

"So it fell on a time King Arthur said unto Merlin... must take a wife...I love Guenever the Kings daughter...but Merlin warned the king covertly that Guenever was not wholesome for him to take as a wife, for he warned him that Launcelot should love her, and she him again...."

Wherefore Queen Guenever had him in great favour above all knights, and in certain he loved the Queen again above all other ladies and damsels of his life...."

Extracts from, Le Morte d'Arthur. Sir Thomas Malory, c 1470

Return to Spirit



Shirley Lambert



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My thanks go to my husband for all the support and cups of tea.

To my publisher and friend, for the advice and help.

To Alan and Joan, for all of the spiritual training that gave me the foundation to base this on. The knowledge you impart to your students spreads further than you could ever have envisaged, for this you have my eternal thanks.

Preface

This book was conceived from imagination, set within a legend close to my heart, the seed of which came to fruition on a beautiful day at a legendary Castle.

The village of Tintagel, in Cornwall, is surrounded by myth and magic. It was very evident to me on the day we visited that it is a place of beauty, sea gulls and mystical energy.

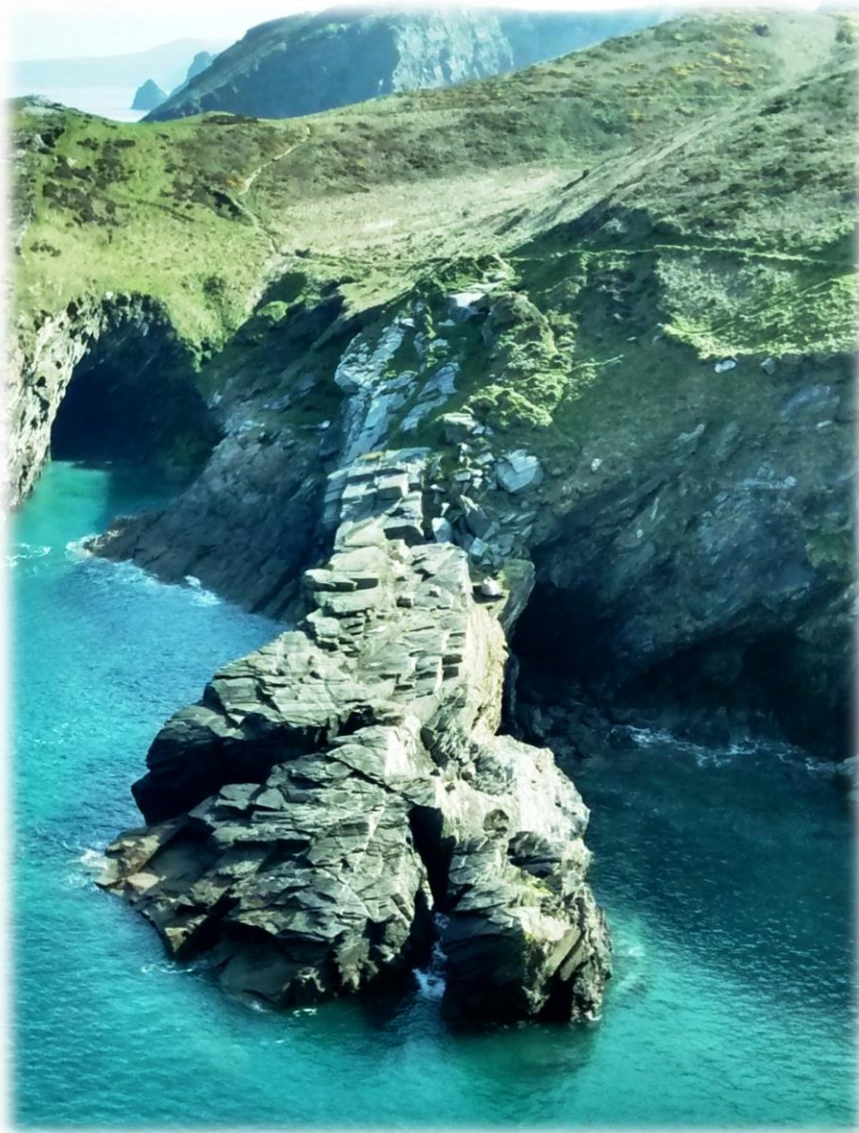
The journey I undertook with the Arthurian characters immersed me in a world of fantasy; I felt as if I had been on a journey with them and I found myself lost in a story that has enthralled generations.

This book took its time evolving into what you see before you, as it spent a good part of its early life in a drawer awaiting that indefinable, something. To bring it to a conclusion it needed a kernel of truth and that came in the form of my spiritual training and having the confidence to write on a subject that can spread from truth to fantasy.

Along the way, I learnt a lot about all things spiritual, my life these days is grounded in clairvoyance.

As the book came together, writing it has given me so much enjoyment.

So, to all of you who are about to embark on this journey, I say thank you and enjoy.



Tintagel Castle, Cornwall UK

Chapter One

'YOU BASTARD. YOU PROMISED... BASTARD.'

Crows took to the air screaming their dismay at being disturbed. They circled around, calling into what little light was left before slowly, one by one, disappearing back into the long shadows of their night-time roost. On the ground, a woman on her hands and knees amongst the tomb-stones sobbed into the mud.

Brian Baxter stood behind his desk leaning forward on his podgy fists spluttering words at his wife.

'Look, for God's sake we have got to find her! She must be somewhere. Have you phoned her neighbour, what's-her-name? Mary?'

He removed his grey silk jacket, exposing dark, wet circles around his armpits, and looped the jacket over the back of his executive chair, and resumed glaring.

'Maria, her name's Maria.'

'Well, have you?' A globule of spit landed on the desk in front of her, she looked down at the grey liquid that had flattened itself onto the polished surface, and curled her lip slightly.

'Yes,' she answered without looking up.

Slowly, Olivia pulled herself up to her full height and looked across at him; enjoying the way he now had to look up at her. Even when the little runt was standing, most people were taller, and he hated it. She took in the fleshy, sweaty features that disgusted her like nothing else at this particular moment. She ran her fingers through her dark, bobbed hair to hide the revulsion searing her stomach.

'Well, what did she say? Bloody hell! It's like getting blood out of a stone here.' Olivia slammed her hands down on the edge of the desk, making him jump. Her thin, red, lips stretched out in an ugly line across her white face, while the perfectly plucked eyebrows met above the bridge of her nose and her voice turned to a hiss.

'Don't get angry with me! I don't know any more than you and *no*, Maria has not seen her since yesterday.' Olivia leaned forward and her voice dropped to a growl. 'David Turner, was a pain in the arse when he was alive and now, apparently, his widow has taken his place! I don't know where she is, Brian, and I don't bloody well care!'

Brian moved back a little, bumping the back of his legs into his chair making him stumble.

'Sorry, darling, but Dave would never forgive me if anything happened to his wife.' His bottom lip protruded slightly as he looked down and fiddled with the corner of a sheet of paper. 'And...well, I suppose I like to feel that someone would look after my beautiful wife if anything happened to me. You know how much I love you. The Sun rises and sets over my gorgeous girl, even if your health does get in the way of fulfilment sometimes.'

He glanced up at her and she could see lust rearing its ugly head.

Olivia produced a weird sound in the back of her throat as a sneer spread across her pale face. 'What? Don't be ridiculous. You're feelings for me have nothing to do with it; you're glad he's gone and don't you dare start looking at me like that. You know I'm a martyr to migraine after a long day.'

She straightened her back and deliberately smoothed the pencil-slim skirt down over her thighs, taking note of the way her husband almost drooled at the movement. You can look, she thought, but you sure as hell won't be touching.

Brian sat down heavily on his chair. The back of it towered above him, but the width was barely enough. As he slouched, the buttons on his shirt were pulled to capacity allowing pale skin to peep

through.

'You know what I mean,' he said, still focusing on her thighs. 'Oh God, where do we look? Shall I go and drive round the town and see if I can spot her, do you think that would be of any use? It'll be dark soon. *Shit, shit, shit!* What will people say if anything happens to her, and we didn't do anything to try and find her? They'll say I pushed the poor little widow over the top. It'll all be my bloody fault.'

'That's more like my Brian,' she announced. 'Who the hell will *know*, whether we looked or not? Chances are she'll go off somewhere on her own and calm down, then head for home when she's good and ready. Maria will ring when she sees her. We both know how bloody-minded she's been since he snuffed it, poking her nose in where it's not wanted. She's been too close for comfort at times. So please, stop climbing the walls and wait, it's all getting too sickening to watch, and remember, we didn't get chandeliers in the dining room and your revolting 'naked women' art collection, by playing by the rules, did we?'

The comment bought a smile to Brian's face as his eyes glazed over.

'Oh, you're disgusting!'

'What? I get a lot of enjoyment out of looking at my ladies.'

'I know, and what a lot of time you spend with them on your own, with the door shut, grunting!'

Olivia regained her full height and looked at her husband. Look at him, she thought. He's got the face of an over-ripe aubergine that erupts every time he gets a problem. Christ, if I went that colour and had skin like that, I'd shoot myself on the way to the dermatologist. He hasn't even got a neck for Christ's sake; his head sits on top of his body! Never mind, my darling, you just carry on believing that I love you. The bank accounts are filling up nicely and it won't be long before I can head for the divorce courts, screaming infidelity, how could you? Not yet, though, I'll put up with you a bit longer!

'I heard she went a bit weird,' said the secretary, leaning against her desk.

'I know! I heard she trashed the office,' answered the new temp, who was making coffee in the opposite corner.

'Had to happen though.'

'What, her flipping, you mean?' The temp answered adding a sweetener to the cup. 'I don't really know her. Is she nice?'

'No, cold as ice that one. Never shed a single tear at his funeral, you know.'

'Did you go then?' She picked up the cup and took it to her desk and set it down.

'No!' said the secretary scornfully. 'The menials weren't invited, but I was told....'

'Shh, the old cow's coming,' said the temp as she hurriedly picked up some papers.

Olivia Baxter glared at them both in turn as she breezed through the office and out the other side.

Reverend Martins made his way towards St Luke's. All day it had been wet, cold and grey, with a mist hanging in the skeletal trees. Now it was freezing hard and the path he trod was treacherous as it turned into a miniature ice rink. The Moon was rising, a beautiful round orb bathing everything around him in a white light that made deep shadows around the lychgate as he entered the church grounds that he loved so much. He closed the gate behind him and noted the sharp click of the catch with pleasure. He always thought it to be a strong, reassuring sound, something that he could rely on, much like his faith, really.

A long time ago he had concluded that people were prone to be a little untrustworthy and fickle, particularly women. He had nearly fallen foul of womanly desires once, but he had managed to see through the devil-induced trickery and therefore stay pure of heart and body.

He felt pleased with himself tonight. A young couple had come to see him about getting their baby son baptised, but as he had pointed out, they were not married. He had managed to make them see that this was not an ideal situation for bringing up a child, no, not at all. First, they should commit to each other in the eyes of God, then and only then, could they have a baptismal ceremony. After all, a running order existed for these things, marriage should come first. This young couple had done that wrong for a start, but he would get them back on track; God's track. He had sent them home with a bible that he had lent them, and a list of verses he wanted them to read. They were then to come back to him and discuss the way their lives would go forward. He might even insist on separate dwellings until they had resumed God's path and said their vows in his house of worship. After all, he could not condone her manipulating ways, as it was obviously her that was leading the young man astray, and he was such a good looking young man, really rather handsome. This had inspired his sermon that evening entitled 'The glories of God's path', yes, rousing in the extreme. He gave a contented sigh as a smile played around his mouth.

He had come back to the church to make sure that Mrs Hepford had locked up properly when she left a little earlier. In his hand he could feel the large bunch of keys, some of which were old, heavy and over-sized. He gave them a squeeze and ran his fingers lovingly around the cold metal. He loved their hard, solid feel next to his body. They made him feel secure, untouchable. His church, his faith, his very being. Praise be to the Lord!

He walked into the moonlight and stood still to look at the steeple. Yes, tall and proud, same as always. He looked around, taking in the crisp air and letting out plumes of white breath. To his left, half in light and half in shadow, a movement caught his attention. He strained his eyes to try and identify what he was looking at. Again it moved.

'Who's there?' His voice split the stillness and drifted away, as he continued to strain his eyes into the darkness. He was positive someone lurked in the shadows.

'Who is there? Answer me.' He stood straight and clenched his fists. There was still no answer from the direction of the tree.

Slowly he started to walk across the grass, his heart pounding, sending blood surging through his veins. As he got closer he could make out a vague shape. He started to close the gap, one slow step leading to another, until he reached the old tree. He let out a slow breath as relief spread throughout his body on recognising female footwear protruding from the shadows.

'Oh, my dear, what are you doing out here?' His words produced clouds of white mist as he bent down over the shape of a woman.

Still there was no response from the huddled heap on the ground. He reached down and started to lift this limp excuse for a human being. As he did so she lifted her head to look at him. A patch of moonlight illuminated a dirty face streaked with tear tracks.

'Mrs Turner?' Gently he lifted her to her feet. 'Come on, my dear; let's get you into the warm. The vestry door is over there, slowly does it, there's no need to rush.'

Fth. Martins returned with two mugs of tea, placed them on the table in front of the young woman and stood beside her, his head to one side and a hand on her shoulder. The room was sparsely furnished, with only a small table and four chairs in the middle, and a long sideboard against one wall. There were no adornments or pictures anywhere except for a large crucifix, but tucked in the furthest corner there was a fridge with tea-making facilities on the top, and a sink with a dripping tap. The walls were painted white and even with the heating on the room seemed cold.

He studied this muddy image sitting in his vestry. He knew this woman, after all, had he not married her here in this church? He had also buried her husband. A beautiful service, he recalled it well. Had he not excelled himself that day? He felt a warm glow creep up his face. He smiled to himself as memories took hold, and his eyes became glazed as he looked back at the past.

They were a close couple if he remembered correctly, in his humble opinion this had been one of God's better unions. Why, then, had the good Lord decided afterwards to separate them? He couldn't think, but it was not his job to question God's decisions.

He looked back down at the filthy image in front of him. Her blonde hair was flattened to her

head, her clothes were plastered in mud at the front, and her hands looked as if she had been digging in the ground. What she might have been trying to dig up in his churchyard, was probably best not thought about, he grimaced as the thought crossed his mind. Perhaps tomorrow he should go and look to make sure all was well.

'Mrs Turner, here is your tea, drink it while it's hot, you're frozen. Are you ready to tell me what happened to you?'

No answer; the silence was deafening.

'Have you? Forgive my bluntness. But have you been attacked in some way?'

Silence.

'Please, Mrs Turner, answer me, or I will have to fear the worst and ring the police. I don't want to do that if I don't need to. Why are you in such a sorry state?'

She shook his hand off her shoulder with a sudden movement. 'You have a very muddy churchyard, Father. Well, you did, until the bloody temperature decided to drop all of a sudden!' She glanced around the room and shuddered.

He ignored the bad language and continued. 'Did you fall, my dear?'

'Nope.' She sat with both hands wrapped around the mug, staring blankly at it.

'What then?' He frowned as he switched his weight from one foot to the other.

Why won't this silly woman talk to me? He thought. After all, she is sitting in my church vestry and I am the Lord's representative here on Earth. Did I not marry them? Then bury her husband when he departed to meet his maker? This thought made him puff out his chest as memories flashed before his eyes once again. Sent off, I might add, with an amazing eulogy. My job was done and done well. His thoughts were interrupted when his attention was pulled back to the woman at the table, as he became aware of being watched.

She was looking up into his wrinkled face, creased and worn by the sins of his Parish.

'Actually, I threw myself.' She leaned back in her chair and folded her arms.

'What exactly do you mean, threw yourself?' He snapped.

The woman looked intently at him and then vigorously nodded her head, as if corroborating a thought. 'Collapsed might be a better way of putting it. Yes, hands and knees jobby...in the mud.'

He cleared his throat, and pulling himself up to his full height, walked determinedly around to the other side of the table. He now preferred the distance and something solid between them. She continued to stare at him through narrowed eyes. He looked down at the table and gripped the back of a chair, she sounds sarcastic he thought, even a bit mad. What am I to do to send her on her way and end this awkward situation?

Suddenly, he took a step back, patience ebbing. 'God is always by your side, my child, but is there someone I can ring for you? A friend to collect you maybe?'

'No thanks. There is no one to stand by my side now. As for your God, he doesn't exist. If there was such an entity He would not let someone like you represent him. You are nothing but a sham! I fear for the congregation in this church. They have their eyes closed. They don't see through you as I do.' She stood up making the chair screech, panic etched on her face. 'I shouldn't be here in this awful place. I must go. I'm not far from home. I'll be on my way now.' Swiftly, she moved to the door. 'Thanks for the tea. I'll forgo the sympathy if it's all the same to you,' she muttered as she ripped the door open.

'You're welcome, my dear,' he said as he moved towards her, a plastic smile spreading across his face. 'Take care you don't slip. It's a good thing that you don't have far to go.'

By the time he reached the door, he was relieved to see she had disappeared altogether, not even her shadow remained. As the huge lie hung in the air he stood briefly in the pool of light peering into the darkness, then quickly closed the door and locked it...he knew Mrs Turner didn't live anywhere nearby. It was right of him to infer that she leave though. After all, it was her choice to go and there is no excuse for rudeness.

Anyway his decisions were always right. Having a conscience was not his style; he just needed to feel the keys in his pocket.

'Maria, come and sit down. You're like the proverbial cat on a hot tin roof.'

Pulling her head out from between the sitting room curtains, she turned and looked at her husband. Slightly grey at the temples, blue eyes, chiselled features. She knew without a shadow of doubt that he loved her with all his heart.

'How can I sit down and relax knowing Karen's out there. It's freezing, Tom! She's got to be in a state after what happened, and to make her do what she did.'

Maria crossed her arms and then uncrossed them again, her slender body hunched. Pushing her dark hair behind her ears with one hand, her clear olive-coloured skin highlighted the concern on her face.

'So Karen threw a few bits in the office. That's no big deal; you throw things in a temper, occasionally, sometimes.' He grinned broadly.

Tom was sitting on the sofa with his long legs stretched out towards the fire, watching the television.

'I'm never going to live that down, am I?' Smiling, she looked toward the ceiling.

'Nope,' he said, glancing up at her.

'But seriously. This was no small thing and you know it. Karen flipped.' Maria shrugged her shoulders. 'She's sailed through this so far. Why now?'

'Does it not occur to you then that maybe this is long overdue?'

He pointed the control at the television and turned down the sound, then twisted around in his seat to look at her, resting his arm on the back of the furniture.

'You mean this is some sort of breakdown after Dave's death because she hasn't grieved properly? Or she's held all her emotions in to put on a front for us?'

'That's it in a nutshell. You've got used to her getting on with her life. Everyone has, me included. I stopped waiting for the tears and tantrums. Basically we are all to blame.'

'Oh, Tom, I feel awful, this is our neighbour. I'm supposed to be her friend.'

'Don't compound our neglect by feeling sorry for yourself. Concentrate on helping her when she comes home, that's all.'

'Was it really bad? What happened at the office I mean?'

'From all accounts, she absolutely exploded. Brian asked for some paperwork or other that she was supposed to have sorted out for an important contract, and when it couldn't be found, he lost it. You know what he's been like since Dave's death. He's taken over in every sense of the word. I'm not going to say that he's glad Dave's dead, but my God, he didn't take long to start doing things his own way, did he? Anyway, her reaction was to scream at him that she would find it, and to get off her back. He told her to calm down and that was it. All the papers and files were swiped from her desk to the floor with one stroke, she went over to the filing cabinet and pulled open a draw, couldn't find what she was looking for and heaved the cabinet towards her knocking it to the floor, and that takes some doing, they're heavy! Brian went over to her, to try and calm her and she nearly flattened him with a left hook. Come to think of it, I would like to have seen that.'

'I thought you liked him?' Maria asked.

'I did once, in the early days, but like I said, he's taken over a bit too much since Dave died. Karen's so small and he's a bit, overweight shall we say? You must admit, it's pretty amazing.'

'What then? Was that when she walked out?' Her head was amongst the curtains again and her words were muffled.

'Maria, can you hear me with your head in the curtains?'

'Of course I can, continue.'

'Okay, two people came rushing in to see what the noise was, she screamed that they could mind their own business and pushed past them. On her rush downstairs she nearly pushed some poor sod off his feet, and that was that. No one has seen or heard from her since.'

'What time was that?'

'Eleven thirty.'

'We ought to go look for her, Tom. That's nearly twelve hours ago.'

Tom could see he was not going to get any peace until he did something, and anyway, it would also make him feel better.

'I'll go and look around outside. Maybe she's home. You stay here with the kids.' On his way to the back door he pulled a torch from the cupboard and grabbed his coat.

Tom swept the beam of light from left to right. Why did he have this unshakable feeling he would find something in her garden? It was a ridiculous thought, although he still searched every inch just in case, but found nothing. He shivered. I hope she stormed out in a thick coat, he thought, pulling the collar of his own up around his ears.

The faint sound of breaking glass came from the direction of the house. 'Oh no! Not on top of all this,' he muttered.

Carefully, keeping to the shadows, he made his way back up to the house. His heart hammered, he even tried holding his breath in case it made too many white clouds and was seen. As he approached the kitchen door, desperate to breathe out, he could see one of the small panes of glass was broken. Slowly, he crept right up to the door and peered through the window, but it was too dark to see anything. As he put his hand out to grab the handle a light went on. A scream sounded in the kitchen, followed a fraction of a second later by something similar from outside, as Tom and Karen looked at one another across the room.

'Bloody hell, Karen! You nearly gave me a heart attack.' As the last word left his lips he clenched his fist and pulled a face. 'Oh shit! I'm sorry. You made me jump, it's only a saying. I thought you had burglars. Sorry.'

'Don't be. As you can see I'm not a burglar. It's only me, good old Karen and I'm fine. You can leave me to it. Thanks for coming round. You can go back to Maria now.'

Karen Turner had moved across her kitchen and was now stood on the other side of her door.

'Are you alright?' Tom's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open.

She was filthy, her face was tear-stained, her clothes were crumpled, frosty, and the front of her coat had two huge dirty patches, as if she had fallen to her knees, or knelt down in some mud. Her hands were filthy, her nails black, her face was drawn, pale. Her long blonde hair hung down in dirty clumps, plastered to her head. He put a hand back on the door handle, on impulse.

'No don't come in. I'm fine, really. Thank you, Tom. I only want a bath and bed....goodnight.'

He was horrified to hear her voice bordering on hysteria as it rose to a shriek. 'Anything I can do?' His concern was increasing.

'Will no one....leave...me....alone?' The answer came in an overly controlled voice, whilst glaring at him through dull, sunken eyes.

Tom jerked his head back slightly, unaccustomed to the outright hostility in her voice. 'Okay, I'm going.'

'Goodnight and thank you.'

He noted the supreme effort that she was now putting into controlling her voice and left.

The constriction in her throat threatened to choke her, and the pain in her chest was unbearable as Tom walked away. She locked the door and walked through to the hallway turning out lights as she went up the stairs and into the bedroom. There, she flung herself onto the bed and proceeded to punch the mattress and sob until she could no longer stay awake.

Images swept before her eyes, the office, Dave, the hospital ward with the heart monitor machine, making that hideous bleeping noise, and Merlin.

The cleaner was singing to herself, as she briskly polished the oak desk with her duster. This one was much better than all the others. They were modern, but Mr Turner had insisted on keeping his when the partner, that Mr Baxter had decided that the offices needed updating.

He had a special one made. In fact, it was assembled in his office and the workmen even shut the door and refused to let anyone in, until Mr Baxter had seen it for himself. What a lot of nonsense, it was even difficult to dust because of the size. In her opinion when he sat behind it, he looked like a little grizzled gnome on a huge throne.

This desk, well, she had been pleased that it was saved then, and she was pleased now because his poor little wife had it moved into her office after he died. Such a nice couple, but it was so tragic, him going suddenly like that.

I, Mary Scott, was one of only two from the office who had actually gone to the funeral, and I was proud of that fact. Mrs Turner bless her, had kept it small and low-key. People in the office had said she was too snooty to want them there, what a lot of rot and she, Mary, had told them so too. Sour grapes, that's all that had been, all because they had not been invited, but then, why should they have gone? They all stood around in little huddles, complaining about this and that. Mrs Turner had heard them. She knew....back biting young things. There wasn't one of them that didn't fancy Mr Turner. He had been such a good looking young man. They were all as jealous as hell of his wife, poor woman. Then there was yesterday, throwing things about and walking out worrying everyone like that!

'Morning, Mary.'

The voice came from behind making her swing round quickly.

'Good God, you made me jump.' She started to flap her hand in front of her face. 'Mrs Turner, I didn't know you were coming in, you're awful early,' she peered at her watch. 'It's only six thirty.'

'Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. You've gone rather red in the face. Here, sit down a minute. Are you alright?' Karen looked concerned and steered Mary to a chair.

'Oh yes, I'm fine. It's my age, that's all. It'll pass in a couple of minutes. How are you, are *you* alright? That's more to the point.'

'I will be,' she answered.

'It'll take time you know. You need some space to concentrate on yourself for a while, and forget about work. That's the only thing I can say to you that's of any help. Time doesn't cure, but it will help a bit. I lost my Fred fifteen years ago and I still miss him.' Mary noticed her eyes looked sore and swollen, and a lump formed in her throat as her heart went out to this tired young woman.

'Thank you for that. I'm going to, for a while anyway.' Karen gave her a very weak smile as she turned and picked up her keys from the desk. She walked towards the door where she stopped and stood looking at them thoughtfully.

'Mary. If anyone genuine asks where I am, can you say that I'm okay, I'd rather keep my movements to myself; do you see what I'm getting at?'

'Yes, Pet, I do. I'll be careful who I talk to and what I say. Take care, and one thing before you go, Pet. If there's anything that I can do for you, anything, just ask. Please.'

Karen nodded.

Mary watched the young woman walk away with shoulders drooping and head down. She sighed and carried on polishing.

Karen left the building without a second glance and headed for her car, put her bags in the boot and got in, started the engine and moved towards the gateway.

Brian gave up knocking on her door.

'What now,' he muttered, taking a step back and looking up at the bedroom window. He scowled at his watch; it was twenty minutes past nine. Maria had phoned last night, waking them up, to let him know that finally Karen had put in an appearance, but said she was best left until the next morning. Brian shuddered as he remembered how Olivia had been furious at being woken - as if they were going to get up at that time of night on Karen's account, she had screamed at him. Then she had insisted he sleep in the guest bedroom so that she stood any chance of getting back to sleep. Shame,

he had hoped that she might not have a head-ache in the middle of the night. All he had done was to run his hand over her naked flesh under the silk of her night attire when her back was turned. It had felt so good, so soft and yielding, it was such a long time since he had been allowed to enter her, the excitement was unbearable, then he was repulsed like a tramp in Harrods! Ah well, he thought as he turned and once again knocked the door and waited.

'Where is she *now*?' He muttered, and looked at his watch again.

The house looked deserted so he turned and headed for next-door.

He lifted the knocker and slammed it down four times. He was about to abuse the knocker again, when Maria flung the door open.

'Maria, there's no answer at Karen's. Are you sure she came home last night. I mean, you spoke to her, right?' He demanded, 'the house looks empty.'

Trying to control the anger she felt towards this man, who was rapidly turning a peculiar purple colour, Maria straightened her back and lifted her chin 'Well, she came home. Tom spoke to her, but she was in no mood to hold a conversation. She wanted to be left alone so he came back.' Maria took a couple of steps forward and looked over to her neighbour's house.

Brian sighed, pulled a face and wiped his forehead on his coat sleeve.

'Look, if you like, we can both go round to the back of the house. Maybe she's in the kitchen and isn't answering the door or something. If she freaks out we can walk away, but at least we will know she's okay.'

Brian, despite the bad attitude had inadvertently given her the excuse to go round to Karen's house; good excuses having eluded her since she got up at six o'clock.

'Well, if you could. I was at my wits end yesterday when she disappeared, but now, I don't know what to do to be honest, I'm extremely busy today. I really don't have time for tantrums. I need to find the papers for that contract, it's important. I told your husband it was her inability to do a simple task properly that sent her off at the deep end. If she couldn't handle the bloody job, she should have said so!' He finished this tirade with a nod of the head.

Maria stepped back onto her doormat and stared at him, anger and exasperation written across her face.

'This is far from a tantrum and you know it! This is grief, pure and simple.' Her dark eyes flashed as she reverted to a thick Spanish accent, 'and we, selfish so-called friends, couldn't even see she was cracking up inside. We were all glad that we didn't have to cope with a lot of weeping and wailing. That way, we all got on with our lives with minimal disruption. Aren't we the lucky ones?' She raised her eyebrows and glared at him, but not waiting for an answer Maria pushed past him, and made her way to the gate and looking back, shouted, 'well, are you coming or not?' Then continued on, walking briskly towards the house.

Looking stunned, Brian followed her around to Karen's back door, and eager to see what was going to happen, pushed in front.

'Oh my God, her house has been broken into,' he said, taking a hurried step back to stand behind Maria. She glanced back at him, 'My hero! No, Karen did it last night to get in. I dread to think what she's done with her keys and, come to that, where's her car?'

'Still at work, she walked out and left it in the car park,' said Brian, matter-of-factly, trying to peer over her shoulder. 'Can we get in? Try the handle.' He sounded impatient but excited, 'maybe she has committed suicide!'

'Suicide!'

'Well you hear of these terrible things, don't you? You know, on the television and on the news and such forth. A body has been found by the concerned neighbour, that sort of thing.'

Maria squashed the urge to just hit him and be done with it and tried the door. It was open, so she pushed it and went in first. 'Karen...Karen.'

'There's no one here. I told you the house seemed empty. What am I supposed to do now?' He pushed past her, making her stumble to one side and went to the table, picked up some post and started to look through it. 'This could be interesting,' he muttered.

Maria moved swiftly and took it from him. 'That's, Karen's I believe, mind your own business! Stay here, I'll go check upstairs.'

Maria glanced at the sweaty little man and wondered why Dave had ever wanted him as a business partner, then went to the bottom of the stairs and looked up. All the curtains were shut tight, making it seem very dark despite the daylight outside. Slowly, she put a foot on the first stair and stood on it. Composing herself, she crept halfway up the staircase, and then turned to look at the landing as it curled back around to her left, it seemed so quiet and still.

'Kar...' she cleared her throat, 'Karen.'

Taking two more steps up, she turned to look back again; the hairs on the back of her neck were now standing on end.

'It's me, it's Maria. Brian's downstairs. We came to see how you are this morning.'

Suddenly the hall clock struck the half hour. Maria jumped so hard, she had to grab the handrail to stop toppling backwards.

'Shit!'

'Maria, what's wrong? What have you found, is it her?'

'Nothing, I stumbled, that's all.' Her heart was now banging so hard, it could actually be heard. 'Karen,' she called in a small strangled voice as she hesitantly continued up to the top, with thoughts chasing one another around in her mind. Was she here? Was she alright? Was she alive? Was Brian actually right? Would she find her friend dangling from the ceiling on a rope from the garage, left by her dead husband? Stop it, she thought, your imagination has been fuelled by the idiot downstairs who is hoping she is dead, so that he will get the business all to himself. Pull yourself together, Maria, you're being stupid.

One deep breath later she stood on the landing. Again she hesitated as her heart raced on.

'For God's sake Maria, pull yourself together,' she muttered sternly. 'What the Hell do you think is up here?'

Straightening her back as if she were about to walk into an office for an interview, she moved forward with a determined step and knocked on the bedroom door.

'Karen, it's Maria; are you awake?' Her voice sounded surprisingly normal. 'I'm coming in. Good morning.'

She opened the door to be met with the image of an unmade bed hidden at the edge of the gloom, with articles of clothing adorning the carpet between it and her. It was the quiet that stopped her, the unnerving quiet. It came hand in hand with the sort of stillness that announces absence.

A mumble drifted up the stairs, bringing her attention back to the mundane.

'Pardon,' she called back.

'I said, is Karen *there*?'

'No!'

Maria went to the window and pulled back the curtains. Light flooded the room, making her close her eyes for a few seconds. Blinking and frowning as she took in the scene, she was horrified at the disruption and mess surrounding her. Karen was a neat and tidy person. Dave used to moan he could never find anything because it didn't stay in one place long enough, but this. Burglars couldn't have done a better job if they had tried. Wardrobe doors left wide open exposing naked hangers, drawers left pulled out, clothes strewn everywhere, but one thing was obvious. She had packed what was wanted in a bag before she left, and it was a big one. Karen had gone off to get away from all her well-meaning friends that had failed her. Moving forward, her eye fell on the muddy coat slung carelessly onto the bed, she picked it up, and for some unknown reason, stroked the soft fabric and then put it to her cheek and smelt the perfume that still lingered, causing a lump to come to her throat.

Oh, Karen! Why didn't you come to me when it got this bad? You're my friend and I love you, she muttered into the material.

Back down in the kitchen she could hear Brian moving about and she was sure he was talking to himself. Placing the coat back on the bed and wiping the tears from her face, she quietly crept to the

top of the stairs and peered over the banister, listening intently. He was muttering something about being an important businessman and not having the time for this sort of nonsense.

'Maria,' he bellowed suddenly, making her jump back.

He was standing in the doorway to the hall with his head at an angle, trying to see up the staircase, but obviously doesn't come to the bottom of the stairs.

I wonder why? She thought, absent-mindedly.

'Have you found anything?'

Slowly, Maria started down the stairs. The sound of him moving quickly back to the table was very obvious as he bumped into it.

'Karen's packed a bag and gone,' she said, shrugging her shoulders on reaching the doorway. 'That's all I can tell you. Karen's gone.'

'Gone? Gone where?' He spluttered. Maria noted that he actually spat onto the floor with the sudden ferocity of his words.

'How the hell do I know that? All I can see is that she has packed a bag with clothes. Her wardrobe is half empty and her drawers look the same. She's probably gone away for a few days; maybe she should have done that in the first place. Gone off and spent time on her own, grieving. Time for herself, I can't make it any clearer for you.'

'Oh great!'

'What does that mean?' With patience finally running out, Maria folded her arms and glared at him; ready to defend her friend if he should be stupid enough to make another derogatory remark.

'It means, *my dear*, that I'm left to soldier on all on my own, with no consideration from anyone, most of all *her*. What am I supposed to do if I need her signature on something, what then? Eh, what then? My workload has doubled. I'm working all hours! I know I promised Dave that I would look out for Karen, but Christ, there has to be a limit on what I have to put up with. This is vindictive and uncalled for.'

'You, selfish bastard! Maria's mouth dropped open.

'I beg your pardon?' He tried to stretch what little neck he had, while putting his shoulders back and pulling himself up to his full minimal height. Meanwhile, the colour on his puckered complexion went into overdrive.

'I bet you do. Dave is *dead*. Karen adored him. They were joined at the hip; they were the most together couple I have ever met. It must feel as if she's been ripped in two, and you stand there expecting me to feel sorry for you? So what if you have a bit more to do at the moment. Employ someone; get another temp in, you'll like that.'

'Please don't lose your temper; you have no right to talk to me like that. You don't know what the hell you're talking about. The strain I've been under would have destroyed a lot of men.'

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow. Brian turned, and retreating from the kitchen, started walking down the path flapping his arms about, and shouting over his shoulder that he would not be back.

'Good,' she shouted after him.

Maria left Karen's house, making sure the door was at least locked, having found the key in the lock on the inside. Turning to go back home, she noticed movement up at a bedroom window in the house opposite, and waved to the 'curtain-twitcher' over the road, 'that's left her wondering what is going on,' she muttered.

Back in her own warm home, Maria phoned Tom.

'Shall I get a glazier to fix her kitchen window?'

'No, don't. It'll cost a fortune and we don't know when we might see her again. I don't want to seem mean, but, well, money's tight at the moment, isn't it? No, I'll come home at lunchtime, do a swift measure up and get the glass. It won't take long to put it in. At least that way we know the job is done and the house is locked up and safe.'

'Okay. Do you think I should I go in and clear up?'

'Actually, I think maybe leave it for a bit. She might come home sooner than we imagine. Quite

honestly, we're stuck in a difficult situation. The last thing we want at this stage is for her to think that we're interfering.'

'I suppose you're right. I wish she would phone or something, so that we know she's alright.'

'Sweetheart, the whole point of what Karen's doing is to get well away from everyone. Not to think about any of us. I'm sure she really is fine, but time on her own is going to be the one thing that's needed and no one, not you, me, or anyone else, can give her the peace she needs. Let her go. Stop worrying. We'll make her house safe and you and I have got to wait. Okay?'

'Yes, I know you're right, but it's so hard. See you at lunchtime...Tom.'

'Yes?'

'Love you. That's all.'

'I know. I love you too, one heck of a lot as it happens.'

The temp smiled and placed the file on Brian's desk.

'Can I get you anything else before I head for home, Mr Baxter?' She leaned her low-cut, cotton top, with pushed-up breasts, towards him and flicked the brassy blonde hair from her ageing face.

'No, that's all for now. See you in the morning?' He licked his lips.

She stood up straight and slowly arched her back, all the time watching his licentious gaze on her cleavage.

'Yes,' she cooed, 'as far as I know, you can have me for a few days. Of course, that's if you want me? I'm quite happy to do as you ask. Open to any ideas, you might say. I noticed a rather nice restaurant around the corner, but it looks a bit expensive. Is it?' The sudden smile and tilt of her head made the colour rush to his face.

'Great. I'm very pleased you're open to ideas, very pleased indeed. The...err...restaurant may have to be explored. We'll see how it goes, shall we?' The smile was broad and lecherous. 'I'll have you here bright and early then, have a good night. Don't do anything I wouldn't.'

As she reached the doorway she turned and smiled. At the same moment, Olivia arrived and pushed past her.

'Goodnight then, *Bertha*. You can go now. I can help my husband with anything he might need before *we* go home together.'

'It's Bernadette,' she answered, frowning.

'Whatever.' She pushed the door shut in the woman's face and glared at Brian. 'Don't even think about it!'

Today hadn't gone well. Her hairdresser had called in sick and she had to cancel her appointment. The wine order had been delayed, and her cleaning lady had dropped one of her expensive figurines so she had sacked her on the spot. This, in hindsight, was not a good idea because now, she didn't have a cleaner at all, but one thing was for sure, she was not going to do it!

'But, darling I...' His voice wined and grated.

She cut across what he was about to say. 'Have you managed to get around this fiasco yet?' She pointed at a file, while tapping a purple nail on the desk.

Brian smirked as he answered her, 'the missing paperwork has been found. I've been in touch with Malcolm at Spencer's, played the 'poor partner died and wife has gone missing' card, to perfection. He couldn't do enough for me the Idiot! Still, I now have an extra week to get this organised properly to our advantage. Her car has gone, so we can assume she's bugged off to lick her wounds. No bloody Karen leaning over my shoulder watching my every move, and getting in the way arguing about the method I want to use, now that Dave has gone. If she's not here, it makes it a whole lot easier to do what really needs to be done.' He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands on his chest.

His wife took in the smug, contented, ugly face and her stomach tightened.

'You've changed your tune more than somewhat since yesterday. Back then it was, 'where is she? I

promised Dave that I would look after her', sniff, sniff. What's changed so rapidly?

'I've been thinking that's all.' He straightened up in his chair.

'Be careful, my darling, it might become a habit,' she said curling her fingers and inspecting her manicured nails.

'Look. I really don't need your bloody sarcasm. In fact, I'm sick to bloody death of it. Come to think of it, maybe it's just *you* I'm sick to death of! You and your lack of concern for my needs, my need for a fulfilling relationship, you can be like a cold fish most of the time.'

Yes, she thought, push your luck, you miserable excuse for a man and make my day. They stood glaring at one another like a couple of kids in a playground.

'Finished?' It was hard to control her urge to hit him, but still hoping he would push her to the limit and keep fighting. Instead, she watched him back down the same as he always did.

'I can step up and run this business my way now he's gone, and I bloody well intend to. It's a shame Dave died, he was a nice bloke. We got on great while he kept his nose out of what I was doing, but he had the edge on me, what with him owning slightly more of this place than I do. Now she does, but I intend to buy her out or get her out, and I don't care which. Dave's dead, shit happens as they say! It's my turn now and changes are going to be made to our advantage. I have plans and she is not going to get in the way.' His glare turned to a smirk.

Maria put the phone down and stood looking at it. Behind her, leaning against the door frame, with his hands in his pockets, stood Tom. Tired expression, gold-rimmed spectacles and feeling irritated with his wife.

Maria turned and jumped visibly. 'Oh, Tom, you frightened me to death, how long have you been standing there?'

'Long enough, I thought we had agreed!' He said looking into his wife's worried eyes.

'I know, but I wanted to know if she had gone down to Cornwall.'

'And?' He asked.

'No, no sign of her.'

'So you're no easier in your mind now than you were five minutes ago are you?'

'No.'

'Then for goodness sake, leave it. Karen will be in touch when she's good and ready, okay? Anyway, even if she has gone down there, you haven't given her time to actually drive all that way, and Alice won't know anything until she goes over to look for herself. So I'm afraid the phone call was all for nothing.'

Tom went over to his wife and wrapped his arms around her. She felt so small and defenceless. They had been married six years, he was ten years older than her, and all of a sudden that gap mattered. He must make sure he had good life insurance; maybe take out another policy or something. He made his mind up to go and see his insurance advisor as soon as possible. If nothing else, he wanted to know that Maria and the boys would be financially secure if anything happened. He pulled her even tighter and kissed the top of her head.

Alice put down the phone.

'Melody,' she called.

'Yes.'

'I'm going over to Clifftop Cottage. It's time.'

'Karen's on her way then?' Melody walked into the cluttered sitting room as her mother came towards her. 'Mum.'

'What?' Alice stopped and glanced at her daughter while fumbling in her bag.

'Umm.' Melody hesitated.

'Well, what is it?'

'Are you going to say anything yet?'

'No. I'm going to light the stove. It may not be very cold, but I have the feeling she's going to need the welcome of a real fire in the sitting room when she arrives. Maria has phoned, looking for her. There's been a bit of fuss at the office evidently. Well, more than a bit of a fuss, actually. Nobody knows where she is. Karen's coming, as we knew she would, but in all honesty, what can we say at the present time? "By the way Karen, we knew psychically that you were coming down to Cornwall, and that something seems to be wrong in the Spirit World?" What do we actually know for certain, Mel? Anyway, what would she believe? What we tell her *or* that we have both gone barmy?'

'I see your point. Need any help?'

'No. I won't be long.'

Melody watched her mother leave and then went upstairs to her bedroom. The Sun had come up that morning over the sea in a blaze of reds and oranges, but the sunrise had been deceptive, as the day had gone on to be warm with small waves glittering their approval in the sunlight.

Her room, unlike the rest of the house was neat and tidy, her mother having a slightly haphazard way of house-keeping. The white painted bed and wardrobe was a miss-match from the local antique shop. The oak dressing table was inherited from her grandmother, with rows of brightly coloured beads hanging on the ornate posts that held the mirror in place. The room had no carpet or rug, but the painted floorboards had worn down to the wood beautifully, in many places. At the far end, green gingham curtains moved gently in the soft breeze passing through the doors that opened out onto a balcony. It stretched the entire width of the back of the house, her mother's bedroom having a mirror image at the other end.

Melody had positioned a wicker chair facing out to sea. She sat down, closed her eyes and relaxed.

Alice drove straight to the cottage and let herself in, the stove, unlike her own, was a modern one and easy to light. Alice went from one room to the next making sure everything was alright and ready for Karen's return, while she waited to make sure the fire was indeed intending to stay lit, and continue pumping out heat and a cosy glow.

Alice Brown caught sight of her reflection in the full length mirror in the hallway and stopped. Frowning at her own reflection, she took in the image. Tall, in her late fifties, skin beginning to sag a little around the neck and cheeks. Oh dear, she thought, I hate getting old. Alice sighed, knowing that some would class her as an aging hippy. That thought made her raise her eyebrows and tilt her head for a few seconds, as she realised the image fitted the thought, but she also knew a lot would say she was plain weird, in more ways than one. She hoped that those who knew her well would say that under the new-age clothing there was a spiritual woman, one they could rely on.

Alice pulled her thoughts back to the mundane. On her way home she needed to drop into her shop in Tintagel village. Along with a friend she made a living selling pottery and paintings by local artists, including her own. There had been a delivery due and she wanted to check that it had arrived safely. The fire was doing well and had settled into a warm glow, so after one last glance around Alice headed for the door.

The car took over. It seemed to want to go in a certain direction and Karen let it. Anywhere was better than here, but she knew that the place she wanted to be, the place that was free from the mind numbing pain inside her, didn't exist. It couldn't be found in a vodka bottle. It couldn't be found in a bottle of tablets either...so the car went on, taking her somewhere, anywhere, mile after mile.

It pulled into a motorway service station and she sat on a plastic bench, leaning on a sticky table

with a bitter cup of coffee for an hour or so, staring out of a grimy window.

A family sat at the next table for a while. The parents looked the same age as her, the children were around five and seven years of age. The youngest, a boy, was tired and irritable, the older one, a girl, was excited about the holiday they were about to start. The girl laughed a lot and asked endless questions.

Karen had no children. They weren't planned for another few years. After all, there was no rush was there? She took a sip of cold coffee, but it was so strong that it stuck to the roof of her mouth; the half empty cup was pushed across the table, and discarded.

Back on the road, car still in charge, they continued their journey, this odd couple. They went through rain and sun, busy road after busy road. Junctions came and went. Brake, clutch, gears, stop, wait, gears, accelerate. Karen pushed the pedals and she steered the car around bends and along endless miles of motorway, all driven on automatic pilot.

Then came the time that Karen actually began to drive, making conscious decisions about direction and which road to take. At one point, she stopped at a little shop, but only briefly. Finally she pulled into her drive. Turning the engine off, Karen closed her eyes and put her head back and rubbed hard at her sore neck. The ache subsided as she leant forward with her arms on the steering wheel. Resting her hands on the top of it, a sigh escaped from her lungs almost reluctantly. Subconsciously, she had been pulled to the one place that had always made her feel at ease; the seaside home they had called their bolt-hole.

You see, this place was where they were going to see out their old age together, happy to be in one another's company forever. This place of stunning sea views, seagulls and the Knights of the Round Table.

CHAPTER TWO

Slowly, Karen got out of the car; any joint that could ache, did. She stretched and leant against the bodywork.

She could only see a small part of the garden and cottage from where she was on the turn-around at the end of the drive, most of it being hidden by a profusion of trees and shrubs. The slate roof was almost the same height as the ground where she stood because it was built into the cliff-side, above it and beyond, the sea moved gently, unaware of time or her plight.

Slowly, she went down the stone steps and began to make her way towards the green archway of shrubs to the side of the cottage. Ducking down to pass, a jasmine branch pulled her hair, and the shrubs to the side grabbed her shoulder bag, making her turn and give it a tug.

There had been the odd pang of guilt over the last few months that she had not been down to make sure everything was alright, but the thought had been pushed to the back of her mind, along with a myriad of other decisions. Anyway, Alice or Melody would have phoned her had there been a problem here. Poking the errant branch back up inside the confusion of greenery, she carried on down the cobbled path.

The cottage was to her left and the tangled mass of shrubs continued to her right, ending parallel to the corner of the building. Here, the lawn ranged wide and fairly long; at the end was a thick, ancient, dry-stone wall. Beyond this was wild cliff-top that sloped steeply down to a sudden drop. Below, the Atlantic Ocean would roar or slide in and out, according to the nature of the weather.

Karen hesitated. Then, putting the key in the lock, she pushed the door open. A rush of warm air came out to meet her. Even though she knew this meant the stove was alight, she could not grasp how on Earth it could be. She entered the small square hallway, then turned right into the sitting room and stood looking at the welcoming fire burning behind the glass door. The room felt warm and cosy, the same as it always had. Somehow she had expected it to feel different now, now that she was on her own. Turning back to the hall she pushed the front door shut, continued down to the end, and opened the kitchen door. This room felt colder.

'Door's been closed,' she muttered.

Although this room was built more recently than the rest of the cottage, it still had a fair bit of age to its credit. Originally, as a small kitchen and outhouse, it had been knocked into one and extended to reach from the front to the back of the cottage, making one large room. The floor was covered in old quarry tiles, the cupboards, which included a huge dresser, were separate pieces of furniture. The walls were covered in open shelves, displaying the blue and white china she had collected from many Cornish second-hand shops and fetes.

When they bought the cottage, the original idea was to strip out and modernise the kitchen using fitted units, but it didn't take long for Karen to change her mind, as she realised how well it worked as it was. They had however, exchanged the ancient Aga for a new one; the original having so many little quirks that she found it impossible to work with.

At the far end there were French doors with a window on either side, making the most of a beautiful sea view. Up towards the doors was an old, scrubbed table with eight unmatched chairs. It had obviously had quite a life as the cuts and missing edges bore witness. The lack of shine from all the scrubbing and cleaning over the years, had actually taken the surface off. Her on-going plan had been to try and get a polished shine back on to it, but those thoughts were abandoned now as being unimportant.

Karen went over to the doors and placed her hand on the handle with the intention of going outside, but stopped as she started to undo the bolt. It was what she always did; a ritual, Dave used to

call it. Throw open the doors and shout 'Hello, ocean', but not today. Not any day, not anymore. Karen stopped and rested her forehead on the door for a few seconds before turning around.

'Tea,' she said to herself, and began to move towards the other end of the kitchen. After three steps she stopped. On the worktop next to the kettle, the same as always, two cups and saucers complete with little lace covers, waited for one of them to put the kettle on and make the first cup of tea. Her face crumpled and she clamped her hand to her mouth as nausea swept up from her stomach, and sobs threatened to choke her.

'No...no....Dave, why did you have to leave me? *Why?* I love you so much; I can't do this, not without you. I can't go on. I don't want to go on. Please come back and get me, don't leave me here on my own. I can't bear it, please.' Her voice trailed off into a whisper.

Slowly Karen sunk to the floor on her hands and knees. The tiled floor struck very cold, but what finally focussed her mind was the sensation of something warm and soft touching her wet face. Opening her eyes she looked into a pair of beautiful green eyes. Jumping back in surprise and sitting up, the realisation came that she was looking into the face of a silver tabby cat that was standing in front of her, staring intently. Wiping tears away and trying to get her breathing under control, she looked back at the intruder.

'Where did you come from?' Slowly, she reached out her hand and stroked the silky fur. The cat purred. 'You really are a beautiful colour. I don't think I've ever seen a tabby quite like you before, your coat almost glitters. Who do you belong to? Is it Melody, or Alice?' The cat rubbed itself around her, as cats do, purring its approval. It even managed to make her smile. 'I suppose I ought to get up and make that tea, didn't I? No good sitting here on a cold floor. It took me by surprise you see. I forgot Dave always put the cups out ready for the next time. He said it was a nice greeting and made it feel like home.'

She stood up and went over to the kettle, filled it, and switched it on. Slowly and carefully, the cup and saucer was moved to one side; not having the strength of will to actually put it back on the shelf. That was too final and heart wrenching.

'Right, cat, I had better go and get the milk out of the car. Good job I stopped at that little shop for a bar of chocolate and remembered a few bits of shopping. Do you eat shortbread biscuits?' She looked down expecting to see a pretty little face looking back up at her, but the cat was gone. 'Cat, here puss, you can have a drink of milk if you like.'

The cat had disappeared. After searching, but finding no trace of it anywhere, it all remained a mystery, but assuming that Alice had lit the stove, the assumption went that the cat was indeed hers; had come with her and been left behind, although that didn't answer the question of where it had gone.

Karen got the Aga started before making a cup of tea. Taking it with her, she headed for her favourite room, the sitting room, and sat down feeling exhausted. The thick stone walls were rough plastered and painted cream. A pair of red, two-seater sofas encouraged sitting down amongst soft, squashy, cushions, perfect for curling up on for a rest or with a good book, while the rain lashed the windows on days when bad weather battered the coastline.

On the walls were countless paintings of boats; old sailing boats gracefully bobbed on the sea next to trawlers fighting huge waves. Over the fireplace was a large painting Dave had found in an antique shop. It was painted from the sea looking to land, and the view was of Tintagel Castle. The sea was rough with huge waves lashing the rocks at the bottom of the cliff, sending up white plumes of spray. They rose in the air as if trying to reach the ancient walls above, but they stood strong and proud, as they must have done many hundreds of years ago. Above the Castle, a dark sky was ripped in two by a flash of lightning, with rain falling almost horizontally.

The painting had a magical feel and Dave had adored it. The longer you looked the more you noticed within the brush strokes of colour. Karen had often caught him standing in the middle of the room, arms crossed, and so absorbed by this painting that he had no idea she was watching him.

In the corner, a battered old sideboard was covered in framed photographs where family and friends smiled back at her; staged or informal, they were all treasured. In the middle, taking centre

stage was a wedding photo of herself and her new husband smiling at the camera. Above, on the wall, was a collection of prints depicting Tintagel Castle, and the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and of course, Merlin.

Dave had been captivated by the legend as a child, and had never grown out of the habit of collecting all things Arthurian. The only difference was as he grew, his taste matured and instead of bubble gum wrappers it was prints and books. Common sense, he had told her, dictated that it was all nonsense; but the child that still lingered inside insisted that it was true, and one day, some eminent professor would find ancient proof in some hitherto unfound book, and astound the world. She had loved him for it; loved his enthusiasm, his imagination.

They would often go to the Castle with a picnic on a hot summer's afternoon; it didn't matter that the place might be packed with tourists. They would sit on their blanket, and Dave would launch into one of his stories about Merlin, his cave, and how he would guide King Arthur towards this or that decision. Of course it would always be the right one and have a fantastic ending. She had told him that he would be chief storyteller to their children, as she could not possibly be as good. He had simply laughed and kissed her.

Karen woke with a start. Her heart pounded and her head swam.

'Who's there?'

She sat bolt upright in the darkness, trying hard to listen for any small noise. There certainly had been something that had woken her. The noise repeated again in her head; it sounded like something scraping or moving in the room.

Grabbing for the lamp next to her seat, she only managed to knock it totally off the little table, making an almighty crash as it knocked over the companion set in the hearth. Fear was now rising in her throat; without realising what she was saying she called out for Dave. Stumbling towards the door, arms held out in front, she walked into the coffee table en-route, before reaching the main light switch where by, the light came to life and blinded her.

Clinging to the doorframe until she could open her eyes properly, it became obvious that there was no one other than herself in the room. Slowly, the minutes ticked away as her heart rate dropped and her breathing went back to normal.

'Oh, God,' she muttered, looking around the room.

The glass lampshade was in pieces in the hearth, and the companion set strewn in all directions. Karen sat on the arm of the sofa for a few minutes rubbing her knee vigorously, but it continued to throb no matter what she did. Still convinced she had heard something, she continued to look around the room. Everything seemed to be normal. Until that is, she looked up above the fireplace to the Tintagel painting. It had slipped to one side and was now hanging at an angle. Grinning to herself, she gave a nervous little laugh and went over to straighten it.

Karen had cleared up the broken glass before realising she had slept her way into another day; it was ten minutes past three.

From her bedroom window there was not a star to be seen in the inky velvet sky. Darkness enveloped the cottage and Karen's empty bed. At five o' clock she got up again, having tossed and turned for a couple of hours. Coming down to an Aga-warmed kitchen was a comfort. It always had been, but she could not get rid of the idea that nothing would ever be the same, that Dave's passing, would make an irrevocable difference to everything in her life and this cottage.

Back in the sitting room with a cup of tea, the only light came from the hallway and the stove. Her legs were tucked up under her as she pushed herself into the cushions with the intention of staying there to see the sunrise. Sipping her drink she felt very tired...no, she corrected herself, not tired, weary...weary of everything. The same old thought went through her mind, will I ever find a use for existing in this life again, or will it be like this forever?

As her thoughts rambled on she happened to glance up at the painting on the chimney-breast, and yet again it was hanging to one side. She frowned, shrugged her shoulders and continued to watch the view through the large window that looked out to sea.

Their boat sprang into her mind; The Westerly Wind had been Dave's pride and joy. What was she

going to do with it? She knew how to use it and steer it, but did she want it? What good was it to her now? It was moored safe and sound along the coast where it could stay until a decision was made, and that was as far as her thoughts wanted to go at this time.

The morning proved to be a big disappointment with the weather setting in wet, grey and misty. After a long hot shower and getting dressed, it occurred to Karen that she was actually hungry. This didn't happen very often these days, so she went down to the kitchen and started making toast, with the intention of covering it with lashings of Melody's homemade marmalade, when she heard a knock on the front door.

Karen went through to the hall and came to a halt in the middle, uncertain as to whether she wanted to open it. Another knock reverberated through the cottage. Slowly, she walked up to the heavy front door and pulled it open enough to see who was on the other side.

'Hello, Karen. I thought I'd better come over to make sure you really had come down, having lit the stove yesterday? Just in case, you know?' Alice leaned to one side, peering through the small gap.

Karen pulled the door open to its full width.

'Hello, come in.' Karen lent forward and kissed her on the cheek. 'Thank you for doing that, but how on Earth did you know I was coming down here? Hell, I didn't know I was coming down here, but I'm afraid your cat has gone off, did it get home alright?'

'What cat?' Alice looked confused.

'There was a cat in the kitchen when I arrived. I assumed it must have been yours.'

'I don't own an animal of any sort and I really don't remember any cat when I was here.'

'Oh well, it got in and then it disappeared. It's gone now.'

'Can I smell burning toast?' Alice glanced past her friend towards the kitchen.

'Oh, no!' Karen ran back to the Aga.

Alice came in and closed the front door behind her, smiling and relieved she didn't have to answer Karen's question, about how she knew she was coming down. Maria had asked her not to let on, in case Karen thought she was being watched.

'No flames I hope, only wonderful smells,' she said, as she walked into the kitchen taking off her coat.

'How can you call burnt toast a wonderful smell?'

'You obviously didn't have a mother that regularly burnt your breakfast,' she laughed. 'It brings back so many memories of breakfast with Mum in the farmhouse, sat next to the Aga on a cold and frosty morning, waiting for Dad and old Bill to come in for their mug of tea with bacon and eggs.'

'You must have had a great childhood; from what you've said in the past, I always guessed that you did.'

'It was the best. I know time tends to reject all the bad bits, but even so, our childhood and into our teens was amazing. Up until my brother Edward was killed that is. It changed after that. Dad always blamed himself, right up to his dying day and he was eighty when he went, which, I must say, was pretty stupid. It was no more his fault than anyone else's. He wasted his life on 'if-onlys'. He should have accepted Edward's death and got on with his own life.'

'Easier said than done, Alice!'

'I know, but I'm talking about years. You only have ten months behind you; it's very early days yet. Are you down for very long? A well-earned break, maybe?'

'I don't know. I headed this way to get away from everyone. I'm sick of having to smile for other people. They don't want a grieving widow in their midst.' Karen was leaning against the Aga with her arms folded, toast forgotten for the moment.

'Well you've come to the right place then, haven't you?' Alice looked very hard into her eyes until Karen could no longer hold the gaze. Tears welled up and rolled down her face as she looked away.

'Oh, what am I going to do?'

'Grieve, young lady, which is what you should have let yourself do in the beginning. I've been waiting for you to come down here and start to heal yourself. Let the air and the sea get into your life for a while, go for walks, go into the village and drink coffee. You have more friends up there than

you realise. They can help you to find yourself. Go to church, sit in God's House for a while and soak up the peace and quiet. There aren't many people about at the moment. There's room to move.' She reached out and took Karen's hand. 'Sweetie, I can't take the pain away from you. I wish I could; David would not want you to go on like this, look at you. You must have lost stones in weight, there's nothing of you. Your face is all sunk in. You *must* look after yourself. Come on, move over. Let me do this toast. My taste buds are doing a dance here. Go lay the table for two.'

She did as she was told and fetched the tablecloth, marmalade, plates, butter and knives. The kettle started to whistle, slowly picking up momentum until it was screeching. Karen seemed barely to notice as she stared out to sea, lost in her own little world.

The rest of the week Karen stayed close to home. The weather stayed wet and gloomy for a couple of days and then went back to being mild and sunny. The rest of the country shivered with cold winds and temperatures that refused to climb, but Cornwall was a different world.

At the side of the cottage was a little bench that was out of the wind, unless it came from the east. Karen got back into the habit of sitting out there with her morning cup of coffee. Winter Jasmine vied with spring Jasmine, both of which were in bloom, a result of the weather so far this winter. The old wooden bench had seen better days, but it was solid enough and the colour had mellowed beautifully to a silver grey. The lawn stretched out in front of her, looking much better for its hair cut if you ignored the parts that the lawn mower had chewed because it really was too wet to mow. Beyond the stone wall, the sloping cliff top was covered in tufted grass where wild flowers were starting to bloom.

The garden had been completely overgrown when they had first bought the cottage. They had really enjoyed cutting it all back, and then going off on excursions to different garden centres; asking advice from different people. Alice had helped no end, but in particular with the little herb garden. Unfortunately, over the last ten months or so, Mother Nature had tried very hard to reclaim what was rightfully hers, but Karen felt that she had come down at the right time to pull it back into shape.

She had always found the garden very therapeutic. On the odd occasion when an argument had turned into full blown war, they would usually go their separate ways for an hour or two. He would go for a walk and she would stomp off to the garden. By the time he returned, the garden would have worked its magic and it was not long before they forgot their anger and were friends and lovers again.

Today, she actually sat in the sunshine on her bench with her problems forgotten, as she made mental notes of things that needed doing. It wasn't until she thought about telling Dave they needed fertiliser that reality crashed in on her. Guilt swept over her. How could she have forgotten him? Even for a few minutes while she considered plants and pruning? Feeling wretched at her lapse, she stood up and wandered over to the wall and gazed out to sea.

A loud and crystal clear voice broke through her thoughts.

'Go to the Castle,' it said.

The abruptness of it made her jump and she spun around, stumbling backwards, expecting to see Dave standing behind her.

'Hello.'

No one answered, Karen shuddered and folded her arms across her body, as a chilly breeze caught her hair and made her shiver. Her eyes searched the garden for a possible reason for what she had thought was not just any voice, but *his* voice.

'How odd,' she muttered, and turning back, continued watching a boat pottering along, but she could not get that voice out of her head. An urge to go to the Castle was gradually growing. Finally she conceded, ran indoors, changed her clothes and headed for the village.

The car park had plenty of spaces as it was mainly residents of the village this time of year coming in to do a bit of local shopping. So she parked easily and made her way along the road towards the Castle.

'Hello, nice to see you're back. Come in for a coffee when you have time, on the house, my treat.' Doreen from the tearooms waved and disappeared back into her premises. Karen smiled back and

was pleased that she didn't have to go into detail about her life at the moment. Two more people waved and called out, but none of them stopped or bothered her. Karen began to relax a little as she headed down the slope towards the entrance to the Castle.

At the bottom, was the path that would take her up to the payment booth, and then on to the bridge and up the cliff side steps. She paused to take in the scene and then continued towards the booth.

'Hello, Mrs Turner. I was so sorry to hear about your poor husband. It was tragic to lose someone that young. You must miss him something terrible. I do hope he didn't suffer too much. Was he ill for long? How are you coping now that you're all alone?' The woman leaned forward with a pained expression on her face, obviously settling herself in for a long conversation, conceived out of good quality gossip, to be passed onto the ladies of the village or anyone else that might lend an ear.

Karen took a step back. 'I get through from one day to the next, but if you don't mind I'd rather not talk about it. Can I have my ticket, please?' Her painted-on smile was resurrected to cover the need now surging within her to strangle this stupid, nosey, busybody that peered at her through bottle-thick glasses.

'Of course, here you are, have a nice walk. See you on the way down, bye.'

Karen didn't answer, but made her way up the hill and away from her prying eyes, the ones that she could feel burrowing into the back of her head.

On the bridge she stopped to look at the waves hitting the bottom of the cliffs. The water moved in like an express train, then changing direction it slid up the rock, until it turned back and returned to the green seething body of water with a crash. The cliff of the mainland rose high above her to the left, and The Island dominated to her right. Now that she was away from the shelter of the cliff path, there was a good breeze. Spray coated her face making her take a deep breath of salty air tinged with the smell of seaweed. It invaded her nostrils and she felt invigorated; pulling the collar of her coat tight around her neck. An unseen wave suddenly boomed as it collided with rock somewhere inside the cliffs, making her jump but smile at the same time. There were so many happy memories here from many afternoons spent whiling away the time in the sunshine.

The wooden bridge felt sturdy beneath her feet. It replaced old steps which had become dangerous, most of which had now slid into the sea; slowly this narrow strip of land was being claimed back. At some point, the part of the Castle called, The Island, would be exactly that, an island. Karen stood for a while, watching the sea push up and down the cliff base. Listening to the rush of the waves on a high tide as they thrust themselves up the rocks, the breeze whipping her hair and filling her lungs as the salty particles tickled her cheeks and coated her lips. Until that is, an unexpected feeling of urgency pulled her towards the long haul up the cliff side. The steps were steep, and climbing them made her breathless, but she continued until reaching the top and The Island Courtyard.

In one of Dave's history lessons, he had explained that at one time, there would have been a great hall in this part of the Castle. It was built by Richard, Earl of Cornwall, in 1233. Part of the courtyard, and one end of the great hall had now fallen down the cliff, making the whole area smaller. In front of her were remnants of ancient stone walls that rose up towards the sky, reminding her of the mouldy, skeletal remains of a wedding cake, where, at the top of each spiky protrusion was a roof of yellow lichen. A beautiful blue sky peeped through the holes that punctuated the battered grey walls surrounding the archway at the far end. Under this and off to the right was a little path that led down towards the cliff edge overlooking The Haven. A small bay where ships would have unloaded their cargoes centuries ago, now it was simply a pretty little beach with a waterfall.

Karen went as close to the edge as she dared and peered down, the sea was an amazing shade of blue, the depth of colour intense. In fact, something about it didn't seem quite normal, but she could not rationalise what she saw. The colour of the sky was its usual shade of blue, so what was wrong down there? Unable to answer the question, she dismissed it as imagination.

The sun on this side, away from the wind, made it feel quite hot, so she took off her coat and sat on it. The view beyond The Haven was rugged coastline, the contours of which wove in and out with

jagged rocks rising up from the sea. Somewhere up there, hidden from view, was her cottage and a pang of regret stabbed her heart. Above the rocks, cliff tops smooth with grass kept in good health by a multitude of rabbits gleamed with fresh growth. The edge of this wonderful county stretched on for miles, and Karen actually felt a strange sense of peace. The slight breeze ruffled her hair and a vague scent of flowers drifted past. Sitting with her arms wrapped firmly around her knees and the sunshine on her back she relaxed and drifted off to sleep.

She began to dream and seemed to rise up into the air and start gliding, unseen, over The Island, circling with the gulls that encouraged her to mingle with them, as they all swooped and wove around one another. Karen was as light as air and the exhilaration of the moment made her laugh out loud.

Looking down at the ticket booth, there was a group of six people arguing with the nosey woman about the price of their tickets. Further on, there was an elderly couple sitting on the bench near the café. Around again, and she saw two children playing in the waterfall and their mother trying hard to get them out.

The gulls led her out to sea. They showed her how to swoop down from a great height to skim the water's surface, making her stomach lurch as it would on a fair ground ride. They followed a pod of dolphins, watching them jump in and out of the sunlit water as they hurtled along at great speed; she could even hear them calling to one another, their clicks and whistles distinct from the sound of the waves. They flew low, the gulls and this weightless Karen, back towards the Castle. Then she flew higher and caught a thermal, the warm air smoothing her cheeks like a feather gently stroking her skin. Her body was almost motionless as she lay on the rising air; the strength of which astonished her as she gently moved from side to side, as if lying on a bouncy castle.

Down on the cliff edge, sat a woman hugging her knees; this woman seemed to be familiar. Then there was an unwanted pull downwards. She tried to fight it, but could not push herself back up, back to the gulls that were above her, swooping, watching her descend.

Karen woke with a jump. Vivid coloured flashes flicked before her eyes like lightning bolts making her feel dizzy, sick. The ground she was sitting on was moving - the atmosphere stifling. Karen grabbed a handful of grass in each hand and held on tight trying to steady herself, while a scream formed in her throat, but refused to go any further. Thoughts whirled around in her mind, none of which made any sense.

Daring not stand or move, she called out in her mind, what's happening to me, what shall I do? Help me someone, help; her vocal chords were paralysed, her voice lost.

Abruptly everything stopped. The slight breeze ruffled her hair again and fragrance drifted past, all the same as before. The gulls above called to one another as they flew around and caught the thermals, everything was the same.

Karen looked around as she cleared her throat, trying to free it from the vice like grip that seemed to control her speech. Looking, searching, for another living soul that might have seen what had happened, but not one single person was in the vicinity. No one stood with their mouth wide open in disbelief, to prove one way or the other that it had actually happened, or not!

That has got to be the weirdest sensation I have ever had in the whole of my life, she thought, it was a dream, that's all. I must have woken with a bit of a jump. That's why I felt dizzy. That makes sense, doesn't it? A vivid dream followed by a sudden awakening. Yes, that's it. Karen felt desperate to rationalise what had happened.

For a while Karen sat still, then glancing round to make sure there was no one watching, she carefully got to her feet. Standing up straight and steadying herself, but feeling suddenly cold because of the wind, made her put her coat back on. For a few minutes she gazed out to sea watching boats, but not really focusing on them. The only reminder of what had just happened was a feeling of cotton wool inside her head. Slowly she turned and began to make her way along the path. Pushing her cold hands into her pockets, she found something small, hard and round; pulling it out, she stared at the stone in the palm of her hand.

'Where did that come from?' She said out loud.

Glancing around hastily to make sure no one had overheard, Karen proceeded to turn the stone over in her hand, studying it carefully.

It was rough on one side, but on the other was a carved Celtic cross. In fact it was beautifully carved with intricate detail. All this was becoming somewhat over-powering; dreams, intensely coloured seas and now carved stones that came out of absolutely nowhere. Holding the stone tightly in her hand, she made her way further down the path to the Iron Gate. The old gate was long gone, but there had been one when this was a thriving community, and she automatically took the route that they had always taken from their sitting place.

Dave had loved this part of the Castle, partly because it wasn't on the main path so it wasn't so busy, and it was also sheltered from the wind if the weather was a bit colder. Maybe that was why she had been drawn here; that and maybe a need to look at a breath-taking view of a place that she had always truly adored. Then, of course, Dave would say she had been brain-washed by his stories of King Arthur and Merlin; the made-up versions and the reality because a storyteller he may have been, but the fact remained that he had also had a vast knowledge of Tintagel. The history of the place fascinated him and the depth of his knowledge had always astounded her.

From the Gate she climbed back up and then further on, to the top of The Island. The wind caught her hair and blew it across her face and as it did, she got a brief glimpse of a beam of light and a man standing in it, waving to her, but as soon as he was there, he had gone. Karen squinted, but could see nothing like the brief glimpse of...who?

'That's it. I'm going home. Enough is enough, I've lost the plot,' she muttered.

Moving off at a fast pace straight over the top, and glancing behind her, she joined the path back down to the courtyard, then going under the stone arch, a group of people came towards her. Two men were laughing at the women coming up behind them who were obviously struggling with the steep climb. A little further on, she moved to one side to allow a man and a woman to pass, they were deep in conversation about the awful woman on the ticket booth.

'No. I won't shut up about it, Trish. That woman was downright rude and you know it.'

'Yes I know, but I'm not going to let it spoil the rest of my day. It's over and done with. Let it go for goodness sake and let's catch up with the others. They're way ahead of us now.'

'The woman tried to over-charge us with those bloody tickets,' he said

'You don't know that for sure, it might have been genuine! Her giving you the wrong change.' she answered as they walked past.

The conversation drifted away with the two people. Karen could not believe what she had heard; this had got to be a coincidence. Continuing on, and heading towards The Haven steps, a rather irate voice drifted up.

'I told you to come away from the water before someone fell in, didn't I? But no, you had to go back one more time, and look at the state of you now. What am I supposed to do? I don't carry a spare set of clothes around you know!'

Up the steps came two children, both about seven years of age, both soaking wet, with their mother following on behind carrying beach bags, towels and a furious expression.

Karen continued on down, past the ticket booth, her heart hammering and her mind racing.

'Poor girl,' said the nosey woman to the stranger buying his ticket, 'her husband dropped down dead a while back. She doesn't know where she is half the time.'

'Really,' said the stranger, who then walked swiftly away.

By the time Karen reached the bottom, her only conclusion was that she had finally gone mad. All that was needed now was to go up the path towards the café, and see an elderly couple sitting on the bench. If that happened, then a swift walk to the nearest doctor's surgery to turn herself in, would be appropriate. She hardly dare look, supposing they really were there. What did it all mean? She reached the little bridge over the stream and stopped, for what seemed like ages, and stood looking at her feet.

Don't be ridiculous, Karen, take a look! Whilst holding her breath and glancing up, to her relief, she realised the bench was empty and laughed out loud. Once again a furtive glance around, told her

no one was watching.

Starting to make her way up the hill towards the village, and feeling relieved that it had all been a silly coincidence, she walked on. Ahead of her, an older couple were walking slowly up the hill. A vice grabbed her stomach. The man was wearing a tweed jacket with leather patches on the sleeves it was distinctive, and extremely memorable. On getting closer their happy chatter could be heard, so as Karen passed she commented, 'Pity the café is closed at the moment isn't it? With it being such a beautiful day, a cup of tea would have gone down rather well.'

'Yes. To be honest that's what we went down there for, but we had to settle for a sit in the sunshine on the bench instead. Shame really. Still, it was nice.'

'Yes, it's a beautiful day for it,' muttered Karen quickening her step, as the vice tightened on her stomach.

Oh dear God, what's going on, how did I know they had sat on the bench? Those wet kids, and the people with their tickets. They were nowhere to be seen when I got here. They bought them while I was up on The Island. How did I know? I couldn't really have dreamt all that, could I? But I was zooming around with seagulls! That's not for real, it can't be - it's all too ridiculous to contemplate. There's only one answer. It's the strain of losing Dave. I've cracked up.

Driving home, thoughts whirled around in her head. Nothing made sense. Back in the cottage she made a cup of tea and sat down staring at the wall. The phone suddenly starting to ring made her jump and she slopped tea in her lap.

'Oh, calm down for goodness sake, and stop talking to yourself!' She lifted the receiver while rubbing her wet leg.

'Hi, Karen, did you take yourself off to the Castle for the day? The sunshine has been glorious hasn't it?'

'Hello, Alice. How did you know where I went?'

'Good guess. Why?'

'Oh, nothing, I wondered, that's all. How are you?'

'I'm fine. Actually we were wondering if you would like to come over for some supper tonight?'

Karen hesitated. 'Well, actually I'm a bit tired. You know, what with the sea air, and those steps up; it takes it out of you doesn't it?'

'Put it like this. I've made a Moussaka big enough to feed an army, so I can't take no for an answer. Get your glad-rags on, and come over as soon as you're ready. I've also got a batch of elderflower wine ready to pop its cork, should be good. So as you can see, you are obliged to come and rescue us. See you soon. Bye.'

The phone went dead in her hand. 'Shit!'

It wasn't the eating out that bothered her, it was just that there was so much on her mind that did not make any sense, and going out anywhere, didn't come into the equation, but she felt obliged and headed upstairs for a shower.

Chapter Three

'Is she coming?' Melody looked up from her book.

'I didn't give her an option.'

'Good.'

'Can you go and get me some of the wine? You know, the elder, the old one that's been designated as rocket fuel.'

'Oh, that one!' Melody grinned at her mother and headed for the outhouse.

This was where pheasants were once hung, hams would have been kept and wine was matured. Built of stone and covered with lichen, always cool even in the hottest of summer weather, overgrown by trees, bushes and honeysuckle and looking as if it had been there since time began.

On her way back, a sudden flurry of wind and leaves encircled her. She stopped and looked around. It didn't seem to be affecting anywhere else, and it stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Melody frowned, turned, and screwing up her eyes stared out to sea.

'Mel. What are you looking at?' Her mother called from the open kitchen window.

'Don't know to be honest, but something isn't right, not right at all. A feeling of, what can I say? Expectancy?'

'Yes, I know what you mean. Something's different, something's changing, I don't know what yet, but I do know it will be big.' Alice turned her back on the window and moved over to the Aga. 'I hope we can cope, that's all,' she muttered.

Karen arrived and parked her car outside Alice's cottage and sat for a moment looking at its familiar shape. It had all but disappeared inside a blanket of ivy, but somehow the way it had grown around the windows, gave it a smiley face; and the peeling paintwork a feeling of age and serenity. The old lamppost gave off its usual yellow light, which gave it the air of a scene from an old movie. Karen loved it here. She and Dave had spent many an evening watching the Sun go down, while slowly but surely getting drunk on good company and Alice's fantastic homemade wine.

Alice and Melody had been the first people on their doorstep the weekend they had moved in to Clifftop Cottage, with a smile and a basket of fruit and homemade bread. What a welcome that had been. Since then, they had probably become the best friends either of them had ever had, and Karen had found herself looking forward to this evening, once she started to get ready.

Alice appeared around the corner.

'Hello, I thought I heard a car. Come on in.' Looping her arm through Karen's, they headed towards the kitchen. 'Gosh! You have actually caught the sun today. I didn't think it was that hot, must have been good sea air and the wind that picked up. It's put some colour in those pale cheeks of yours. Come on, let's find Mel. Last seen opening a bottle.'

'Is this a new batch, or an old one that's ready for inspection?'

'Oh yes, old. What else would be designated rocket fuel?'

They found Mel struggling with a corkscrew and a disobedient bottle.

'Karen. Hello, it's nice to see you. I'll say it now and get it over with. I'm so sorry about Dave. He was a remarkable man and, I'm sorry, I have to confess, I fancied him rotten, but he only had eyes for you, lucky girl. You may have lost him, but wow, you had a man that adored you and a lot of women never have that, even after years of marriage.' She put down the bottle and flung her arms around Karen and gave her a big hug.

'Thanks, I appreciate that. You're right, I should think of myself as being lucky for what we had, and the time we were together, right from university, but it wasn't long enough.' Karen's mouth quivered.

'Enough now, you two, I want this evening to be one of laughter and food and booze. By the way, don't worry about driving home, because I've made up the spare bed ready for you to fall into later, okay?'

'Thanks.'

'Here, try this. See what you think.'

Karen took a sip from the glass handed to her and the taste exploded in her mouth.

'Bloody hell!' She stammered as the liquid momentarily took her breath away, 'that's got a kick. We really are in for a great time, all assuming that I can remember it in the morning of course.'

Alice laughed 'Come on, let's go sit. The dinner won't be ready yet, as it has to rest for a while, and we have the whole evening in front of us. Sitting room, lead the way, Mel.'

This room, as usual, was total havoc, and no one could find anything, except Alice. Even so, there were times when even she couldn't put her hand on what she was looking for. It was a large room, housing two walls filled with floor to ceiling bookshelves, crammed with antique leather-bound volumes down to modern paperbacks. To Alice it didn't matter what the books were made of, the written word was sacrosanct. A fire had been lit in the old fireplace, and little flames were beginning to take hold of the huge logs that crackled and spat as they produced sparks. Above, on the mantle shelf was a collection of much loved old photographs in ancient frames. Sharing the space were wooden carved boats, candles (most of which had gone into weird shapes from the heat), a small group of seashells, crystals, pebbles and driftwood. On the wall space over the mantle, was a painting of a floundering ship on a stormy sea. The once vivid colours on the canvas were gradually disappearing behind years of dust and soot from many open fires.

Scattered around the room were piles of books, paperwork, magazines and floor cushions. Covering the floor that could be seen between the piles of clutter were colourful rugs over old battered floorboards. One huge deep sofa dominated the room in front of the fireplace. On the far side were two scruffy old armchairs covered in brightly coloured throws, which had holes in and were slipping towards the floor. Karen settled herself in the chair nearest to the door, on the left of the fire.

'Alice, I know it's February, but is it going to be that cold tonight?' Karen looked a bit sceptical. 'It's been such a beautiful day.'

'The sky is clear, the stars are coming out and the frost will drop. You'll see.'

'There speaks my mother, the sage,' laughed Mel. 'Honestly Mum, what do you sound like?'

'I bow to your superior knowledge. Take no notice of the young person over there,' said Karen, taking a sip from her glass while burrowing back into the numerous cushions and curling her feet up, as the fiery liquid made its journey down inside her body.

'So what did you do at the Castle today?' Melody asked.

'I went up to The Island, off to the right where the old houses were and sat in the sunshine for a while. I fell asleep actually. I also had a weird dream,' taking another sip from her glass and giggling nervously, added, 'I'm not sure what to make of it all.'

Alice pulled her feet up onto the sofa and also took a sip of wine. 'Ooooh, do tell. What did you dream about?'

'Oh, you don't want to hear about my weird dream. I'm not sure that I want to repeat it.' Karen picked at a cotton thread on her trousers.

'Yes we do, don't we, Mel?'

'Go on, please.' Mel settled in her chair and stared hard at Karen, smiling, 'go on.'

'I dreamt that I sort of floated up into the air above myself.' She glanced from one to the other. 'See, I told you it was weird.'

'No, it's interesting,' said Alice, leaning forward slightly, 'What did you do then?'

'I flew around a bit with the gulls for company...as you do.' A sense of feeling herself go hot, followed by a rather large mouthful of wine made her cough as she tried to swallow it.

'Great, how wonderful, what happened next?' Alice nodded encouragement at her. 'Come on, you can't stop there.'

'It's not interesting really; it was only one of those stupid dreams.'

'Oh go on, for fun, please.' They waited.

Karen stared, frowning, into her glass, for a few minutes. 'I noticed things'.

Alice glanced at Mel, who gave her a knowing nod of the head.

'Go on, pet, tell us. For goodness sake, we won't laugh at you, not much anyway.'

'Well, I flew with the gulls for a while. They seemed to be showing me how to swoop and use the thermals. I could actually feel the air on my face, oh, this is ridiculous. No more.' She pushed herself further into the cushions, moving one onto her lap.

'Yes, more. Please go on. This is great.'

Karen hesitated, glanced from one to the other, and then continued. 'I swooped around with them for a while and then I had the confidence to go off on my own, and, I saw people arguing at the ticket booth about how much they had to pay. There were six of them, three lots of couples. Then I saw a woman getting cross with her children because they were playing with the waterfall down in The Haven, and I saw an elderly couple sitting on the bench near the café looking out to sea, enjoying the view.'

'Anything else?' Mel asked.

'I flew about a bit more, and then found myself looking down at someone on the grass asleep, and, I felt drawn back down and I remember thinking that I didn't want to go. I wanted to stay up with the gulls...see, stupid, wasn't it?'

Alice smiled at her and took another sip of wine. 'No, pet, it wasn't stupid at all. It was an out-of-body experience. You were actually flying. You were looking down on those people and the woman on the grass was in fact, you, and you didn't want to go back into your own body because you were at peace, floating about up there. The peace you can't find here at the moment.' She waited for a reaction. The room fell silent as both women watched Karen, and waited, and waited, but Karen kept staring into the fire. Then suddenly, said something that they were not expecting.

'Actually you could be right. I have heard of something like this. I read about it in a magazine once, but I didn't know how to acknowledge it in my own thoughts, let alone in words. I always thought that it was pure fantasy.'

'Why do you think I'm right?' Alice looked like a teacher waiting for the right answer.

'On the way out, I passed six people. A couple were still discussing the ticket money. A woman was coming up from The Haven, tearing her two children off a strip for getting soaking wet. When I reached the seat there was no old couple, but my relief was short lived, as I found them further up the path and they said they had been sitting on the bench. Everything, was as I had seen it. Am I going mad, Alice?'

'No, you're not, but you have had an occurrence few people experience unless you've had some sort of training, or are a natural psychic. You are indeed truly blessed.' Alice smiled and tilted her head.

'I can't do it, but Mum can,' Melody suddenly blurted out.

'What do you mean, mum can, but you can't?' Karen frowned at her.

'Mum goes astral travelling, and remembers seeing amazing things. I wish I could, but try as I might, it doesn't happen.' Melody stared into the fire, her gaze disconnected from what she was looking at.

Karen grinned at Alice. 'Okay, you've humoured me enough now. Let's change the conversation.'

'We can if you like, but any time you want to come back to this, please, please, come to one of us because we really believe that you did see what you think you did. So when you have it a bit clearer in your mind, come and talk it through, alright?'

'I will.' It was all getting too ridiculous for words, and relief swept over her as the conversation finished.

'Now then, I'm going to check on my moussaka. Mel, you put on some nice cheerful music. Karen,

you sit still.'

Dinner was a total success; Alice's moussaka was almost legendary, the wine, well that did not disappoint either as they ate their meal in the dining room. Karen loved this room. It was painted a dark red, and had multi-layered muslin curtains at the French doors that led out into the garden. The furniture consisted of dark, heavy wooden antique Victorian pieces. The sideboard had old green and white serving tureens placed on the top, with a tray of crystal glasses and decanters. This room could so easily have been dark and depressing, but it was the opposite. The wood burning stove made it welcoming and warm, while the tableware glittered in the soft light of the numerous candles placed around the room.

Alice had been right. The temperature dropped sharply and there was a frost; one of the deepest that winter, but in the room with the three women, the logs burned and crackled, keeping the temperature up and the wine did the same for their mood.

Conversation that night covered many subjects, and much to Karen's relief, no one mentioned the dream again. The wine made her relax, and she found herself laughing with Melody over a trip to the village a while back. Mel, and three other women, found themselves chasing apples down the road after a bag split, stopping traffic and causing chaos. Melody had a way of telling stories to exploit every angle and Karen enjoyed listening to her tales of village folk; her mastery of a broad Cornish accent only enhancing the tale she was telling.

'Melody', Karen asked, wiping away tears, 'why haven't you got a nice bloke?'

'I've had a few boyfriends, but to be honest, most people around here see both me and Mum as a bit weird.'

'I've even been called a witch to my face in the Post Office,' said Alice suddenly, staring absently into her glass.

'What did you do?'

'Bought a book of first class stamps,' she answered slowly.

Infused with alcohol they all roared with laughter until their ribs hurt.

'Karen.'

'Yes, who said that?'

Alice peered over to where Karen was looking. 'Who said what?'

'Someone called my name. I heard it as plain as anything.'

'No one there,' said Melody, 'or I would see them.'

Karen roared with laughter again. Melody glanced at her mother, as Karen waved her hands in the air unable to make a sound.

'Anyone for coffee or shall we give in and go to bed?' Alice asked, peering at her watch, 'it's nearly two o' clock!'

They waited a few minutes for Karen to regain her composure and wipe the tears of laughter from her eyes, before answering.

'Well in that case, bed sounds like a good idea. Am I sleeping in that pretty room at the front, the one with the teddy bear sitting on the window seat? I like teddy bears don't you, Mel? They're all cuddly and soft.' She grasped a cushion to her breast and squeezed it, laying her cheek on the top.

'Good grief, let's get her to bed, enough's enough for one night,' said Alice

Melody and her mother got Karen to her feet, but her legs went to jelly and began to slide to the floor, with Mel on one side and Alice on the other, they heaved her back up and headed for the doorway. Trying to get three people through a narrow gap at once (all of which were at varying stages of intoxication) only made a log jam, and all three descended into fits of laughter and ended up on their knees. Eventually they got to the bottom of the stairs by crawling. Carefully, they made their way to the top landing and through to the bedroom with Karen giggling and chattering non-stop. They sat her on the edge of the bed, and eventually, gave her the teddy bear to shut her up. Alice took Karen's shoes off, slid her between the sheets and blankets, then pulled the eider-down up and tucked her in, the same as she had done years ago to her little daughter.

'Goodnight, Alice. Goodnight, Mel.'

Alice gave her a kiss on the forehead. 'Good night, Karen, sleep well. Nice peaceful sleep. That's an order.'

Karen waved the teddy above her head. 'Say goodnight to teddy.'

'Goodnight, Teddy,' called Mel from the landing.

Alice closed the door quietly. 'Mum. The energy, it's all wrong. What's happening, who was in the sitting room earlier calling Karen?'

'I don't know. I didn't even feel anyone there; we have no other option, but to wait. Sooner or later all this has got to make sense, but for the moment we can't do anything useful. See you in the morning, and don't worry, it'll work itself out,' she kissed her daughter on the cheek, 'goodnight, sweetheart.'

No one woke until mid-morning. Alice was first downstairs to put the kettle on the Aga, and to check that the fire was completely out in the sitting room. In the chair where Karen had sat the evening before, Alice could see something on the seat; she went over and picked it up. It was a postcard and it had been on the bookshelf along with a few more, waiting to be filed in a box.

The picture was of the coastline opposite the Castle, beyond The Haven. The card was very old, and she had bought it in a curio shop in Truro a week or so back, when visiting a friend. She frowned. How had it got there? They all went to bed at the same time, Mel had gone into her room and shut the door before she had shut hers, and no one had got the cards out during the evening. All these insignificant things that keep happening, surely they make a bigger picture, she thought as a deep frown formed on her face.

A noise behind her disturbed her thoughts and she turned. The noise was a chair being pulled out from the table in the kitchen. Alice put the card back on the shelf and walked out of the room. Karen was in the kitchen, crossed arms resting on the table and head resting on her arms, groaning.

'Never again will I drink your evil brew. I am teetotal from now on. For the rest of my life I will drink only water. I swear,' came a muffled voice from somewhere within the folds of clothing.

Alice laughed. 'I'll make you my secret hang over cure. Hold on to sanity for a few more minutes.'

Out of a cupboard she took a small bottle of green liquid and poured a measured amount into a glass, then added water.

'Here, drink this. You might want to hold your nose so that you can't taste it though.' Alice put the glass down in front of her. Karen moved her head around to look at it.

'What's in that? It's green.'

'Don't be a baby now, drink it down in one go. Go on.' She stood over her, watching.

'Sadist,' muttered Karen, and sitting up, held her nose and drank it down as instructed. 'Ugh...that is truly disgusting!'

Suddenly she heaved, clamped her hand over her mouth, and looked up at Alice with huge wide eyes.

'You are *not* going to be sick! It can't work unless it stays down. Take a deep breath. Look, like this.'

Alice took in a deep noisy breath, and let it out slowly with a whooshing noise, moving her hands outwards in an emphasized, downward arc. Watching her, Karen repeated the breathing.

'That's it. Good girl, deep breaths. Keep going and I'll make us a drink.'

After a lot of heavy breathing and swallowing, the nausea subsided. Alice came back with two mugs of hot steaming tea and sat down. 'How are you doing now?'

'Better thanks. What's in that stuff?' The residue left in the bottom of the glass needed investigating, and she turned up nose gave an analysis.

'Herbs. Nothing nasty, I promise.'

'Hmm, okay! Alice thanks for last night. I haven't laughed much lately. You know, it actually sounded strange because I haven't heard the sound for so long. Does that sound silly?'

'No it doesn't. David wouldn't want you to go on like this. You must let go. You're holding yourself on such a tight rein, if you're not careful something will die inside you. Scream if you want to. Cry, shout, get angry, anything, but you must let it out.' She put her hand on top of Karen's and

peered into the pale face.

'When Dave died I didn't believe it. I went to a funeral that I organised. I kept it small because I didn't want a lot of people around me. I went, and I saw those bloody curtains close in front of the coffin that I had chosen, but I didn't believe Dave was dead...my Dave! He promised, he *promised* that he would never *leave me*. That he would always be there to love me, look after me, protect me. We were going to come down here and have a couple of children, live in Clifftop Cottage to raise them in the clean air, and see our days out together, with grandchildren coming for holidays in the sunshine.' Her frightened eyes met Alice's as she continued, 'I *hate* him for breaking his promise. *I hate the man I love and I can't cope with it!* What am I going to do? I've lost, *me*, somewhere, and I don't know where to look. I don't want to be on my own. I want him back.'

As the last words hit the leaden air, her face crumpled. Tears came fast and furious as the sobs began to rack her body. Alice moved to the chair next to her's, put her arms around her, and began to rock back and forth very slightly. 'That's my girl, let it all out. You're going to need strength for the future. Good girl, cry it out.'

Alice nodded at her daughter who came into the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea, which she took back to her room, leaving the two women in peace. Alice continued to rock Karen gently until the sobs subsided, the tears dried and all that was left was a limp human being, with a catch in her breath as her chest moved in and out.

'That's better. Your tea has gone cold would you like another one?'

'Thank you,' she mumbled.

Alice busied herself doing things that didn't need doing, to give Karen a chance to pull herself together. Finally, she sat back down with the tea, and smiled at the swollen face. 'David would not have left you by choice. Deep down, you know that. You're kicking out at him, through your grief because you need to blame someone. He adored you. A heart attack took him, nothing else. Don't blame him. It will only make you bitter and twisted. Enjoy the love you had for one another, don't destroy it.'

Karen was staring down at the table top. Alice lowered and tilted her head to look into Karen's face. Misery was etched on every feature of the young woman's expression as their eyes met. She forced a very weak smile as tears threatened to well up again.

'I know. I miss him so much. Sometimes it's as if I can't breathe without him. He was my soul, but he left me, how could he do that to me?' She placed her fingers over her mouth in an attempt to stem the emotion, as her eyes pleaded with Alice for an answer.

'I'm not going to sit here and give you the usual platitudes. Like time is a great healer, it's not. You will forgive him. You will adjust. You will always miss him and you will cry, but maybe not as often, and your life *will* go on, one way or another.' As Alice finished her sentence she was fighting her own tears; the emotion hanging in the air was hard to cope with.

'You're the first person I've really sat down and talked to. Everyone back home was good, but they didn't want "upset Karen" with tears and stuff. I could see the pain in Maria's face if she thought I was going to cry. They didn't know what to do if I got upset, so I learned not to and got stuck into work. Until I snapped, that is. Dave's so called friend and partner, can't wait to get me out of the way so that he can start running the business on his own, using his crooked methods. I got to the point where I wanted to hit him and that's when I walked out and came down here.'

'Did you hit him?'

'Yes.' Karen grinned at the memory.

'Hard?'

'Not really. My aim wasn't very good.'

'Pity.'

'Alice. I thought you were anti-violence.'

'I am.'

'But not towards him?'

'Correct.'

Melody put her head around the kitchen door. 'Alright now?'
'Yes, thanks.' Karen stretched her hand out and took Alice's, 'Both of you.'

Karen went home soon after a breakfast that she really didn't want, but Alice insisted on her eating something before she went anywhere; she argued that it helped the green liquid. When Melody found out that Karen had been given the 'hangover cure,' she pulled a face and passed on her sympathies.

The weather had warmed up by the time Karen got home, but the low cloud was grey, heavy, and the wind was picking up. The fire had gone out and Karen was in two minds as to whether she needed to light it again. As long as the temperature did not drop too much outside, the heat from the Aga with the doors left open would keep everywhere warm.

Pottering about the cottage, she kept herself busy doing jobs that had been put off for ages. Cupboards needed cleaning in the kitchen and the airing cupboard was in a real mess. All this kept her busy and her mind concentrated for most of the day. It was late afternoon when the phone rang.

'Karen, its Alice.'

'Hi, is there anything wrong? You sound worried?'

'Mel has been down in the village at her friends' house. Evidently, her brother is a fisherman on one of the trawlers. He says that we are in for a really big blow. There's an almighty big storm coming our way, due in the early hours and all boats have headed for shelter. His boat was due out tonight, but they've postponed going until it's passed. Do you want to come back here with us and spend the night?'

'That's very sweet of you, but I have seen some bad weather down here. I've got to get used to being on my own, haven't I?'

'I know, but it doesn't have to be tonight, does it? This is going to be a big one, bigger than we have seen in a long time. It's to do with exceptionally high tides and two depressions coming from different directions and colliding with high winds, sort of like a bad recipe.'

'No. I'll be alright. I'll light the fire so that I'm nice and warm. Lock all the doors and make sure the windows are secure, how's that?'

'I suppose so. It will be a cold night though, so make sure you have plenty of coal in the house. Don't go wandering about outside after dark in high winds, promise me?'

'I promise. Now stop worrying, I'll be fine, and if I'm not, I'll get straight on the phone to you. Will that do?'

'Alright, but please take my warning seriously. You haven't been through really bad weather like this down here yet. It can be quite frightening for the first time. Are you sure you won't come here with us?'

'Positive.'

'But you will phone if you get worried?'

Alice sounded like an over-protective auntie, and Karen's voice told of the smile behind her answer as she said, 'I will honestly!'

On the other end of the phone, her friend was forced to return the smile ' Goodnight then.'

'Goodnight, Alice, and thanks for the warning.'

She replaced the receiver and glanced firstly at the window and then at the coal box. When she had first come home the wind was getting up, but, to her surprise, it was very calm as she walked outside and not quite dark. She could easily see her way to the shed where the coal was kept and she filled the box. Having returned it to its place in the hearth, she went back out to the garden and wandered down to the wall where she stood gazing out at the sea. It was very calm with only miniature waves moving the surface. The garden around her had a sort of still silence that closed in and sent a shudder down her spine.

Suddenly, she realised she was looking at a grey bank heading towards her from the sea, it was fog. A large patch of it seemed to be heading for the coastline and her bit in particular. It swirled and

moved as if being blown by a breeze, but there wasn't a breath of mobile air anywhere, everything was motionless. She felt mesmerised and watched as it came quickly towards her, like some giant growing organism. The hairs on the back of her neck were now standing to attention, but she couldn't take her eyes away from this pale, swirling mass.

Karen gazed up as it passed over her head obliterating the sky, and was quickly encompassed by air that felt warm, like being surrounded by a thick, soft blanket. She heard a voice, but somehow knew she hadn't actually heard it, was she sensing something? Could she hear a distant voice carried on the air? There was no wind to carry it. Suddenly, a hand was placed on her shoulder, panic swept over her and she stumbled backwards and swung around.

'Who's there?' She demanded as her heart thumped, whilst swinging this way and that trying to see who had touched her.

There was no answer, the fog only got thicker, but still, she thought there was a voice. It seemed to be calling her and it definitely wasn't a conversation drifting in the air. Karen started walking backwards, her eyes searching the swirling fog for a shape, a face, anything tangible.

Her chest tightened as though it were in a vice on turning and stumbling back towards the cottage. The swirling grey light had turned oppressive as the building loomed, forming a dark shape in front of her. Rushing for the door she stumbled over the edge of the path, but retained her balance and continued her flight, went into the cottage, and slammed the door behind her, bolting it firmly.

Karen looked towards the sitting room and then up the stairs. The hairs on the back of her neck began to prickle again. Her mouth was dry, and panic threatened to engulf her as she realised the door had been left wide open; had it been left open? Wasn't it shut behind her? She turned, gave the door another push to check it was closed securely, then spun back and glanced at the sitting room before racing off to the kitchen.

Flinging open a cupboard door, and rummaging inside, the contents went spewing across the floor. Coming away empty handed, and desperately looking around the kitchen, her eye fell on the tall cupboard, where she found what she was looking for. Glancing around the room, Karen straightened up with a baseball bat in her hand, and listened hard.

Slowly, with both hands clamped around the bat's handle as she held it high, she went upstairs and moved from one room to the next, leaving lights on in every room as she went. Wardrobes were searched, all beds had the space underneath checked and curtains were closed. Her heart began to slow in her chest, sliding back to its normal beat as she lowered the bat and made her way back downstairs.

Once her mind was put at ease that no one had entered the cottage while she was outside in the fog, the next job was lighting the stove. The fire took hold very easily and Karen sat back on the floor watching the flames flicker into life and change colour. It was then that a noise invaded her thoughts; the wind outside was blowing hard, very hard. Going to the window, she screwed up her courage and pulled the curtain back a little way to peer out into the night. It was very dark and the moon was a mere glow behind the scudding clouds. The fog had gone.

A gust of wind slammed into the window and rattled the glass, making Karen give a squeak and jump back a step. At arm's length she pulled the curtains shut and then stared at them as if defying them to move.

'Now,' she said to herself, as she backed away from the window. 'Pull yourself together woman or you won't get through the night.' Wrapped her cardigan around her body like a shield, and walking off towards the kitchen, food was something to focus her mind on.

Surprisingly, she was hungry and ate some supper followed by a cup of tea. Alice had said that the storm would arrive in the early hours of the morning, and Karen had sort of hoped it might get waylaid and arrive late, around breakfast time, once it was light; it was now obvious that it was going to be a lot earlier than expected, and it was going to be a rough night.

At one point she even considered going to Alice's after all, but then decided to see this through. After all it wouldn't be the last storm she would have to face. There would be many to come in the future if this was going to be her permanent home.

So settling in front of the television and focussing her attention on the screen, time moved on, but every time there was a big gust of wind that hit the cottage, she would look to the window, half expecting it to cave in. Then the rain started, hitting the windows like stones being thrown at them, the noise got so bad that the television had to be turned up. The curtains insisted on moving in the draught and the movement kept catching her eye; destroying her concentration on the programme. This was more than she had bargained for, Alice had said that these storms could be frightening, but she had, had, no idea that it would be like this.

It was about one o' clock in the morning when Karen gave up on any idea of sleep, so she wrapped herself up in a blanket and settled down on the sofa. Just a few minutes later, a huge gust of wind and rain slammed into the side of the cottage, making all the lights go out. Her ears seemed to pop and she blinked hard as darkness engulfed the room.

The noise outside was incredible, at times it sounded similar to an express train charging past, and at others it resembled a jet engine. The old cottage creaked and groaned as the high winds buffeted the walls and windows. She was sure that the whole cottage actually moved or the roof lifted a couple of times. Even the fire roared every now and then, as it was fed a back draught from the sheer force of this wind coming straight in from the sea, and down the chimney.

Karen sat rigid on the sofa. Gradually, her eyes adjusted to the small amount of light coming from the fire. Her feet were pulled up tight with the blanket screwed up in her hands and moved up over her mouth, as she stifled the urge to scream.

Time and time again, the wind crashed into the cottage carrying rain and sleet that rattled the windowpanes, as if testing the hinges and locks for any weakness. Karen, hiding under her blanket, began to cry. At any moment she expected the window to shatter and the man from the fog to come in and get her. Fear and imagination rampaged through her mind.

The memories of what had happened earlier, next to the wall outside, were still fresh. She was sure that someone had touched her shoulder, but no one had been with her. The garden had been empty, or was it?

'Dave, why did you leave me? Why aren't you here now, to hold me in your arms and tell me everything will be alright, and that you love me?' She wailed into the blanket.

A few minutes passed, the next gust of wind was not as ferocious as the last one and the next even less. Gradually, everything slowed down until it was quiet outside. Karen waited for a long time, then moved the blanket to her lap and listened, tensed and ready for the noise she was quite convinced would come. Nothing happened. Moving slowly, so as not to fall over anything, she made her way to the window and peeped through the curtains, to her astonishment, it was thick fog. Is this normal? She wondered, watching the grey swirling mass on the other side of the glass.

It swirled about in the dark making horrible shapes, so she closed the curtains tight again. Her mouth was dry and a drink would be very welcome. Taking her time in the half-light and moving towards the sitting room doorway, the black gaping hole that was the hallway made her hesitate. Even though Karen had remembered that candles stood on the sideboard, with matches in the drawer, she turned back and pushed the door shut, but now that the thought had registered, she went over and lit them. This, at least, gave her more light than the glow from the fire. Settling back on the sofa it was not long before she fell into a fitful sleep.

There was no peace to be had in this world, only dreams. The fog whirled around her, warm and wet, making clothes cling to skin and damp hair stick to head and face. This was not a nice place to be, fear was her only companion.

Walking forward, the surface under her feet felt rather soft and squashy as it oozed around her toes. Occasionally, it became hard and uneven. Farther forward, it became even more difficult to walk, until her feet and legs refused to move. When looking down she couldn't even see her feet; let alone what she was walking on.

Twice she called for help, but no one answered. Karen stood still, staring around her, but the fog was so thick, her hand could not be seen if it was raised. The fog in front of her seemed to be getting lighter in texture and colour, as if a light had been lit from above and was filtering down, it still

swirled about, but much slower. The fog appeared to be thinning, moving to one side almost. Focusing hard on the gap, there appeared to be something or someone there.

'Hello,' she called out several times. There was no answer, but the shape was getting more defined. It was becoming a human shape with no features, no face, it floated in and out, swirling from side to side, never holding the shape for very long. 'Hello. Is there somebody there? Speak to me.' The shape became more pronounced.

'Karen, do not feel angst, for I am here to guide and protect you.'

The voice drifted about.

'Are you the one that touched me on the shoulder?

'Yes, I wanted you to heed me, but I only filled you with dread. I beg forgiveness.'

'Why are you here?' She strained her eyes to try and see who, or what, was talking to her in such a strange manner.

'I will be the one to escort you to the end.' It told her.

'What end? Will I know when it's the end?'

'Yes.'

'Is it soon?' Karen was totally confused, but strangely, not frightened.

'If you trust in your true self, you will know when the time is come.'

Through this conversation, Karen felt that this person had not uttered a single word by mouth, but she had heard what he was saying in her head, not through her ears. The resonance of the masculine voice made her skin tingle, as it penetrated deep within her very soul. Karen knew this was a man. Even without the voice, the sense of masculinity that surrounded her was so strong it made her senses reel. The fog closed down and the light faded as Karen reached out towards it. Then she woke with a jump, and screamed.

On opening her eyes she found herself balancing on the outside edge of the stone wall in the garden, with her arms out-stretched towards a shape that no longer existed, swaying unsteadily. Not quite being able to take all this in at once, whilst standing precariously marooned, and trying not to look down as the world beneath her feet undulated like thick liquid, she slowly began to rotate towards the garden. Karen focused on the cottage, stepped forward and jumped down to the safety of her garden and landed on solid ground.

For a moment she stood using the wall for balance, rubbing its surface with the palm of her hand to feel its reassuring cold, hard, texture. It was then that she realised she was soaking wet and it was no longer dark.

'Oh, God help me, what have I been doing? I'm going mad. I don't remember a thing. How did I get out here? Why am I wet?'

Karen wiped tears from her cheeks and looked around. The wind was still quite strong and a cold blast whipped past her wet body, making her shiver. She made a dash for the cottage and the fire, squelching over rain sodden grass and jumping puddles.

The stove was beginning to die down, so coal was quickly put on the dying embers and the damper opened up. After a few long minutes, little flames sprang up and began to dance, making her smile with relief. Why had it died down so early, she wondered? It usually went well into the morning after being banked up late. Glancing up at the clock, then looking back again in utter astonishment, told her it was now one o'clock in the afternoon! Karen began to tremble uncontrollably.

Thoughts chased one another around her head. Visions intruded, taken from the dream last night as her memory started to return. Confusion crept into every pore of her being. Never, ever, had she walked in her sleep. Not as a child, nor as an adult, so why now? She could have killed herself, one wrong move on that wall and she would have been sliding to a watery grave.

Even cuddled up to the fire, the cold still penetrated her body. The decision to go and have a shower seemed the only sensible one, so she went upstairs, peeled off her wet clothes and stepped into the cubicle. The water was piping hot and filled the room with steam very quickly.

Standing against the shower wall, her arms stretched out in front of her, hands connecting with

the tiles on the opposite side, head down, the heat from the water penetrating her neck and back. For a long time she allowed the water to rush over her. Slowly, the heat warmed her cold body.

Karen felt exhausted. Every limb ached at best, or hurt at worst. She watched the steam drift about, the same as the fog had done, and memories rushed in. As hard as she tried to keep him out, the vision of his shape kept appearing in her mind. The memory would not be wiped away.

What had he meant by guiding her through to the end? What end? End of what? Which way round was she supposed to think of it? Did it make a jot of difference anyway? Leaning against the shower wall with all her body and turning the heat up a little more, the hot water ran down her naked skin and it felt good.

It made her skin tingle and reminded her of Dave's hands gently making their way all over her body, and she remembered the tenderness of his love making with the intensity of the feelings they had for one another. Sobs convulsed her body as she slid down to the sand covered shower tray and crumpled in a heap, a handful of hair from the back of her head in one fist, her other arm wrapped around her knees. Still the water fell, reminding her.

'Dave, my darling Dave, come back to me. I can't stand this any longer. I need you! Please, don't leave me like this. I can't bear it, I just can't bear it.'

Her voice trailed off to a whisper. Suddenly it was as if an inner-calm took hold of her. The tears stopped and the grinding pain in her chest ceased. Warmth and safety embraced her, as if invisible arms were holding her. She felt at peace.

Looking up into the stream of water, it seemed as if a light shone above it that wasn't usually there. Karen stood up, but on regaining her full height and reaching up towards it, the light disappeared.

Turning off the water, she climbed out and began to dry herself. The overall feeling now was of total peace and calm, but it was the exhausted variety. She needed a thick baggy jumper, leggings, woolly socks and a sofa full of cushions, with a piping hot cup of chocolate and a girlie magazine, something, anything that could be described as normal.

Suddenly, in her mind once again, crystal clear as before, she heard a voice say. 'I will usher you, have no fear. I will not let you fall.'

The voice, she was sure, was from the man in the fog, she could still remember what it had made her feel like, exactly what he had sounded like; a deep resonant tone that lingered long after he had spoken, and his weird turn of phrase. Her whole attitude had changed. No longer did it seem wrong or strange to have his voice in her head. In fact, the opposite seemed normal. She accepted his right to be there.

Alice turned the car around for the third time that day.

'Damn these bloody roads! Is there no way of getting to Clifftop that isn't blocked by a fallen tree?'

She had been ringing Karen since seven o'clock that morning and there still wasn't any answer. Now, try as she might, not one road was usable and time was marching on as the day slipped past. Trees were down everywhere and the local news was full of stories of squashed and wrecked cars, broken phone lines and total black outs. Thank God for mobile phones, there, it had been said; never did she think that those words would ever leave her lips!

Melody was not really surprised to see her mother walk back into the kitchen.

'Couldn't get through then?'

'No. I tried every conceivable route I could think of. What do I do now?' She pulled a chair out and flopped down, putting her elbows on the table and her chin on her hands.

'Try ringing her again. Go on, it's been a while since you tried.'

Alice picked up Mel's mobile and punched in the number. After what seemed like ages, it answered.

'Sweetie? Are you alright?' A smile lit her face.

'Yes, I'm fine. Are you?' Karen answered sounding distracted.

'I have been so worried about you. Where were you? I started ringing about seven this morning. I even tried to get to you by car, but every road is blocked between Clifftop and us. I had to turn back. Did you get through the storm unscathed? No damage of any sort? The cottage is it still standing and in one piece?'

'Thank you for that, but you needn't worry. No damage, everything's fine. I went for a walk and forgot time, you know how it is.' Karen's voice faded in and out as if she were looking around while speaking.

'Are you alright, you sound rather weird?' Alice frowned as she listened to Karen's preoccupied voice.

'I'm fine. Honest. A bit tired I suppose after a bad night and then a long walk. That's all.'

'Are you sure? You will ring me if you need anything, won't you? On mobile of course, phones are out, lines are down.'

'Of course, don't worry! I have plenty of food and the cottage looks good by candle light. If the lights don't come back on by tonight, it's no big deal.' she laughed, but the sound made was strange and strangled.

'Alright then, if you're sure.'

'Positive. See you when the roads are cleared.'

The mobile went dead in Alice's hand.

Karen returned the mobile to her bag and smiled to herself.

'That means I have total peace and privacy. I'm all on my own,' she said out loud.

Humming to herself, Karen went to the sitting room window and looked out at the sea; white tips still festooned the waves as the sunlight glinted on the water. It welled up in wide slices of green, blue and brown, thoroughly churned up by the high winds last night. Seagulls swooped and called to one another in an aerial display that only they could understand. Twisting and turning up so high it was hard to see them. Others went low, skimming over the waves, barely high enough not to be pulled to a watery grave.

Karen watched, remembering that she had been up in the sky with these acrobats where they had seemed to communicate with her. Some had shown her how to catch the breeze and hold it; gently going up, only to swoop back down, but all the time controlling her movements. How could this be possible? Was this any stranger than talking to non-existent men, in a fog that came and went in between ferocious winds that ripped trees from their roots?

Watching them now, her memories were vivid. The feel of the thermal pushing her up as the breeze rippled her hair, the weightless sensation of falling back down towards the cliffs, and the pull of the turn as she twisted her body slightly to change direction.

On sudden impulse she headed for the door, and pulling her jacket and boots on went outside.

Once down by the wall, she grabbed a piece of stone that jutted out, heaved herself up, and stood on the top. All of a sudden, this was exhilarating, making her feel high as if on some invisible drug that she hadn't taken. Standing on the wall, she threw her arms out to the side and shut her eyes, a smile spreading across her face.

'Take me, show me how to join you again; I want to come up there with you,' she yelled.

There was no fear in what she was doing. The knowledge that she would not fall came from somewhere within herself; *Karen just knew*.

A prickly sensation crept up her body as her feet left the wall, making excitement course through every pore of her being. Her skin tingled, her heart pumped and her head felt dizzy. Up she went with the gulls, where she reached out and touched one. Watching her with its piercingly pale eye, it tilted its body and moved out of reach, there was a sense that it was telling her not to touch as it was a step too far.

She looked down. The cottage roof had algae growing on one side. A gull sat on the chimney and a piece of jasmine was growing out from between some slates at the edge.

On her journey she travelled over the village, noting tiny houses, and miniature people scurried about their business. Roads were blocked. Workmen were valiantly trying to cut and haul huge

branches and heavy trees out of the way with tractors and trucks, before darkness enveloped them.

The Castle pulled her as before. Karen noticed that the same group of gulls were escorting her on her travels. On each twist and turn they were there to guard against, what? She felt safe and this felt perfectly natural, it shouldn't, but it did.

Down low over the Castle they swooped, dropping down to The Haven, where they stopped and hovered in front of what she knew as Merlin's cave. Standing not only in space, but time, she slowly moved towards the opening. The gulls started to swoop around her, screaming, guiding her, their excitement increasing with every minute that passed.

Floating on a cushion of air, movement took her forward until she stood at the entrance to the jagged cavern. The waves were rushing in and out only a foot or so below her feet, and wet salty spray coated her face. This time she hesitated, unsure of her next move.

Without warning, she suddenly found herself further inside than she had wanted. It was dark, the only light coming from behind her. Sound boomed and echoed as the surf below oozed and spat while it hurtled around the cave. The surrounding cavernous space closed in, and she felt claustrophobic, enveloped by it, pushed almost.

Something caught her eye. It was movement up on a ledge at the back of the cave in the extreme darkness. Her throat constricted and her hair felt as if it were standing on end. In her mind she called for the gulls. A black backed gull came out of nowhere and guided her, turning her like a child might turn a bicycle whilst still learning to ride it. Slowly they headed for the light.

They moved forward, but then the gull was gone and the light was a long way off again but she could hear screaming, then there was realisation that it was her own voice.

Back in the sitting room, the fire was only a glow. It was in desperate need of some fuel. Karen looked at it for a few minutes before her mind began to comprehend that she was back in her cottage, sitting on the sofa.

Her stomach turned a sudden summersault. Clamping a hand over her mouth, nausea swept her body making her heave. She started to run for the bathroom, tripping up the stairs in her panic, as waves of nausea swept over her, time and time again, barely reaching it before starting to vomit so hard and so long that her ribs hurt. Finally, she sunk to the floor next to the toilet and groaned. Karen felt light-headed, the room swayed and the floor below her felt as if it were moving. The cold china bit into her chest as again the heaving began, again she found herself hanging over the pan, and retching up her very existence, while fantastic colours flashed before her eyes.

Sitting on the floor time moved along, until finally everything went back to normal, or nearly. No longer did she feel sick, the floor felt solid and her head felt as if were attached to her neck the right way round. Very slowly she got to her feet and holding on to the wall, took two careful steps towards the door. Each exaggerated step placed her foot somewhere unexpected.

Taking one slow step after another, she made her way down to the kitchen. Going down the stairs was an experience that would never be repeated. Not once was she sure that her foot had actually been placed onto the tread. Each step down, was a leap of faith or stupidity, she wasn't sure which.

When she finally arrived in the kitchen, without thinking, the kettle was placed on the Aga, and then came the surprise that it began to make sounds as it heated up. Making a cup of tea turned into a marathon as every movement felt exaggerated. She picked up a cup and saucer. It seemed huge, and the distance between the dresser shelf, and the dresser base, was far greater than it had ever been. The air and space around her felt thick and was not very easy to move through. Pouring the milk from the little blue jug took ages. Walking to the Aga to put water in the teapot felt like walking through mud as she had to look down and watch where her feet were going. Finally the water was in the teapot and it was taken to the table, as was the cup and saucer. The milk jug was remembered, in case she was unable to get up again. Finally, she sat and poured out this much needed drink and gratefully began to sip the hot liquid as she watched the garden become bathed in moonlight...where had the day gone?

Melody was in her room, sitting on her chair in the window, trying to meditate. This was the second time today that an attempt had been made, but somehow she was being blocked. Yet again, nothing was coming through.

Mel got her gifts from her mother. Who, in turn, had got hers from her mother and this was how it had been for generations, coming down on the female line in this old Cornish family, but today all her skills seemed to have deserted her and it was beginning to scare her. The energies were not balanced, something was definitely happening, but what? It was a mutual understanding between herself and Alice that it was something around Karen. Melody though, sensed her mother knew far more than she was saying, and that worried her a little, in case it meant that this problem was far more serious than had been originally thought.

Alice was an exceptional clairvoyant, a skilled medium and healer, there had been times when Mel had seen animals skulk off, looking back over their shoulder because her mother had looked at them, but others had been inexplicably drawn to her.

Melody had grown up with some of the villagers calling her mother a witch, and treating her as if she would give them some terrible disease if they as much as looked at her. She also knew people that would not have a word said against her, many of whom had been helped by her healing hands or messages from departed loved ones.

Then, as Mel got older, it extended to her as well, but the majority of people knew Alice and her daughter as friends and staunch believers in the local community. Many a local battle had been fought with Alice and Melody in the forefront of any proceedings.

The smell of freshly baked bread wafted into her room, making her mouth water. As she stood up to go down to the kitchen something out at sea caught her eye. Screwing up her eyes she concentrated on the, on the what? What was that out there?

'Mum, *Mum*.' Melody began to run down the stairs. 'Mum.'

'What?' Alice shouted anxiously.

'Out at sea...come and look. Quick!'

They both ran outside, Alice following Melody, drying her hands on a tea-towel as she ran. They stood on the edge of the cliff, peering into the gloom.

'What am I supposed to be looking for?' Alice asked, 'is it a wreck or something?'

'I can't see it now. It's gone. Damn it!'

'What's gone? What did you see out there?' Alice squinted her eyes as she scanned the sea.

'That's the trouble, I don't really know,' said Mel.

'Okay, close your eyes and visualise what you saw.' Alice waited. 'Can you see it?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Now describe it,' said Alice.

'Grey with a sort of translucent glow behind it, swirling but not moving, like the telly when the picture goes out of focus.' Mel spoke the words slowly as she concentrated on the vision in her mind.

'Size and shape?'

'Oh Lord, I don't know, sort of round, yes, maybe round shaped. Size? I don't know. It was quite a way over.'

'There, you see, you can tell me. Always go back to basics, but it doesn't tell us what you actually saw. Do you think it was a patch of sea fog? When you said over, what did you mean?'

'Over Karen's direction, towards the Castle...as for the fog, I really don't know, but there's a lot I don't know at the moment, and it's beginning to freak me out a bit.'

'Why is it freaking you out? It's only a patch of something out to sea.' Alice put a protective arm around her shoulders.

'Twice this morning I've tried to meditate. There's no one there. I can't get through, Mum. It feels,' she searched for the right word, 'it feels like a huge expectancy. It's as if the Spirit World is expecting something to happen, and the spirits haven't got time for us at the moment. They're busy. The energy, it's all wrong. I don't know of any other way of putting it. Even my guides are not

communicating with me. It's so quiet, what's happening?'

'I think it's something big. The Spirit World is keeping secrets, but I also think it's in turmoil. I've never known anything quite like this, and I know what you mean about the expectancy thing; it feels extremely weird, but at the centre of everything we will find Karen. I'll see if I can get over to Clifftop later. She's the key to all this. I'm sensing someone close to her; not family, not David, but it is to do with him. I have a feeling that it could be the love they shared, has somehow disrupted the usual flow of energies when a partner passes over to the other side. Somehow, they are still connected, but Karen doesn't know that. She only feels the pain of extreme loss.'

'Lots of people pass to spirit and leave someone behind they loved very much. So why is she different?'

'I really don't know, but one thing is for sure, we have to keep a careful eye on Karen in case our help is needed,' Alice looked at her daughter's face and held her arms out. 'Here, you're not too big for a cuddle when you're frightened. Come here.'

Alice held her tight, looked to the sky and said a prayer.

Karen was asleep on the sofa, cuddled up in a blanket. The house was very quiet, the only sound to be heard, was the purring of the silver tabby cat asleep amongst the folds of the blanket. Karen had slept for a long time, dreaming of fog, gulls, wind and the Castle. What she didn't know was that they weren't alone in the room; the cat knew, but Karen didn't.

When she finally woke, the sunlight was shining through the windows, lighting the room and making it warm and cosy. She lay still, glancing slowly around all the objects that were so familiar until her eyes came to rest on her wedding photograph. Pushing back the blanket, she got up, crossed the room and picked it up. Pressing the image against her mouth, she kissed her husband. Tears began to roll down her face. Slowly, the sobs began, followed by an anger that felt as if it was rising from the pit of her stomach.

'Bastard, you left me! We were going to live here, you and me, forever and a day. Your bloody words, not mine, but you didn't keep to your word did you? No. I'm here on my own, feeling like my chest has been ripped open and my heart has been taken out. *I don't feel anymore. I don't feel anything anymore, except pain, and it's all, your, bloody fault!*'

As her voice rose to a scream, she raised the frame and hurled it at the wall. The crash resounded around the room. Karen hung onto the edge of the sideboard and screamed until she choked, her breath, sticking somewhere in her chest. All of a sudden she could not breathe. Gasping sounds came from her throat, mixed with the sobs that insisted on continuing. Clutching her throat, she slid to the floor, the room began to swim and everything went black.

Alice's car pulled up outside Clifftop Cottage and she turned off the engine. Everything went quiet, except for the gulls calling overhead, until a strange sound drifted from somewhere up in front of her. Alice got out of the car and listened.

'My God, it's a scream. I'm coming.' Alice muttered as she rushed down the side path and tried the door. 'Please, please be open.'

The door opened easily, she entered and stood listening. The screaming had stopped, but there was a very strange gurgling sound. Frantic, she went the wrong way and looked in the kitchen, then retracing her steps, headed for the sitting room where she found Karen, unconscious, on the floor.

'Can you hear me? What happened?'

Alice moved Karen onto her side and pulled her knee up into the recovery position and stroked her hair, then raised her hand above Karen's forehead and closed her eyes.

After a few long minutes, Karen moved and then coughed. Her eyes opened and looked up into Alice's face and smiled.

'What are you doing here?'

'Good job I am, young lady. What are you doing on the floor, giving a good impression of being unconscious?'

'Would you believe, I don't know? I think that I had a bit of a choking fit, that's all I can remember.'

'Can you sit up?' Alice helped Karen to a sitting position, then to her feet and over to the sofa.

'Would you like a cup of tea? You look terribly pale'

'Yes please.' Karen glanced around the room, frowning. Moving the crumpled blanket to one side she sat down. Alice was surprised to notice cat hairs, but said nothing.

A leaden silence had fallen in the room.

'Well, you sit still. I know where everything is.' On turning towards the door, she saw a photograph in a frame on the floor and picked it up. 'Your wedding photo was on the floor. Where does it live? I'll put it back for you.'

'On the sideboard in the corner,' answered Karen, waving her hand in the general direction.

Alice put the frame back in the gap, headed for the kitchen, and potted about putting the kettle on the Aga and getting a tray ready with cups, saucers and milk, giving herself time to think over this weird situation.

When she went back to the sitting room, she found Karen standing next to the sideboard, turning her framed wedding photograph around in her hands, examining it carefully.

'Is everything alright?' She came up beside her.

'Yes thanks.'

'What really happened?' She asked quietly.

'I choked. I told you.' Karen straightened her back, pulling herself up to her full height and placed the frame back in its place.

'I know what you said, but I would like to know what really went on. It was more than a choking fit, wasn't it?'

Karen stayed silent for a few minutes. To Alice, it seemed like hours.

'I threw the bloody picture at the wall. I was angry. I cried. I sobbed. I choked. End of story. Are you happy now?'

'I didn't mean it to sound as if I was poking my nose in, but you were on the floor, out for the count. I was worried.'

'Alice.' she sighed, 'I need time on my own to sort out all my feelings, and work through my anger. Cry. Scream. Make my peace with Dave for leaving me. After all, that's what you told me to do, isn't it?'

'Yes. That's fine, but we both know that there is definitely more to it than that, isn't there?'

Both women looked at one another intensely. Alice refused to drop her gaze, and she was very aware of a male presence standing next to her, the energy was very masculine, that part came through loud and clear. Her senses told her he was tall and that he meant no harm. In fact, he seemed very protective. She knew that Karen had seen him and that he had something to do with the fog, this was an extremely strong spirit, the strength of which she had never encountered before, and he didn't want her interference.

Karen finally dropped her gaze. 'You know, don't you?'

Alice hedged her bets. 'I know a lot of things.'

'I went flying in a dream, back to the Castle. This time, I went into Merlin's cave. I didn't like it in there, it was sort of threatening. I came out and then back to the cottage. I must have, because I woke up here.'

'Where did you start from?'

'Here,' Karen mumbled.

'Where exactly did you start from?'

'Outside on the stone wall,' she answered quietly.

'Have you seen the man from the fog again?'

'No. How do you know about the man in the fog? I've told no one.'

'Karen.' Alice took her hand, 'You didn't need to tell me. I know that something is happening, and I really don't know at the moment what it is, but I am certain that it has something to do with you.'

Karen's body stiffened. 'If it does, I'll handle it on my own. If you don't mind, I would quite like you to go now.'

'All right, I'll leave you in peace, but do something for me?'

'What?'

'Keep God The Creator close. Ask him to put a protective light around you; will you do this for me? Will you humour an old lady?'

'You're not old, but yes I will. For you, now, please go.'

Alice gave her a kiss on the cheek.

'God bless and protect you, now and for always.' Alice said as she picked up her coat. 'Don't forget the kettle is on the Aga.' With a heavy heart, she went back to her car and drove home.

The following day Karen caught a train up to London, booked into a hotel and spent some time putting her financial life in order. On her return, life settled into an uneasy calm as the weeks slipped away, and the weather kept getting warmer.