He could hear it ringing. Once. Twice. She answered.

"Hi I'm just leaving," Abbi said. She sounded so excited. "I'll be there in five minutes okay?"

"Hey listen. I can't make it tonight."

"Oh." There was silence on the phone.

"Look I really want to go with you but my father has a business meeting at the hall in New Port Town to go to that he has to take me to and I can't get out of it. I tried to get him to take my brother but he wasn't having any of it. I really did try Abbi."

She still didn't say anything. "I'm so sorry. I was really looking forward to tonight as well."

"It's fine," she said.

"I have to go," Mark said. "I will call you okay?" but he was talking to the dialling tone. Abbi had already hung up.

Abbi looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. She had looked perfect. She had spent more than an hour curling her hair after she had washed and blow-dried it. She was wearing a little black dress and some black heels. She had on all her

silver jewellery and it all worked together. However now she would just be sitting at home doing nothing instead of the wonderful evening she thought she would have.

Her mother knocked then came in. "Darling you look wonderful! What's wrong?" she added seeing Abbi's face.

"I'm not going out. He's just cancelled."

"Why?"

"His father has pressed him into a business meeting," Abbi said. "He said he tried to get out of it but he couldn't and that he was sorry it was at the last minute."

"Don't worry," her mother said. "I'm sure he will call you to make alternative plans later."

"Yeah," Abbi looked into the mirror. "Look, I'm going out for a walk to clear my head. I shouldn't be too long okay."

Eleanor was about to argue but thought better of it. "That's fine."

"I'm just going to slip on some more comfortable shoes then I'll be gone." Eleanor watched her daughter very quickly leave the house. She hated to see Abbi disappointed. Eleanor put the kettle on to make herself a cup of tea and then she sat down to think things over. Her ironing was all piled up in the car and that would take all of tomorrow afternoon to deliver but maybe she could take Abbi shopping in the morning. That might cheer her up. That guy had known Abbi for less than a week and he had already upset her. Oh, things had started to get complicated concerning her daughter.

After Mark called Abbi he picked a tie and put it on. Bang goes my plans he thought to himself. Steve came bounding into the room.

"You look like you're going to your own funeral, not out with the gorgeous blonde girl to Lily's." Steve looked at him.

"I'm going to New Port Town for dad's stupid "meeting" to introduce me to all the right people." Mark looked very upset.

"Oh God," Steve looked surprised. "Did you already tell her that you were taking her to Lily's?"

"Yes," Mark said through gritted teeth.

"You told a girl that you got in too Lily's on less than twelve hours notice and cancelled just before she was leaving?" Steve said incredulously.

"Yes."

"She's going to think you were lying," Steve informed him.

"Thanks for that. On that note I think I'll go downstairs to meet my father," Mark said and he walked out of the room.

When he got to the lounge there was a myriad of people all very smartly dressed. He found his father almost immediately and was informed that all of these people were accompanying them to the meeting. Mark was beginning to see that "meeting" was a euphemism for booking a place where important people milled around each other while being laced with alcohol and bad dances.

"Mark, this is Alan, my banker." Mark shook hands with Alan the banker.

"This is Anna my human resources contact," and on and on the introductions went.

"This is Stuart my main supplier for interiors," and on.

"This is Jessica, daughter of James an important business contact who couldn't come tonight." Finally Mark thought. Someone under forty. Jessica looked the same age as he was. She had a friendly face and Mark thought he could probably get on with her.

"Hello," she smiled. "I didn't realise that there would be this many people here," she continued.

"No," he said. "It is quite busy isn't it?"

At that precise moment a man Mark didn't recognise announced that the cars were here and if they could all make their way outside they would go to New Port.

Mark went to walk with his father as he assumed they would travel together. His father was right behind him and said, "accompany Jessica to the hall would you Mark? You two seem to be getting along so well. And she is a very nice girl." Mark suddenly knew what was going on. He was being set up. However he couldn't find anyway out of the situation without causing a scene, which was exactly what he didn't want. He supposed he would have to go along with it.

Jessica smiled at him and offered him her arm. Silently cursing his father he led her out to the cars.

Without knowing where she was going Abbi raced out of her bungalow. Before she knew it she was walking along the beach

again. She had headed that way out of habit. She wasn't all that far from the hotel and she could see from this distance that there were quite a few smart black cars parked in a row outside. She suddenly got up and before she knew what she was doing she was halfway towards the hotel to see what was going on.

She had walked along this street thousands of times so she knew where to hide herself if she didn't want to be seen. She stood behind a little cottage and peaked out from behind it to watch. There were loads of richly dressed people getting into cars. She knew she was waiting to catch a glimpse of Mark. She just wanted to see him again.

Suddenly he came into her view. God, he looked good she thought. No sooner than she had thought this she saw that he was escorting a girl into the car. She looked beautiful even from this distance. The mystery girl was a tall leggy brunette wearing one of the shortest dresses Abbi had ever seen. Mark gave her a smile as she elegantly sat in the back of the car.

Abbi took one last glance and ran. She was extremely glad she had changed into flats rather than remaining in her heels. She got home and went straight to bed. However, the tears took a long time to stop before she went to sleep.

Mark had been staring blankly into space for the past hour and a half. The girl his father had tried to set him up with had hardly uttered two words to him all night. She just stood next to him like a shadow he couldn't shake off. She was trying to get on his good side, Mark could tell. Jessica kept flicking her hair and batting her eyelashes as if that was going to make any difference.

He thought he actually might have gone to sleep with his eyes open. After the first half an hour his father hadn't introduced him to anyone else so he had ended up standing in a corner of the room while everyone else made "business contacts."

"Jessica, I am just going to excuse myself for a minute", Mark said. Before she could say anything else he made his way outside. Thankfully all of the company cars were waiting outside. Mark hopped into one.

"Sunset Hotel", he told the driver, who obediently drove away from that nightmare. He would call Abbi in the morning and arrange another time for them to go out together.

As soon as Jessica got out of her cab at her house she could see her mother twitching the curtains waiting for her to return. She knew that her mother was expecting a romantic fairytale of an evening. Her family was almost bankrupt. They still had a bit of cash flow but their finances were quickly dwindling away. Her parents were so desperate to make a match to the heir of the Hammond fortune they had even called in a favour and got a professional make up artist and hair stylist to make sure that the first time Mark saw her, he would be impressed.

It had all fallen flat on its face. Mark had barely even looked at her all night. He hadn't asked to dance with her and mortifyingly what was worse was that he had ducked out very early. Embarrassingly early. It was her duty to make an advantageous match as she was constantly reminded. The heir to the Hammond fortune was about as good as she could aim.

Her mother especially was going to be very disappointed. Jessica's father and been tied up in business affairs with George Hammond for as long as she could remember. They were not going to be happy.

Jessica opened the door and met her mother in the hall.

"Well? How did it go?" She looked at Jessica with her complete faith that nothing could possibly go wrong.

"It was an absolute fiasco mum." Her face crumpled. Jessica hated letting down her parents. However her father was still in London so it was only half as bad.

"What happened?" Her mother was convinced this would merely be a blip on the horizon of her rosy future with Mark.

"Oh God, where to start?" She took a deep breath. "He kept trying to leave without me, he didn't even want to take the same car as me to the event. He never even said more than three words to me at a time. He looked bored all evening. You know your stylists you got to do three hours work on my face and hair? Barely even a glance. My dress is so short you can almost see my knickers and he didn't look at my legs once. He left really early as well."

Her mother's mouth fell into a frown during Jessica's retelling of the evening. "Look. We will just have to plan again. There is a ball coming up in a few weeks. A society event. You will just really impress him at that okay?"

"Mark isn't interested in me. He just doesn't like me mum", Jessica said. "To be honest I'm not particularly keen on him either."

"You don't know him," her mother started. "You can't dislike him when you don't know him. Also..." She paused for a moment and then went on. "Jess I love you okay? But your personal feelings are not what is important here."

"That's just great," Jessica said sarcastically. "Tell me, if this all works out the way you want, the way you are planning and I ended married to a person I hated and who hated me, would my personal feelings be important then?" Before she could get an answer she ran upstairs away from the mess.

Mark woke up really early the next morning. He went downstairs for breakfast and bumped straight into his father, who looked like thunder.

"Hello dad," he said. "You're looking in a charming mood this morning."

"Don't take that tone with me!" His father was furious. "What were you playing at last night?"

"What are you talking about?" Mark was a bit confused. He had made an appearance and met all the important people his father had wanted him to. His father took hold of Mark's arm and led him outside so no one would overhear their conversation.

"Jessica!"

"Ah." Mark was not looking forward to this conversation. "What about her?"

"Come on! She was drop dead gorgeous and you hardly even looked at her all evening. From what I could see you spent the entire time trying to escape from her. You even left early. That looks incredibly bad for me. The heir to my fortune can't be bothered to stay with all the people who have helped me over the years get to where I am! What is wrong with you!"

Mark was starting to get angry now. He wrenched his arm out of his fathers grasp. "What is wrong with me is that I didn't

appreciate being set up with someone who I am completely not interested in. Just because her father has helped you doesn't mean that I am going to fall for her. Also while we are at it I only left there ridiculously early because after the first half an hour no one even looked at me. I had made my appearance and that should be good enough for you."

"You didn't even talk to Jessica. How do you know that you didn't like her?" His father countered. Mark didn't say anything. He just glared at his father.

"There's someone else isn't there?" Mark still didn't say anything. "Oh come on Mark! At least admit it."

"Yes there is," Mark said. "Before you ask, it is no one that you know. She is not one of your business contacts daughters or anything like that okay? Her name is Abbi. Just drop it. I mean it."

They both said nothing for a while. His father took a deep breath. "What's her last name?"

"Wilkins, Why?" Mark asked.

"I just wondered," his father said. "I won't interfere. I do think that you should bring her to the summer ball though."

Mark hadn't thought of that. Maybe he should invite Abbi. She might enjoy it after all. "I'll ask her." His father looked much more happy. "If she doesn't want to come, though, the subject's dropped, okay?"

"That's fine", his father said, evidently assuming that every girl would want to go to a ball. He left Mark on his own to think things over. He decided he would give Abbi a call. Despite the fact that she might be asleep, he really wanted to talk to her and make plans to make up for last night.

Abbi's phone ringing woke her up. It was eight o'clock in the morning she saw as she glanced at her clock. Before she thought about it she answered the call.

"Hi its me." Mark's voice burst out of the phone. She hung up as quickly as possible while the feeling of unhappiness spread through her. His voice had brought it all back to her. She now remembered what had happened last night that her sleep-ridden head had tried to forget. She heard her phone go again and looked at caller ID. It was Mark again. She ignored it and got dressed.

By midday it was getting ridiculous. Her inbox was filled with text messages ranging from "I'm really sorry for cancelling please talk 2 me" to "y r u so angry wiv me. I didn't mean for it to happen. I really wanted to b wiv u." Even one or two in the vein of "Come on pick up ur fone!! I need to talk 2 u!"

Abbi also had six voicemails begging her to talk to him and asking why she was ignoring him. He had been trying to talk to her for the best part of four hours. Her phone rang again. She finally gave in and picked up the phone.

"What do you want," she said sharply when she answered.

"Thank God you actually picked up," Mark said. He sounded genuinely relieved.

"What do you want?" She repeated.

"Why are you ignoring me?" Mark asked. "I'm really sorry about last night and I did try to get out of it."

"I am not mad that you cancelled," she said furiously. "I'm mad that you were helping a gorgeous brunette, in the shortest dress known to man, into a taxi and you were laughing with her while telling me you were at a business meeting." He didn't say anything for a moment. His silence for that second was damning.

"I can explain that," he started.

"Don't bother," and Abbi ended the call.

Mark waited about a minute before he tried to call her again. How on earth had she seen Jessica and him together. She must have followed him when he cancelled their dinner plans. He called her. It rang and rang until it went into voicemail.

"Hi Abbi. I really want to talk to you but you won't pick up the phone. The only reason I was even within throwing distance of that girl was because it was a event where I am in effect showcased. I am the heir to a very rich company and these girls just act like it's open season. I don't care if I never see her again. I do want you to call me. Just...Call me. Bye."

Mark thought that that was just how he wanted it to sound. It was the truth anyway. He had noticed it for a couple of years now. Girls seemed to throw themselves at him simply because of the state of his father's bank account. It had never bothered him before. It just seemed to be a fact of life for him. The way things were. They were starting to do it to Steve now as well.

Not as much as towards Mark himself because Mark was going to get the lion's share of the company, money and properties. He hoped she would listen to his message.

"Just...Call me. Bye." Abbi had just finished listening to the message. She didn't know what to think. He actually had several good points. After all why wouldn't girls want to ally themselves with all that wealth. She knew enough about the rich and powerful people to know that money was a serious enticement for those circles. Also she hadn't seen him doing anything romantic with her. They were just getting into a car. She realised she was already talking herself around to his way of thinking.

She was going to call him. Abbi picked up her phone and pressed speed dial to call him. Mark picked up before the first ring had died away.

"Hi," Mark said.

"Hi," Abbi replied. "I'm sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusion. I just saw a gorgeous girl getting into a car with the guy I like. I was knocked for six a bit."

"That is more than okay." Mark said. "So you're not mad at me any more?"

"No," she replied.

"I do have a question for you though," Mark began. "How did you see me? Did you follow me?"

"That's two questions", she said. "But no I didn't follow you. I was disappointed that we weren't going out to Lily's so I went for a walk. Before I knew where I was going I just walked to the hotel where I work. It was out of habit rather than anything else."

"Are we okay?" Mark asked her.

"Yeah." She was smiling.

"Do you want to go out tonight?" Mark asked. "I promise I'll show up this time."

"No I can't tonight." She was quite disappointed. "I've got to work."

"Okay then what about tomorrow night? How about a movie?"

"Yeah, that sounds great. See you tomorrow Mark."

"Bye."

Chapter 5

Meeting Eleanor

It was one o'clock in the afternoon and Eleanor was working on her stack of ironing while listening to the radio. Abbi had gone out somewhere. Eleanor had no idea where she had gone. Suddenly there was a huge banging knock on the door. Eleanor stood the iron up on the board and switched off the radio. When she opened the door she had no idea who the man standing there was.

"Can I help you?" Eleanor asked. He was a tall man who looked in his late forties and he was wearing a suit. "Are you Eleanor Wilkins?" the man asked.

"Yes," she said nervously. "Who are you?"

"I'm George Hammond. Mark's father," he added in response to the blank look Eleanor gave him.

"What do you want?" she asked him.

"Can I come in?" he said. "I want to discuss something with you?" Eleanor hesitated but then decided to let him in. She opened the door and showed him to the living room.

"Do you want anything to drink?" Eleanor asked. "Tea, coffee?"

"Black coffee, no sugar please," George said. Within five minutes they were both sitting down staring at each other.

"What do you want?" Eleanor repeated. George smiled at her.

"I'm sure you know that your daughter is dating my son. I want it to stop," he said bluntly.

"They have been seeing each other for a week," Eleanor said slowly. "You don't know my daughter, you don't know me. What is the problem?"

"Look, I am sure that your daughter is a lovely person," he said in a tone, which showed he doubted it. "But I know my

son. He has gone out with girls before. It's never been serious. I can tell with Abbi that it's different. It's more serious than the others. He's behaving differently than normal."

"It is none of our business," Eleanor said taking a sip of her tea.

"I want it stopped," George said clearly.

"Supposing, for arguments sake, I agreed with you," she said carefully. "What do you want me to do?"

George looked mightily relieved that he seemed to be making progress quickly. "If you used your influence on Abbi to stop her seeing Mark I would be prepared to sign this check for fifty thousand pounds." George got out of his suit pocket a check.

"You want to buy me and my daughter off," Eleanor said plainly. She wasn't asking him. She was merely stating a fact.

"Oh come on," George said. "I know what fifty thousand pounds could do for you. All you have to do is influence her to end the relationship."

"What if I tell her that Mark is awful? I tell her that he is Satan on earth. What if she doesn't listen? And she might not listen to me. I'm not sure how much she cares about what I think. What happens then in your grand master plan?" Eleanor watched as George took a deep breath.

"I will appreciate the attempt and I will give you ten thousand for trying."

"I need to think about this," she said quietly.

"Fine," George said instantly, sure that in the cold light of day the money would sway her. "Call me on this number when you have made a decision." He gave her a card and left the room. Eleanor noticed that he hadn't drunk any of his coffee.

She was thinking hard. She could tell that Abbi really liked Mark. What right did she have to tell her daughter to stop seeing Mark, simply based on the money? On the other hand the money would come in useful. Things were getting really tight at the moment. What should she do? She knew that she should ignore him but the money was very tempting. What was she going to do? She had no idea. Well, at least she had time to think it through.

They had arranged to meet at seven so that they could get to the cinema when doors open at half past. Abbi was by the

Sunset Hotel waiting for Mark. She had gotten dressed up in a purple sundress with a black shrug, flat shoes and her long hair down. Mark very quickly materialised by her side. He was wearing a dark shirt and jeans. He looked very good. He gave her a kiss on the cheek in greeting.

"Right," she said. "How are we getting there?"

"I've got a car around the corner," he said. Abbi thought that she should have expected nothing less.

"I must admit that I didn't realise quite how rich your family were," Abbi said. "Property development must definitely be the business to be in."

"Yes well my father made enough money to make some investments", he said. "They paid off and he seems to have the ability to just make more money off existing money. He just has the talent for it. This is mine."

They had stopped by a dark blue small car and got in. The cinema wasn't too far away so it was quite a short journey.

"What does your mum do?" he asked her.

"She runs an ironing company from home", she said. "She doesn't make a lot of money but it's enough to live on." Before too long they were at the cinema and parked.

Abbi took a deep breath. "Before we go in I've got an idea. Follow me." She dashed off to the local shop just a few doors down.

"I thought you weren't allowed to take stuff like food into the cinema", he said.

"You can't. They inflate the prices like mad though. It's ten times cheaper to pay for it here so I take it in myself," she said. "What's your point?" Abbi had a huge grin on her face. "Why do you think I have this huge bag?" She grabbed a packet of sweets.

"Oh I thought you had that huge bag because you got some more keys," he teased her.

"Pick a bottle of wine," she told him choosing to ignore his last comment.

"We can't do that," he said.

"Oh of course we can," she assured him. "I've got two plastic glasses in my bag. So pick one. A screw top one though, I didn't bring a corkscrew."

Mark stared at her. "You are amazing."

"Thanks." She let her eyes linger on him for a moment longer than necessary. "So wine?"

Ten minutes later they were both sitting in the cinema. They were going to watch some romance film, which Mark had picked for her, Abbi suspected. "Shall we open the wine then?" he whispered as people were starting to come nearer them.

"No," she said immediately. "We'll wait for the lights to go down and open it during the titles."

"You've done this before." It wasn't a question because he instantly knew that she was right. Had they opened it now they would most probably have been caught and thrown out.

"I can't have too much you know," he told her. "I am driving."

"Well it's a good thing we aren't opening it until the movie starts isn't it?" Abbi said and gave him a dazzling smile.

Two hours later the curtain closed and the movie had finished. Half a bottle of wine was sitting on the floor forgotten by both of them. Mark had his arm around Abbi's neck and she was resting her head on his shoulder. They were both quite sorry to see the film end. Not that it had been good but they had both got very comfortable with each other.

They left and got back to the car. "That was an awful movie," Abbi said

"God yeah it was terrible," he agreed. They drove back and talked about mundane things like how the lead actor was the worst thing as no one could possibly believe his performance.

They were just getting back when Abbi said quickly, "turn left."

He obliged and when down a lane. "Why this way?" he asked. "I don't know where we are going."

"I do," she replied. "We're almost there. I live down here." Mark raised his eyebrows in silent question. "I realised you didn't know where I live so I thought you could drop me off. Stop the car." There was only one building in sight. It must be where she lived he realised. It was quite a small bungalow.

"Your mum won't be mad your getting home late?"

"No. I was back at midnight the other night.", she said. "It's barely ten now.

Mark leaned across to kiss her cheek. "You look beautiful," he said. He then kissed her lips softly until he felt her respond. He stopped and looked her in the eyes. They really were beautiful. A gorgeous hazel colour.

"Do you want me to come in and meet your mum?" he said quietly. She didn't say anything for a moment.

"Only if you want to," she whispered.

"Yeah I'll come in." He gave her another kiss. "Come on." They both left the car and went up to the bungalow.

"I'll just go in first and tell her that you're going to come in okay?" Mark smiled at her. She left him on the doorstep. Abbi found her mother curled up on the sofa reading a book.

"Hi sweetie," she said without looking up.

"Mum, Mark's waiting outside." Her mother looked up sharply. "Is it okay if he comes in?"

"Yeah sure." Abbi walked away to let him in. Eleanor was shocked to say the least. She had no idea what to expect of this guy with whom her daughter couldn't seem to manage without seeing at least every other day. It had been less than a week and already he was brave enough to meet the girlfriend's mother.

Before she knew it he had entered the living room. Eleanor stood up to meet him

"Mark, this is Eleanor Wilkins my mother. Mum this is Mark Hammond," Abbi said by way of an introduction.

Mark shook hands with Eleanor and said, "nice to meet you Mrs Wilkins"

"Call me Eleanor," she said smiling. "Would you like anything to drink?" Eleanor offered.

"No thank you." Mark was being very polite and charming. "No I was just dropping Abbi off and I thought it was a nice idea if I met you before I left. Good evening." Mark gave Abbi a last kiss on the cheek. "I'll call you. Bye."

Mark left and a few moments later they heard his car rumbling away. "Well?" Abbi asked. When her mother said nothing she added, "what did you think?"

"He is very nice isn't he?"

"That's all you've got to say?" Abbi seemed slightly disappointed.

"Fine okay then," her mother said. "I think it's been under a week and he is willing to meet your mother. He must be crazy about you. He's polite, rich and drop dead gorgeous."

"So you approve?" Abbi seemed to feel that she needed her mother's approval.

"From what I've seen so far yes." Abbi beamed from ear to ear.

"Good. Right I'm going to bed," and Abbi left the living room. She got to her room and couldn't remember being just as happy as she was at this present moment. Her phone beeped and she had a message.

"How did I do? J xxx M"

The next morning Mark thought he would surprise Abbi by taking her out to breakfast. He drove around to her house and parked outside. It was early on Friday morning. Mark wasn't convinced she would be up yet and he didn't want to disturb her. He spent about twenty minutes watching when he got the shock of his life.

Eleanor was right outside his car watching him through the car window. Mark immediately wound down the window while his heart rate slowed down.

"What are you doing?" Eleanor looked suspicious.

"I wanted to take Abbi out to breakfast," Mark said.

"Okay," Eleanor said. "In that case why are you sitting in your car staring at the house? You could come in you know?"

"I wasn't sure anyone would be up yet," he said honestly. "That thought only occurred to me when I had already driven here. I didn't want to disturb anyone."

Eleanor smiled. "I don't bite, you know. Come in." She opened the car door and Mark got out. "You were right by the way," Eleanor continued. "It's only half past eight. Abbi is still asleep. She usually has a lie in if she isn't working. It's a reaction from years of getting up early for school."

Eleanor opened the door and led Mark inside. They were in the hall. On the left there was the living room, which he had been in last night. That had an open space, which led through to the kitchen so you could be in the kitchen and still know what was going on in the living room. Eleanor walked into the kitchen and Mark followed.

"Do you want a cup of tea?" she asked, filling up the kettle.

"Yes that would be lovely," he said. Mark was trying to think of anything to say to her and was coming up with absolutely nothing. Silence surrounded them as the kettle started to boil.

"Sugar?"

"One please." Eleanor then sat down opposite him.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'm not going to interrogate you about your intentions or other nonsense like that."

Mark laughed. "Okay then." She stared at him for a moment.

"How old are you?"

"Why?", he asked.

"Oh, I just wondered," Eleanor shrugged her shoulders. Mark took a sip of his tea and looked around the room before answering. It was a small homey kitchen. It was basically a square with the table in the middle and all the appliances around the room- like the fridge, cooker, microwave and things like that. He saw that Eleanor was watching him taking in the surroundings.

"I'm twenty. Twenty one in September," he said to cut the silence.

"I'm sure our surroundings aren't what you are used to," she said scathingly.

Mark looked her straight in the eye and replied, "I was not thinking anything like that. I was actually thinking how nice everything looked."

Eleanor smiled begrudgingly. "Even if you are just saying that- it was very convincing." After a while she added, "Why are you really here?"

"I told you", Mark said. "I wanted to take Abbi out for breakfast."

"And?" Mark shrugged. "Look, I believe that as far as it goes", Eleanor said. "But I think there is more to it than that. You could have phoned her last night and arranged that. Even if you want it to be a surprise you still seem like you are hiding something."

"You are remarkably astute," he said and she laughed.

"What is it?" she asked him.

"There is something I want to ask her," Mark said slowly. "There is a ball in two weeks that I would like to take her to. My father and his circle book out a hotel a little outside London for the weekend and we go to a ballroom down the road. I would really love to take her with me," Mark finished and looked at Eleanor. He couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"She would stay overnight?" Eleanor asked.

Mark could tell that might become an issue. She was a mother after all. "Yes. We would go down early on Saturday morning and come back on Sunday afternoon."

"I quite like you and I'm going to tell you something that I might regret," Eleanor said. "I got a visit from someone I wasn't expecting yesterday." Mark looked blank as she had expected. Of course his father wouldn't have told him. "It was from your father."

Mark's mouth fell open. "How did he know where to find you?"

"I imagine money talks", she said dryly. "Anyway. He came over and offered me a proposition. He said that if I told my daughter to stay away from you I would be given ten grand." Mark looked incredibly shocked and hurt. "If it actually worked and you two broke up because of it he said I would get fifty grand."

Mark was opening and closing his mouth like a fish. "But... How..." Mark tailed off into silence while he tried to comprehend this. When he found his voice he asked, "why are you telling me this?"

"Because I hadn't decided what to do yet", she said calmly. "But you come over here and spend your time talking to Abbi's mother and being polite. What I am trying to say is that you seem quite nice. You are telling me about the ball that

you are planning to take her to so I thought I would tell you about your father and the ways he spends his money."

"All in all I don't like being bribed no matter how much is offered or the reason," she finished.

"Thank you," Mark said quietly. "Is it alright if I ask Abbi to come with me to the ball?"

Eleanor was thinking. "You can ask her. She's nineteen, I can't stop her going."

"But you won't do what my father asked you to," Mark said.

"No," Eleanor replied smiling. "I'm not available to be bought."

At that moment Abbi came walking into the kitchen. She was wearing a dressing gown and her hair in a mess. Clearly she had just got out of bed.

"Morning," Mark said cheerfully. She froze. Abbi was clearly surprised to see him there.

"What are you doing here?" she said at the same time as running her hands through her hair trying to straighten it out.

"I'm going to take you out to breakfast," Mark said. "Get changed and I'll be here." Abbi rushed out of the kitchen and went back into her room to get dressed quickly.

"Are you going to tell Abbi what your father offered me," Eleanor asked.

"Probably," Mark said. "Thank you for the tea." They both smiled at each other until Abbi came back dressed and ready to go.

"Bye mum," she yelled as she went out the door. Eleanor was left wondering if she had done the right thing by telling Mark. She went to the fridge and dialled George Hammond's number.

When she got through to him she said, "This is Eleanor Wilkins. You can stuff your fifty grand. I am not going to be bribed," and she slammed down the phone. She felt much better after that. She felt relief.

Chapter 6

Shopping

Mark had taken Abbi to a little café, which did early morning breakfasts (despite the fact that it wasn't early morning any more). The café did all breakfast foods you could imagine. There were full English breakfasts, croissants, toast, cereals, eggs, kippers, pancakes and omelettes. Mark had ordered a bit of everything so that neither of them had to choose.

"We will never eat all of this," Abbi said. Mark shrugged.

"I thought that we could try all of it so we don't miss anything," he said. "To make up for the dinner that I missed." She smiled at him. "I want to ask you something."

"I'm listening," she said while buttering a piece of toast.

"My father is hosting a ball coming up in a couple of weeks. A society ball", he said. He got out a small envelope with an invitation inside and handed it to her. "I would like you to come with me." Abbi dropped her toast and looked down at her plate.

"I can't," she said. When Mark didn't say anything Abbi looked at him. He looked very disappointed.

"Why not?" he said.

"Because I don't want to go," she lied. She still had the envelope in her hand and was trying hard not to look at it.

"I think you're lying," he said lightly. "Why won't you come with me?"

"Because I can't afford to," she said turning red. "I'm barely above minimum wage. I could never spend that kind of money on a dress I would likely only ever wear once."

"Look in the envelope," he said. Slowly she opened it. The envelope hadn't been closed, just tucked in. Inside there

was a headed paper with Claire's Dresses written elegantly on the top. There was an account number and quite a lot of business jargon that she didn't bother to read.

"What is this?" she asked.

"It's an instruction to the owner of Claire's to charge what you spend to our account. With all our details," he said simply.

"I can't take this," she said surprised. "You have known me for a week. You can't give me all this money just so I will go with you to this ball."

"I'm not giving you money, I am giving you a dress. Do you want to go?" he asked her. Abbi's eyes lit up in spite of herself. Evidently she did want to go. "These things are incredibly dull and I have to spend all weekend talking to people I don't like about things I have no interest in. Believe me you would be doing me a favour."

"So it's a weekend thing?" she asked.

"Is that a yes?" he said looking in her eyes.

"Yeah, I'll go," she said.

"That's great," he said and he kissed her.

"We have only known each other a week," she said. "Are you sure that you won't change your mind by the time we leave?"

He shook his head. "Will you?"

"No," she replied. It felt slightly strange to both of them that they had only known each other a week. It felt like an awful lot longer than that. They finished eating and left. They were walking down the street when Abbi started to notice that something was wrong. Mark hadn't said anything since leaving the café and he was looking unhappy.

"What's wrong?" she said. "I will go with you. I'm looking forward to it."

"It's not that," he said immediately. "I heard something this morning that is eating away at me." Abbi didn't say anything. She waited for him to continue. "Your mother told me what my father did yesterday. He visited her and offered her... He offered her fifty thousand pounds if she persuaded you to stop seeing me."

Abbi's mouth fell open. "Why?"

"I imagine he thinks it is his business to know who I am seeing", Mark said. "I'm not dating one of the girls he thinks I should be." He was careful not to mention Jessica. He didn't know how Abbi might react to her. "He was being his usual interfering self."

"Why didn't my mother tell me?" Abbi was thinking that maybe her mother had wanted the money and would have done what George Hammond had wanted her to.

"I don't know," Mark said. Abbi hadn't really been expecting an answer. She was talking to herself.

"Do you still want to go out with me?" Abbi said.

"What are you talking about? Of course I do," he said fiercely.

"Your father clearly dislikes me without knowing anything about me," she said.

"Forget him," he said and he kissed her. They carried on walking down the street.

When Abbi got home she went up to her mother.

"Why didn't you tell me about the money Mark's dad offered you?!" Eleanor was sitting down in the kitchen sipping a mug of tea.

"Ah. Mark told you then?" she said quickly.

"Yes he told me!" Abbi ranted. "I would have expected you to tell me. I've lived with you for my entire life. I've known him for one week and he tells me something that important first!"

"Hold on Abbi that's not fair," Eleanor started. "He has spent more time with you this week than I have. You were out yesterday afternoon, then out with Mark in the evening and back out with him this morning. When was I supposed to tell you? It's not something I can slip in to conversation. Also who do you think told him?"

Abbi didn't know what to say to that. Her mum was right. She went out in the afternoon yesterday to sit on the beach. She had come home and left again pretty much straight away. Mark was here this morning too which must have been when her mum told him. With a shock she realised she had spent hardly any time at home since she had met Mark.

Between work, Mark and generally going out she seemed suddenly very busy.

"I'm sorry I had a go at you," Abbi said sitting down next to her mum.

"That's fine," she said very quietly.

"Would you ever have taken it?" Abbi asked.

"I'm not going to lie to you, it was very tempting," Eleanor said. Abbi raised her eyebrows and looked like she was going to interrupt. "But I thought about it long and hard and decided that if you wanted to go out with him, I shouldn't interfere. No matter what money was at stake."

"Thank you," Abbi said. "You don't mind if I go to a ball do you?" Eleanor shook her head. Abbi got a can of coca cola and sat back down next to her mother. Each woman lost in their own thoughts.

As soon as Mark got to the hotel he went in search of his father. He found him in the lounge tapping away on his laptop.

"What are you playing at?!" Mark shouted at his father.

"Do you have to shout," his father said without looking up.

"You offered Abbi's mum fifty thousand pounds if Abbi broke up with me!"

"How on earth did you find out about that?" His father looked really shocked. Mark had actually managed to make his father look shocked!

"If you want things to go according to your plans you shouldn't try to bribe people you don't know. You never know how they are going to react."

"Eleanor told you," he said.

"I know you will find this hard to believe but not everything in the world can be bought. By the way I asked Abbi to the ball so you can meet her," Mark said. His father looked like he was going to start smoking at the ears. "Remember dad, you told me to invite her."

"Yes but I only did that because I planned to pay Eleanor that money," his father said quietly. Not quietly enough.

"Let this be, okay. I've already told her to buy a dress okay. She is going tomorrow. I am not cancelling on her again. Especially if the only reason is you being a complete idiot." Mark walked out on his father leaving him staring after him. This had completely backfired on him, George thought. This relationship would have to be stopped. His eldest son and heir could not be going out with a cheap two-bit gold digger. It just wasn't going to happen. He would have to think of another way to stop it.

Later that evening when Abbi got to work she met Rosalyn.

"Hi," Abbi said while hanging her jacket up and tying her blonde hair out of the way. "How are you?"

"Oh I'm fine," Rosalyn said. "What's with you?"

"What?"

"Come on," she said. "You've got a huge grin all over your face. Who is he?"

"It's none of your business," Abbi said while she tried to stop smiling. She wasn't entirely successful. Rosalyn didn't say anything waiting for Abbi to speak first. "His name is Mark Hammond," she said quietly.

"Mark Hammond," Rosalyn said incredulously, her voice turning into a high-pitched squeal. "The son of George Hammond. George Hammond who is the amazingly wealthy guy staying in this hotel?"

"Yes. Now please keep your voice down," Abbi whispered.

"Afraid he'll hear you," Rosalyn teased her.

"Do you want to hear what I've got to say or not?" Abbi said still smiling. Rosalyn nodded.

"Mark has asked me to a ball in a couple of weeks. Do you want to come ball dress shopping with me tomorrow?" Abbi didn't know why she had said that. She hadn't meant to.

"Yeah," Rosalyn said eagerly. "Where?"

"Claire's Dresses in New Port."

"I've never even been in there. Are you working tomorrow morning?" Rosalyn asked clearly excited.

"Yeah I am."

"Come up to my house when you have finished. You know where it is up the road?" she barely waited for Abbi to nod and carried on. "I'll be ready to go."

"Girls are you going to get any work done tonight or not?" Bill had appeared and was looking mock stern at them. They both walked away and got on with their work.

As Abbi was walking home in the dark she got a call. It was Mark.

"Hi," Abbi said.

"Hi. I can't sleep," he said.

"Okay and what am I going to about that?" she stopped walking so she could talk properly to him.

"Nothing. I just wanted to call you. I knew you were working so you wouldn't be asleep yet."

"What is the time?" she asked

"It's just gone eleven. Where are you?"

"I'm on my way home. I will have no trouble sleeping tonight. I am shattered. It was a hard night tonight. Idiotic customers are the worst."

"Do you want to do something with me tomorrow?" he asked.

"No I can't," she said immediately. "I'm busy tomorrow."

"Doing what?" he asked curiously.

"I have to get up at seven and serve breakfast at the hotel. When I have finished there at about twelve thirty I have to go and buy a ball dress. After that I am back at the hotel to serve dinners. I will then climb into bed completely exhausted."

"I have to tell you something", Mark said. "We won't be staying at the hotel after this weekend. We are moving to our holiday home."

"Okay. You'll have to show me where that is sometime."

"Sure thing," Mark said.

"I have got to go," she said. "I need to get some sleep for my busy day tomorrow."

"Okay then. Talk to you tomorrow. Bye."

The next day Abbi said goodbye to her mother in the morning saying she might not see her again until much later in the day. She was really looking forward to the day. The morning seemed to snail by. Finally she switched the vacuum cleaner off and packed it away. Abbi sprinted out of the hotel and raced to Rosalyn's. She was so excited about the type of dresses she would get to try on.

She rushed up to Rosalyn's and saw that she was already in her car. She jumped in and they were off. It was a half an hour journey during which they talked about work. Rosalyn did ask how she could afford this.

"Mark is paying for my dress", Abbi said shortly. She still felt slightly guilty for spending his money. That guilt evaporated when she got to the shop and saw the fabulous gowns just in the window. They both went in and heard a bell ring. Shortly they were met by an elegant thin woman in her fifties. She had her grey hair gracefully swept up and was surveying them with dislike through her glasses.

"Yes?"

"I'm here to pick out my ball dress for the Hammond ball in two weeks time," Abbi said. The woman's face softened slightly.

"I don't mean to be rude," the woman said. "But how do you intend to pay for one of my dresses. They are very expensive."

Abbi had a smile all over her face as she handed the woman the letter that used her own-headed paper. She immediately became much friendlier.

She smiled and said, "I'm sorry about that. I have been getting people trying on my dresses who have no intention of buying them. I'm Georgina. You're the only one here at the moment. A couple more girls for the ball said they would come at some point today." She showed them through to the back of the shop where they had rows of gowns and changing rooms.

"What exactly are you looking for?" Georgina asked while rummaging through the dresses. Rosalyn and Abbi looked at each other. "You have no idea do you." Georgina was smiling at them kindly though. "Don't worry, we will find something perfect for you. Any colour preference?"

"I don't want black," Abbi said instantly. "Nothing in too bright a colour either so no bright pinks or anything like that." Georgina didn't say anything, just picked out one gown and told Abbi to try it on. It was a gorgeous pale blue mid calf length dress. It had a v neckline and long floating sleeves. She came out of the changing room and asked what they thought. Rosalyn didn't say anything. Georgina immediately shook her head.

"That won't do. It's not the right style. Try this one." Abbi looked at her slightly surprised.

"I thought you would be more concerned with making a sale than making me look good," she said.

"Nonsense," Georgina said instantly. "If you don't suit your dress than the dresses aren't shown to their best." At Abbi's look she added, "It's all about advertising and customer satisfaction."

Next Abbi tried on a dark blue sleeveless knee length dress. Georgina seemed slightly more enthusiastic about this one. "Yes. Yes that is a bit better. Definitely a sleeveless dress for you I think." Rosalyn still had her mouth shut.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Abbi asked her.

"I don't know what to say", Rosalyn said. "They are all so stunning I don't know how to pick anything."

"I'm glad I brought you with me then," Abbi said sarcastically. She then tried on a yellow sleeveless full-length dress. Georgina cast her critical eye over it. "What do you think?" she asked Abbi.

"I like the length and I like it sleeveless too. The colour is awful for me and I'm not sure I like the skirt."

"Okay I can work with that," Georgina said. Abbi tried on an awful lot of dresses in a similar style. Then she tried on a silver dress. It was full length and sleeveless like the others. The dress shimmered when it caught the light but it wasn't an "in your face" type of silver. As soon as she came out of the changing room Rosalyn gasped.

"That's the one," she said immediately.

"You're sure?" Abbi asked.

"Absolutely," Georgina said. "That is perfect for you. You will quite literally be the belle of the ball!" Abbi looked at herself in the mirror. It did look beautiful she thought. As she

changed back into her clothes she was so excited about the ball. When she came out Georgina asked her if that was definitely the one she wanted to take. Abbi nodded.

"Right, I just have to get a box for it and find the matching gloves," Georgina said.

"Wait! Gloves?" Abbi asked worried.

"Trust me, everyone wears them at the Hammond summer ball." When Abbi still didn't look too happy she added, "if no one is wearing them when you're there, which I doubt, you can always take them off."

Abbi and Rosalyn went to sit in the front of the shop.

"What do you think?" Abbi asked her.

"You are so lucky," Rosalyn told her.

"I know," she said and they both laughed until two girls came into the shop.

"...ething like this Jess," a redheaded girl was saying.

"This is going to be the best night of the year," the girl called Jess said. With a start Abbi realised that she had seen that girl before but couldn't place it.

"I can't wait for the ball. It's going to be great," the girl called Jess continued

"Yeah and you are going to have such fun," the red-head said. "I don't even have a date yet."

"Well it's sort of agreed that Mark's going with me," Jess said. Abbi suddenly remembered where she had seen her before. She was getting into the car with Mark on the day of his business dinner. She was beautiful.

"You're so lucky," redhead said. "The heir to all that wealth. And he is really good looking too." Both girls laughed. Abbi didn't know what to think. At that moment Georgina came back into the room carrying a huge box, which had her dress in it

"Here we go. Hello girls I'll be with you in a moment. Right, I'm charging it to that account there," she said to Abbi brandishing the piece of paper at her. Abbi started to shake her head but then stopped.

"Yeah," she said. As they were driving back Abbi was thinking hard to herself. If Mark was never going to take her, why give her the money? Maybe she was just being paranoid.

Why would that girl say that though if it wasn't true. And she had been getting into the car with Mark.

As Jessica was leaving the shop she felt horrible. She was going out of her way to try to upset Abbi. She had known exactly who she was because George Hammond had called her mother to discuss the problem. Both sets of parents seemed to find the Mark-Jessica match a good one.

Jessica knew that the blonde girl's name was Abbi Wilkins because of George Hammond. She also knew that Abbi's mother was not going to help them split Abbi and Mark up. But then why should she? Abbi's mother was probably seeing pound signs before her eyes already.

It wasn't right to do that to her. It probably wouldn't work anyway, Jessica thought. It was a feeble and stupid attempt to try to derail them. Jessica sighed to herself in the car on the way home. She wished this would go away.

Rosalyn said goodbye to Abbi as she dropped her off outside her house. They hadn't spoken much on the journey home. Before Abbi went inside she gave Mark a call.

"Hi," he said.

"I overheard a conversation in Claire's Dresses today," Abbi said cutting to the chase. "A girl came in and she mentioned to her friend that Mark Hammond was her date to the ball."

"That's not true," he said. "Who was this girl?"

"I think her friend called her Jess," Abbi said. She heard him sigh over the phone.

"She has been determined to get together with me for a while now," he said. "I don't know what has got into her head but she won't leave me alone. She must have been winding you up."

"Yeah," Abbi nodded. "I was inclined to think that too, which is why I bought my ball dress."

"You've got a dress already?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's beautiful," she said. "Thank you for giving me the money for it."

"Forget it. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Sure." They both hung up their phones as Abbi walked into her house carrying her dress. Smiling away to herself.

"My God," her mother said. "That box is huge!" Abbi walked into her room carrying the box and placed it on her bed.

"I know," Abbi said. "It looks beautiful though. I'll try it on for you." Within five minutes Abbi had emerged from her room wearing the gorgeous silver dress. She hadn't put on the elbow length gloves. She still thought they were too much.

"Well?" Abbi asked turning around. "What do you think?"

"You look beautiful," her mother said, slightly awed. "It's a stunning gown. You are definitely going then?"

"Of course I'm going. I can't not go now I have this dress. Let's face it, where else am I going to wear it?" Her mother let out a childish giggle.

"I would have loved to go to a ball when I was your age," she said wistfully.

"You don't mind that it's going to be overnight?" Abbi asked.

"You are nineteen. In the autumn you will be twenty. You're old enough to make your own decisions," Eleanor said carefully. "I don't mind."

Abbi's face lit into a grin. "Thanks mum. Now I have to go to work." Twenty minutes later Abbi was slamming the door shut. Eleanor was smiling too. It was nice to see her daughter that happy. She dearly wished that this boy wouldn't one day break her daughters heart. He probably would though. He didn't live around here. It was a set up for eventual disaster as it could never last.

The next couple of weeks passed relatively peacefully. Mark and Abbi saw each other almost everyday and they called each other much more. Eleanor could see that Mark was well on his way to stealing her daughter's heart. It reminded her of when she herself was young and in love.

George Hammond considered his sons behaviour to be very inappropriate. Mark couldn't seem to manage to spend

a day without this new girl. Abbi seemed to have a spell over him. Even asking Jessica to go to the dress shop to wind Abbi up hadn't worked. Either Jessica hadn't been very convincing or Abbi had simply ignored it. Now Jessica he considered to be a fine match for his eldest son. The daughter of one of his close associates. He would encourage that to work.

Abbi felt herself to fall a little more in love with him with every day that passed. Mark missed her when she was busy working or just quite simply wasn't with him. He wanted to be around her all the time. Slowly the weekend of the ball came around. A whole weekend that he would get to share with her.

They were due to leave early on Saturday morning. Abbi got a call from Rosalyn the night before they were leaving.

"Hi Abbi, look I need a favour," Rosalyn burst out.

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" Abbi said grimly. She knew she wouldn't like it. She could just sense it.

"I need you to cover my shift at the hotel tomorrow morning," she said in a rush.

"Rosalyn, you know I can't," Abbi said slowly. "I booked this weekend off two weeks ago, when I got the invitation to the Hammond ball. I can't cover for you."

"Oh please Abbi," Rosalyn pleaded. "I know you are going to the ball but I'm busy for the first couple of hours. I'd be back to take over by half ten. Roger's family has unexpectedly descended on him and I'm needed to help him sort through the guest room so they don't all sleep on the floor. I can't do it tonight as I'm doing your usual shift because you're packing for your dream weekend."

"Rosalyn, I can't," Abbi started. Rosalyn just didn't get it. "Mark's getting here just before nine and we are leaving straight away. You know that. I've already told you."

"Look I need this. You out of the blue booked the weekend off, so I'm stuck doing your shifts. I'm just asking for a few hours. Please!"

Rosalyn sounded quite desperate. "Call someone else. I can't do it. I'm sorry." She heard Rosalyn breathing hard.

"I'll remember this," and Abbi flinched as she heard the phone being slammed down. Abbi tried to ignore what

Rosalyn had said and went back to packing her suitcase. Her parting words rung out in Abbi's head. She and Rosalyn quite often swapped shifts if one of them was stuck. She didn't want to make Rosalyn her enemy, as she was a good mate to have at work. "I was in the right though," Abbi said to herself. She had booked this time off a while ago. She had made it clear to everyone that she simply was not available this weekend. She sighed inwardly as she clipped her suitcase shut.

Mark had finished packing his stuff for the weekend. His mother had already left to make sure that the hotel that everyone was staying at was up to the usual standard. His father was barely speaking to him and Steve was leaving his packing to last thing in the morning before he left.

Mark couldn't wait to pick Abbi up. This weekend was going to be perfect. His family had moved to their holiday home nearly two weeks ago. He had packed using several small bags as his suitcase still had some of the debris from staying at the Sunset hotel. He still hadn't properly unpacked yet. But that didn't matter. Tomorrow was going to be great.

Chapter 7

The Ball

It was Saturday morning and Abbi had been awake since six. She was so excited that she couldn't go back to sleep. Abbi had been sitting in the living room since eight waiting for Mark to drive up and pick her up. Her mother kept shooting glances at Abbi. After half an hour of this Abbi snapped.

"What is wrong with you?"

"I want you to be careful okay?" her mother said. She waited for Abbi to nod before carrying on. "Don't do anything that you aren't ready for."

Abbi suddenly got the gist of what her mother was trying to say. "I'm not planning to sleep with him."

"Even if you were, you aren't very likely to tell me are you?" Abbi privately admitted that her mother had a valid point. She wasn't going to tell her about what happened between herself and Mark.

"Anyway that's not the point," Abbi's mother continued. "I just want you to only do what you are happy with."

"I've got the message mum," Abbi said irritated. Suddenly she heard an engine driving up and slowing down. She jumped up and looked out the window. "He's here!" She gave her mum a quick hug.

"I understand what you're saying," she told her mum. Abbi shouted a goodbye to her mum as she dragged her suitcase behind her.

"Hi," she said as she met Mark and kissed him.

"Looking forward to today?" he asked her. Abbi nodded. "Do you want me to say goodbye to your mum?" he asked.

Abbi hesitated. After what her mum had said to her, she didn't want her to say anything like that to Mark. "No she'll be fine," Abbi said. She could see her mum looking out of

a window at them. They both waved at her. She waved back. Quite quickly they were driving along the road away from her house.

"How come you have so many bags?" she asked him. As they were putting her suitcase in the boot Abbi had noticed four or five smaller bags.

"My suitcase hasn't really been unpacked since I moved from the Sunset hotel," he said. "I guess I'm just lazy."

Mark was driving and Abbi didn't feel like starting a conversation. Abbi could drive, she had passed her test in February, but she didn't have a car. What was the point when work was just a five-minute walk away?

"You still haven't shown me where you live now," she said to break the silence.

"I will," he said.

They got to Greenford hotel after driving for two hours. Abbi had a look at the building. It looked like a huge mansion. "How many rooms are here?" she asked.

"Seventy two at last count," he said pleased at her awed expression.

"Is the ballroom here as well?" she asked.

"No", he said quickly. "We hire a company which give us about fifty cars for the evening. They drive us down the road. A ten minute car journey to the ballroom." They smiled together as they went up to the reception desk.

"Mark Hammond and Abigail Wilkins," Mark said to the happy receptionist. She went through a list on a clipboard in front of her. She found their names and asked them to sign next to them. After that she gave them their keys. Mark was in room fourteen and Abbi was in fifteen.

"They're up the stairs to your left," the receptionist said pointing to a beautiful staircase. Both of them followed the directions they were given. Their hotel rooms were right next to each other. Mark asked her if she wanted to do anything for the rest of the day.

"Of course I can't," Abbi said. "You told me we have to be ready to leave at six. That's only a few hours away. I have to get ready and look as fabulous as all those other rich girls."

Mark smiled humouring her. "How about at twelve I'll get you and take you downstairs for some lunch? You have to eat something." He said.

"Yeah okay," she said. She kissed him and went into her room. It was magnificent. There was a lovely bathtub and a shower. The towels felt like velvet and there was a gorgeous dressing gown that was actually silk. As well as the double bed there was a spacious wardrobe. It took Abbi a while to unpack her things and hang her dress up. She had no idea how it had happened but she had half of Mark's things. She picked them up and knocked next door. Mark emerged and smiled.

"I thought you must have had them," he said lightly. He kissed her slowly. "So lunch?" Abbi nodded and they spent a happy hour in each other's company.

It was one o'clock by the time Abbi started to get ready. She had a quick shower washing her hair and blow-dried it, which took ages because it was so long. When it was completely dry it had a wave to it so she got out her hair straighteners. The only available plug was by the door. Half way through her hair there was a knock on her door.

"Come in," she said immediately without thinking. Mark opened the door. Abbi quickly took stock of what she was wearing. Her underwear and a silk dressing gown and not much else. She quickly grabbed her dressing gown so it was closed.

"I think you still have one of my bags," he said. Abbi looked on the floor and sure enough saw the bag in question. She quickly grabbed it and gave it to him. "I'll see you later," he said smiling and he left her to it.

Mark went back into his room holding his bag. She hadn't though before telling him to come in. That much had been obvious. She had looked stunning. For that second or so when she hadn't realised what she was wearing he had had a good look at her. She looked absolutely fantastic. He was very glad that he had asked her to the ball tonight.

Later that evening Mark knocked on her door. Abbi was dressed and ready to go. Abbi was pleased to see that

Mark looked slightly speechless. She must look good she thought to herself. Mark gave her a long slow kiss. When he let her go he said quietly, "You look beautiful."

"Thanks," she said. "You don't look bad yourself." She was right. He was dressed in tails and he looked gorgeous. He held out his arm for her and she took it. They descended into the lobby of the hotel. There were a few well-dressed people milling around. They must be quite early because the cars were just parking up and there weren't that many people there yet.

"Do you want to get going or hang around here first?" Mark asked.

"Oh, we'll be one of the first," Abbi said. They got into the first black car and started to drive off. They were rolling through unfamiliar countryside and Abbi was starting to get quite nervous. She was going to meet Mark's interfering father and mother tonight. They both knew she was staying at the hotel and coming to the ball tonight but they both had avoided her so far. Abbi thought that was probably a good thing as she didn't want to provoke them into a bad reaction.

Mark stroked her hair and asked if she was okay. "I'm fine," she told him. "Just a bit nervous about meeting your parents."

"Don't be," he said kissing her cheek. "My mum will be lovely and polite and she will love you."

"And your dad?" she said tensely.

"He'll probably dislike you anyway," Mark said slowly.

"That's just a kind way to say he hates me already." Abbi looked at Mark for confirmation. The look in his eyes said it all.

"Tonight is not about them," Mark said. "I don't care if they both hate you." He was speaking softly to take the sting out of his words. But they still hurt. "Tonight we are going to have fun, I mean look at you. You are gorgeous." She smiled at him.

"You're right," she said. The car was slowing down outside a large building that was evidently the ballroom. "Let's have fun." She kissed him for a long time and they then got out of the car.

Mark and Abbi entered the ballroom. It was absolutely stunning. The walls were all shimmering in bronze and gold. The ceiling was high and domed. There were several candelabras and they had actual candles alight in them, not electric lights. At one end of the hall there were several tables with centrepieces of white flowers such as lilies and white roses. The glasses were actually crystal. Real crystal! Abbi couldn't stop staring. It was amazing. The other end of the ballroom had a dance floor and there was an actual band there.

As more people began to arrive Abbi started to feel like she stuck out a bit. Most of the ladies were either in black dresses or in gold like the décor. She was wearing head to toe silver. Her dress was floor length and it glimmered when it caught the light. It was a sleeveless dress and she was wearing those elbow length gloves. She thought that they were far too much but now others were arriving she saw that everyone else was wearing them and she was glad she had them.

Even though she loved the dress she didn't want to be the centre of attention by its colour. Oh well. Nothing to be done now, is there she thought to herself. She did however have the style right. Everyone was wearing over the top gowns, elbow length gloves, tiaras and there were even a couple of ladies wearing hoop skirts. At least she hadn't been that drastic!

She felt much better looking around the room. She had been so nervous that she had been having trouble breathing right. However now she saw other people her oxygen levels were heading back to normal. Mark was holding her arm leading her to their table. According to the seating chart they passed on the way in they were going to be sitting with Mr and Mrs G Hammond, Mr S Hammond plus guest, Miss J Carter and Mr M Adams. Mark helped her into her seat and sat down himself. Within fifteen minutes everyone was sitting down at their appropriate table.

Mark's parents were the obvious ones she thought. They were the only ones around the table who looked over thirty. Mark's mother smiled at Abbi immediately.

"It's so nice to meet you," she said.

"It's nice to meet you too Mrs Hammond," Abbi replied, shaking her hand.

"No, no. None of that. Call me Julia." Both women smiled at each other. On the other hand Mark's father had completely ignored her. Not even a glance. Abbi tried to say hello but he immediately engaged in a conversation with Matthew, a young investor he was trying to impress. Mark was sitting next to her and she saw him looking daggers at his father.

Before too much longer the starter had arrived. Just before she started eating she noticed who was sitting opposite her. It was the brunette "Jess" who Mark had been getting into the car with. That night Mark had cancelled the dinner date at Lily's. At a distance she had thought that the girl was just pretty. She saw that she was wrong. Now Jess was sitting across from her she saw she was drop dead gorgeous. She was in an extremely low cut black dress and just looked stunning. Throughout the meal Abbi noticed that she kept looking at Mark more often than she liked. Mark, however, didn't seem to even notice that Jessica kept looking at him.

Quite quickly, or that was how it felt, dinner was finished. Mark's father had ignored Abbi the entire time. Julia couldn't have been more different. She kept the conversation going with Abbi throughout the meal and seemed genuinely interested. Abbi had also been introduced to Steve, Mark's brother. He acted perfectly normal towards her. He was lively and animated. Steve's partner was a five foot nothing blonde waif of a girl who hadn't said a word to anyone all night. He introduced her as Grace Williams. The glare that he gave his father while introducing her spoke volumes. Steve had evidently been set up.

When the dinner had ended Julia gave Abbi a very warm smile. Abbi was very pleased that Julia seemed to like her. Before the band had even started playing Jessica asked Mark, "Do you want to dance? Ladies choice." Mark nodded and turned to kiss Abbi. It was a lingering kiss. Abbi smiled and gave Jessica a quick look. She didn't look too happy. Good.

"I'll be back in three minutes," he said and they headed off to the dance floor leaving Abbi sitting alone.

"What are you doing, Jess?" Mark asked as they slow danced. They were the only ones on the dance floor.

"I'm trying to dance," she said lightly. Jess had noticed that Abbi's eyes hadn't moved off the pair of them by one inch.

"You know I am with Abbi, right?" Jess nodded, still smiling. "She is the one I want to be with tonight. I can see what you're up to. It's not going to work."

"I know," Jess said still smiling. "No one else in my family agrees with me though. I have to keep it up. I have to. Plus, you're not exactly bad to look at," she added. They both burst out laughing. At that moment the song came to an abrupt end.

"I'll see you later, Jess," Mark said and walked over to where Abbi was sitting. Jess saw Abbi's whole face light up

This was completely and utterly pointless, Jessica thought. He is never going to notice me again. His eyes were on only her. He simply couldn't take his eyes off her. Jessica's mother was around here somewhere. If she could see the way Mark had looked at that blonde even she might admit it was hopeless. It had taken ages for their family to get a seat on the table with all the Hammonds. It had not been worth the effort. But then she knew that it wouldn't be. Their previous conversation had made that crystal clear if nothing else had.

Jessica saw her mother coming over to her with a surprised look on her face. This was not going to go well. She knew it.

"Why are you just standing there?" She demanded.

"Why don't you look at the dance floor?" At Jessica's words it was painfully obvious what she was talking about. The band had only played a few songs. As it was early in the evening there were only two couples dancing. One was Mark and his blonde girl.

"They haven't stopped looking at each other since they started dancing mum." Jessica was getting a bit mad. "What would you like me to do? Throw myself at his feet and beg him to go out with me? I doubt he would even notice." At that moment, as if to illustrate her point, Mark and Abbi burst out into laughter staring into each other's eyes.

Her mother paused and then said, "This is a set back. You made him laugh earlier. You just need to put the charm on."

"Mum open your eyes. It won't work with her in his life." Watching them slow dance around the floor even she had to admit that Jessica was right.

"I know what you could do", her mother said quietly. "When she leaves on her own to touch up her make up or something you could get chatting to her. Just generally drop in that for the last few years it's common knowledge that the girls he takes with him to the ball he only wants for sex. Say everyone knows he has done it before and that he will do it again."

"Absolutely not," Jessica said aghast. "If I can't get him I'm not going to resort to lying like that. It's just wrong! Plus she probably wouldn't believe it coming from me anyway. I hated talking like that in the dress shop. I won't do something as degrading as that again mum!"

"Fine. It was just an idea."

"You are shockingly single minded has anyone ever told you that?" Jessica asked.

"Yes. Your father tells me almost every week."

A voice from somewhere in the room said audibly "Pamela?" With that her mother turned away and ran to find who had called her. Jessica sighed to herself while grabbing another glass of champagne. She had no interest in Mark at all. Jessica just wished he didn't have money because if that were the case she wouldn't be in this situation.

"Pamela when are you going to drop this?" James her husband was looking livid. "Neither of them are interested in the other," he continued.

"But James, it is such a wonderful opportunity for us. Our money is running out!" Pamela was trying to plead with him.

"Yes it is a wonderful opportunity," James agreed. "However it looks like that blonde girl is going to be taking it. Not Jessica."

"Don't you want the best for your daughter?" Her voice was getting very loud now and people were beginning to quieten down and listen to their conversation.

"I do want the best for her. I admit that I thought this was a good idea at first. Forcing her to do what you find appropriate won't make her happy. Deep down you know it won't."

"Fine!" Pamela flounced off leaving James on his own. He deeply hoped he had heard the end of this.

"Right. I will be back in a minute," Abbi said to Mark. However he didn't let go of her hand.

"You forgot something," he said and kissed her gently.

"See you in a bit," she said smiling. Abbi walked around looking for the powder room. She went down the hall to the left and heard the loud chatter of women after a few paces. She followed the noise. She knew that the powder room would be absolutely manic. It always was on nights like these. Abbi pushed open the door and loads of women of about twenty were all laughing at the mirrors. Before Abbi could reach the mirrors the conversation hit her.

"...and that's not even to mention his brother!"

"Yeah. I've heard he is even worse!"

"Loves em, leaves em faster than the drop of a hat."

"Mark is rather gorgeous though isn't he?"

"Helen you can't be serious."

"The last three years after the ball he sleeps with them and then dumps them the next day. It's just what the Hammond's do."

"All the Hammond men are quite good looking though."

"Well I wouldn't put up with it no matter how good he looked."

"That poor girl on the dance floor with him tonight."

"Once he's slept with her he will leave so fast her head won't stop spinning until at least next year."

Suddenly one of the girls caught sight of Abbi and gasped. A deathly hush fell over everyone. They were all waiting to see how she would react. She could tell. Abbi walked straight back out with her head held high.

"I want to talk to you," Abbi said as soon as she found him in the crowd of people. She grabbed his arm and dragged him outside into the vast gardens.

"Christ, what on earth is wrong with you!" Mark looked completely bewildered.

"Is it true?" she asked.

"Give me a hint about what you are talking about," he said. She didn't say anything for a moment. He genuinely didn't have a clue what she was saying.

"I heard an interesting conversation tonight," she paused wanting to look at his face to see whether he was lying or not. "It seems that everyone but me knows that after the ball every year you have sex with your date and then dump her the morning after." He looked horrified.

"That is one hundred per cent untrue," he said quietly. "Who... Who told you this... rubbish?" He sounded a bit dumbstruck.

"All the girls were talking about it in the bathroom. It sounded like it was common knowledge. How you treat your women." Abbi was really upset and she didn't like the way it sounded in her voice.

"Abbi you don't believe this." Mark paused. "Do you?" he added very quietly when she didn't answer.

After a long while she said, "No. I looked at your face when I told you what they were saying. You didn't look like you were lying. Plus I trust you," she said simply.

Mark looked at her. She did look so very beautiful. "Listen. They obviously want you to think that I sleep around and am going to leave you." He held her hand and she leaned her head against his shoulder. "Lets get back in the ballroom and have fun. That will show them."

"Yeah you're right," Abbi said. She gave him a kiss and led the way back into the dance floor.

"Well Done girls," Pamela said. "Thank you so much. I owe you all a massive favour. Come on then. Lets go out and see what's going to happen between Mark and his new tart." Pamela led the troop of giggling girls out of the bathroom. She was smiling to herself. That girl would leave him like a shot

now. It was the only thing she could reasonably do she thought to herself as she went back into the ballroom.

All of the women who had been slandering Mark had spread out in the ballroom to be with their respective partners. A very short time after they had all come back Abbi and Mark were back on the dance floor. To the surprise of everyone they looked as happy as ever. Pamela's mouth hit the floor when she realised what she was seeing. This was mirrored by every single woman who had been badmouthing Mark. They were astounded.

As Abbi was dancing she noticed after every few faces there was a shocked woman. That was the biggest tip off she could have had that they were all lying. If they had been telling the truth they would have been mildly surprised that she hadn't left him and embarrassed because she overheard them. These were outraged faces. If it had been the truth there would have been none of that because it was her own business.

Abbi leaned closer so she could whisper in his ear, "I completely believe you. It was all rubbish." Mark looked very pleased.

"What made you so certain?" he asked

"Apart from the fact that I trust you, I looked at the faces in the crowd. Every now and then there are shocked women. They can't believe that I am still here. With you." For the next minute or so Mark looked around. She was right. There were two women looking at them talking exceedingly fast. And there. A mouth open in horror.

"You're right." Abbi laughed.

"I'm sorry I listened to them. Even for a second." He didn't say anything. He just replied by kissing her. Abbi could vaguely hear all those malicious women gasp.

"We don't have too much longer here," Abbi said.

"The ball ends in ten minutes. At midnight," he said.

"Shall we get out of here? I have had fun tonight but my feet are killing me," she said grinning.

"Yeah lets go." They both walked out of the room, ignoring the stares and whispers that followed them.

As they left Abbi saw Steve and his five foot blonde Grace passionately kissing in a bunch of bushes. Maybe that

set up hadn't been quite as bad as Steve had envisioned it to be.

Chapter 8

Aftermath

They got into one of the cars to take back to the hotel they were staying at. It was only a fifteen minute drive. It would have taken twice as long if they had waited until the ball had ended because everyone would have been trying to leave at the same time. Abbi had taken her heels off and had her feet up on the seat, her head on his shoulder.

"I had a great time Mark," she said. He moved her off his shoulder so that he could kiss her. He had kissed her many times. This time he just didn't stop. He couldn't. After a moments surprise she was kissing him back. She grasped his shoulder very tightly. He put his arms around her waist. He noticed that the car was slowing down. Damn it they were there already.

Abbi got out of the car slowly. That had been good she thought. Shame they got to the hotel so soon. Mark had his arm around her waist as they walked up to their rooms. She had her shoes in one hand and her dress in the other so the bottom didn't drag along the floor.

They were outside her room very quickly. "Do you want to come in?" she asked very quietly, hoping the answer was yes.

"What would everyone think? Would you think all those girls were right? The first time I get you in a hotel room alone..." he left the rest of his sentence unsaid. He was so close to her that she was struggling to think clearly.

"That doesn't answer my question," she said smiling. "Do you want to come in?"

He didn't say anything for a long time. He leaned close to her and just before he kissed her he whispered, "yes."

He wrapped his arms around her. She was trying to unlock the door without looking with very little success. She stopped the kiss by turning around. She focused on unlocking the door, which was made very difficult because Mark was kissing the back of her neck.

She finally got the door open and they both rushed in. She shut the door and made sure it was locked. She threw her shoes onto the floor and wrapped her arms around him while they kissed each other. He lifted her up and they both fell onto the bed, laughing together. He took his jacket off and threw it to the floor. He ran his hands through her hair as she took her gloves off. He kissed her again as she took his shirt off. She moved her hands over his bare chest.

Dimly she could hear the chatter of other people starting to arrive further down the hall. He turned her over so that he could undo the zip of her dress. It came off very easily. She was now in nothing except her underwear. Black underwear. She had never been so excited in her life. He moved his hands all over her very slowly.

"Do you definitely want to do this?" he asked. She nodded and kissed him again.

George and Julia were in their hotel room and he was ranting about Abbi.

"Have you finished?" Julia asked. "Good," she said before he could answer. "She is a lovely girl. You can't possibly hate someone that much who you spent the entire night ignoring."

"She might well be fine but that's not good enough. The girl that Mark ends up with has to be right. She has to be from the right circles and know our ways, like Jessica." George was calming down slightly now.

"You and I both know that," Julia said quietly. "The harder you push Jessica towards him the more he will dig his heels in. You know that's how he works. Let him have his fun with the blonde. It won't matter in the long run. They will fall apart in a matter of weeks."

"Did you see the way Mark looked at her?" George didn't wait for a response but carried on anyway. "He's falling

in love with her and he won't see that she is wrong for him before it's too late."

"It will fall apart in the long run," Julia soothed. "Trust me. He knows what the right thing to do is. Even if it takes him a while to get there."

Mark woke up very suddenly. He looked at Abbi. She looked extremely peaceful. She was lying on her stomach and her long blonde locks were completely tangled down her back. She had never looked better he thought. He was about to get up when she suddenly stirred. She turned over and opened her eyes blearily.

"Morning," he said to her. She looked up at him and smiled. "You're not regretting last night are you?"

"No," she said instantly. "You're not are you?"

"Of course not." He gave her a light kiss. "I have to get up though," he said making no effort to move. "Otherwise all those girls will know about us and think they were right."

"I am not going to be your dirty little secret!" Abbi was indignant.

"That's not what I meant and you know it." Mark sighed. "You don't think the only reason I brought you here is for sex do you?"

She shook her head. "No of course I don't. You could have left me in this room in the middle of the night and gone next door yourself."

"I could have," he agreed. "But I didn't."

"I know," she said and giggled. "Five minutes more isn't going to make a difference you know. It's still early."

"Yes. It is early," and he gave her another cuddle in bed. After a few minutes there was a sudden knock at the door. "Oh God!" They both said desperately.

"You hide in the bathroom!", Abbi hissed. She grabbed her dressing gown and made sure it was done up. She checked that Mark was hidden from sight too. She opened the door a crack to find George Hammond waiting outside.

"I want to see my son," he said very quickly. The look on her face must have given her away. George pushed the door open and had a quick look into the room, getting a general

impression of the clothes that had been flung every which way the night before.

"Send him out when he's dressed Abbi," he said sharply and he slammed the door shut.

"So much for five minutes," Mark said. Abbi was chewing on her lip, thinking hard.

As he was quickly getting dressed she said, "I hope this hasn't caused trouble."

"No more than usual", he assured her. "Don't worry about it. I wouldn't trade last night in for anything in the world." He had his trousers and shirt back on by now.

"I'll see you later," she said and kissed him deeply. "Good luck," she mouthed as he left her room with his jacket slung over his arm.

"Oh dear."

Mark left Abbi's room with a sense of foreboding. His father was not going to be pleased. That much he knew. With an unpleasant shock he realised that his father was still standing outside his room.

"Come with me for a walk." It was not an invitation, it was a demand. They went outside and he hadn't said anything else. It was so early there was still a dew on the ground.

"Just spit it out," Mark said impatiently. He was getting irritated with the silent treatment.

"You have profoundly embarrassed me," his father started. "You spend the entire four hours of the ball with that... that waitress. You don't dance with any of my contacts daughters. Just one would have done. There were loads to choose from. And last but not least I find you at six in the morning in that girls room and you were definitely doing more than just sleeping."

"How did you know to find me there by the way?" Mark interrupted.

"It was so painfully obvious Mark. I didn't even bother checking your own room first. I knew where you would be."

"That girl as you call her actually has a name you know," Mark challenged. "I would appreciate it if you started calling her by her name. Abbi, not just that girl or that waitress. She is my girlfriend and "that girl" is not good enough.

You wanted to meet her. You told me to bring her here and you didn't say one word to her at dinner. Mum was great. You didn't even say hello to her. I foolishly told you she didn't have money or social status and that's it. Your mind is made up."

"Do you want your inheritance or not?" his father threatened.

"It is my business who I spend my time with and whether I sleep with someone is not your concern," Mark said, his voice rising in spite of himself.

"She is a gold digging cow! Anyone can see that. She is only with you because of the reward check she can see on the horizon. What if she gets pregnant? You never thought of that did you. If that happens there will be a bastard Hammond child demanding support payments or rubbish like that." His father was getting even more angry. "She is not fit to be your wife!"

"What are you talking about?" Mark said confused. "We have barely been together a month and you are taking about me marrying her!"

"I can see that you are serious about her." Mark decided enough was enough and started to walk away. He heard one last comment.

"We will discuss this in the future. You can count on it"

Mark decided he would go and see Abbi and apologise for leaving her like that. He got to her hotel room and knocked. She opened the door almost immediately. She didn't say anything. Just looked down at the floor. She had got dressed by now, he noticed. He wrapped his arms around her and he swung the door shut behind them.

"I did not want to leave you like that," he said into her hair. She still didn't say anything. He let go of her and held her face making her look him in the eyes. "What's wrong?" She tried to shake her head. He kissed her very softly. "What's wrong?"

"You're going to break up with me," she said looking down at the floor. "Aren't you?"

"No," he said quickly lifting her face so he could look into her eyes.

"You're just saying that." Her eyes were filling with tears. "You know it's only a matter of time before your father makes you leave me."

"My father can't make me break up with you. I am not going to leave you because I love you." There was a very loud silence. He had not meant to say that. He realised that it was the truth though as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

Abbi just stared at him. "I love you," she said. They then kissed each other for a long time.

It was late morning and most of the party goers had packed their things and were ready to go home. Abbi was going home with Mark in his car, the same way they had got there. Abbi was staring at her suitcase thinking about what had happened since last night. She got her phone out and asked him if he had finished packing yet in a text. She didn't fancy bumping into one of Mark's parents at the moment.

Within five minutes there was a knock on her door. Abbi got up and opened it to find Mark standing there. "You ready to leave?" Without waiting for an answer he gave her a kiss.

"Yeah," she said when he let her go. They started to leave the hotel with their cases. "Are we going to say goodbye to anyone?" Abbi didn't really fancy another meeting with his father.

"Nope," Mark said immediately. They were both wheeling their suitcases in the car park by now, walking along the rows of cars looking for Mark's. "I've already said goodbye to my mother and Steve. My father can go and rot in hell for all I care."

They had got to his car and Mark unlocked the car boot and was loading their things into the car. "You don't mean that," Abbi said. In response Mark looked questioningly at her. "About your father," she added.

He slammed the car boot a bit harder than necessary. "Yes I do," he said getting into the car. Abbi followed suit. Within five minutes they were on the road and neither of them had said anything.

"What did your father say about me?" Abbi asked. Mark didn't say anything. He just stared at the road concentrating on his driving. "Come on," she said. "Look I know it was bad. I can tell from your reaction. Considering it concerns me I would like to know what he said."

"Okay," he said. "But if I tell you, don't think for a second that it's how I feel because it's not. Also please don't hold it against me." Abbi nodded. "He said that you..." Mark tailed off.

"Go on," she said. "Oh please go on. I really want to know what he thinks the worst of me is."

"First of all he didn't even say your name. He just called you "that waitress" or "she." He said that my behaviour at the ball had embarrassed him as I only danced with you not his contacts daughters or the right people. He told me that I was threatening my inheritance. He said that you were a gold digger and he implied that you wanted to get pregnant so that you could get your hands on his money."

Silence descended upon them. Abbi could feel it separating them. Each of them were drifting away on their own thoughts. Abbi wasn't particularly surprised at George Hammond's reaction towards her. She had been thinking things like that anyway. Hearing it in words though put a different look on it. This all suddenly seemed so much more real. She glanced at Mark and saw that he looked very frustrated. She put her hand on his leg.

"I don't blame you," she said very quietly. Mark was concentrating on driving but his frown had eased slightly.

"I knew you wouldn't," he said simply. He turned and pulled into a lay-by. "I don't know what to do here," Mark sighed. "I am going to carry on seeing you. That is going to make my father furious for his own twisted reasons." He looked at her, his eyes filled with emotion. "I can't stop seeing you. Which means I am stuck," he finished succinctly.

"We could stop seeing each other," she whispered. He looked at her speechless. "I don't want to," she added. "Your life is in London anyway. It was never going to be forever. It was always going to end up badly. We..." She couldn't say anything because Mark had kissed her. He slowly let her go.

"What was that for?" Abbi said smiling.

"I am not going to stop seeing you," he said determinedly.

"But..."

"No but's," Mark said cutting her off. "We will discuss problems as and when they occur. Okay?"

"Your whole way of life depends on your father's money," she said. "I don't want to be responsible for you losing that. Any of it."

"Shh," he said holding her face. "We'll deal with that later. If my father is really that intent to take away my future money it will take ages to settle anyway," he assured her. "I am the only feasible option at the moment. He has been training me up for at least ten years to one day take over from him. Steve wouldn't know the first thing about running the company and he doesn't want it either. Forget about him Abbi."

He kissed her once more. "Seriously Abbi, forget what he said. None of it matters." She nodded and smiled.

"Come on, drive us home," she said. Abbi gave him one more kiss and they drove off. Mark looked much happier. Abbi was uneasy. It could very well be true that no one could do the job that Mark had been trained to do without a longer time period elapsing. However it was also true that in under a month Mark would be going back to London without her. There was nothing she could do about that so, for the time being, she would bury her doubts.

"You did what!" Jessica was pacing in the dining room. Her mother and father were sitting at the table. They had all left the hotel as early as possible. Both Jessica and her mother didn't feel like lingering. They felt a great disappointment in the entire evening.

"I asked all the girls in the bathroom to say horrible things about Mark to try and get that girl away from him," her mother said looking at the floor."

"Pam, what did you tell them to say?" James said quietly still sitting down. Jessica's father looked extremely disappointed.

"You are going to be furious with me," she said to both Jessica and her James. "No one said anything in response to this.

"I got them to all be chatting in the bathrooms when Abbi walked in about how Mark only brought her to the ball so he could have sex with her." Jessica's mother was talking extremely fast. "Only I made it seem like it was a tradition of his and he had done this type of thing before. My plan didn't work out because Mark and Abbi were with each other like nothing had happened when we left and had a look at them. That girl hadn't believed a word I had said."

Jessica's father looked livid at that. "Our savings are at breaking point. The only thing that is keeping us with the lifestyle that you have been accustomed with is our good name. You can't go and do something like that. Word gets around. I told you to drop it," He said. Both women knew that his voice went quieter when he was angry rather than louder.

"I know you did James, I just couldn't let it go." Pamela was looking so depressed.

"I told you that was ridiculous," Jessica said still pacing up and down the carpet. "I don't want anything to do with Mark! I've had enough mum. You are not going to push me at him anymore or anyone else for that matter okay? He is not interested and neither am I." Jessica stormed out of the room leaving her parents to it and rushed upstairs. This situation just seemed to get worse by the day.

As Steve was sitting in his parents car on the way home he was thinking. It had been a good weekend ball. He knew his father was still dwelling on the Mark Abbi situation. Steve couldn't see what all the fuss was about. She was beautiful and charming. She had been polite and friendly. Abbi didn't do it for him but if Mark was happy (and he was evidently besotted with her) what was the problem?

Steve had had an extremely eventful evening. He had been set up by his father to take Grace. Steve hadn't liked it but he couldn't think of a way to get out of it and as there was no one else he wanted to take, he went along with it.

She had seemed so scared that she didn't say anything. However out of his parents ear shot, she suddenly

became animated and she smiled a lot. Grace had looked gorgeous. Yes it had been a good weekend.

Abbi was beginning to relax by the time they were almost home. Mark's mum had liked her. She had at least made an effort. Abbi knew that his father's opinion would probably never change. There was nothing she could do about that so she would stop worrying. If Mark didn't care then she shouldn't either.

"Are your parents at home yet?" she asked. It was starting to rain outside now.

"No. Why?" he asked her.

"I thought you could show me where you live," she said. He seemed to think about it for a moment.

"Yeah okay," he said. They carried on driving home the way she knew. Before turning into her lane they turned right and came to a stop. The rain was lashing down on the windscreen and he pointed through the blur.

"It's there", he said. It was the only house on that side of the road. It was twice the size of Abbi's house and it was gorgeous. They only used it for a few weeks a year. Life wasn't fair she thought bitterly. She tried not to begrudge Mark, but she couldn't help it. He had such a charmed life. He was so lucky and he didn't even know it.

"What's wrong?" he said suddenly bringing her out of her thoughts.

"Nothing," she lied.

"Come on, spit it out," he said smiling.

"I was thinking about your holiday home," she said carefully.

"You were thinking that a house this big is completely wasted on us. Being that we are hardly ever here and that we take up local property." He sounded like he had heard that argument many times before.

"Not quite like that," she said. "I had actually segued into thinking how lucky you were and you hadn't even realised it."

"Do you want to come in?" he asked. She shook her head.

"I think I've had enough of your family for one day," she said calmly, smiling.

"You are right," he said quietly. "I am lucky. But if I could trade in all of my money, my fathers money to have a normal family that isn't governed by social positioning and business contacts and money. I would do it you know," he told her.

"That is very easy for you to say when you've got money," she said sadly. "When was the last time you needed a new pair of shoes to go to school and looked at the price and put them back? When was the last time you couldn't pay the phone bill so you were disconnected?" She looked at him through her tears. She wanted to stop crying but she couldn't. "When I was six I woke up one day and daddy wasn't coming back home and I didn't understand why. Suddenly we didn't have enough money to pay the rent, water bill, even to buy enough food to survive once or twice. We couldn't even afford things like the bus. So it's easy enough to say you'll give up the money when you have it."

Abbi was crying silently. She hadn't wanted those thoughts come to mind. But they had. Mark put his hand up to her hair. She batted him away. "It's so easy to say that," she said. "When you have no idea how hard it was to live on benefits. Just to carry on, day after day." After that she was so upset that she stormed out of the car. It was still pouring with rain but she didn't care. It was only a short walk to her house from there anyway.

"Abbi!" Mark yelled. He had got out of the car and was running after her. Within seconds they were both soaking wet and he had caught up with her.

"I'm sorry for getting so mad. I'm completely crazy," Abbi said. Mark put his hand gently over her mouth to stop her talking.

"I'm the one who should be sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to make a comment like that that would upset you." She wanted to say something but his hand was still covering her mouth. "I had no idea how hard things have been for you in the past Abbi. I'm sorry. I won't be that insensitive again." He took his hand away from her mouth and replaced it with his lips.

After a moments surprise she was kissing him back passionately. When they stopped Abbi spoke.

"I don't know why I thought of those things. I have kept those feelings buried for so long and..." he kissed her again. She felt dizzy. He held her tightly as she grasped him closer. Abbi took his shirt off as quickly as she could and felt his muscles. She could feel her own clothes coming off. They slowly fell to the floor as they carried on kissing each other. The rain was still pelting down on them but neither of them noticed. Mark couldn't believe this was happening but was powerless to stop it.

Before either of them knew what had happened they were both lying naked in the grass with the rain still lashing down. Abbi was quickly getting to her senses and was trying to find her clothes so she could get dressed or at least covered up. Mark was quickly following suit, realising that no one could find them like this.

Abbi was amazed at what had happened. They both clearly had no sense of restraint! At least around each other. They were both finally dressed and they were drenched. Mark loosely put his arms around Abbi and she smiled. They kissed in the rain for a few minutes longer. Until they forgot about the rain.

When Abbi got up to the door of her house she waved goodbye to Mark. She opened the door and almost bumped into her mother.

"Hi Darling. What happened to you?" her mother looked shocked. Abbi caught sight of herself in the hall mirror and could see why her mother was so shocked. She looked like she had been swimming in the ocean with her clothes on.

"It's raining outside," Abbi said cheerfully, dumping her suitcase in her room. "I had fun mum," she said and went and kissed Eleanor's cheek. As Abbi went into her room to get changed Eleanor sat and thought about her daughter. She had come home in high spirits despite the weather. Eleanor thought that Abbi probably had slept with Mark over the weekend. Abbi was setting herself up for a fall though. Because Mark would leave here and leave her. He would have to.

Chapter 9

Graveside

Mark came around to visit Abbi the next day. He was about to knock when she came bursting out of the door.

"Oh hi Mark," she said while looking like she wanted to get away.

"Hi," he said and gave her a quick kiss. "Where are you going?"

"Um... I was going to visit my dad," she said uncomfortably looking down at the floor.

"Okay," he said. "Do you want me to go. I'll go. I'll meet up with you later." He was already walking away from her.

"Come back here," she shouted after him. "You could come with me." She wondered where that had come from. Abbi thought that she didn't want to be alone though. He nodded slowly. They left and started to walk across the footpaths to the cemetery.

Mark didn't know what to think. He was going with his girlfriend to visit her dead father. Every instinct was telling him to run in the other direction. But he stayed with her. He wanted to be there for her. Even though it scared him slightly.

Abbi was leading the way across the cemetery. Soon enough she had stopped by a grave that he assumed to be her father's. Abbi sat down by it. Mark read the gravestone.

Simon Wilkins. Beloved husband and father. There was a small poem there too. *In the boundless sky the bird is soaring, Above, one lonely gull is cawing, For her loved one that was left behind, The one that she can no longer find.*

"That's the poem you read to me on our first date," he said. She nodded.

"I remembered it when I saw that bird. My mum picked out the poem when he died."

"How often do you come here?" he asked. He was very curious about that. After all he had died over thirteen years ago.

"I've come here about once a month since he died. My mother has never been here since the day we buried him." Abbi stood at the grave for a long time. Mark by her side.

When they both left the cemetery Abbi was in silence. Mark kept asking her things and she wasn't responding.

"Come on Abbi say something!" Mark burst out.

"What do you want me to say?" she asked quietly. Mark put his arm around her shoulders.

"Anything," he said. "What are you thinking?" She took a deep breath and stopped walking.

"I was wondering why you came with me here," she said. "It's not exactly the best place to go on your holidays is it?"

"I came so I would be here for you. I love you," he said softly.

"I love you too. I've never been to my fathers grave with anyone else," Abbi said as they carried on walking. Mark didn't know what to say to that so he said nothing. After a while Abbi kissed him. He wrapped his arms around her and returned her kiss passionately. She stopped and leaned her head against his shoulder while he ran his hands through her hair.

"Thank you for coming with me," she said. Mark could see that she meant it from the way she was looking at him. He kissed her again and took her home.

"I want it done properly alright?" George Hammond was speaking to someone in the darkness outside his London flat.

"It will be done properly," the man assured him. "When will I get my money?"

"When I am satisfied that you have done it to my standard," George told him. He turned to leave but the man grabbed hold of his arm.

"That's no good. I want at least half now. I need some money to trust that you are going to pay me the rest. The way you are leaving it I will get nothing until you say so. That just won't work." The man let go of George. "Alright?"

"Fine," George said after a moment. "Wait here and I'll get your half of the money now." George left and went upstairs in the building to get the money.

The man he had been talking to leant against the wall, hiding in the shadows. He wasn't sure he could trust George Hammond but if he didn't pay the full amount when it was done he would regret it. He was glad he was wearing black now. There weren't that many people around as it was late. The few that were there were walking slowly looking at everything. He didn't want to stand out.

Soon enough George was back with a small bundle. He handed it over to the man.

"It's all there?" the man asked.

"Yes. Five thousand. You will get the other half when I see that you have done it. You only have two weeks to carry it out otherwise I might change my mind," George replied.

"You keep that much in cash at a place you aren't even staying at, at the moment?" the man asked.

"Yes," George said. He evidently wasn't going to elaborate further. The man was thinking that George kept a lot of money in cash. He wanted to bribe and pay more people for... undesirable activities. The man swept off into the night leaving George on the pavement.

George had pled an urgent meeting to his family and left immediately. The truth was he wanted the best for this unpleasant business. He knew that the best man for the job lived in London between operations.

We would see how it turned out, he thought to himself and went to get some sleep before his early morning train back to his family.

The next day Mark's mum was making some bacon sandwiches for breakfast, while Mark and Steve sat at the kitchen table.

"Where's dad?" Steve asked. Now that Steve had mentioned it their father had been missing all yesterday and he wasn't here now.

"He had to go back to London," their mother said. "Apparently it was 'urgent' but then it always is with him." Their mother went back to frying the bacon. Now that Steve had mentioned it, it was odd that his father had left. Mark hadn't spoken to his father since the morning after the ball at Greenford hotel. Mark had expected his father to be ranting and raging at him. But he wasn't. For the main, George was ignoring his eldest son. Maybe he thought the problem would vanish if no one talked about it. That was certainly not the case. Mark loved Abbi. He really did. He had never felt like this before. He was not going to leave her because his father didn't approve.

"What did you think of Abbi mum?" Mark asked. She was plating up the bacon sandwiches and brought them to the table before answering.

"She's lovely," she said. "She was polite and charming and well mannered and beautiful."

"But?" Mark asked.

"She isn't really suitable for you, Mark," she said. Mark's mouth fell open. "Can you honestly see this working out in the long run?" Mark felt he had nothing to say to this. "Go on, eat your sandwich," his mother urged.

"I'm not hungry," Mark said and dashed from the kitchen. He left the house as fast as he could. None of them understood a thing about him. Mark didn't want his parents life of arranged marriages, money being more important than life, business arrangements and social position. It wasn't worth the hassle. He didn't want any of it. At the moment he wanted Abbi. He thought he would go around and see her.

When he got there Eleanor told him that Abbi was still asleep. Mark left Eleanor on her own as she looked in a bad mood. Mark was going to come back later when he had an idea. He walked around her house and stopped outside her bedroom window. She had forgotten to draw the curtains the night before and Mark could see her in the early morning light.

She looked gorgeous. She was lying on her stomach and she wasn't wearing anything. Her blonde hair was trailed down her back. Mark could see her face in profile. He thought he had never seen anyone so beautiful as she was. In that moment he knew he would never leave her.

He couldn't have explained it to himself but he knew it was right. He loved everything about her. The way she looked at him. The way she smiled. Just the way she was. He turned to leave her but she fidgeted in her sleep and curled up around herself. She was now facing the window. He didn't want to leave her so he kept watching. Until the sun was much higher in the sky.

Abbi was waking up. She knew she was awake but she kept her eyes shut. She was so comfortable. In her dreams she had been reliving the last couple of days. They had been very good. She opened her eyes and saw Mark at her window, watching her. He froze when he saw that she was awake. Abbi was so shocked at his appearance that she didn't move for a second. She then grabbed a sheet off her bed and went to the window. As she opened it Mark wondered what she would think of him watching her like that.

"Morning," she said. "What are you doing?" Abbi didn't sound mad, he thought. Before doing anything else he gave her a deep kiss.

"I was watching," he said.

"Couldn't you have found anything more interesting to watch?" she asked lightly. He shook his head and kissed her again.

"Do you want to come for a walk with me?" he asked.

"Yeah sure. Give me a minute to get dressed." Abbi turned away and was about to drop the sheet when she noticed that Mark hadn't moved. He had a boyish grin on his face. She walked back up to him and said very quietly, "Are you going to leave?" He shook his head while grinning from ear to ear.

"No," he whispered. He gave her another kiss.

"Fine," Abbi said sighing and she dropped her sheet, quickly getting dressed. Mark had seen her naked before, of course, after the ball. She still looked more stunning without

any clothes on. Neither of them said anything to each other until Abbi was ready to leave.

"I'll say good morning and goodbye to my mum and I'll be out," she said. Locking the window as she went. Within no time at all she was outside with Mark and they walked down to the beach.

"They're beginning to put pressure on you," Abbi said to Mark. "Aren't they?" she added. Mark nodded.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "None of it matters." They were sitting down on the sand. It was early so there were very few people around so they had space for a private conversation.

"This is never going to work," Abbi said.

"What's not going to work?" he asked.

"You and me," she said sighing. "It will never work. Eventually everyone else will manage to split us up. We should stop seeing each other while the goings good."

"No," he said immediately. "I don't want to stop seeing you. I love you."

"I love you so much it will hurt not to see you," she said. "It will hurt me very much but it has to stop. The longer it goes on the worse it's going to be when we break up. You are leaving here in a matter of weeks. Maybe even days. Then what? What will we do when this summer ends?"

"I have and would put everything on the line for you, Abbi," he said. His voice was rising now. "I have so much more to lose than you and it doesn't bother me. Why should it bother you?"

"I have already lost my heart, Mark," she said quietly. "It feels like I will never get it back. When you leave you will be taking my heart with you. Where will that leave me?"

"I am so in love with you. I am losing my family. I could lose my inheritance. But I don't care! I thought it was all worth it. For you! For us! Now you are telling me that you want to stop seeing me!"

"I don't want to stop seeing you. I don't want you to lose your family or inheritance for me, which is why I think we *should* stop seeing each other." Abbi's voice was getting quieter as Mark's was getting louder. "You haven't answered

my question. What will happen when summer ends and you leave?"

Mark didn't reply. He kissed her fiercely. She tried to stop the kiss but she couldn't. All at once she stopped trying to pull away from him and kissed him back just as passionately. He felt her response and eased away from her slowly. "I can't leave you. Even if I am not here, I won't leave you." Abbi knew what he meant. He was trying to tell her that wherever he actually was, his heart would be with her. She had been trying to say the same thing earlier.

They decided that they would try to stay in touch with each other. When Mark had finished at Oxford University he would come and visit her again. May seemed such a long time away but they didn't know what else to decide.

Later that day Abbi was at home alone as Eleanor was delivering some ironing. There was a sudden knock on the door. Abbi got up and opened the door to find Jessica standing there. She looked quite run down and was wearing jeans. Abbi had never seen her in jeans before.

"Hi," she said calmly. "Can I come in?"

"Give me one good reason why I should let you into my house," Abbi said furiously.

"I've come to apologise," Jess said. Abbi took a moment and decided that she was being sincere.

"Alright. Come in. I guess I have time to hear an apology." Abbi led the way to the living room and both women sat down. Abbi kept her eyes on Jessica's face warily.

"I am very sorry about trying to go after Mark. It was wrong and there's no other way to put that. It was plain wrong. I'm also sorry for that rumour at the ball about Mark. I had nothing to do with it," she added catching the look on Abbi's face.

"It was my mother who started it because I told her I was giving up on Mark. She wanted Mark and I to be an item. I had a lot of pressure on me to make that happen from both my parents. But I am truly sorry that I hurt you. Or him."

"My mother doesn't understand me or my decision to stop trying to get him to notice me so I've finally left her house.

I just needed to tell you that I'm not usually a bad person. I just made a bad decision."

All through her speech Abbi felt herself softening towards her. "You've left your house?" she asked when she found her voice. Jess nodded.

"Do you accept my apology?" she asked formally. "I don't really blame you if you don't."

"Yeah, I do. I'm far too nice for my own good," Abbi said with a laugh. Jess smiled too. "Where are you living then if you aren't at home?"

"Oh um. Back seat of my car I guess. Its as good a place as any." Jess looked slightly embarrassed as she mentioned that.

"Don't you have any plans at all?" Abbi asked her.

"No. It took a lot of courage for me to leave that house. I focused my energy on that rather than what I would actually do next." Jess looked really upset as she told Abbi that.

"If it's alright with my mum you can sleep on the sofa." Abbi told her.

"Are you serious?" Jess said astounded. "I can't ask you to do that. I've been a total bitch to you."

"True. I can't make you take the offer but our sofa is free if you want it. Told you I was far too nice." Abbi smiled in spite of herself. She didn't know what her mother would make of this but Abbi didn't think she would be too upset.

"I'll make up the last month or so of my behaviour," Jess said seriously. "I promise." At this point Jess went to her car to grab her suitcase. Probably so Abbi couldn't change her mind.

By the time she got back to the house with her single suitcase Abbi was having second thoughts. "Mark will be around here a lot okay? If I even get a whisper of you being up to your old tricks you will be praying that I kick you out of here." Jessica nodded. She perfectly understood what Abbi was saying and where it was coming from.

"I won't be here too long," Jess said slowly. Abbi had a cupboard in her room which wasn't exactly empty but with a little rearranging she could manage to get one draw free.

"You can put some of your things there," she said. Abbi still wasn't convinced she was doing the right thing. It

was too late now though and she couldn't go back on her offer. Well, she would see what happened when it did.

In the end Eleanor didn't mind much that Jessica was staying on their sofa. She had just one condition. "You must phone your parents and let them know you are okay and safe." Jess agreed that she would. The next day when Mark came to see Abbi he was very surprised to bump into Jessica.

Mark knocked on the door as always and Jess had answered it as Eleanor was out and Abbi was in the bathroom. Mark stood on the doorstep and his mouth fell open. What on earth was Jess doing here!?

"Come in," she said and turned around back into the house. Mark followed her.

"Um... Is Abbi here?" he asked. He felt wrong footed. This was perhaps the last place on earth he would expect to find Jessica Carter.

"Yeah, she'll be here in a minute. Jess went back to watching the television as she tucked a stray lock of red hair behind her ear.

At that precise moment Abbi came out. "Hi," she said. "I need to talk to you." She led the way to her bedroom. Once the door was closed she turned to speak to him. However before she could open her mouth to speak Mark had kissed her.

"Good morning," she said when they parted.

"What...?" Mark started to say but he never got his head around the words.

"I know," Abbi said knowing what he was trying to say. Abbi lowered her voice and continued speaking. "She turned up yesterday and apologised for everything that she had said and how she had tried to interfere in our relationship. She said the pressure her parents were putting on her was very hard to deal with. I believed her. She said she had left her home and I asked if she had anywhere to go. She said she was planning to sleep in her car. I offered her the sofa. It's as simple as that."

"You didn't have to let her move in just because you felt sorry for her," Mark said.

"I know. What do you think about her?" Mark took a moment to think and frame his words carefully before he spoke.

“At the ball she I told her it wasn’t going to work. Her messing with me and you. She said it was her family rather than her. She was just going along with it. I do feel a bit sorry for her. We’ll see.”

“Yeah that was my reaction too.” Abbi and Mark lapsed into silence each thinking about Abbi’s new housemate.

That was the night that Abbi was attacked.

Chapter 10

Attack

Abbi was walking home from work that night when something tragic happened. She was halfway home when she got the feeling she was being watched. It was nothing particular just a sixth sense. Suddenly without warning a dark figure came out in front of her. She jumped out of her skin and turned to run. Before she had even stepped two paces away the figure pounced on her.

Before she knew what had happened she was knocked off her feet and was flat on the floor. The man had a hand over her mouth so she couldn't scream out. His other hand had grabbed her arms so she couldn't move either. Before he had got a good grip on her she struggled violently to try to make him let go of her. He slapped her face and her head swung back. That split second when Abbi froze was all her attacker needed to get a decent hold of her.

Instinct took over and she bit the man's hand which had been muffling her as hard as she could. He grunted with surprise rather than with pain and backhanded her across the face again. She was still struggling to get away from him. Without warning a white hot pain went through her once, twice, three times. Almost instantly her eyes clouded over. She heard no more and everything went black.

Eleanor was woken at one in the morning by her phone ringing. This was going to be bad news. No one called at one in the morning unless it was bad news. "What is it?" she said immediately as she grabbed the phone.

"Is this Eleanor Wilkins?" said a voice on the other end of the phone.

"Yes," she said sitting up. "What's wrong?"

"Your daughter is in hospital," said the voice.

"What! What's happened!" Eleanor had sat up in bed and was holding onto the telephone for dear life.

"It seems that she has been stabbed."

"Which hospital is she at?"

"St Mary's," with that information Eleanor hung up the phone and raced to her car. Before she got there she bumped into Jessica.

"The phone woke me up. What's going on?" Jessica had ruffled hair and it was clear she had just woken up.

"Abbi's in hospital. She's been stabbed. I have to go." Eleanor ran past her before she could be questioned any more. Jessica was now wide awake. This was bad. Very bad.

By the time Eleanor got to the hospital she was regretting not talking longer on the phone. She had thousands of questions running through her head and had been throughout the entire journey. Who found her? How many times has she been stabbed? Who stabbed her? What are her chances looking like? How long had she been in hospital? Why had it been her? She just wished she could turn her brain off.

Eleanor had fallen asleep before Abbi got home from work. She was so stupid! Finally she drove up to the car park and ran into the hospital and was at the reception desk.

"I need to know where my daughter is. Abigail Wilkins," she said as quickly as she could. The receptionist was taking the slowest amount of time she could looking it up.

"Okay," she said. "And you are?"

"I'm her mother," Eleanor said irritated.

The receptionist had finally found Abbi's name on the clipboard. Eleanor could tell from her face that whatever it was, it wasn't going to be good news. "Right, she is in emergency surgery at the moment. Take a seat and I'll find a doctor to tell you more," she said sympathetically as Eleanor's face went white. Eleanor walked slowly and sat down in the waiting room. St Mary's was a small hospital. Were they absolutely sure this was the best place for her? Maybe she should go to a larger city hospital with experts. Eleanor sat there thinking hard.

Within ten minutes someone a doctor was with her. "Eleanor Wilkins?" She nodded unable to speak properly.

"I'm afraid to say Abigail has been stabbed several times. It seems she was attacked for her bag. When she got here we had to immediately take her into surgery to repair the damage."

Eleanor swallowed and found her voice after a few seconds. "What are her chances?"

The fact that he didn't say anything greatly increased her fear. "We are doing all we can," he tried to assure her.

"That means that she is going to die. Should she go to a larger hospital to give her a better chance?" Eleanor said.

"Moving her would do much more harm than good. As she has lost a lot of blood she probably wouldn't survive the journey," he added gently. "Believe me, we know exactly what we are doing. Being in a larger hospital wouldn't particularly help her either."

"When can I see her?"

"She is still in surgery but you should be able to visit her in about an hour," he informed her. "I'm sorry but I have to go. I will keep you informed when I get more news," and with that he quickly left her. Eleanor sat down feeling the earth slide beneath her feet.

When you are waiting for it to pass, an hour is an eternity. Finally after an hour and a half of agony the doctor came back to her. "Well?" Eleanor said worriedly as she stood up.

"We have finished surgery and it's looking slightly better for her. She was stabbed twice in the stomach and we have managed to stitch the wounds up. They were the more serious injuries." The doctor sat down and she followed suit.

"They could have been deeper though so it could have been worse. She was also stabbed in the shoulder but that should heal fairly well. That one isn't as much of a concern," he continued. "There are also two slash wounds on her face, which we have had to stitch up too. She has lost a lot of blood I'm afraid to tell you. She has about a forty per cent chance of surviving from this attack."

"Can I see her?" Eleanor asked quietly.

"Follow me," he said quickly. They were walking through empty corridors. There were hardly any people around as it was so late at night. There were only a couple of night nurses around. Eleanor didn't know what to think as her feet followed the doctor. Finally they came to a door and the doctor opened it first. After a second she followed.

Abbi was in a private room, Eleanor saw. Her daughter was laying on the bed with her eyes shut. "Can I be alone with her?" she asked. Without saying a word the doctor left the room. Slowly Eleanor sat down on a chair next to Abbi's bed. There was a reassuring regular beep of hospital equipment.

She looked at her daughters face. A ugly red line went down her right cheek she saw. On the same side her mouth also had a slash going right through it down to her chin. She had thin plastic tubes attached to her as well. Eleanor's started to cry as she looked at her daughter. Abbi was usually so full of life and she was lying here so fragile and looking very close to death. For what? All her handbag would have had in it was a mobile phone and ten quid. A life for ten measly pounds? Eleanor wiped the tears away.

After an hour or so the doctor came back. "Are you ready to leave?" he asked gently. She looked at Abbi once more and nodded. It was hurting her to see her daughter in this state. She bent down to give Abbi a kiss on the forehead and left the room.

"I don't even know your name," she said.

"I'm Doctor Jones," he replied. "I know you must be incredibly worried but she really is in the best place she could be. She was at the hospital barely half an hour after the incident happened which was just as well."

"She normally walks home by a shortcut using the footpath. How did she get here so fast?" Eleanor asked.

"A call for an ambulance was received anonymously for her." Eleanor raised her eyebrows. "It's a violent crime. The police have already started trying to trace the call," he added in response to her look.

"I have some things to do," she said. "Can I come and sit with her in the morning?" It was more a statement than a question. Dr Jones nodded and Eleanor walked out of the hospital. She got to her car and checked the clock. It was four

o'clock in the morning and she had so many thoughts in her head she thought she might drown. She had so much to do. She sighed and turned the engine on. All through the journey she ignored the tears that fell from her eyes.

When Eleanor got home Jess had got back to sleep. Eleanor picked up the telephone and left several messages on people's phone's. She called the Sunset Hotel and left a message saying that Abbi couldn't come into work this morning. She called Mark but he didn't really expect him to answer this early in the morning. She decided not to leave a message for him. Something like that was going to be worse left on a machine. She left messages on her clients mobile phones saying that owing to emergencies she would be behind and unable to keep up with their ironing. She then called her mother. It was picked up after two rings of the phone.

"Hello?" Her mothers voice came down the phone.

"It's me mum," Eleanor said softly. "Abbi is in hospital." After several attempts to explain what had happened Eleanor finally got it out. She was sobbing over the phone.

"I know there is nothing you can do but I needed to talk to somebody," she said. Her mum soothed her over the phone for a long while.

"Do you want me to come down?" her mother asked.

"No. I will be fine. I just had to talk to someone. I was going crazy."

"Anytime sweetheart", her mother said and Eleanor heard the click of the phone being disconnected. She stayed crying into the phone for a long time afterwards.

Mark was snoring in his room when his mobile phone woke him. Sleepily he glanced at his watch. It was seven on a Sunday morning! It was an unknown number calling him.

"Hello," he croaked into the phone with his eyes still shut.

"Hi it's Eleanor, Abbi's mum here," came the response. Mark was waking up very quickly now.

"Oh Hello. How are you?" Mark asked instead of why are you calling me? Which was what he wanted to ask.

"To be honest I'm awful," she said. "It's Abbi." Silence went down the line.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"She... She is in hospital. She was... has been attacked." Mark couldn't say anything. He could feel his heart beating at triple its normal speed.

"How... Is it bad?" he asked praying the answer was no.

"I'm outside your house Mark. I'm going to see her now. If you want to visit her I'll give you a lift okay?" Mark heard the noise of a disconnected phone. Before he could think anything else logical he was racing out of bed grabbing clothes. Any clothes would do. Oh God, he thought to himself. Please don't let it be too serious. It couldn't be. Not to her. His heart was in his mouth as he rushed out to see Eleanor's car in the drive of his holiday home.

Mark opened the passenger door and jumped in. Eleanor had started to drive almost as soon as he sat down. Eleanor had red and puffy eyes. She looked like she had got no sleep at all. Which she probably hadn't he reminded himself. "What happened?" Mark asked slightly desperately.

"They think she was stabbed for her bag. But not just once she was stabbed five times. She has been stabbed in her stomach twice and in her shoulder", she said bitterly. Mark froze. He couldn't think what to say. His beautiful girl had been... He couldn't even think it to himself.

After a while he asked, "Will she survive this?"

"They don't... They don't know. She has a chance at least." Eleanor had started crying and she hadn't even realised it, Mark noticed. "I've got to warn you. She has been slashed on her face twice as well. It looks... Well honestly it looks terrible," she finished.

After a long painful silence they eventually parked the car in the hospital car park. The both raced out. Eleanor seemed to know where she was going because she didn't stop and ask the receptionist. Quite quickly they were outside a room Mark assumed was hers.

"Do you want to go in first?" he asked. He didn't know what he wanted her to say to that. He was so scared that Abbi might actually die.

Eleanor shook her head. She slowly turned the door handle and went in. Mark quickly followed. She sat down on one chair by her daughters bed. Mark took the other one on the other side. He then looked at her. Her face looked really bad. She had an awful red gash running down one of her cheeks and her mouth had a horrible red line that had split her lips on the same side of her face.

He couldn't believe that this had happened. Seeing her had shocked him. "When will she wake up?" he asked without taking his eyes from her face.

"It's not when," Eleanor said slowly. "It's an if." Her face crumpled and she started to cry. She immediately left the room. Maybe she didn't want him to see her cry. Mark was left alone with Abbi. He held her hand while looking at her. She looked in a very bad way. Her face was extremely pale except for the red angry knife wounds and she just looked so helpless. Even her hair looked washed out. As if the life had flowed out of her. He wanted to do something to help her but he just couldn't.

"Wake up, Abbi," he whispered to himself. "Come on. It was rubbish about us breaking up. I need to see your eyes again. Just wake up. Please." He stayed with her for another twenty minutes when Eleanor came back in. "I'm going to go and leave you alone with her", Mark said.

He bent down and gently kissed the side of her face that was free from injury. "I love you," he whispered to her and he left the hospital room. He was walking down the corridor when Eleanor came running up to him.

"Will you come back to see her?" she asked.

"Of course I will," he said surprised that she had even asked.

"It doesn't bother you that she will probably never look the same again?" Eleanor was looking at him in an extremely odd way.

"I don't care about that!" he said shocked. "I only want her to get better. I just want her to wake up and get well."

Eleanor didn't say anything straight away. "I know that my daughter cares a great deal for you. If you are going to leave her because of her face I want you out of here. I know it

is very bad but she doesn't need someone visiting her who will just leave her when she wakes up because of the damage. That will hurt her too much after what has happened."

"How can you even think that I only care about her face? It doesn't matter. All that does matter is that she does wake up. I don't care if she never looks the same again but I do care about her life." Mark glared at her.

"From your reaction, I believe you," she said slowly. "I wanted to be sure that you wouldn't care about her face."

"I love her, Eleanor. You don't mind if I visit her?" Mark challenged.

"No. I think it would be great if you sat with her." Eleanor said. "I want you to. Who knows it might help her. I do like you Mark," she added.

"Thank you," Mark said. Eleanor left him to go into her daughter's room. He sat down with his head in his hands, crying silently to himself.

Two days later Mark went into her room with a bunch of flowers. He put them down and immediately sat down next to her. He was on his own with her as it was early and Eleanor was at home, probably catching up with on sleep. "Hi gorgeous", he said holding her hand. He noticed that her face was going puffy. It looked like a bruising was coming up. He was so worried about her he was struggling to think of anything else. "Please wake up. I have so much I want to say to you. I need to talk to you properly."

He had spent his entire holiday with Abbi that he had no other things to tell her that she didn't already know. "Please don't give up on your life, Abbi," he whispered almost to himself.

She didn't move. He sat holding her hand quite tightly. It was a moment before he realised that her hand was pressing gently back. Mark relaxed his grip on her hand. She was definitely pressing back. It was a very light pressure but it was there. He looked at her more closely. Her eyelids were flickering slightly.

"Abbi," he said quite loudly. Very slowly she opened her eyes a little dazed. They quickly closed again. He couldn't

believe what he was seeing. It took a second before Mark could come to his senses. "Abbi," he repeated.

"Where am I?" she said very quietly opening her eyes. As soon as she spoke she winced. He knew that talking would probably have hurt her split lips as she was unaware of her injuries.

"You're in hospital, Abbi," Mark told her. When he spoke she turned her head and looked at him. "You were attacked. Stabbed. Do you remember anything?" She shook her head and then stopped.

"It was one guy on his own. That's all I know," she said slowly. Mark noticed that her words were slurring slightly. "Where have I been injured? Everything aches," she added looking away from him.

Mark didn't want to tell her so he paused saying instead, "I love you."

A ghost of a smile appeared on her face as she looked at him again. "That must mean it is very bad. Tell me. Please." Still Mark didn't say anything. "I have to know, Mark."

He took a deep breath. "You were stabbed in the stomach twice," he said slowly. "Also in your left shoulder. They have cut your face too." She gripped his hand slightly tighter.

"Can you show me how bad it is?" she said. "Please." He released her hand and stroked her face. As gently as he could he traced the wounds with his fingers. She flinched away from his touch. It was clearly very painful. Neither of them said anything when he had finished. Mark's fingertips stayed on her chin at the end of the slash. He didn't quite want to let go of her.

He kissed her hand. Abbi's eyes were filling with tears. "It looks really bad doesn't it?" she whispered.

"It doesn't matter," he said. It didn't answer her question and they both knew it. "I'm going to leave you for a minute and call your mum. Tell her your awake." He looked at her. She was still incredibly weak. You could see it by looking at her. "Will it hurt you if I kiss you?" he asked softly.

She smiled and shook her head slightly. He bent down and kissed her gently. It did hurt quite a lot, just that

gentle touch but she ignored the pain. "I love you," she said quietly.

"I love you too," he said and he left the room leaving Abbi on her own.

When Mark left her, Abbi had time to think. Her face was awful. She traced her scars again where Mark had shown her. It was really bad. Her lips had been completely cut and they throbbed constantly. Everything else ached. She couldn't believe Mark was here when she woke up. At that moment in time she felt very lucky that she hadn't died. The first few seconds when she had opened her eyes, Mark hadn't realised she was back. He had looked so worried about her. Amazing how much can change in a few days, hours and sometimes even minutes.

Abbi just noticed some flowers which had been left on the chair in her room. She felt exhausted and went to sleep. Within twenty minutes she heard two worried voices calling her name. She resurfaced from sleep and saw both her mother and Mark looking at her. As soon as she opened her eyes Mark quietly left leaving Abbi and her mother alone.

"Oh God," her mother said. "You're awake! We were all so worried." She seemed so relieved. Abbi stared at her. She had clearly raced here from bed. Her hair was all over the place and she had evidently just grabbed the clothes which were closest to hand. Abbi noticed her jumper was inside out.

"I'm glad you're here," Abbi said quietly. Her mum gave her a quick, tight hug which was actually quite painful because of her shoulder injury but she bore the pain in silence.

"I'll be back soon. I've got to phone people to tell them you are alright," she rushed. At Abbi's questioning look she added, "like your grandmother and our neighbours and friends and the hotel. People like that," and Eleanor left the room to be quickly replaced by Mark.

"Hi," Abbi said smiling. "Flowers," she said in response to the bouquet she had seen earlier. Mark glanced at them and kissed her gently on the lips. Abbi winced involuntarily as he did so.

"That hurts you doesn't it?" he said.

"No," she lied quickly. "Well only a bit", she amended when he looked sceptically at her. Mark allowed himself the first smile in what felt like weeks.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. She raised her eyebrows slightly. "Okay stupid question," he said smiling.

"Not exactly what you thought your summer holidays would be like is it?" she said.

"Oh God that hardly matters. The important thing is that I am here and I'm not leaving you. Alright."

"Do..." She tailed off.

"Go on," he urged her.

"Do you still think I'm beautiful?" she asked without looking at him. She focused on watching her hands. "I'm... Well it's not very good to look at is it?"

"You are beautiful," he assured her. "Just because some maniac has slashed your face doesn't stop you being beautiful." He ran his fingers through her hair and his face was smiling at her. The way he looked at her made her feel...safe. There was no other word for it. She felt safe.

He held her hand and neither of them said anything else. She was grateful for his presence there. He was comforting to her. He was so relieved that she had come back. They both looked deep into each others eyes. They had reached a state of affairs where they simply needed no words to express what they felt for each other.

When Mark managed to get home he felt as if he had aged ten years in the past two or three days. He looked at his bedroom and felt like curling up in a ball to make all of this go away. He was perched on the end of his bed staring into space when Julia came in.

"How is she?"

"You don't really care how she's doing do you?" Mark said. "It's not as if this relationship is going to work out after all is it?" Julia sighed and sat down next to her eldest son.

"I didn't want this to happen," she said slowly. "She is a lovely girl. I honestly think that but I thought that it would fizzle out when..."

"When what mum?" Mark cut across her angrily. "I don't care that she doesn't have enough money or social

positioning for your liking. I am in love with her and she is in hospital and that hurts me. It hurts that no one in my family seems to understand that it doesn't matter what she has. It's who she is that really counts and how we feel about each other." Mark hadn't meant to shout but his voice had started to rise during the previous seconds.

"You know, I half wish that it was me in hospital rather than her because I hate seeing her suffer," he continued. "It's worse seeing her deal with the pain than it would be to feel the aches and pains myself."

Julia put her arm around Mark and took a deep breath. "I didn't realise you felt like that about her."

"That's because you couldn't see past the fact that she was "inappropriate" for me. You weren't listening when I said this was more than a summer fling. You didn't think I was being serious. We were being serious I should say."

"Do you think this will last after September?" Julia asked plainly hoping for an honest answer. Mark took some time to think before answering.

"Yes. It will be incredibly hard with me up in London and her here but I think it will last. More importantly it can last. It's not impossible."

Julia nodded. "Okay. I won't say any more about her not being right for you. Even if I occasionally think it I will promise to keep my opinions to myself."

Mark looked at his mother. "Thank you." As she left him to it he felt a weight being lifted. To have one person who would support him even if she didn't agree with his relationship felt very good. In a minute his mother was back and she gave him something. He looked at it. It was a small box. Inside there was a plain silver ring. There was nothing on it at all. He looked back at his mother questioningly.

"This was given to me by an ex-boyfriend a long time ago," she said looking at it. "You can give it to Abbi. If you want."

"Thanks mum," he said quietly and sincerely as he snapped the box shut. He put it in the top draw by his bed. He would give it to her. He just had to decide when.

"You idiot!" George was shouting to his acquaintance. "You were meant to disfigure her not nearly kill her! Mark will never leave her now!" George gave the man a push. George was so angry. The culprit looked him straight into the face angrily.

"She did not come easy. I did what you ordered and I cut her face. I called an ambulance as soon as I left her on her own."

"I am many things but I am not a cold faced killer. I only wanted her to lose her looks not her life!" George said. "You can forget about the rest of your money mate."

"Now wait a minute..." the man tailed off as George was holding a dagger to his throat.

"You should think yourself extraordinary lucky that I'm not asking for my five grand back as well," George whispered to him. The man was holding his hands up in the air. With one quick manoeuvre the man knocked the knife out of George's hand and had his pistol pressed against George's forehead.

"You can pull a move like that but can't slash a teenage girls face in without almost killing her?" George said incredulously.

"You know what they say," the man started menacingly. "Practice makes perfect. Now I want my money or your brains will be splattering this wall behind you."

"You wouldn't shoot me," George said surely. "I don't mean anything to you if I'm dead."

"Try me," the man said forebodingly.

After a pause George said, "Alright. I'll pay you." When the man didn't move the gun away from George's head he added, "Can you get that gun away from my head please." Slowly the man lowered the gun. He, just as slowly, put it away.

"You'll get your money," George said. He turned and walked away. It came down the same in everything in his life. You want a job doing properly, you had to do it yourself. Ten grand down the drain for nothing but a backfired plan.

The next day she had a visit from Jessica. "Hi," Abbi said quietly. "You have the opportune moment to make a move on Mark," she added sarcastically.

"Ha ha," Jess smiled. "How are you feeling?"

"Like hell." Both women smiled at each other.

"I've bought you some chocolates," Jess said. "Nothing like chocolate to make you feel better."

"Thanks," Abbi said. After a long moment she added, "Would you do me a favour?"

"Of course I will," Jess said. "If it weren't for you I would be homeless. Whatever I can do."

"Will you talk to Mark. He feels awful about what's happened to me. I can see it when he looks at me. I think he just needs someone to talk to."

"You would trust me to do that?" Jess asked surprised.

"I'm not sure that I trust you but I do trust him. I'm just being honest." Jess nodded. She could understand that.

"Okay. Sure, I'll do that."

"Thank you." A little while after that Abbi fell asleep. Silently Jess left her to it.

True to her word Jess found an opportunity to speak to Mark later that day. Mark had come around Abbi's house out of habit. As soon as the door opened he realised that she wasn't there. However Jess took this opportunity to do what Abbi had asked.

"Come in," she said. They both went through to the living room and sat down next to each other.

"How are you?" she asked. Mark shook his head.

"It doesn't matter how I am," he said. "All that matters is that Abbi gets better." Jess could now see what Abbi meant. He was concentrating so much on Abbi that he had forgotten himself.

"Abbi's worried about you," she said.

"That's stupid," Mark said instantly. "She worries too much."

"A bit like you then." Mark smiled. "She will heal you know. It will get better."

"I know," he replied sighing. He relaxed back on to the sofa and closed his eyes. "I miss her being her. I love her so much that I think this hurts me more than it would to actually attack me."

"Hey, listen to me," Jess said quickly and grabbed his hand. She will be fine. She's talking now and she is actually conscious. That is a massive improvement on what she was. You know that." Mark didn't say anything. He had opened his eyes and Jess realised that she was still holding his hand. She quickly dropped it. There was quite a tense atmosphere around them. Jess tried to keep the conversation going but she suddenly had nothing to say.

Mark grabbed her hand looked at her. Before he could think he leaned into her and kissed her. Gently at first and then with more insistence. He couldn't stop. Jessica knew that it was only for comfort, nothing more than that. Mark put his hand up to her face to run through her hair. Jessica backed off.

"You don't want to do that," she told him, barely an inch away from his face. It took perhaps five seconds before he realised what he was doing. Immediately Mark backed away from her, horrified by what he had been doing.

"I'm sorry," he said when he had walked several paces away from her.

"Mark, don't be so hard on yourself."

"Abbi must never find out about this," Mark said breathing heavily. "Ever."

"Okay," Jess agreed quietly. Mark left as soon as was physically possible and raced away from her house. When he stopped he tried to catch his breath. He was finding it very difficult to breathe evenly. Never could he imagine ever kissing another woman who wasn't Abbi. He knew that it wasn't desire, it was only as a relief for the pain. Abbi's pain. He felt that he must never tell Abbi. It would hurt her far too much. It was already hurting him.

Four days later Abbi was told that she could go home as long as she took it easy. Abbi had been constantly asking the doctor when she could go home and he had finally caved in, saying that she was much better anyway. Mark came to pick

her up. Her mother had strangely been keeping her distance since Abbi had woke up. She didn't like being left alone with her. Today she said she was delivering clients ironing back which apparently jut couldn't wait an extra day. Abbi was much better than what she was. The scars on her face had faded slightly and they would continue to do so. She was eating properly again as well. However she was still quite weak.

When they got to her house Jess was there. She let them in and asked how Abbi was. After that she went for a drive and left Abbi and Mark alone. Mark supported Abbi until she laid down on her bed.

"Thank you," she said. Mark looked at her sadly.

"Do you want me to do anything? Get anything?" he asked her. She thought for a moment and nodded.

"Will you lie next to me?" she asked. He didn't say anything, just laid down behind her so they were curled up together like spoons. He put his arms around her, careful of her stomach so he didn't hurt her. She sighed.

"Thank you for being there for me this past week," she said gently.

"Ssh," he said giving her a gentle squeeze. "I wouldn't have been anywhere else in the world." He kissed her cheek.

"I haven't worked up the courage to look in a mirror yet," she said slowly. I've seen the damage on my shoulder and my stomach. I haven't seen my face yet." Mark didn't know what to say to that so he said nothing. They both sat up facing each other. "Do you think I should?"

"Yes," he said instantly. "The longer you wait to look at yourself, you will be imagining it much worse than what it actually is." She considered this.

"Can you get me a mirror?" she asked quietly. "There should be a hand mirror in the bathroom." Pretty quickly he was back with one.

She picked it up and closed her eyes. She finally looked in the mirror. It was quite a shock to her. It could have been worse was her first thought. Half of her face was absolutely fine. The other looked awful. Her mouth on that side had been split all the way to her chin. She moved her fingers over the red line. It was very delicate over her mouth. Even that

small touch had hurt her. The other scar was a crooked line down her cheek. That hurt as well. Both of her scars together made her face look quite different to the face she remembered. She put the mirror down. Her eyes clouded over for a few seconds. She seemed so far away.

Mark had been sitting watching her study herself. He saw that her mouth was sore. She winced slightly as she touched it. It was much worse watching her look at the damage than to look at it himself. She finally put the mirror down and looked at him, her eyes filled with tears. "It's bad," she summed up. He lent across the bed to kiss her. She whimpered softly as she felt the pain from her lips.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I'll stop if you want." She replied by kissing him back through the pain of her mouth. She smiled softly at him. He kissed her again. She moaned quietly through the pain but kissed him back so that he didn't stop. He ran his fingers through her hair while kissing her injury free cheek. She wrapped her arms around him and felt him do the same. As he hugged her, her shoulder throbbed painfully. She cried out and then bit her lip.

"I'm hurting you," he said and let go quickly.

"Only a little," she said. "It hurts all the time anyway," she said in a matter of fact tone.

"You are very brave," he said softly.

"I've no choice," she said. "It's happened. Moaning about it won't make the pain go away or the wounds heal any faster. I'm sorry for crying out. Ignore it."

"Don't be sorry," he said quickly. "I can't ignore your pain either," he said. He gently kissed her again. She moaned quietly once more. He let go.

"Don't stop," she said smiling slightly. He returned to kiss her. She didn't make a noise. By this time Abbi was laying down and Mark was leaning over her. He deepened their kiss. A strangled cry came from her. Before he could do anything else he heard her bedroom door slam. There were two police officers in her room.

"Sorry," said the first one. "The front door was left open." Abbi noticed that they were both women and looking very worried.

"What do you want?" Mark said clearly irritated.

"We would like to have a word with Miss Wilkins with regards to the attack on her. About a week ago," they replied.

"How come it has taken so long for you to talk to her?" Mark asked.

The officers were looking at him with dislike all over their faces. "We were told by her doctors that she was far too weak to talk with in hospital and we have to respect those opinions," the first officer said.

Abbi said, "fine," and sat up in bed, cringing slightly as her stomach moved. Mark stayed put and they clearly expected him to leave the room. Mark kissed Abbi on the top of her head and slowly walked out.

The officers sat down on the bottom of her bed. Abbi realised at this time that she had at some point started to cry through the pain. She rubbed the tears away quickly.

"I'm Claire from victim support and this is Karen. Was that guy troubling you?" the second one said kindly.

"No!" Abbi said angrily. "Nothing like that!"

"You've been crying and we heard you try to shout out earlier," Karen said.

"In case you haven't noticed my mouth has been split open by a knife," Abbi said angrily. "It hurts when I move it, even just talking." They let it go for the time being.

"What happened on the night of the attack?" Karen asked.

"I didn't see a lot before I was knocked out," Abbi said. "I was walking home from work late on Saturday. I was halfway home when I saw someone in front of me. I turned around to run but he caught up with me in a split second. I was knocked onto the floor, stabbed and I passed out."

The officers looked at each other. "You are sure there was only one?" Claire asked gently.

"Of course I'm sure," Abbi said quickly. "I think I would remember how many people were sticking knives into me."

"We believe it might have been a personal attack rather than just a mugging to get hold of your bag," Karen said.

Abbi was more than surprised to be told that. "Why?"

"You were attacked on a footpath," Claire said. "Your bag had practically nothing in it according to your mother whom we spoke with a while ago. You were also slashed on your face. It implies malicious intent."

"I have five aching wounds from a knife. I would definitely define that as "malicious intent," Abbi said fiercely. "It still doesn't help me recognise him though. He was wearing black. I probably wouldn't be able to identify him if he was right in front of me. That is the sad truth."

"Well if you do remember anything else call this number", Karen said giving her a card. Abbi barely even looked at it. She knew there was nothing else to remember.

"Are you sure that that guy was not attacking you," Claire asked gently. "Telling us won't hurt you, you know."

It took Abbi a moment to realise what they were talking about. "Oh don't talk rubbish", she said. "There is nothing inappropriate going on between Mark and myself," she said clearly and firmly.

"Okay then," Claire said clearly unconvinced. "At any time of day or night you can call this number to get through to me. Victim support workers are very sympathetic."

Abbi knew what they were trying to imply. "Mark, can you come in here," she raised her voice. In the next instant the door opened. Abbi realised that he must have been listening outside her door. He sat next to her immediately, holding her hand. She smiled and leaned towards him to kiss him. After the initial surprise he closed his eyes and kissed her back intensely. She moaned slightly but this time with pleasure rather than pain. She drew away from him slowly.

Abbi turned to the officers and calmly said, "anything else?" The look on their faces was quite shocked.

"No," Claire said. "Remember to get in touch if you remember anything or need any support. Or just anyone to chat to." They got up and left the room.

Abbi said to Mark, "I have all the support I need," and kissed him again. She kissed him so passionately that when they stopped he could taste her blood on his lips. The wound had slightly opened up. It must have been really hurting her but she didn't say anything. She hadn't even cried out during their kiss.

"Your lip is bleeding," he murmured to her while holding her face. She nodded while tears went down her cheeks. "Why are you crying?"

"Because it hurts," she said closing her eyes as if in defeat. "It all really hurts." On an impulse Mark gently kissed her closed eyelids. Her face broke out into a smile. She held him close to her.

"You haven't seen the other injuries have you?" she whispered to him. He looked at her intensely and shook his head. He wasn't sure if he wanted to see them or not. Abbi slowly lifted the bottom of her top up so her stomach was showing. Mark braced himself and he had a look at the damage. It wasn't as bad as he thought it would be. There were two scars. One was almost directly above the other one. They looked quite neat actually he thought. Around both of them was raised skin like a bruise and they were inflamed.

He was starting to get angry looking at them. Not because they were ugly but because seeing her wounds like that really made it hit home. Someone hadn't cared if they had killed her or not. They were perfectly prepared to murder her. The woman he loved. That was clear because he was looking at the evidence. He kissed each of her scars very gently. He felt her stiffen. She hadn't been expecting him to do that. She sighed softly in pain as he touched them as lightly as he could.

"It will be fine," he said looking her in the eyes again. "Once it heals and doesn't cause you any more pain it will be fine," he said.

"You are perfect," she said quietly to herself. "I half expected you to leave when you saw the extent of the damage." She was blushing slightly.

"I am not perfect," he said. "Plus I wouldn't leave you just because you had suffered a knife attack." They spent the next hour lying on her bed while they held each other.

Chapter 11

Leaving

Claire and Karen walked out of Abbi's house. When they were in their car they had a discussion.

"What do you think of that?" Karen asked Claire. She didn't answer straight away.

"It was either just as she said or she is petrified of him," Claire said. "I hope it's the first. She doesn't need anyone else trying to hurt her."

Karen thought for a moment. "I'm not convinced. She was definitely crying and she tried to shout out. I think it may be more sinister than that. I don't even think she knew she was crying you know."

"Maybe I will come on over when she is alone and talk things over," Claire said.

"That might not be a bad idea," Karen said. "Come on. Let's go."

Abbi's eyes clouded over for a second or two. Mark knew that she had been thinking of the attack again. It had been happening all day.

"Are you going to talk to me and tell me what happened?" he said quietly while holding her hand.

"I don't want to relive it all again. It was bad enough going through it once."

"Abbi, look at me." Mark waited until she did. "You think about it all the time. I see it in your eyes when it comes back to you."

"I know and I hate it." Abbi's eyes were now filling with tears. She swallowed a couple of times.

"Right okay. I will try to tell you but give me a few minutes." She paused and took a few deep breaths to calm

down. "It was over in about thirty seconds. It was very quick." She closed her eyes and continued to speak slowly with her eyes shut. Mark kept hold of her hand. "I was walking home and got a sense that someone was watching me. Next minute I was on the floor on my back and I struggled to get away from him. I mean, I really struggled. So he slapped my face to make me stop. It worked for a second or two so he managed to get a better hold on me. He had a hand over my mouth so I bit him. Probably not the best thing to do in hindsight." Abbi took a deep breath again and continued still with closed eyes a couple of tears were leaking out of her eyes.

"Cos I bit him he slapped me again. I kept struggling but he wouldn't let me go. He wouldn't! I don't remember much more. I felt a searing pain go through me a couple of times and then I blacked out almost instantly. I hate that I don't remember more than that. It is so infuriating that I feel like there is more that happened. But I don't remember or I'm subconsciously blocking it or whatever it's called. I can't remember and I need to know what happened. I can't remember! I don't know who it is either. Who did this to me?" She gestured at her face.

She finally opened her eyes. Mark half wished she hadn't told him. He thought it might help her but to imagine that happening to Abbi was not a good image. And it came to him far too easily. He realised that he was trembling slightly and tried hard to stop.

"You'll be alright," he said. It was more to assure himself than it was her. However she nodded.

"Thank you for being here for me," she said while hugging him. What else was I going to do, he thought to himself, but he didn't say it. He felt her relax slightly and thought that maybe telling someone had been good for her.

As he left Abbi on her own he took a deep breath and tried to take it all in. He hoped that she would feel slightly better after confiding in him. He hoped for all kinds of things. He didn't want to leave her which would soon become inevitable.

Mark left her alone after making sure that she was okay. He had even bought her a new mobile phone as her old

one had been stolen in the attack. Mark had programmed his number in it in case she needed something else.

"Stop fussing over me," Abbi said. "I'm fine. Now go and have fun. It is your holiday after all."

"Nothing is fun on my own," he told her.

"Alright then. Leave me alone so I can get some sleep and rest without you annoying me." They both burst out laughing.

"Fine. I've got the message," he said smiling. He kissed her on the top of her head and left her. Abbi fell into a fitful sleep when Mark went. She kept dreaming of men dressed in black and coming at her. Whenever they were about to stab her she woke up suddenly, her heart in her mouth. It was only two in the afternoon she noticed as she woke up again.

She gingerly walked into the kitchen to get something to eat. She went to the fridge and got a yoghurt out. She walked back to her room and turned on some rock music very loudly to drown her thoughts. When she had finished eating she went to sleep again. This time she slept peacefully.

Over the next couple of days Mark was extremely relieved that she seemed to be getting better. Abbi was still tired quite a lot but she would heal. When her survival had been in doubt he could only think of the next few hours. Now he had a problem. In less than two weeks he was due to go back to London with his parents. He had never wanted to go less than at the present moment.

Before the attack he was trying to work up to saying goodbye. He was now stuck. He seemed to fall in love with her more as the day's went by- not less. Even scarred as she would be, she was still one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen.

He had also appreciated the way she had vehemently denied the insinuation of rape with those two officers. He had been listening to every word through her door when they came around. Finding the two of them like that had evidently thrown them. He wished he hadn't seemed as annoyed as he had done. Both of them thought that he had been attacking her. It caused

him a slight twinge of unease at the fact that two officers thought him guilty.

He walked in to his holiday home and saw the rest of his family gathered in the kitchen. "What's going on?" he asked immediately.

After a moment Steve spoke up, "We are leaving. There has been an opportunity which means that our father is needed in London." Mark looked at his father for confirmation. He got it.

"When?" he asked dreading the answer.

His father still wasn't saying anything. He only looked at Mark. Steve cleared it up again by saying, "Seven in the morning, the day after tomorrow."

"No," Mark whispered. His father left the room. Mark followed him out into the garden."

"Look I know you don't want to leave your tart but we have to go," his father said.

Mark ignored the slight on Abbi to start an argument. "Yes you are needed up in London. I'm not arguing there. Please let me stay here. Just for a week."

His father shook his head. "No you all have to come with me."

"Dad my girlfriend has just got out of hospital after a knife attack. I have to stay with her." His father didn't say anything. Mark could tell he was beginning to get through to him. "I am only asking to stay here for seven more days. I will leave when that time is up. I promise. I will then join you to show my face in all those meetings you insist on before going back to Oxford. Please dad. Give me a week." Mark stopped to let that sink in. "I have to stay with her. Did you ever have to do anything when you were my age?"

Unbelievably his father nodded at him. "However," he began. "You will come back to London when your week is up otherwise I will drag you there myself with no sympathy whatsoever."

"Yes, fine," Mark said. He breathed again. His father walked away, presumably to tell the others the change of plan. Mark looked up to the sky. He had managed to get an argument past his father. He smiled to himself.

The next morning Claire was surprised to get a call from Abbi. She picked up the phone. "Hello."

"Hi it's Abbi," came the reply.

"Oh. I wasn't expecting you to call me," Claire said honestly. "How are you feeling?"

"Terrible," Abbi replied instantly. "I'm just in quite a lot of pain and I can't sleep."

"Explain to me what's happened," Claire said patiently.

"I usually sleep on my front," Abbi started. "I kept going to sleep on my back so my injuries wouldn't hurt as much. I keep rolling over in my sleep onto my stomach and the pain would wake me. That and the dreams."

"Dreams?" Claire encouraged her.

"I... I keep dreaming that men in black are attacking me. It's awful. I can see it happening painfully slowly all over again. The actual event probably lasted less than thirty seconds but it gets worse every time I dream it." Abbi sighed into the phone.

"Don't worry. It will get better," Claire soothed. "There may be a link between you lying on your stomach and the dreams associated with that injury." Claire stopped careful of how she phrased the next question. "Is Mark there to comfort you?"

"No," Abbi said instantly. "I don't want to worry him. He has done so much for me."

"He might want to be worried by you," Claire said.

"I don't care if he does," Abbi said swiftly. "I really don't want him to be more worried than he is at the moment."

"You are thinking a great deal about him. Does he think so much about you?" She heard Abbi giggling down the phone.

"I think so," Abbi said with certainty. "He didn't want to leave me yesterday because he was worried about me. He left when I told him that I had had enough of him hovering over me. After that he left." She paused. "I know what you are worrying about", she said. "Please stop worrying about that. He wouldn't rape me."

"I didn't say that," Claire said.

"No but it was implied," Abbi said. "I do appreciate that what you saw probably looked very wrong but it wasn't. I wanted him to kiss me but he kept stopping when I cried out due to the pain in my lips. I told him to ignore it. That's all he was doing."

"You were right. It did look very bad," Claire said. "If you say that's all it was I will believe it." Claire really wanted to believe it too. "Are you having sex with him?" she asked gently.

"That's none of your business," Abbi said quickly. After a moment she added, "Yes. Twice."

"Why only twice?" Claire asked immediately.

"Lack of opportunity rather than anything else," Abbi replied. "When we were together, we were in a hotel room with privacy away from our parents."

"Why did you call me?" Claire wondered.

"Because I wanted to talk to someone who doesn't know me and won't judge me and won't say anything," she said.

"I am always here if you want to chat okay?"

"Thanks," Abbi said and then the phone went dead. Claire didn't know what to think now.

Just after she had ended the conversation with Claire her phone rang. Abbi looked but she didn't really need to. Only Mark had this number at the moment.

"Hi," she said.

"How are you this morning?" he immediately asked.

She smiled at his concern for her. "Yeah, I'm alright."

"Can I come over?"

"Oh yeah sure," she said. "Ignore my mum though. She has been in a really weird mood ever since... Ever since I woke up at the hospital."

"Love you," he said. She smiled.

"I love you." When the conversation had ended Abbi immediately got dressed as fast as her injured body would allow her to. She might feel rotten. It didn't mean she had to look it.

Within about ten minutes Mark was sitting on the bottom of her bed. He gave her a kiss hello. He was looking extremely down.

"What's wrong?" Abbi asked.

"I have got bad news," he said. He took her hand. "Here goes. My family is leaving tomorrow morning."

"What! That's less than twenty four hours away!" She burst out.

"Hold on a minute," Mark said quickly. "I have managed to persuade my father to let me stay here for an extra week." Neither of them said anything while Abbi let it sink in. "I do still love you," he told her. She had dropped her head into his chest while he wrapped his arms around her.

"I know that I knew this was coming," she said. "It doesn't make it any easier. It is just such a short time away." Her arms were tightening around him.

"I got us seven more days," he whispered to her. "Just remember that it could be worse."

"This is just typical," she said. "Our time is running out and I am not really well enough to move very far out of the house." He tilted her face up and gave her a kiss. She didn't cry out from the pain like she had been doing. "I don't want to lose you," she said.

"We have a week," he said gently.

After a while when neither of them said anything Abbi asked, "would you do me a favour and lie down next to me?" He nodded and they both lay back on her bed. Abbi looked at him. He wrapped his arms around her, careful of her injuries. She sighed and leaned into his shoulder.

Within a minute Abbi was asleep. She hadn't got much last night Mark guessed. She settled down and Mark looked at her. She was gorgeous. She tried to turn away from him in her sleep. He stopped her by grabbing her arm and turning her towards him. Otherwise she would have settled on her injured stomach. She snuggled closer to him in her sleep. This was incredibly comfortable Mark thought.

However within about ten minutes of her sleep she sat bolt upright. "What's wrong?" he asked her.

"Dreams," she said cuddling up to him again. "I keep dreaming of my attacker," she said quickly.

"What do you dream about him?" he asked her gently.

"I dream he has me again and they... He stabs me over and over again. It's awful. I can't bear all the pain and I wake up."

Mark was silently crying as she said that. It terrified him that she was still hurting this badly over this. It wasn't bad enough that they nearly killed her, they were haunting her dreams now too.

"You need to forget him," he said softly.

"I know I do. I've been trying. It's not easy," she said impatiently. She looked at him and was shocked to see him crying. "Don't cry Mark. Please." With a huge effort he stopped. "Can you take me out somewhere?" she asked.

"Are you well enough?" he asked. She nodded.

"I would like to be away from the same four walls for just an hour or two," she said. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Abbi's mum and Jess were in the house so both Mark and Abbi stayed put. Soon though there was a knock on Abbi's bedroom door. Eleanor popped her head around the door.

"You've got a visitor," she said. Mark and Abbi had sat up by now. The door opened wide and Rosalyn walked in with a bunch of flowers.

"Hi Abbi," she said. Mark held Abbi's hand quite tightly as Rosalyn came in. Eleanor shut the door and all three of them were left alone.

"What do you want?" Abbi asked.

"I've come to say I'm sorry," Rosalyn said. "I was an idiot on the phone and I really am sorry."

"This has nothing to do with the fact that I nearly died about a week ago," Abbi asked shrewdly.

"Well, I..." Rosalyn didn't know what to say. She looked at Abbi for the first time since coming into the house. She was shocked by the state of it. Abbi saw Rosalyn recoil slightly. Abbi stood up and walked over to her.

"If you were really sorry it wouldn't have taken you this long to visit me." Abbi was suddenly furious with Rosalyn and saw her for the pathetic girl she was. Always blaming someone else. "What gives you the right to come here and look disgusted at my face? It's my face. It's not your problem. You didn't apologize for the phone call at the time. If you had have

done it would have been such a small thing we would have both forgotten about it by now. You feel guilty. That's the only reason you are here."

"Abbi that's not true," Rosalyn said. But it was and they both knew it.

"Get out," Abbi told her. "Get out of my house." Rosalyn slowly departed taking the flowers with her. Abbi breathed heavily as she sat back down. Mark asked her twice if she was alright before she answered.

"Yes I'm fine," she said while holding his hand. "That one has been coming for a while."

"What do we do now?" he said.

"I guess we just keep sitting here," Abbi said. They held hands in the silence all morning.

Abbi had fallen asleep again. She was still holding Mark's hand in her sleep. Mark looked at her, thinking about her. He would miss her so much when he left. But he had to leave. He would keep in contact with her though. He couldn't not. Mark ran his fingers lightly through her hair. Abbi woke up with a start.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he said straight away.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "I'm not exactly enjoying my sleep recently anyway. Please take me out somewhere. I'm going crazy."

Mark wasn't sure that leaving was best for her. "I will go and ask your mum if it's alright?" he said to give him some thinking time. He left her room and went searching for Eleanor. He found her doing some ironing in the kitchen while listening to the radio. She turned it off when she saw Mark.

"Abbi wants to leave the house for a couple of hours," Mark told her. "Is it okay if I take her out for a while?"

Eleanor nodded. "Be gentle with her," she said quietly. Mark walked back to Abbi's room.

"You can come out with me if you want," Mark told her. She looked so grateful that he knew he was doing the right thing. "I walked over here so I'm going to get my car and come back."

"I think I can manage walking to your house," Abbi said smiling. "I've been stabbed, I'm not an invalid." Mark

didn't say anything but walked with her out of the house. By the time they got to his car she was pale but still walking.

"You're sure you are okay to go out?" Mark asked again. He was beginning to doubt the wisdom of what he was doing.

"Yes. Now please don't ask me that again." Abbi impatiently got into the car.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked her.

"I don't mind," she said shrugging. Mark thought he would take them to a cinema for a lunch time movie. When the movie had started and had been going for five minutes Mark looked at Abbi. She was asleep again. She looked very peaceful.

As the movie ended Abbi started to stir. Mark gave her a gentle shake.

"I guess I fell asleep," she said smiling.

"Yeah," Mark said. He kissed her forehead and they left. At some point during the film it had started raining. Neither of them had so much as a coat.

"You wait here," Mark told her. "I'll go and get the car and stop outside here." Before Abbi could say anything Mark had left the cinema and was running into the pouring rain. Abbi felt much better. She had got some dreamless sleep. Finally. She was hungry though. Maybe they could get something to eat before going home. As this thought occurred to her she saw Mark's car outside and he beeped the horn. She quickly dashed out and got in the car.

Mark looked like a wet drip. He was soaking. "The car seemed further away than when I parked it," he told her grinning as they drove off.

"Can we get something to eat?" she asked him.

"Sure. What do you fancy?" Abbi had no idea what she wanted.

"Anything as long as it's food," she said. "I'm starving." He quickly drove them to a fish and chip takeaway and went in to order. Soon enough he was back with two cod and chips. The smell was heavenly. Within a very short time most of the food was gone. They had completely steamed up the car. You couldn't see anything and the rain was drumming

down harder than ever. Eventually Mark took Abbi home. It had been a good day.

The rest of the week passed far too quickly for both of them. Abbi had seen Mark almost every day of the summer. She would badly miss him when he left. Abbi thought about him constantly. Mark thought about her all the time too.

Abbi was getting much better as the days passed. She was out with Mark every day. Jess was helping the situation too. She distracted Abbi from her injuries. Abbi recognised that they were slowly becoming friends. Jess never mentioned what had happened between Mark and herself to Abbi. It didn't mean anything so there was no point.

Too soon Abbi and Mark's last day together arrived. Abbi didn't want to wake up. That would mean waking up to their last day. She wanted to fall back into oblivion so she wouldn't have to say goodbye to him.

It was eight o'clock in the evening and Abbi was just about to leave the house as Mark was going to pick her up. Her mother came into her room and asked, "When do I expect you back?" Abbi paused for a bit.

"You don't," she said quickly. Without even looking she knew her mother had raised her eyebrows. "Look I am going whether you like it or not," she said. "It's his last night here. It may well be the last time I ever see him. I would like you to trust me and let me go willingly rather than making me sneak out."

After a second Abbi's mum said, "I agree. I just worry about you because two weeks ago you were repeatedly stabbed and in hospital. I am sorry I was avoiding you when you were ill." Abbi looked at her. "I just got so angry looking at you and knowing what some lunatic had done to my daughter so I avoided you and I shouldn't have." Her mum held her arms out for a hug.

Abbi gave her one. "Right I have to go," Abbi said.

Jessica popped up around the corner. She said in a low voice, "does this mean your bed's free tonight and I don't have to sleep on the sofa?"

"Yeah sure," Abbi said smiling.

"Thanks. You have fun tonight," she said rolling her eyes. Abbi laughed and said goodbye to her mother.

"See you tomorrow," her mum said. "Just be careful okay?"

"Yes mum," and she left the house and saw Mark waiting for her.

"Hi," Abbi said getting into his car. She gave him a kiss and they drove off towards his holiday home.

"You feeling okay?" he asked her.

"Yeah, I'm feeling much better," she said truthfully. A companionable silence filled the car. Eventually he parked the car outside. She was suddenly very nervous. They both got out and Mark unlocked the door.

"You don't have to do this you know," he whispered to her. She smiled and kissed him.

"I want to," she said. Mark opened the door and Abbi stepped through it. When she looked around she realised that rose petals were on the floor. She immediately kissed Mark passionately. "They're perfect," she said and kissed him again. He swung the door shut and led the way to the bedroom as they wrapped their arms around each other.

When they got there she noticed what he had done with the room. There were rose petals sprinkled all over the bed which had silk sheets on it. There were candles alight giving the room a soft glow and there was even a bottle of champagne on ice with two glasses on the side.

"You make an effort when you are trying to impress a girl," she said and they both laughed.

"Only when you're the girl I'm trying to impress," he said seriously then he kissed her. He held her face gently as she wrapped her arms around him pulling him closer. He started to kiss her neck and she sighed with pleasure as he worked his way down. He was stopped by her top. She pulled him closer and took his T-shirt off. He pushed her onto the bed gently. She smiled at him as he took her top off her. He threw it on the floor and looked at her incredibly passionately. Her hair was done up in a dark ribbon. He gently took that off her and kissed her once more.

She touched his face softly as he took his trousers off. He then unzipped her skirt and threw that aside too. They were

both shaking. He went to kiss her stomach where her scars were. They were still bruised but they looked less painful. He kissed the first one and she sighed. She had been holding her breath, he could tell. He delicately kissed the other scar.

Her hands went down to stroke his head while he kissed her body. Then he looked her in the eyes. She kissed him tenderly as he put his arms around her back. He slowly undid her bra. Their kiss got deeper. She looked at him with complete trust as he kissed her again and again and again.

When it was over she curled up beside him. "We haven't drunk our champagne yet," she murmured. He kissed the top of her head and went to the side to get the bottle and the glasses. He sat up next to her pouring their champagne.

"This is nice," she said as he gave her a glass. "You really made an effort for me," she added as they clinked glasses together.

"Of course I did," he said gently. She kissed him on the cheek. "Which reminds me", he said. "I have something for you." He reached under the pillow and found a jewellery box. He gave it to her and she slowly opened it.

It had a silver ring in there. She looked at it carefully as she got it out of the box. It was a plain band but it looked like it was real silver. It had been engraved she saw as well. "Together and apart. Love M." Her eyes were shining and she started to cry.

"Stop that," Mark said gently. "This is to let you know that I will always be thinking of you, wherever I am. And to remind you that I love you always." She held out her hand silently. He put it on her engagement finger. It fit perfectly. "One day I will come back," he said. "I know it seems so far away but I won't leave you."

"I love you," she whispered. "I always will do. I swear." She held him tightly as he made love to her once more.

After he had made love to her again she fell asleep. As he watched her he thought that she wasn't really well again. The effects of the attack were still hurting her. He had felt that when he kissed her. Half her mouth was still swollen. She didn't complain once though. He was shattered but he daredn't

go to sleep. If he did he would miss all these moments to be treasured until they met again. He hated leaving her. It was going to be awful tomorrow morning when he did leave. They had both been preparing for it for so long. He knew it would be terrible and it would hurt near to agony.

He had an early train so he had to be in his car by seven to get to the station. All his stuff was packed so he wouldn't be in a desperate rush in the morning. He had a sudden thought and slowly got out of bed so as not to disturb her. He looked around the floor for something. There it was. He took hold of the ribbon that had come out of her hair. That he would keep until they met again.

"What are you doing?" Abbi had woken up.

"I was looking for this," he said holding up her hair ribbon. "I want to keep it to remind me of you. Of tonight."

"Keep it," she told him. They both drifted off to sleep soon after, arms around each other."

Mark woke up at six in the morning. He only had one hour left with her. He didn't know if he should wake her up or leave her to sleep. After a minute he decided to wake her up.

"Abbi," he said shaking her slightly.

"What is it?" she said with her eyes shut.

Mark swallowed. "I've got to go soon," he whispered to her. Suddenly her eyes flew open as she remembered where she was.

"How long have we got?" she asked quickly waking up.

"About an hour," he told her.

"Oh God!" She got out of bed wearing nothing but the ring he had given her the night before. That sight made him feel oddly calmer. She came back in five minutes wearing a dressing gown with a couple of racks of toast on a tray.

"You take good care of me," he said smiling. She grinned too and the both started eating. Within five minutes the toast had gone. They both curled up in bed together.

"When I have left," he started. She looked at him like she wanted him to stop but he carried on. "When I have left I will leave you with the key. You can stay for as long as you

want, just post the key through the letter box when you're ready to leave."

Their time together went far too quickly. Before she knew it he was getting dressed. He was at the door his hands around her face. He gently kissed her scars down her face ending with his lips on hers.

"Please keep in touch with me," she said. She was crying but she couldn't stop herself.

"Of course I will you daft thing. I love you very, very much," he said softly. "The key is by the champagne in our room", he said slowly. Abbi's tears were running freely by now.

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him for the last time before he left. "I love you too," she said.

"I'm not going to look back at you," he said quickly. "Because if I do I won't be able to leave you." He gave her one last hug and he said quickly, "Bye." He walked away from her and was true to his word. He didn't look back.

When he had driven away Abbi went to the room where she had made love with him last night. She was still crying and she looked by the champagne. Sure enough there was a key. There was also a note to her. She dashed away her tears and read it quickly.

Abbi

There is so much I want you to know that I will never get the chance or be brave enough to say it all to you when I leave. I will never ever forget you. I will come back one day, I promise you that. I also promise that I won't get involved with anyone else while I am not with you. I could never do that to you. I love you so much. I don't want to leave you. But I have to.

I hope that your scars will fade. (I know how much you hate them though I couldn't care less about them. Only the pain that they cause you.) I hope you will be happy. If you feel the same way about me as I do about you it will be the hardest thing you have ever done. Watching me go. I can't imagine walking out that door and not coming back to you. But it has to be done.

I will be back one day and we will be together again.
Last night meant everything to me and I hope it did for you.

I love you always

Mark

Abbi fell on the floor, crying with the weight of her broken heart.

An hour later Abbi had got dressed, had dried her eyes and was ready to leave. She wanted to leave the house as soon as possible because too many fresh memories of him flashed at her. Mark had told her that one of his father's people would come and close the house up for the year in a couple of weeks so she could leave everything as it was.

Abbi left the house and locked the door. She was about to post the key through the door when she had second thoughts. She pocketed the key. Just in case. His house was only a ten minute walk away from her own and she felt up to the walk so she left. When she got home her mother was up and waiting for her.

"How did it go?" she asked before Abbi had closed the door. Abbi walked into the living room and collapsed on a chair.

"It was ... fine," she said. She looked at her own hands and saw the ring that Mark had given her. She curled her hand into a fist so that it caught the light. She knew she would never take it off.

"Tell me more than that," her mum said impatiently.

"I've never been happier," Abbi said. "And I've never been sadder." Eleanor followed her daughter's gaze and saw the ring on her finger.

"He gave you that did he?" she asked.

"Yes," Abbi said. She didn't feel like going into it at the moment. She kept reliving their final moments together in her head. It was like a looped tape that went over and over that she couldn't stop from playing. She didn't want to think about him. It was too painful. Her mother evidently got the message because she left her daughter to it.

Abbi got her phone out of her pocket and checked to see if she had any messages. She hadn't. She sent a text to Mark simply saying I love you. Within five minutes she was reading a message he had sent to her. I miss you already. My heart is with you. Love you M. Abbi silently started to cry to herself.

She opened the door to her room and saw Jess asleep. It might be nice to talk to her when she was awake. Also it gave Abbi time to calm down slightly. She shut herself in the bathroom and continued crying silently.

Chapter 12

Long Absence

After their last meeting the months passed. Abbi became fully healthy and went back to work. She tried as hard as she could to not think of him at least several times a minute. It didn't work. They kept in contact by letters and phone calls but they hadn't seen each other since that fateful day. Jessica was still living with Abbi. She had got a job as a cleaner of an office block in New Port town which she hated. Jessica insisted on putting some money towards the household bills though so she needed a job. Jessica and Abbi had become friends which was inevitable with the amount of time they spent together over the past few months.

Mark had gone back for his last year at Oxford University as he had been told he had to. He constantly thought of Abbi. He kept a picture of her in his wallet. She was laughing at the camera with her dazzling smile. The months came and went. His father was very pleased that he had done what he should have and was in his proper place. As far as his father was concerned Abbi was out of Mark's head. Steve was more sympathetic and he knew that Abbi was never far from his mind.

One day in early December Steve asked Mark what he was doing over Christmas.

"Not a lot," Mark said "Why?"

"I know that you never stop thinking of Abbi," Steve said. "With Christmas nearly here you have time off school. You're not even needed for any meetings with dad. Go and visit her."

Mark was silent at that. He could go and visit her, that was true. He had already bought her some Christmas

presents. "Go and get the train down to visit her," Steve continued.

"Won't everyone be upset that I'm not here for Christmas?" Mark asked.

"Are you kidding?" Steve said. "Dad doesn't care about Christmas, mum will understand and I could do without seeing you moping around looking like death." Before Steve had even stopped speaking Mark had raced up and went to call the train station to reserve his ticket.

That was just as well thought Steve because he had planned to spend Christmas with Grace, who lived up in Manchester. If their parents let Mark go for that long, they would certainly let Steve go and see his girlfriend. Especially as they approved of Grace.

Mark had planned that he would leave London on the 21st December and come back on the 2nd January. That gave him nearly two weeks with her. He would get to spend Christmas and new years with her. He wouldn't tell her he was coming down to see her. It would be a surprise. The rest of the month crawled by.

Eventually the morning of the twenty first dawned. It was a freezing day. Steve had been right. His parents didn't particularly mind him leaving. His father barely even realised it was Christmas. The train journey took ages. It was jam packed as well as everyone seemed to be leaving London for the festive period.

Finally he got off the train and saw his old car still in the car park where he had left it four months ago. He went up to it and unlocked it. It still worked fine even though it looked quite grubby. He put his suitcases in the boot and drove to her house. He couldn't wait to see her.

There was barely any traffic on the roads but Mark had to drive slower in case of ice. It felt like it took twice as long to get to her house than it usually would have done.

Finally he parked outside her house and got out of the car. Her mother's car wasn't there he noticed, pleased. He would have her to himself for a while at least. He phoned her on his mobile waiting for her to answer.

"Hi," her voice rang out.

"How are you?" he asked.

"I'm missing you if I'm honest," she said. "The hotel has closed over Christmas as no one was going so I'm sitting at home flicking on the T.V as there is nothing better to do. And I'm bored out of my mind."

"I have an idea," Mark said quickly. "Go outside. I was watching the weather forecast and apparently it is going to snow," he said feebly.

"No way," she said. "It hardly ever snows here plus it's freezing. Anyway I could look out the window to see..." She never finished her sentence. Mark saw the curtains twitch as Abbi looked outside and saw him standing outside her house. The phone went dead as the door of her house was flung open.

She ran up to him and threw herself into his arms. She was clinging to him as tightly as she could. He returned her embrace and then kissed her intensely. Abbi returned his kiss and it was a long time before either of them could stop.

"Surprise," he whispered as she tightened her arms around him. After a while he let her go and had a look at her.

"Your hair," he said quietly. Her long blonde hair had been cut and it was now shoulder length. It made her look so much different than the girl he remembered.

"Do you like it?" she asked. He didn't bother to reply but kissed her instead.

"Come in," she said. "I'm freezing." He had a look at her. She hadn't even put shoes on when she came out to meet him. Her scars on her face had faded to pink thin lines now. They looked much better now than they had over the summer. She looked much happier now as well. He put his arm around her as they went inside.

They sat down in the living room next to each other holding hands. She was still wearing the silver ring he had given her. Seeing that she was still wearing it made him feel very contented. "How long are you staying for?" she asked.

"Until January 2nd," he said smiling at her. She kissed him passionately.

"I've missed you so much," she said when she stopped kissing him. "Are you here on your own or are your family with you?" she asked.

"I'm on my own," he said quickly. She beamed at him.

"Are you staying at your holiday home?" she asked him. From her face he could tell that she was thinking of their last night there in the summer.

"Yes," he said.

"Let's go there," she said. "My mum and Jess will be home soon. I want to have some privacy with you." He nodded and they left the house after Abbi had written a note to her mum.

When they arrived at his holiday home they both picked up his suitcases. Mark stopped facing the door. He stupidly realised that he didn't have a key. He had idiotically left it at home. Abbi noticed what was the problem. She got the key out of her pocket. He looked incredulously at her.

"I kept it after the summer," she said shrugging. "Just in case." They both carried his suitcases into his room. Instantly Abbi felt the memories of the last time she was here dragging her back. She remembered how they had drunk champagne and they had made love in this room. She swallowed trying to forget their last goodbye.

"I love you," she said quietly. He smiled at her, dropping his suitcase on the floor. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her until she was gasping for breath. She couldn't let him go. Part of her was afraid that if he let go of her, he would disappear back to London. Away from here. Away from her.

With neither of them knowing quite how it had happened they had made love to each other and were lying naked in bed holding each other.

Mark said gently, "Your scars have healed really well." She shrugged. It was true they had. The ones on her body had become practically flat and were white lines. The ones on her face were just pink lines.

"I didn't come to see you for sex," he added. She smiled.

"I know that," she said. Mark noticed that she looked slightly upset.

"What's wrong?" he asked stroking her back lightly.

"I just keep remembering the last time we were here," she said and swallowed. "I know you will leave again but

at the time it was just... awful. And it hurt like hell." He held her and looked deep into her eyes.

"Stop thinking of that," he said softly. "I said I would come back and I have. I missed you." He kissed her neck and she smiled.

Abbi's phone started ringing. It was her mother. She put her fingers to her lips so Mark would be quiet. She answered.

"Where are you?" came a worried voice.

"Don't worry mum I'm fine," Abbi said. Her mother didn't respond straight away. Abbi heard her breathing heavily down the phone.

"Say hi to Mark for me," her mother said. Abbi was shocked into silence. "No one else would make you leave the house that quickly," she said while Abbi was gathering her scattered wits. "And Christmas is coming so he must be here to visit you." Her mother hung up the phone.

"My mum says hi," Abbi said stunned.

"You told her I was back?" Mark asked stunned. Abbi shook her head.

"No I didn't. She guessed," Abbi said. They both burst out laughing.

A few hours later Jessica called her. Abbi wanted to speak to her so she excused herself from Mark's company and walked outside so she could have some privacy.

"I should have known," Jess said happily as Abbi answered.

"What?" Abbi asked.

"Only Mark could make you leave the house that fast."

"Yeah I know. I have really missed him. You know how much I missed him. I must have been driving you crazy the amount that I went on."

"No more than usual," Jess said and they both laughed. "So have you slept with him in the few hours since he's been back?"

"Jess!"

"I take that for a yes then!"

Abbi was lost for words for a moment. "Yeah, take that as a yes. I can't stop smiling."

"Dangerous combination. Sex and love," Jess said seriously. "You know how bad this will hurt when he leaves again."

"Yeah I know," Abbi said sighing. "But I'm not going to think about that while he's here. It'll only ruin the precious little time we actually have together. It'll hurt anyway no matter whether I have been keeping my distance or not."

"Probably."

"Look I hate to be terribly rude but..." Abbi was interrupted by Jessica.

"But you want to get back to Mark. Don't worry I understand. Thousands of friends wouldn't." Abbi could tell she was having a laugh.

"I'll talk to you soon," Abbi said. They disconnected the call and Abbi returned to Mark.

Later that evening Abbi said she wanted to take him somewhere. He drove the car and she screamed directions at him while they both laughed. After about forty minutes driving they were in the middle of the countryside with nothing but fields for company.

"You are sure you know where we are going?" Mark asked her.

"Oh Yeah," she nodded. "Turn left and we are there at the end of this road." Mark obliged and she told him to stop outside a house.

"Stay here," she said. "I'll be back in a minute." Mark was left in the car bewildered as Abbi knocked on the door. A woman of about sixty opened the door. Abbi and the woman spent a few minutes chatting and then Abbi gave the woman some money. Abbi was then walking back to the car.

"Come on," she told him. He slowly got out of the car and followed her to a shed. There were hundreds of different pairs of ice skates there. "Take your size and follow me," Abbi said. He did as she said. She went out of the other door of the shed and there was an ice rink in front of him. It was of medium size and there were thousands of tiny fairy lights above it. All in white it looked like a Christmas card.

They were the only ones there, Mark saw. "What is this?" he asked slightly awed.

"What does it look like?" she said brightly. By this time she had taken her shoes off and had her skates on. "Come on, Mark." She said while she skated off. He followed suit and changed his shoes to his skates. He was much more unsteady on the ice than she was. After about twenty minutes he had got the hang of it though and he followed her around the rink.

"How did an ice rink get to be built in the middle of nowhere?" he asked her as she circled around him.

"Well there is a story to it," she said. "Rumour has it that one Christmas morning many moons ago the pond froze over. Mr and Mrs White and their seven kids spent Christmas day on the ice. They had so much fun that they decided to build an ice rink that would be there every year for their family to enjoy. So every year at Christmas their children and grandchildren would come home and spend the morning skating around the ice."

"However they froze the water over at the beginning of December every year so all their friends could enjoy it too. At present only locals really know about it and they are still more than happy to let us use it. Their children don't come home anymore. No one knows why. I've skated here every year since I was five. They like to keep the ice rink going just in case one year their children or grand children turn up," Abbi finished.

"That's quite a story," Mark said. He came up very close behind her and put his arms around her waist. She was surprised by this and moved away. Mark immediately lost his balance and fell onto the ice. When he got up he was soaking. Abbi burst out laughing. He came after her and she raced away from him. She started too quickly and slipped over herself. They both got up drenched with the top layer of slush on the ice soaking them. They both laughed at each other and spent the hour chasing after each other.

The old woman in the house was watching Abbi and Mark chasing each other, sighing to herself.

"That could have been us," she said to her husband. She looked at him and realised that he was asleep. She smiled

to herself. She had really wanted children. It had just never happened for them. She built this ice rink to hold onto her childhood memories. It also let her watch people in love. Nothing seemed more romantic to her at this time of year. That made her smile because she found Christmas a particularly lonely time. No children to laugh with her, only her husband who seemed to sleep more and more each year.

She did enjoy watching people in love she thought as she sat down next to her husband.

Mark and Abbi were sitting in the car laughing together as they drove home. They both looked like they had been thrown into a swimming pool.

"That was a really good evening," he said to her.

"Yeah it was," she said.

"Do you want to come back to mine?" he asked. She didn't say anything.

"I should probably go home," she said. He felt his heart sink. "I would love to go back with you, believe me. But if I did my mum would get seriously worried and probably drag me out of the house at two in the morning." Mark nodded. He thought she was probably right anyway. He didn't want to incur Eleanor's wrath before he had even seen her.

He parked outside her house and walked her to the doorstep. "Thanks for the ice rink," he said gently.

She kissed him then said, "I love you." Before he could say anything else the door burst open and Eleanor was standing there. She didn't look particularly angry he saw. He kissed Abbi once more.

"I love you," he said quietly to her and he said good-night to Eleanor and he went back home.

Abbi walked into her house while her mum looked at her. "You had a fun day?" her mother asked sarcastically. Abbi nodded and went for a hot shower. She was aching everywhere from where she had fallen and been pushed onto the ice. She was so happy he was back. Even if it was only for less than two weeks.

Later as she curled up in bed she was thinking to herself. She hadn't taken her ring off since the day he had given it to her. Not even to read the inscription. She knew what it said

and that was enough for her. Today had been exciting and thrilling for her. It had been such a shock to see Mark outside that she could have sworn her heart had stopped until he held her. He was just as handsome as she had remembered. She couldn't wait to see him tomorrow.

The same evening Mark opened his wallet and looked at the picture of her. He would have to change that picture he thought. He would replace it with one of her with her shorter hair. He slowly took the picture out and looked behind it. There was the dark ribbon she had worn in her hair the last time he had seen her in the summer. He ran it through his fingers thinking of that time they had been together. Nothing else could bring her as clearly to mind as this ribbon did.

At the moment he wanted to touch her face and to kiss her lips. He just wanted her. He put everything back where it was in his wallet and went to sleep. His dreams were filled with her. The way she laughed, how her smile lit up her eyes and the way she cried. Every piece of her.

Early the next morning Mark was woken up by his phone. It was six in the morning. It was still dark outside.

"Hello?" Mark answered.

"Hi Mark its Steve." Mark groaned inwardly. His brother always had a lay in even if he was meant to be somewhere else. Calling his brother this early in the morning meant there was something wrong.

"What's wrong?" he asked resigned to a long conversation.

"You know Grace?" Steve said.

"Yes, vaguely. The girl you were with at the ball in the summer?"

"Yes well..."

"Spit it out Steve," Mark said impatiently.

"She's pregnant." Mark almost dropped the phone. He couldn't think of a thing to say. Luckily Steve got in first

"She's about four and a half months gone. It was after the summer. She didn't tell me. I visited her for Christmas and it's painfully obvious. I didn't tell her I was coming and there is something else too."

"What else?" Mark asked. He didn't know what else there could be.

"She is completely broke. She has no money, her family have no money. She was lying about everything. Just to seem *suitable*."

"Dad's going to kill you."

"I know."

"All over the summer he was going on and on about "my tart" with no money or social connections and that she might get pregnant and he would have a bastard grandchild to support, when all along he was talking to the wrong son."

"Please don't sound so arrogant and can you stop gloating," Steve said. "I'm desperate here. What do I do?"

"Steve there isn't really a lot you can do," Mark told him. "If she doesn't want to get rid of it- and it sounds like she doesn't, what can you do?" Mark heard Steve sighing on the phone.

"Why are you calling me so early by the way?" Mark asked. "It's not like this problem is going to evaporate with fast action."

"I haven't been to sleep yet," Steve said immediately. "Why does this type of thing always happen to me! It never happens to you. Not to the golden boy," he burst out.

"Maybe because you were having unprotected sex," Mark said shrewdly.

"Yeah well it's a bit late to think about that isn't it?" he said irritated. "What do I do?" he asked desperately.

"You have to tell dad."

"He is going to kill me."

"It will be worse the longer you leave it Steve. You know it will be."

"Yeah." Steve sighed. "I know. I will. I wanted to talk to someone else first. I couldn't think of who else to call."

"Next time could you wait 'til I'm awake," Mark said stifling a yawn.

"Yeah," Mark could hear his brother smiling.

"Let me know how it goes alright?" Mark said.

"I will." Mark put the phone down and rolled over to go to sleep. He couldn't. Not now that bombshell had been dropped. Grace- pregnant. Their father would be furious when

he found out. And he would have to find out. This type of thing never stays quiet for long. Mark was profoundly glad that it wouldn't be him getting the bad end of his father's temper. But then he and Abbi hadn't been as stupid as Steve had evidently been.

Over the next few days Mark and Abbi spent every free second together. They went shopping on the Christmas market on the last day it was open. They got some stranger in the market to take some new pictures of them laughing together. They went to one of those one hour developers as well to get the pictures before everything closed for Christmas day. And before Mark left. They even got a Christmas tree for Mark's house. A little one.

Eleanor, Abbi's mother, seemed resigned to the amount of time Abbi was spending with Mark. She didn't even try to stop Abbi spending Christmas Eve night over at Mark's for which Abbi was very grateful.

"I want you to come over here though," Eleanor said. "I can't spend Christmas day without you Abbi."

"Of course I would come and see you," Abbi said. "Do you mind if Mark comes or do you want it to just be us two?"

"Oh you can bring him over," her mother assured her. "It's not as if the house will be empty anyway what with Jess hanging around." Abbi privately admitted that she had a point. Jessica had no intention of going home and seeing her parents at Christmas. As far as Abbi could tell she had no intention of ever seeing her parents again.

Abbi had a bag packed and was leaving when she gave her mother a hug. "I'll see you tomorrow," Abbi said. Her mother kissed her on the cheek and watched as Abbi walked over to Marks house.

Mark was surprised to see her. He gave her a kiss hello and said, "I thought you would be at home for Christmas."

"My mum didn't mind if I stayed here," she said. "That's alright isn't it?" He answered her by kissing her passionately.

"I would be delighted if you stayed here," Mark said.

"Good," she replied and they both walked in to the house. They had spent quite a bit of time decorating the house for Christmas. It now looked very homey. She walked into the sitting room and was surprised to see a fire in the grate. She flopped onto the sofa and saw Mark standing in the doorway looking at her.

"What are you staring at?" She asked. He didn't say anything. Just watched her curled up on the sofa looking so comfortable. He walked over to her and gently kissed her.

"I just can't believe that we are both here, together," he told her stroking her hair. They spent the rest of the evening chatting about nothing in particular cuddled up together by the fire.

Before Abbi went to bed she hung up a stocking at the end of the bed and put Marks Christmas present in it. She then cuddled next to Mark. He kissed the top of her head gently. They went to sleep with their arms wrapped around each other.

Mark woke up first in the morning and he looked at Abbi. She had her face turned towards him. He gently touched her face and she moved towards him in her sleep. On impulse he kissed her cheek. She was half awake and moved her arms around him.

"Are you awake, Abbi?" he asked her. She opened her eyes slightly so they were slits and nodded, smiling. He kissed her lips and felt her respond which more than answered his question.

She opened her eyes and said quietly, "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas Abbi," he whispered into her ear as he covered her body with his. Her hands flew up to hold his face as he made love to her more tenderly than he ever had before.

When they had finished she got up slowly and handed him his Christmas present in it's stocking. He opened it slowly and found a brand new watch.

"I couldn't afford a very expensive one", she said quickly. "I thought it was good though and I..." She tailed off as Mark stopped her simply by kissing her.

"I love it," he said. "Now for your present. That one is under the tree in the sitting room." She gave him a kiss and got out of bed. She slipped her dressing gown on and they both went into the sitting room.

Abbi sat down in the chair she had relaxed in yesterday as Mark went to look under the tree. He came back with four wrapped presents.

"Oh God," Abbi said. "I now feel like I have horrendously under bought for you.

"Don't be silly," Mark said. "I really enjoyed buying things for you. Anyway you haven't opened them yet. You might hate them." She playfully hit him.

She opened the largest one first and found a gorgeous black leather hand bag. She loved it. "It's perfect," she said beaming. She opened the next two and found a matching earring and necklace set in gold.

"Is that real gold?" she asked him awed.

"Yes," he said and did the necklace up for her.

"Mark you have spent far too much on me," she said.

"Rubbish", he replied. "If I want to spend money on you I will." She opened the last one and found a photo frame with a picture of both of them in it. In the picture Abbi was laughing at Mark. Mark had his arms around her and was smiling a little shyly at the camera man.

"That is wonderful Mark," she said. They wrapped their arms around each other and didn't let go for a long time.

Later in the morning Mark phoned his brother.

"Merry Christmas Steve," he said when he got an answer.

"Hi Mark," he said depressed.

"Have you told them yet?"

"No."

"You need to," Mark said straight away. "Are you at home?"

"Yes. I didn't feel like staying at Grace's. I was in a bit of shock." Steve sighed over the phone. "I can't tell them today. It's Christmas Day."

"Yeah I see that but don't wait too long. They need to know. If you haven't done it by the time I get back, I might tell them."

"You wouldn't do that!" Steve sounded genuinely shocked.

"According to you she is already four and a half months pregnant and she didn't tell you. Mum and dad need time to get used to this because in a little over four months they will have a grandchild."

"Yeah. You're right," Steve said. "I will tell them but not today. And Merry Christmas Mark."

"Merry Christmas." Mark hung up the phone to see Abbi watching him closely.

"What's going on?" she asked. Mark hesitated but then thought what the hell. She would find out sooner or later.

"You remember Grace Williams. She went with Steve to the ball." Abbi nodded. "She is pregnant."

"Oh my God!" Abbi burst out. "But... I can't get my head around that. You're going to be an uncle." Mark hadn't thought of that. The thought sent him reeling. She was right, he would be an uncle.

"That stupid girl!" Abbi burst out. "I remember her. She was that five foot airhead. Clearly she is an airhead."

"Oh come on that's not entirely fair," Mark said quickly. "It's his fault as well."

"I know that. I'm just really surprised. She should have been on the pill."

Mark was quite taken aback by her reaction. Another thought occurred to him. "Are you on the pill?"

"Of course I am," she said briskly. "I don't want to get pregnant."

"You didn't tell me that," he said quietly.

"I know. I thought after the ball that I should go on it. Just in case." An awkward silence enfolded them.

"Come on. We should go to my mum's," Abbi said after a while. Mark gave her a kiss and then rummaged around in his suitcase. "What are you looking for?"

"I bought your mum a Christmas present." Abbi wrapped her arms around him.

"You are so sweet, Mark," she said. He smiled.

"Come on lets go," Mark said giving her a quick kiss. They headed out the door. As they walked outside wrapped in gloves and scarves they saw it wasn't a white Christmas. It was grey, cloudy and generally unpleasant weather.

Very soon they were in the kitchen of Abbi's house. Eleanor was in quite a cheerful mood and there were Christmas carols being played on the CD player. Jess seemed to be giving off a very merry Christmas spirit. It was as if she had never had such a good Christmas.

"Hi you two, she said as she came around the corner. She gave them a Buck's fizz each and they all went into the living room. They spent the afternoon in pleasant company and high spirits.

Mark gave Eleanor her Christmas gift just before they were leaving. The four of them had been having such an enjoyable afternoon that it had slipped his mind. She opened it slowly. Inside there was a gorgeous jumper. "Oh Mark, it's lovely", she said. "I would have got you something but I didn't know you were coming to visit Abbi." At this she gave Abbi a pointed look.

"Don't blame Abbi," Mark said quickly. "She didn't know I was visiting her either. I was a surprise." Eleanor smiled.

"Yeah right," Jess said sarcastically. "I may not be psychic but I thought he would come around for Christmas." Mark caught her glance for a fraction of a second and quickly looked away. Abbi and Eleanor noticed nothing out of the ordinary.

Neither Jess nor Mark had ever mentioned what had happened between them when Abbi was in hospital. Mark felt that it wasn't exactly lying to her, it was protecting her from hurt. Both Mark and Jess knew that their kiss had meant nothing.

They skated over the pause in conversation quickly.

Later that evening Abbi and Mark were walking to his holiday home with smiles on their faces. Mark had an arm around Abbi's shoulders. It had been a very good Christmas.

The next few days passed in a blur. Practically the second they turned on the T.V in the morning there were

advertises for boxing day sales. Abbi hit the sales every year. Mark insisted going with her.

"Don't be silly," she said. "It will be incredibly boring watching me buy clothes all day."

"I'm only here for a few more days," he told her. "I want to spend as much time with you as possible."

"Okay," she said sighing. "Just to let you know, when you are bored you won't get any sympathy from me."

Sure enough when she was shopping he was incredibly bored. He got a call from his brother to take him out of his monotony. Mark walked out of the shop so he could speak without interference.

"Well?" Mark asked.

"I told them," Steve said quickly.

"And?" Mark wondered what they had said.

"It went badly. Mum did everything from starting to arrange wedding plans to crying in the corner. It was quite bad. That's rubbish, it was very bad. I told them last night. I couldn't take it anymore."

"What did dad do?" Mark asked anxiously.

"Shouted so loudly my ear drums are still ringing. Everything from slandering me, suggesting a vasectomy, abortion, you name it, I heard it."

"Did they mention me?"

"No, big brother," Steve said exasperatingly. "Not everything in life revolves around you."

"What are they going to do?"

"I think dad is going to make Grace a big lump sum payment so that she releases me from all future obligation." Steve said.

"You're talking about a baby here," Mark said. "This isn't a theoretical problem. One day this baby will grow up to ask questions about its father. What will Grace tell the kid? I was paid money so that your father can leave an easy carefree life."

"That's not fair Mark", Steve said sternly. "I am getting very little say in what is happening here. Dad has decided that this is the easiest way to deal with this. Then everything can go back to the way it was." Steve just didn't understand.

"How much is dad going to pay them?" Mark asked. He was genuinely curious. He wondered what his father thought was the right price to keep an illegitimate child under wraps and hushed away.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds," Steve said. There was nothing to say to that.

"I'll talk to you when I get home." Before Steve could say anything else Mark hung up the phone. Steve just didn't understand. He saw this as a problem that could be covered up and would go away. He didn't see that he had created a new life. He probably never would as he would never see the child. At that moment Abbi came out of the shop with two more bulging bags.

"What's going on?" she asked. She could see something was wrong by the look he gave her.

"Steve," Mark said. He took a deep breath and finished the sentence. "My dad is paying grace a quarter of a million pounds so that Steve is free from any obligation."

"But that's..."

"Completely and utterly wrong", Mark finished for her. "I know. I can't make Steve see sense though."

"Maybe call your dad," Abbi suggested. "Forget it. Forget I said anything."

"No you actually have a point," Mark said. "You keep shopping, I'll give him a ring." Abbi pointed to a shop that she was going into next. Mark listened to the phone ringing.

"George Hammond."

"Hi dad it's me."

"Oh hello. How are you doing with your girl?"

"I'm fine," Mark said quickly. "Please listen to me and let me finish. You can't pay Grace and her baby off. It isn't right. A baby doesn't go away because you make a payment. This will be a real life person."

"I can do what I like," he said menacingly. "Money buys all sorts of things you wouldn't believe."

"This problem isn't going to vanish just because you want it to," Mark said. "Have you even asked Steve what he wants or are you just doing what you want?"

"Steve is too young to know what to do for the best. He isn't even twenty years old yet. I'm only doing this because she is too far gone for an abortion."

"But dad..."

"How do you know I haven't done this before?" his father asked.

"What do you mean?" Mark said sharply.

"I could have paid Abbi to have an abortion and you knew nothing about it."

"You could have. But you didn't," Mark said firmly. He knew she wouldn't have taken his money without at least discussing it with Mark first. Not for something like that.

"No I didn't. I paid someone to knife her instead," he said very quietly.

"What did you say?" Mark whispered into the phone. He could tell his father was getting angry now.

"I said that I paid someone to stab her," George said before he could change his mind. "I only wanted her disfigured though I didn't mean for her to nearly die." Mark could feel his heart beating very fast.

"Why stop there?!" Mark was shouting down the phone now. "You nearly killed the woman I love. I don't want anything to do with you." Mark disconnected the phone, extremely angry with him.

His thoughts were racing around his head ten to the dozen. His father had nearly killed Abbi. But thankfully she hadn't died. If he didn't like something he tried to fix it the only way he knew how too. With money. His heart was pounding furiously fast. He didn't know what to think. Would he tell Abbi? He didn't know if he should. He didn't want to keep secrets from her, but if she was beginning to forget what had happened he didn't want to bring those memories back to her. He would see what happened.

"How did things go with your father?" Abbi asked as she emerged from yet another shop. Her arms looked like they were going to drop off from the amount of bags she had.

"Badly," Mark said. "Are you ready to go home?" She wasn't but she could tell that Mark had had enough.

"Yeah, sure," she said.

Over the next few days Mark couldn't find an opportunity to tell Abbi the person who had ordered her attack. Not that he really wanted to tell her. He thought that she was beginning to forget about it. He wasn't sure if telling her would be the best thing to do. Suddenly new years eve was upon them. Mark asked Abbi what she wanted to do.

"We'll just stay in," she said. Mark looked sceptically at her.

"That's really what you want to do?"

"I couldn't think of anyone else I would rather start my year with," she said quietly. "Anyway, the nearest party will be miles away. I don't fancy a long drive tonight." Mark privately thought that was for the best. He didn't want to drive anywhere else either. In mid afternoon they turned on the T.V. and watched the fireworks above the Sydney Opera House. It was spectacular. No one seemed to do new year fireworks better than the Australians.

When the fireworks were finally over and the crowd were cheering Mark switched off the television. "What do you want to do now?" he asked. She shrugged. In the silence that passed Abbi felt she knew so little about him.

"Where were you born?" she asked out of the blue. Mark thought for a moment.

"In London. Why?"

"I feel I don't know an awful lot about you." Mark looked a little hurt at that. "Not important things. I mean I know when your birthday is and things like that. I don't know all the incidental stuff." Mark nodded. He did see what she meant. He knew the basic things about her but he couldn't have told her little things about herself. Like the time of day she was born.

"I understand," he said. And he did. "Where were you born?"

"St Mary's hospital. You know which one it is. It's the same one I went to after I got stabbed." Abbi had spoken calmly but he could see the shadow behind her words. Tell her now, he thought. Tell her who did this to her. But he couldn't. He couldn't bring himself to bring back the terrible memories for both of them. He let the moment go and a small part of him,

the honest part of him knew that he would never tell her. Abbi carried on speaking.

"I weighed six pounds eight ounces when I was born according to my mum." Mark was stretched out on the sofa and Abbi had leant back against his chest, her head on his shoulder. It was very comfortable.

"What time were you born?" he asked.

"I don't know exactly," she said slowly. "It was early in the morning of the second of October. My mum has told me but I can't remember exactly. How about you?"

"I was born at half past two in the afternoon on the thirteenth of November." He raised his hand so he could run it through her hair. It felt so different from how he had remembered it over the summer, simply because it was so much shorter.

"Tell me a story from your childhood," Abbi said quietly as Mark's fingers went through her hair.

"Okay then. Give me a minute to think of one." He wrapped his arms around her as he thought of something to tell her. "Okay. My first day of school. I was going to Harrison's school. It was an exclusive primary where you had to pay substantial entrance fees to get in. I was so excited that day because I was going to school and Steve got jealous of me. He kept shouting that it wasn't fair for at least a week before I actually went there."

"I don't remember anything about my parents on the day I went to school. My father was always somewhere else anyway. I hardly ever saw him. I walked into my classroom holding my bag. Everyone else was sitting down and I just stood there as everyone else looked at me. Then the teacher came in and I scurried to find a seat. No one wanted to sit next to me for some reason."

"As we were only little the teacher wanted us to play together and make friends. Hardly any of the class had met each other before that day. Everyone else had already made friends and I sat trying to hide in the corner. Someone surprised me and came up to me. He told me his name was Andrew and he asked if I wanted to play with him. I did and after that day he became my friend. He introduced me to his group of friends, Sarah, Megan, I can't remember the other

one's names. The first term was great. After Christmas we all met up again at school but Andrew was missing. I wondered why and I pestered the teacher for days until she gave in. She told me that Andrew's parents couldn't afford the school fees anymore so he had moved schools. That was the first time I saw money as an issue. Because you were only at that school if you could pay for it."

Abbi noticed that Mark's voice sounded unexpectedly bitter at that. She didn't know what to say to the end of that so she said nothing. He had kept stroking her hair through his story and it was very soothing. "Tell me a story about you. It's your turn," he said gently. By now it had turned dark outside she noticed and began to speak.

"I'll tell you about the day I got my GCSE results. I was so scared to open my results when I got them. I wanted to open them with no one around to see what I had got so I went for a walk. I went up to where we watched the sunset from in the summer. I knew I hadn't done fabulously but I thought I would have passed pretty much all of them."

"The subjects I took were Maths, English Lit, English Language, Science, French, R.E, I.T, Art and Geography. As I opened the envelope I could feel my heart beating so fast. I unfolded the paper and saw that I had failed Science, R.E. and I.T completely. I knew I hadn't aced them but it was a bit of a shock. I scraped a pass in Art. My Maths grade was a B and my two English ones were C's. I was very surprised to see that I had managed an A in French but apart from that it looked quite bad."

"It took quite a while to persuade the school to let me study for my A levels. The truth was they didn't want someone there who was going to mess up their statistics. Eventually I managed to convince them though. It turned out to be a waste of my time though. I failed everything at my A levels. It wasn't that I was stupid but I always panicked about exams and I got too nervous to write anything halfway decent."

"I didn't know you could speak French," Mark said surprised. It felt very odd to not know something that fundamental about her.

"Oh yes. I can. That subject I enjoyed quite a lot. Bon soir." She then went off into a monologue of fluent French. Abbi smiled at the look on his face.

"I had no idea that you were bilingual", Mark said shocked. He couldn't believe that something this substantial he hadn't known about her. He swiftly kissed her very passionately. After a minute or so Abbi had to let go so she could take in a breath of air. He slowly pushed her down so she was flat on her back on the sofa. Mark was muttering things that Abbi couldn't catch as he kissed her neck. Abbi wrapped her arms around him, urging him on. Abbi could feel her heart beating extremely fast as his hands worked their way down her body. She shut her eyes so she could concentrate on what his hands were doing to her. After a while she noticed he had stopped.

"What's wrong?" she asked as she opened her eyes.

"You look a bit frightened," he admitted.

"That is rubbish," Abbi said immediately. "I was thinking about what you were doing to me," she said honestly. He leant over her and kissed her again. She responded eagerly. She needed his touch on her. She put her arms around him to bring him even closer to her. They were both still dressed but it was nice. It was enough to have each other's presence there. It felt safe. That was the only way to describe it Abbi thought. She didn't want to think how she would cope when he left her again. As he inevitably would.

They sat together for the rest of the evening with the television on in the background. Mark had opened a bottle of champagne for both of them. It was his fathers so he made sure he picked the most expensive one. Soon enough there were pictures over the Thames and people were counting down from ten to the new year. Abbi had a glass of champagne in her hand and when Big Ben started to chime.

Abbi looked at Mark with a smile on her face. "Happy new year," she said.

"Happy New Year to you too," Mark said. They kissed each other quickly and watched the fireworks erupting over the city and the London eye. They lasted for at least ten minutes and they were over. Mark reached for the remote and switched the T.V. off. Abbi sighed and leaned back against him.

"You're leaving tomorrow," she said wistfully. It was true. He was getting an early train back to London. He was dreading it.

"Can we not mention that for a while?" he said. Mark wrapped his arms around her again. They stayed like that as the long minutes passed. Neither of them could now think of anything else except Mark's imminent departure. "I hate leaving you," he said.

"I know exactly how you feel. I love you."

"I love you too," Mark said. "I promise I'll be with you next new year."

"That is a long way away. You don't know what could happen in an entire year." Abbi could already feel Mark slipping away from her. His head was already back in London, with his family at home.

"Have you spoken to your father since that phone call?" Abbi asked.

"No," Mark said quickly. Too quickly.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said very quickly again.

"Tell me." Abbi turned around to face him. He couldn't lie to her. Not like this.

"You remember the attack that happened to you over the summer."

"I'm not likely to forget. I see the damage every time I look in the mirror," she said bitterly. Mark felt he couldn't go on. Abbi looked at him intensely. He knew she wasn't going to let him off the hook.

"My father was the one who paid for you to be attacked." Mark had to keep looking at her. She looked so shocked and hurt at the same time.

"Why?"

"He said he wanted to disfigure you. He said he didn't mean for you to be so severely injured."

"Don't you dare try to justify what he did," Abbi said. Mark hadn't meant to sound like that. He didn't support his father at all but he had come across giving that impression. Mark held Abbi's face in his hands looking deeply into her eyes.

"I am not trying to justify his actions. I hate what he did to you." Abbi's eyes filled with tears. Her entire face seemed very tense at the same time. "I never want to speak to him again. But I will have to." Abbi started crying.

"It's his fault that I nearly died," she said angrily. "I was left fighting for my life because he paid a scumbag to knife me." Abbi couldn't stop the tears from falling even though she wanted to. "How much was I worth?" she asked suddenly.

"I don't know", Mark said quietly. "I was so furious that I hung up the phone as quickly as possible. I didn't want to speak to him after I found that out." Abbi looked at Mark and knew he was telling the truth.

"Why bother going back to London then?" Abbi asked bitterly. "You owe no loyalty to anyone."

"It's my home," he said swiftly. "I love my mother. I feel sorry for my brother and the stupid mess he has managed to get himself into. I have to go back and finish Uni. You know I have to."

"Yeah I know," Abbi admitted. "I was just voicing my thoughts. I wish you could stay." They both became silent and soon after they went to bed. Both wrapped up in their own thoughts.

Chapter 13

At the Station

Abbi had insisted going with him to the station this time. She had told him that nothing could be worse than the last time they had parted. They were both waiting on the platform. His train had ten minutes before it was due and they were on those horrible plastic chairs that were on every station..

"I have one more thing for you," Mark told her.

"You have already got me too much," Abbi said. Mark shrugged.

"Do you want it?" he asked. She didn't say anything. He turned and looked at her, holding her hands. "I hate leaving you," he said quietly. "I will be back one day soon to see you again okay?" Abbi nodded. "I love you," Abbi was suddenly in shock. He had got down on one knee and was holding out a box for her. He opened it and said "Abbi will you marry me?" They had gained the notice of other people on the platform. Everyone seemed to be listening to them and Abbi was very conscious that all eyes were on them. Abbi didn't know what to say. The ring was massive. It was very simple but it was a large diamond on a thin silver band.

She looked him in the eyes and shook her head. "I can't," she said very quietly. He shut the box and looked at her, disappointment etched all over his face. He was still on one knee. "I love you," she said quickly. "I love you so much that it is killing me that you are leaving. But we have only known each other for such a short time. Only six months. We are so young to do this and..." Abbi stopped speaking as Mark got up and walked away from her. She ran after him. "Mark!" she screamed after him. He slowed down to a stop.

"I'm not asking you to marry me tomorrow," he said quietly to her. "I am asking you to make a commitment to me." He tried to give her the jewellery box but she didn't want to take it. His train was coming in now. He gave her a parting kiss and got onto the train silently. Abbi had been wrong. This had been a worse parting than before. Much worse.

It was only as the train was pulling away she noticed that he had left her the ring. She didn't dare to open the box. She got her phone out and left Mark a message. He wasn't picking up.

"Hi Mark. It's Abbi," she said swallowing her tears. "I really didn't want to leave you like that. I am completely in shock that you asked me to marry you. I just needed time to think about it but you just got up and left. I'm barely twenty years old and we have only known each other a little over six months. We come from completely different worlds. Why did you leave me the ring? Never mind. I... I don't want us to do anything we will regret. Please, please call me. I love you. Bye." She sat on the platform waiting for him to call her. Waiting for anything.

She studied the box carefully. She carefully opened it and had a look at the ring. It was beautiful. Perfect for her. She half wished he had taken it with him. Leaving it with her had given her a huge decision to make. With a massive amount of thoughts running through her head. Her phone was buzzing and she raced to get it. There was a text from Mark. "I love you too. Think about it for as long as u want xxx M." She didn't know what to do.

Abbi slowly took her silver ring that she already wore off. She slipped the engagement ring on to her finger. It fit perfectly and it looked spectacular. She put the silver band on the same finger on the other hand and looked at her hands together. They looked great. Perfect. Mark was right in what he said though. If she said yes they very likely wouldn't get married for years. They lived in different places. Mark had to finish his degree this year and to be trained to take over his father's business before they could even consider planning a wedding. Despite the fact she hated Mark's father, it was what Mark was going to go on to do.

Abbi took the engagement ring back in the box and put the silver one back on. She got her mobile phone out and took a picture of her left hand with the engraved silver ring on. She sent that to Mark with a text attached saying Call me.

Within thirty seconds of that Mark was calling her.

"Hi," he said. He sounded a bit depressed. "You can have more time to think about it." He obviously thought she was going to say no to him.

"I don't need anymore time. My answer isn't going to change," she said carefully. "Ask me the question."

She could hear him taking a deep breath. "Will you marry me?" She could tell from his tone that he still expected the answer to be no.

"Yes," she said simply.

"You're kidding!" He had burst out laughing and she was giggling to herself.

"I wish you had asked me before today though," she said. "Then we could have said goodbye properly."

"How about Valentine's?" he said. "That's not too far away in the scheme of things. We could go away together."

"Yeah," she said smiling.

"You're not going to change your mind?"

"No," she told him. "I will call you later when I don't have everyone staring at me on the platform. We will need to talk certain things over though."

"Like what?" he asked.

"Like, how are we going to tell our families?" Abbi started. "How will you get around your father when you know he hates me and nearly killed me. We come from different worlds. We need to discuss these things."

"I know," he said.

"I love you," Abbi said with feeling

"I love you too. My fiancée," he added.

"That sounds good," she said.

"Yeah it does. Bye." She closed her phone put the engagement ring in its rightful place. She looked at her finger. It looked fabulous. She left the train station and waited at the bus stop so she could get home. She wasn't sure if she would tell her mother about what had just happened or keep it to herself

for a while longer. She would see what mood her mother was in when she got home.

Mark put his mobile phone in his pocket and glanced around the carriage of the train. There were a few people around but no one was paying him any attention. No one that is accept for the man sitting opposite him. He was a middle aged balding business man dressed in a suit. He had been reading the paper but he had put it down on the table in front of him. He was smiling at him.

"Went well then?" the man asked. "I overheard your conversation. You sure you know what you're doing?"

"Yes," Mark said. He was grinning all over his face. "I know exactly what I'm doing."

"She must be something special," the man said sceptically.

Mark ignored his tone and said to himself, "Yeah. She is." The man smiled once again and got up to use the toilet. As he walked down the carriage the refreshment trolley appeared from the same end so the man came back. He looked out of the window on the other side. Mark had a second's thought that something wasn't right before it happened. The trolley stopped by a woman behind him and then everything turned on its head. Mark's vision went black.

When Abbi found her mother in the living room something on the television caught her eye and knocked recent events out of her mind. The T.V had the news on and she suddenly saw breaking news flash across the screen. The news reader caught Abbi's attention half way through the sentence.

"...crash on the southern trains network." Abbi immediately focused on the newsreader. "We can report that the train was due to be arriving at Waterloo station at eleven forty nine. It is not yet clear what has caused the crash but..." Abbi turned the channel over to one of those twenty four hour news station and saw that it was breaking news there too.

"... believe there to have been approximately two hundred passengers on board. The emergency services are already at the crash site. We will keep you up to date with the latest information as it comes in."

Abbi couldn't believe it. She was sure that that train was the one Mark had taken. She didn't know what to do. Her mother was sitting on the sofa looking immeasurably shocked.

"Is that his train?" Eleanor asked quietly.

"I... I think it is," Abbi said with her head in her hands. "I... I'm not sure but..." Abbi finished as a phone number came on the television.

"An emergency telephone line has been set up and anyone worried about the recent train crash can call this number on screen. Abbi immediately picked up the phone and dialled the number. It rang once, twice then clicked through to "You are in the queue to talk to the southern train network emergency line. Your call is currently in queue position eight." This message was repeated once every minute, slowly counting down positions. Finally Abbi was actually speaking to a person. A woman said, "Southern train network. How can I help you?"

"Yes I... I don't know whether this person was on the train that crashed but I really need to find out. His name is Mark Hammond."

"And you are?" the voice said.

"I'm Abigail Wilkins, his... fiancée." Her mother dropped her mug of tea and it smashed onto the floor but she made no attempt to clean it up. Jess had come around the corner and her mouth fell open. Jess decided to leave them to it and she raced for her car keys. Within about a minute Abbi heard her driving away.

"We have a probable passenger list here detailing everyone who bought a ticket by credit or debit card for this particular train," the woman on the phone continued. "Just hold a minute while I go through it." Abbi waited her heart in her mouth. Why had she not paid attention to what train he was catching? Then she wouldn't be in this situation.

"Right. It looks like he was on that train," Abbi could hear the apology in her voice.

"How do I find out if he is okay?" her voice was barely above a whisper.

"I'm afraid I only have the names of eight people who have been identified and have gone to hospital. I can't say if he is okay as he hasn't been rescued yet. I also can't really give more information out to people who aren't family."

"Wait! Before you go, how many of those eight have died?" Abbi wasn't entirely sure she wanted to hear the answer.

"I'm not really supposed to say..."

"Please," Abbi cut across her, the pleading evident in her tone of voice.

"Four and one other is almost certain to die", she said quietly.

"Thanks for telling me," Abbi said and she ended the call. Abbi felt the tears sliding down her face but she couldn't stop them.

"Well?" her mother said.

Abbi sat down very slowly while her brain went into overdrive. She may never see him again. He could die. All these things were running through her head. "They say he was on the train," Abbi began. "Out of the eight people they have rescued so far, four have died and one more is about to. That's five. Five out of eight have died. They won't give any more information out because I'm not family."

Eleanor was dying to ask her about the engagement ring she had noticed on her daughters finger but she said nothing about it. Instead she said, "Why don't you call Mark's brother? What's his name?"

"Steve," Abbi said. That was a great idea. Abbi raced into her room and found his mobile number tucked away in a draw. Mark had given it to her ages ago and she was now extremely grateful she had not thrown it away. She dialled and waited.

Quickly after the crash Mark was coming around. He felt completely disorientated. His ears had stopped working. Either that or there was simply nothing left to hear. He moved his hand to his head. He could feel his blood running down his face. As soon as he did that pain seared through him from the top of his head. His other arm felt trapped and he couldn't move it.

"Are you alright?" came a voice from above him. Mark looked and saw the man he had spoken to a few minutes before. He seemed perfectly alright. Mark tried to shake his head but it was too painful.

"No," he said very quietly. His eyes were sliding around. Mark couldn't seem to focus on anything.

"What hurts?" he asked quickly.

"I can't feel my arm," Mark said gasping for breath in between words. "My head." Mark shut his eyes wanting nothing more than to fall into oblivion.

"No come on stay with me", the man said loudly trying to get his attention. "I know there are at least four people near us who are dead. You have to stay awake." Mark vaguely opened his eyes to stare at the man.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Ben." Mark wanted to close his eyes and drift off to sleep but Ben kept hitting him on the face to keep him awake. "I think you've broken your arm."

"No kidding," Mark said sarcastically. Ben looked relieved that he was still able to speak like that. Ben left him for a minute to try and smash the window opposite them open. Mark still couldn't hear anything from anywhere else. As Ben was using the in built hammer Mark thought of Abbi. If he got out of this he would marry her one day. He was trying to remember things about her but as he tried things keep fading from his head. He felt his head and could feel fresh blood still flowing from him. He closed his eyes and thought of Abbi.

"Hello?"

"Yes Hi, is this Steve Hammond?"

"Speaking," Abbi was so grateful that she had got the right person so quickly.

"This is Abbi, Mark's girlfriend," she said

"Oh hi," he said. "You never call me. You aren't going to give me another lecture like Mark has about Grace are you?"

"Have you seen the train crash on the news this morning?" Abbi cut across him, holding her breath.

"No I haven't," he said slightly surprised. "Why?"

"Mark was on that train," Abbi said.

Steve didn't say anything for a moment. "Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be. I thought he had caught that one this morning and I phoned the help line and they think he was

too. They won't give me out any more information because I'm not family."

"I'll call you back," Steve said and the line went dead.

It took ten minutes for Steve to call her back. She had spent that entire time staring at the phone. Before the first ring had died away she answered it.

"Yes," she said.

"He was definitely on the train", Steve said. He seemed surprisingly calm. "You saw him get on at nine thirty?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I know he did. How long is it going to take to get them all out of there?"

"At least three hours. More likely much more than that." Neither of them said anything. They were both watching the T.V waiting for more news to come through. They were both silently holding the phone to their ears. Eventually Steve told her that he had to go to make more calls. He promised to call her back when he had more news.

"Wake up!" Ben slapped Mark lightly to get him to look at him again.

"Why are you bothering?" Mark asked gasping for breath at the same time.

"Because I am fine and I have to help someone. Anyone. I called the emergency services as soon as I could. They may already be here." Ben had managed to shatter the glass into one cracked sheet. He warned Mark that glass would fall on him when he broke through it because the train was on its side. Mark nodded quickly. Before he knew it he felt shards hit his face. He couldn't find the energy to lift his one working arm to protect his face. It felt oddly distant as if someone else was feeling it.

Ben managed to get out and look at the rest of the train. At the drivers end he could see several ambulances. The train at that end had completely turned over. There were not many rescue people further down the train and none as far back as they were. Ben got back onto the train next to Mark.

"Right I think I am going to have to carry you out of here. There aren't any rescue people this far down yet. Okay?" Mark tried to nod but he couldn't. Ben noticed that Mark had become very pale. Ben struggled for ages trying to get Mark

out of the carriage. Eventually he managed it. Mark had moaned in pain to start with when he was moved but he had quickly stopped and been quiet.

Ben was gleaming with sweat when he put Mark down on the ground away from the track. Ben was so exhausted that he couldn't carry Mark any further. "Come on wake up!" Ben said angrily. Mark's eyes were open, but only just.

"What's your girls name?" Ben asked trying to get him to wake up. It sort of worked. Mark opened his eyes and he managed to focus on Ben.

"Abbi," Mark said. Before he could say anything else Mark started coughing. He had now started coughing up blood as well. "Abbi Wilkins."

"Can you tell her something?" Mark asked. Ben nodded. Mark coughed again. More blood was coming up. He was in a great deal of pain and was struggling to think clearly.

"I think I'm going to die," he said faintly. Ben tried to say something but Mark continued in a low voice. "Tell her that I love her very much. I'm so sorry that we will never have..." Mark coughed up blood again. "...have our wedding." to Ben he said, "I know I don't know you at all but please try to tell her this."

"I will," Ben said. He didn't know what else to say to him. "What's your name?" he asked suddenly.

"Mark... Mark Hammond," he said quickly. Mark could feel the pain overcoming him now.

"I'm just going to get the ambulance."

"No," Mark said. "Please stay. I... don't think I've much time left. I don't... want to die alone. Please don't leave. Can you tell her... try to tell her that life goes on. She has to go on... without me." They were the last words he ever said. After that Mark closed his eyes and he never opened them again. Ben felt for Mark's pulse and he couldn't find it. Ben felt like he had failed. He had tried so hard to keep Mark with alive and get him off the train. He had failed.

Abbi sat watching the devastating scenes coming through on the television. Images had started to be shown now some clearly from helicopters. Half the train had turned over.

It was awful. You could see more of the underside of the train than the roof of it. Emergency people were smashing in windows and trying to get people out of there. Ambulances and paramedics were starting to arrive at one end of the train. Sooner or later they were everywhere. After an hour of this Abbi couldn't bear to watch any more and she left the room. At the same moment her phone rang.

Abbi raced to it. "Hello."

"They have found him," Steve said.

"And?" Abbi said quietly.

"It's not good news," Steve said quietly. "He... He is dead." Abbi heard Steve trying not to cry on the other end of the phone.

"You're... You're sure?" she asked.

"They... They have found his wallet on him. It had all his cards and identification in it. They have also found a photo which they have described. It's of... of him and a blonde girl who is probably you. A man spoke to him before he died. It's definitely him. My father is... He is on his way to identify him to make sure." Before he could say anything else Abbi dropped the phone to the floor and it smashed apart. She screamed with her head in her hands. Her mother had disappeared from sight. Maybe she had wanted to leave Abbi alone.

Abbi couldn't stop crying hysterically. She could barely comprehend it. Mark had died. He had left her- for good. She would never see him again. Never hear him laugh or look into his eyes. She ran out of the house and she kept running. It was raining she dimly noticed. She ran until she was at Mark's holiday home. She had kept a key for it when he had left. She slowly opened the door and had a look around. They had taken the Christmas tree down the day before and had taken it outside. You could see it from the window. There were the remnants of a fire in the grate. There was still some wrapping paper left in one of the bins.

Abbi still had her things in the bedroom. She had been so determined to go with Mark to the station she said she would come and pick up her stuff later. On top of one of her bags was the leather bag he had given her for Christmas. She picked it up, opened it and took out the paper that shops stuff bags with. At the bottom was a tiny card. She had barely even

noticed it. It had a sprig of holly on the front. It was a small card from the shop. There must be a message in it. Something to say goodbye. Something. Anything. Abbi slowly opened it. The card was blank inside. Mark probably hadn't noticed it was there, she thought ruefully.

Mark and herself had so many blank pages ahead of them, she thought. Blank pages that would now never be filled as he wasn't there to fill them. She felt the tears start again and looked at the Christmas card he had given her. Inside it had "Merry Christmas" printed by the card company. Mark had written, "Dear Abbi. Hope you have a great Christmas this year. I love you always", and he had signed it. She ran her fingers over where he had written his name. She sat there for a long time staring at his name. Until the letters stopped blurring.

Eventually she had managed to stop crying. She grabbed her things and left. Abbi had spent so long there that it was now dark. She locked the door and was about to put the key back into her pocket as usual when she thought, what was the point? Now that Mark was dead she would never come back here. Abbi spent a few seconds staring at the key. She then threw it as far as she could and it was lost in the darkness. Slowly she walked home.

Before she could get into her house Jess was waiting for her outside. Silently she gave her a hug. Abbi felt herself falling apart again. She wailed quietly as Jess tried to calm her down.

"Your mum told me what happened," she said quietly. "I'm so sorry that he's d..."

"Don't say it," Abbi begged. She let go of Jess and looked her in the face. "Please don't say it." Abbi's face was wet from the tears she had been crying. "I can't cope. I..." Abbi couldn't go on. After ten minutes or so Abbi had managed to pull herself together enough to go into her house. Jess walked beside her as she went. Abbi was glad that she had someone beside her.

Her mother was waiting for her as she opened the door. Eleanor had her arms held open for a hug. Abbi shook

her head. "If you hug me, I will dissolve into tears again. I don't want that."

"Okay," her mother said. "Steve called again. It was definitely Mark. Their father confirmed it." Abbi nodded. She couldn't think of anything to say. About anything. She knew that it was Mark because if he had been alright someone would have called her. He would have called her himself. All that she could feel was a hollow cavern where her heart had been this morning.

"So he proposed to you?" her mother asked. Again Abbi nodded. She didn't want to talk to anyone. She had a lump in her throat and was afraid she would start crying again if she had to open her mouth to speak. Abbi walked away from her mother and Jess and she slammed her bedroom door shut. Everything in her room seemed to remind her of Mark. Little things. Like a small picture of them together. Or some letters that he had sent to her. Eventually she managed to get to sleep. She dreamed that Mark was still with her.

The next morning she woke up quite happy. Then it hit her all over again. Yesterday. Train crash. Mark proposing. Mark on the train. Mark dead. She glanced at the clock. It was six in the morning. There was no way she was going to get any more sleep now. Her mobile was in the kitchen. She got up and called Steve. He answered so quickly he clearly wasn't asleep either.

"Hello."

"It's Abbi," she said quietly. "I don't know who else to talk to. I know it's early but I feel like I'm going mad."

"It's okay," Steve said. "Believe me, I wasn't asleep. How are you doing?"

Abbi laughed. "I was just about to ask you that." She then felt incredibly guilty for laughing after what had happened yesterday. "I'm feeling terrible. I seem to have forgotten what to do with myself," she said.

"Well at least that makes two of us," Steve said.

Abbi started to make herself some toast. "How are your parents doing?" She heard Steve sigh.

"My mother left the house and she hasn't come back yet. She had been crying for about two hours previously to that

though. My father hasn't come home from the office yet. After he... identified Mark he made arrangements for his body to be moved and he went back to work. I don't know what he is thinking."

"So you are in the house on your own?" Abbi asked. She started chewing on a piece of toast. It tasted awful so she didn't eat the rest.

"Yeah," he said. "I don't really know what to say to you," he admitted.

Abbi leaned against the wall. "I don't either. You knew him so much longer than I did," she said wistfully.

"I know," Steve said. "He loved you, you know. He was going to propose to you."

"I know he was," Abbi said. "I'm wearing his engagement ring at the moment." She looked at her hand as she was speaking. "He told you he was going to ask me?"

"Yes," Steve said quickly. "He wanted me to tell him if it was crazy. If it was far too fast for the two of you."

"What did you say?" Abbi asked.

"I told him he was crazy," Steve said. They both smiled a little smile.

"It feels awful to smile," Abbi said softly. "Knowing that he isn't here." Steve didn't say anything to that. They were both silent on the phone for a good ten minutes. "How did he die? Was it quick or..." Abbi couldn't finish the sentence.

"It wasn't quick," Steve said slowly. "Apparently he was conscious for a while after the crash. A man who was hardly injured helped him off the train. He then... Mark then lost consciousness and... died." Steve's voice had been fading away throughout.

"When is his funeral?" she asked quietly.

"My father has arranged it for Wednesday," Steve said. "It will be in a church just outside London. You remember where the summer ball was?"

"Yes," she said. Abbi didn't want to think about that. She didn't want to think about any of her memories that had Mark in. Which was very difficult because every thought seemed to lead back to him.

"It's quite near there," Steve finished.

"Yeah, okay but I'm not going to his funeral," Abbi said.

"Oh come on you have to go," Steve said immediately. "He would have wanted you to go."

"No," she said firmly. "I can't. I just can't go."

"Look I will come and get you and drive you down," Steve started. "You won't have to do anything to..."

"This has nothing to do with getting there," Abbi cut across him. "Mark's dad. I mean your dad hates me. I'm sure he won't want me there. Plus he probably blames me for Mark's death," Abbi said voicing a thought that had been torturing her.

"Where on earth do you get that from?" he asked her.

"If I had never met Mark, if we were never in love he wouldn't have visited me at Christmas. He would... He would..." Abbi started crying. "He would never have been on the train journey that killed him." Abbi couldn't stop the tears from falling.

"No one blames you," Steve said slowly. "You want to know what he was like for months when you weren't with him? He was so unhappy without you it was painful to watch. He wanted to be with you, Abbi."

She didn't say anything just sobbed into the phone. "This is pathetic. All we are doing is talking about me. You have lost your brother too."

"I know. Please come to the funeral. I know he would want you there."

"I'll think about it," she said.

"Okay," he said. "I'll talk to you later."

"Bye."

Chapter 14

Sorrow

That day Abbi revisited everywhere she had been with Mark. She didn't know why she was torturing herself like this. She sat on the train platform waiting and thinking. Waiting for the world to make sense again. She felt empty. What had she done with herself before she had met Mark in her spare time? She couldn't seem to remember.

The platform was empty. Trains weren't running properly yet because of the crash. It had started to snow Abbi noticed. She stayed there for a long time staring at nothing. The last time she had been here Mark had proposed to her. Now he was dead. He didn't die quickly either, according to Steve. Abbi had no reason to doubt what she was told. The thought that he hadn't died outright and was in pain disturbed her deeply. She hated to think of him that way.

Abbi tried to focus on the time that they had spent together over the summer and over Christmas and New Year. It was such a short time they had had together. Only a matter of weeks. Abbi remembered the way he had looked at her through those days. The way his smile lit up his face. She remembered the way he had held her through all those times they had been together. Twenty four hours ago he had just left her. If he hadn't got on that bloody train! Abbi thought angrily.

She wasn't sure what to do with herself anymore. She didn't want to talk to anyone about him, but she missed him terribly. She had no idea how long she stayed sitting, thinking and watching the snow lightly fall.

Two days later Eleanor began to see that Abbi wasn't eating as much as she should have been. Her lunch had hardly

been touched and Abbi had been hibernating in her room ever since Mark had died. Eleanor knocked on her daughters room. There was no answer. She pushed open the door and saw her daughter curled up in a ball staring out the window. She was wearing the same jeans and jumper she had been wearing for days and her hair was all over the place. Abbi's eyes had that haunted look and she looked like she had just stopped crying.

"Are you alright Abbi?" she asked. Abbi shrugged her shoulders and kept looking out the window. "Come on Abbi, talk to me."

"No I am not alright," Abbi said raising her voice. "My boyfriend was leaving me for a couple of months, he proposed to me, he was in a train crash and he died within twelve hours. I am most definitely not alright. I feel completely empty and I don't know what to do anymore."

"Abbi you need to eat something," Eleanor said. At that moment there was a knock on the door. Abbi didn't move. Eleanor sighed and went to answer the door. She found a young man standing outside holding a small box..

"Yes?" Eleanor said.

"I'm Mark's brother Steve," the man said.

"You better come in," Eleanor said swinging the door aside. "I'm sorry about Mark. Are you here to see Abbi?" she asked. He nodded. "I've got to warn you, she is in a bad way. She isn't even eating at the moment." Eleanor led the way to Abbi's room. She knocked on the door and opened it. Steve went in and Eleanor left them to share their grief alone.

Abbi glanced around as she heard her door open for the second time. She was surprised to see Steve come in her room.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. Abbi got up from sitting on the floor and moved onto her chair.

"I have something for you," he said sitting on her bed. He handed over the box and she didn't open it.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's some of Mark's things," he said. Abbi immediately tried to give the box back to him. "Abbi you have to accept that he has gone. You need to look at things like this."

"How can you possibly be so calm?" Abbi asked. "Your brother has died and you seem so concerned about me. You don't seem to be worried about yourself. What about Grace as well?"

"Can we leave Grace out of this? I know that my brother loved you," Steve said slowly. "I have been sorting through some of his things and it has helped me to... sort of accept that he won't be coming back to us."

"I don't believe that. Not so soon. You could never accept his death that quickly." She didn't speak for a moment. "What's in it?" she asked looking at the box.

"Stuff of yours and his, together." Steve said. Abbi looked at the box. She couldn't decide if she wanted to open it or wanted to throw it away without looking at it. Steve didn't say a word. He knew she was thinking hard. It was a simple wooden box about the size of a shoe box.

Abbi opened it very slowly. The first thing she saw was the watch that she had given Mark on Christmas day. The face of it had a crack in it but it was still showing the right time. She took that out of the box and found her dark blue hair ribbon that Mark had taken when he left her after the summer. Abbi smiled to herself through the tears. There was a stack of letters from her in the box too. And a smaller stack of photos of them together. Abbi started to go through the pictures slowly.

Steve was watching her closely. She was crying while going through the box of Mark's stuff. She hadn't seemed to have noticed.

Abbi also found a glove of her ball dress there. She immediately went to her wardrobe and checked her dress. Sure enough one of her gloves was missing. How had she never noticed? Abbi assumed she had had other things on her mind at the time. She definitely had other things on her mind she realised.

At the bottom of the box was a photo frame. It was identical to the one that Mark had given her. It had a photo of her in it. She was sitting on the beach. She wasn't looking at the camera, she was watching the sun setting over the ocean. Her face was in profile and the sun had cast a glow over her face. She had no memory of this picture being taken. He must

have taken it when she wasn't watching. That was enough to send Abbi dissolving into tears.

Steve went over to her and put his arm around her as she cried. "I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I can't seem to stop crying now."

"Are you coming to the funeral?" he asked her. She started to shake her head and then changed to a nod.

"The least I could do is say goodbye," she said quietly. "When is it?"

"Two days time," he said. "Another reason I'm here is to take you to the funeral. I didn't think you would fancy going on the train." Abbi laughed and quickly stopped. She felt terribly guilty.

"Mark would have wanted you to laugh Abbi," he said quietly.

It was the morning of Mark's funeral and Abbi was ready to leave. She hadn't got much sleep the night before as she was dreading going. Jess had decided not to go. Abbi had told her that she didn't need to be surrounded by more depressed people than necessary and she was more than happy to agree. Jess felt very guilty whenever she looked at Abbi's face and thought of what she would look like if she ever found out. It was a horrible feeling and Jess felt she had no right to be near her on this terrible day.

The weather was glorious. It was cold but the sun was shining weakly in the blue sky. Abbi was wearing a black dress with a dark jumper as it was absolutely freezing outside. She was also going to bring a white rose which hadn't been easy to get hold of in January. Steve was going to pick her up at nine so they had enough time to get there without racing through traffic. Abbi's mum was watching her.

"Are you going to be okay?" she asked softly. Abbi shrugged.

"I will be okay," Abbi said. "I just want today over with."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Eleanor hadn't asked before today because Abbi wasn't speaking much. She kept leaving the room whenever Eleanor had tried to start up a conversation. Abbi shook her head slowly.

"I'll be fine," she said. There was a knock on the door and Abbi got up straight away to answer it. Steve was standing there in a very smart suit.

"You ready to go?" he asked her.

"Yeah I'm just going to say goodbye to my mum," Abbi said. She went back to her mum and gave her a hug.

"Call me if you need anything," her mum said. Abbi nodded again. She left with Steve and got into his car.

"How are you doing?" Steve asked her.

"I'm alright," she said. "I don't think I could cry anymore even if I tried to. I feel like I am beyond tears. How are you?" Steve concentrated on driving without replying.

Neither of them said anything else until they were about five minutes away from the church.

"I'm trying not to think about him," Steve said as they parked.

"I'm doing the same," she told him. They sat in the car for a few minutes. The church had a few people dressed in black milling around outside. "How long have we got until... it starts?" she asked. Steve checked at his watch.

"About twenty minutes."

"Let's go in then. I want to get a seat at the back," she said. When Steve gave her a questioning look she carried on. "I don't want to talk to your parents more than is strictly necessary. You know your father has always hated me, which is quite an accomplishment as he hasn't said more than a couple of sentences to me."

They both got out of the car and Abbi instantly dashed into the church before anyone could say anything to her. Steve found his father at the door of the church. George Hammond looked as he always did. Stern face and shaking hands with everyone as they came in. Julia, Mark's mother looked much more upset, Abbi thought. She was top to toe in black and her black hat was massive. Abbi could see that her eyes were slightly puffy because she had been crying.

Abbi was sitting at the back of the church just existing. Abbi wasn't thinking of anything at all as the church filled up around her. The church was quite large so no one sat near her. The front two thirds of the pews were completely full leaving Abbi on her own with no one around her.

The funeral slipped by without Abbi paying any attention to it. She wanted it to be over as quickly as possible. She looked at her hands. She was still carrying the white rose. Her engagement ring was still on one of her fingers and the silver band was on another. They would forever remind her of Mark.

Before she knew what was happening a lot of men in suits were carrying out his coffin. She stood up with everyone else as his coffin was carried out of the church and into the cemetery. Abbi however sat back down and stayed inside the church as everyone else followed the coffin. She didn't want to be around everyone else all saying the same things. She wanted to be on her own with Mark.

Abbi walked to the door of the church and watched as everyone gathered around. She was going to wait until everyone had left. However a man tapped her on the shoulder disrupting her thoughts.

"Are you Abbi Wilkins?" the man asked. Abbi nodded wondering what this man wanted. "I was on the train with Mark that day." Abbi's heart stopped for a second. "He wanted to tell you something." Abbi walked over to sit down on a pew while she was taking in his words. He had talked to Mark before he had died. Something which she could only dream of having now. Abbi would never be able to have those last words.

"What did he say?" Abbi was whispering as if afraid of the answer.

"He asked me to tell you that he loved you. Very much." Abbi wasn't looking at the man. She was watching her hands. "I think he knew he was dying at the time. He said he was sorry you two would never have your wedding. Also before the train crashed he told me that you were something special." The man took a deep breath and said, "He wanted to tell you that life goes on. That you have to go on without him."

The man finished speaking. Abbi couldn't look at him. She sat there dry eyed throughout what the man said. She had known Mark had felt that way about her because she still felt the same way about him. She didn't think the pain of him dying would ever leave her. Every day it seemed to get worse than the day before, because it would hit her all over again each morning.

Every time she made herself a cup of tea the pain hit her. If she went for a walk his loss hurt her more and more than the time before. Everyday she seemed to discover more things that would never be the same now that he had died. Every thing she watched on T.V or the music she listened to reminded her that Mark would never share these things anymore. These mundane, stupid things Mark was right. Life would go on, but Abbi thought that it was a much more unfriendly world without him there with her. The man got up and left Abbi to her thoughts.

Abbi got up after a moment or two and watched the scene in the graveyard. Slowly everyone was leaving to go to the wake which was in a hall. It was only a five minute walk down the road so everyone had left their cars by the church.

Finally the last mourner had left and two gravediggers came and started work. Abbi walked slowly up to Mark's grave. The gravediggers looked like they were going to stop working in respect when Abbi approached. She told them to carry on as she watched them. Quite quickly they were done and they left her on her own.

"Hi there," she said to Mark. She bent down so she was looking at the mound of earth that covered him. Abbi placed the white rose on the earth.

"I have got to be honest with you, Mark. I'm not doing very well here," she said. "Why did it have to be that train? I miss you so much. You know when you left after the summer, even though you weren't with me, you called me all the time. I guess I'm just getting a bit lonely without you." She stared at his grave.

"I came to your funeral to say goodbye. But now I'm here I can't seem to do it. How can I go on without you?" Tears were starting to fall down her face now. The cold air was making them freeze on her cheeks. "I love you." She stood up and stayed there for a while longer. "Goodbye Mark."

She began to walk away when she noticed that someone was watching her. Mark's mother walked up to her. "Hello Abbi," she said.

"I'm sorry Mrs Wilkins," Abbi said. Why she was sorry she didn't know.

"Call me Julia please. Why are you here?" She didn't sound mad, only curious.

"I wanted... I needed to say goodbye and I wanted to do it on my own," Abbi said.

"I understand," Julia said. And Abbi could see that she did.

"Do you want me to leave?" Abbi asked.

Julia shook her head. "You cared very much for my son. Didn't you?"

"I loved him," Abbi said. Julia nodded. "I still do love him."

"So do I," Julia told her. "I have wanted to talk to you for a while. Mark had fallen completely in love with you." Abbi stayed silent. She knew that already. As well as the feeling in her heart people seemed determined to tell her that Mark loved her. "I want you to know that I don't think the same thing as my husband does." Abbi could see that was true. Julia would not be standing talking to Abbi by her sons grave if she felt the same way as her husband.

"I quite like you," Julia said. "I wanted you to know that."

"Thank you," Abbi said. "That means a lot to me."

Julia sniffed. "Will you leave me alone so I can talk to my son."

"Of course I will," Abbi said. "I have already said my goodbyes." Abbi left Julia on her own. To mourn by her son's grave.

Chapter 15

Epilogue

After his funeral Steve took me home. When a couple of months went by I put my engagement ring into its box and hid it away with the rest of Mark's things that Steve had given me. I couldn't bear to keep wearing it and looking at what might have been. I imagined it was worth a great deal but I would never sell it. I couldn't. It was enough to know it was there. However I did keep wearing the engraved silver ring. It was a constant reminder of how much I had once loved and been loved. The sorrow over Mark's death did lessen over the following months and years but the emotional scar never faded.

I met Steve occasionally over the years, but we drifted apart. There was simply no one there to bring us together after what had happened. He never spoke once of Grace or of his baby. It was as if they had never existed to him. I never saw George Hammond again. I accepted the fact that George Hammond disliked me for reasons that had little to do with my personality. He disliked the gold digger that he assumed I was.

Jessica and I had a very good friendship which lasted for a long time. I was really glad that I had gotten to know her after that disastrous start. I needed to have someone around me in the months after Mark had died.

The relationship between myself and my mother fell apart. She thought I had gone far too quickly with Mark and didn't think our relationship could be the real thing after only six months together. Several weeks after Mark died we got into a heated argument. I think we both said things that could never be forgotten and that we came to regret.

There was an investigation about the train crash. How had such devastation happened? The driver had been drunk. He had been going far too fast and missed the signposts.

By the time the result from the enquiry came back I didn't care what the result was. It was irrelevant as nothing could bring Mark back to me. It turned out that out of the two hundred and twelve passengers on that train, one hundred and three people had died because of the way the train crashed. What a pointless waste of life.

A long time after Mark died I did fall in love with somebody else. I eventually got married and I had two children. But I never forgot him.

Every year on January the second, the anniversary of his death, I visited Mark's grave. I always brought a white rose with me. The first year I visited him, a gravestone had been built. It was a simple slab detailing his name and dates of birth and death. He had died at twenty one years old. The more years that rolled by, the worse and worse it felt that he had died so young. I was living all these long years that he never got to experience.

I still love Mark and part of me probably always will. I wore the engraved silver ring every day from the day that Mark gave it to me. I will carry part of him with me for the rest of my life.

I thought over everything that had happened over the last twelve months and asked myself again was it worth it? My head couldn't answer. My heart did instead. I think you already know what the answer is.

THE END

If you have any comments on this book please email louisa_rowe@hotmail.co.uk I would love to hear from you and what you think about Abbi... I always respond to all the emails I get.

Also if you want to follow me on twitter my username is [louisa_rowe](#)

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