

1 The Funeral

He turned off the main road into the tree-lined Avenue, and then it happened. His heart raced and sweat oozed from every pore. The pain across his chest became unbearable. He thought he was going to faint and slid his car onto the grass verge. Nausea welled up inside his stomach and hit the back of his throat. He threw open the driver's door. His fingers trembled when he mopped his brow and slumped back in his seat staring through a yellow haze which isolated him from the rest of humanity.

His consultant taught him to 'focus', to take deep breaths. He didn't take his medication; the pills made him confused.

As he began to recover he panicked. He couldn't be late. James glanced at his watch, fifteen minutes ago he was on the main road, but it now seemed hours ago. He looked drunk as he swayed to and fro trying to focus his gaze in the rear-view mirror. The image he saw didn't look that unkempt. His shirt stuck to his back, and his tie appeared crooked. He'd need to comb his hair; however, with luck, he shouldn't meet anyone he knew, when he arrived.

The faint scent of lilac mingled with the sweet evocative smell of new mowed grass, helped him to relax. Memories of his last visit filled his head. His father's death, soon after his mother, had been heartbreaking. With no siblings in support, he felt alone and isolated.

Today he'd come to pay his respects to a client and yes, a friend. He liked Patrick Brownloe from their first meeting, so many years ago. They got together four times a year in a small bistro, near Worthing's seafront. Patrick never married and being the youngest of three children, survived both his sisters.

James drove at walking pace, along the lane and parked in the furthest corner of the car park while he tidied himself and continued with his deep breathing. He thought the fresh spring air might help and left his car to follow the stream of mourners winding their way towards the chapel to await the cortège. He scanned the crowd while he adjusted his cuff links and folded his hands together in front of him.

"Hello James!"

He turned towards the familiar male voice with a heavy heart. Through drooped lips, he managed a faint smile and said, "Hello Mark, Hi Miranda."

James had never seen Mark in a suit. The pin-strip material was perfect for Mark because it made him appear taller and less rotund. Miranda's long black coat was elegant and flattered her figure, but her high-heeled shoes left her towering over Mark.

Miranda swallowed hard as they shook hands. Her half-closed eyes were moist with tears as she said, "They try to make these somber places look so comforting and serene."

James answered Miranda's words with a slight nod. James' mid brown hair looked neat and well cut, and his steel grey eyes gave him an air of inner confidence, complemented by his dark-blue business suit. In these circumstances, it was difficult to find the right words, and he appeared cool and aloof.

Mark cleared his throat and said, "have you met Patrick's family, James?"

'No, I've never met his niece or any of them. However, he talked about them all the time. I got the impression. they were pretty close-knit.'

'Yes, Patrick used to bring them to the bistro for birthdays and at Christmas. They looked like a nice family.'

As they chatted bright sunlight engulfed the crowd, but it did not appear able to warm their hearts. Dressed in assorted

jackets, coats and cardigans it reminded him of a patchwork quilt. Here and there, he thought he could make out the odd person standing alone.

A white-haired woman, with a slight stoop, gasped. She had caught a glimpse of the hearse among the trees, before it disappeared from view behind a clump of Magnolia bushes. Her audible gasp hung, for a moment, in the still air.

The crowd fell silent and started to file inside the chapel. Mark took hold of James' elbow and motioned him to sit beside them in one of the rear pews.

The hymn, "Praise My Soul The King of Heaven", brought the congregation to its feet. Eyes filled with tears stared towards the family. A girl at the front sobbed out loud and a tall well-dressed man, in front of them, stifled a cough.

The procession made its dignified way to the dais, and James' eyes fixed on the light oak coffin. Adorned with a single spray of cream coloured roses, it epitomised Patrick's love of life's simple pleasures.

The youthful clergyman must have known Patrick well. He highlighted the humour and joy Patrick Brownloe brought to those who knew him. The committal caused James to reminisce. The congregation rose and sang, "Now Thank We All Our God", his old school anthem which catapulted to the present.

In reverent silence the mourners drifted from the pews. James turned towards the aisle to find his exit blocked by Miranda and Mark, who waited for an opportunity to join the other mourners.

Miranda, her head bowed, turned towards James, and said, "stay with us, we'll introduce you to Patrick's niece and her family."

Outside, in the warm sunshine, heads raised, eyes dried and the hum of relieved voices resurfaced. Flanked by his two companions, they looked at the family flowers. James didn't realise that their progress along the flowers brought them closer to the family group.

"Hello Mark, good to see you Miranda. Thank you for coming, I do know how much Patrick enjoyed your company."

“Patrick was one of the most genuine people we have ever met,” said Mark in response to Charles Grosvenor's greeting.

Charles turned towards James, "I'm sorry, we've not met before."

Mark rubbed the back of his neck and lowered his gaze. "Sorry Charles, I forgot you'd not met James Wardley, Patrick's stockbroker."

"James, humble apologies. Patrick often referred to you but more as a friend than an adviser," said Charles holding his hands palms up towards James. "I take it you haven't met Patrick's Niece Wendy, my stunning wife. Nor to my two adorable daughters, Rebecca and Julia."

James shook hands with Charles and his daughters but Wendy looked engrossed in conversation with an adjacent group of mourners.

"Darling! darling, sorry to interrupt. I want you to meet your Uncle's friend and adviser, James Wardley."

Wendy turned towards her husband, stared with those alluring green eyes and blushed.

She embraced James with both arms, and kissed him on each cheek. Her grip loosened and her arms slid from his shoulders and squeezed his hands, "James, is it really you?"

"Hello Wendy, I didn't expect to meet you again, in such circumstances!"

Her mid grey dress and matching jacket complimented the rich auburn of her shoulder length hair. Her still slim figure gave her a demure and yet stylish look.

Charles jaw dropped and his eyes opened wide. He blinked several times and said, "I take it you know James?"

"Yes! yes!" Wendy glanced at her husband, her cheeks flushed.

"I'll catch you later, James," she said and turned back to the

group of guests who hovered to her left.

Miranda's eyebrows rose to touch her hairline. When she spoke her breathing was fast and erratic, "I didn't realise you knew Wendy."

"Oh, a long time ago. We met at university."

"Didn't you keep in touch?"

"At first we did."

James heart was beating faster. His skin tingled until he felt goose pimples spread up his arms on to his back. He recalled Wendy's compassion. He had been a callow youth, from a staid background. From the day they met she appeared so mature and took good care of him.

Charles stood erect and motionless and said in a raised voice, "Shall we make our way to the Homestead in Findon?"

He turned back from the main group and pushed a few hairs off his face with his hand. He bit his lip before he said, "Come on Miranda, Mark, James, you must join us, we'll see you there."

Wendy's warm greeting lingered in his subconscious. During the service he decided not to attend. Leaving now was no longer a choice.

They walked into the car park and James noticed that Mark had a glint in his eyes and a swagger in his step. "Do you know the way, James?"

"No, I don't."

"You can follow us."

James followed the Cardwell's Volvo out of the crematorium grounds. His thoughts wandered back to the day he and Wendy met.. The palms of his hands were moist, his heart pounded.

and his mouth went dry.

Wendy's display of affection may have raised a few eyebrows, but he had nothing to hide. Wendy was always affectionate, but their close relationship was history.

The Cardwell's car slowed and signalled a left turn. Too late now he thought. His first glimpse of the venue, brought a smile to his lips. The converted Victorian mansion with its black and white half-timbered façade reminded him of a 'movie set'. Griffins adorned the balcony over the main entrance. He glanced up to these mythical beasts and smiled. Was Patrick receiving a silent acknowledgement from these splendid beasts?

Were these magnificent creatures aware of Patrick's love of ancient civilisations?

He caught up with Miranda and Mark, walking towards the main entrance and inhaled the delicate aroma of warm food in the air

"Excellent," said Mark.

"You can remove the chef from the restaurant but you can't remove the restaurant from the chef , "said Miranda, with a grin.

Inside, the mourners gathered in the rear section of the restaurant, by the Buffet. Waiters circulated with trays of fruit juices and glasses of sherry. James could see a group assembled in the smoking-area in the garden.

He craved a cigarette. His smoking had caused friction, during his time with Wendy. He chose to stay in the confines of the restaurant. Patrick enjoyed a cigarette and often recounted that his grandfather, lived to 98, despite the First World War and his lifetime love of cigarettes.

Wendy circulated among the guests. James watched her join a group seated at a table nearby. The sparkle in her eyes was missing and she smiled through half closed lips. Wendy adjusted the hair on the back of her neck and shuffled on her chair in an attempt to make herself more comfortable. Her gaze flicked around the room and her feet were restless. Her voice sounded more high-pitched when she thanked everyone for attending. Not wishing to stare James turned around and

decided he ought to find Mark and Miranda, before slipping away.

"Well James, what an unexpected turn of events!"

James turned around and their eyes met. His mouth was dry and the lump in his throat made it impossible for him to speak. He shuffled his feet, cleared his throat and his foot slipped.

"I never realised you were the Wendy, Patrick often mentioned when we met."

"The thought never occurred to me either and you'd not changed your surname. Mind you, I thought you looked dreadful at the crematorium, have you been ill?"

He was caught off-guard by her comment and said in a brusque manner, "No, I'm fine."

"Do you still live in south London?"

His whole body tensed and he lowered his gaze to avoid eye

contact. "No! I live near Littlehampton."

"Married?"

"No."

Wendy reeled at the curt replies and hesitated before she said, "Oh, do I detect a touch of pathos in your voice. Tell me more?"

"Sorry but funerals always make me turn in on myself." He decided he needed to steer the conversation away from his personal life.

"You look well."

"Thank you! But I need to discuss uncle Patrick's affairs with you. I need answers to questions, raised by the solicitors who are handling the estate. Can we arrange to meet soon?"

"I'm retired, sorry."

"James, you've not improved over the years. You're still the 'pompous ass', you always were! I didn't ask you as a stockbroker but as an old friend! Just give me your number. I'll call you."

During the drive home James stomach churned and his head, so full of the days events, ached in sympathy with his heart. At university they were intellectual equals but her life skills were way ahead of his.

He learned from her in so many ways. Wendy radiated a love of life and a sense of fun, marred only by her rebellious streak. Everyone liked her but their bond developed such deep roots, he thought it was never going to die.

2 The Past Revisited

In the evening James' mind filled with memories of the day's events. In bed, he tossed and turned as sleep eluded him. Wendy with two daughters at university, a husband high up in the Civil Service, if he'd heard it right. Wendy, the rebel, the anti-establishment figure and embryonic supporter of 'woman's lib' had; it appeared, mellowed over the years.

His marriage to Amelia grew into a disaster, a 25 year disaster. Her fixation with the climb toward the top of the teaching profession, dominated her every action.

Life excited Wendy. Why did it go so wrong? He reproached himself for such sentimental thoughts; it happened so long ago.

Exhaustion swept through Wendy in a tidal wave. After a day of high emotions, she went to bed early. She too couldn't sleep. The funeral, her reunion with James, her heart missed a beat. Her lips pursed, and she fidgeted in her bed. She started to drift at last only to rouse herself as she mumbled out loud about tomorrow's early start. The girls must catch their train. Wendy couldn't allow herself to over sleep.

Charles told her after they arrived home that he must be in Whitehall by eight o'clock, to brief for an important meeting at ten o'clock.

Early starts got Wendy off balance, and this was one of the reasons she left teaching. Her current work, with the West Sussex County Council, allowed her to work flexible hours. The alarm clock roused her from her shallow sleep. She saw Charles as he said good-bye to Rebecca and Julia. An hour later she drove them to the station, in good time for the Southampton train.

Wendy took a couple of days holidays. She resisted the temptation to climb back into bed. Coffee in hand she settled in the lounge to read the morning paper. The sky was heavy with cloud, with rain forecast for later in the day.

A smile crossed her lips as she said a prayer, to thank Uncle Patrick for the fair weather he had chosen for his funeral. Wendy glanced through the newspaper headlines and read 'Economy, Downturn Heralds More Cuts for Local Authority Spending'. She sighed and thought redundancy had a definite appeal, at this very moment.

Tossing the newspaper to one side, she took a deep breath, grabbed her phone and with a flourish began to dial.

"Hello James I hope I'm not too early, but I've discovered that I'm free for lunch today!"

He appeared to freeze as silence dominated the conversation. Was that panic, she sensed, as at last he said, "Hello Wendy," in a hesitant tone.

She decided she needed to take the lead. "Let's book a table at Miranda's bistro and toast Uncle Patrick in style!"

"Well ah."

At once, she realised his reluctance and said, “Excellent see you at one o'clock.”

He hesitated for a moment, which gave Wendy enough time to end the call. Her hands started to shake, and her mouth went dry. A coy grin began to fill her whole face, and an excited bloom tinged her cheeks.

She stood transfixed with her finger on the button, and was unaware that James had dropped the phone as he attempted to replace it on its cradle. Nor was she aware that as James had wiped his brow, his fingers began to shake. She smiled to herself, as she punched the air with delight at her mischievous action.

Set back from the front in Worthing, Miranda's bistro nestled in one of the Victorian squares, a short walk west of the pier. The sky was slate grey as James searched for a place to park.

The heavy rainfall and the onshore wind brought the characteristic scent of ozone, salt and seaweed far inland. James did not see the weather forecast. He'd no thought to bring a coat.

The only thing he found, to ward off the elements, was the small attaché case he picked up at the last moment. This was really another business meeting, he told himself for the tenth time in as many minutes. It was a quarter to one, and his search

for a parking slot looked as if it had taken him ever further away from his rendezvous.

He had no choice but to park the car and make a frantic dash for the bistro. As he left the car, he realised he was not that far from his destination but in this incessant downpour, it might as well have been miles. A sudden strong gust of wind brought goose pimples up on his arms and soaked his clothing.

As he scurried from doorway to doorway, he jumped over puddles and skipped around streams of rainwater along his route. He knew he must have looked a sight as he entered the bistro at a full gallop. He puffed and panted as he fought off a mixture of dizziness and nausea.

Rain dripped from his face on to his sodden jacket and tie. Sweat and rain drops covered his face and streams of perspiration covered his back. He stood by the entrance and thought every eye in the restaurant had focused on him.

Miranda came to his rescue. She greeted him with a kiss on the cheek and a large fluffy white towel, "You can dry off in the cloakroom, James. Don't worry, Wendy has just phoned. Her taxi has not arrived, and she'll be fifteen minutes late."

"Thanks Miranda," James said as he composed himself before he dashed towards the cloakroom.

As he returned to the restaurant, he caught sight of his

reflection in the corridor mirror. He thought he looked presentable, once again. He was still uncomfortable due to the effects of damp clothing, which began to rub against his skin. Miranda took the towel and motioned for him to follow her to the table reserved, by Wendy, in the rear corner of the bistro.

Miranda drew closer to him and lowered her voice as she said, "We thought this would be more private and out of earshot from the other diners."

James thought he noticed a hint of a smile, on Miranda's lips? He pondered for a moment before he dismissed such foolish thoughts from his mind. He was a grown man, not a stupid, love struck teenager.

It was him, not Wendy, who precipitated the end to their relationship with his stubborn and intractable stance.

When Wendy swept into the bistro, she was out of breath, and her face appeared flushed. She greeted James with a fond embrace, as he rose to meet her. In James' eyes, nothing could detract from her radiance as she took her seat.

"Sorry I've kept you waiting."

She smiled at James and added.

“My, you did get wet, didn't you?”

James' cheeks reddened, and his gaze dropped toward the floor. At that moment, he wished he had, stayed at home.

"Oh James, I'm so sorry."

They looked at each other, and she began to giggle as she had done, in the face of misfortune, so long ago. His heart ached as he remembered the fun and laughter she brought to his life. They lived together in a flat in London as she trained to be a teacher, and he started his career in the City.

“Shall we go back to my place? I'll rustle up a set of dry clothes and a spot of lunch. My culinary skills have improved over the years.”

James' face changed back to red, which made him fear he resembled a human traffic light sequence. Again, he wished he'd never agreed to meet.

"James, I didn't mean to embarrass you."

Inside he recognised the turmoil of regret. It was years ago he played and lost. Lost was no exaggeration. Today he sat face to face with an elegant, happily married, mother of two.

He cleared his throat and with a shrug of his shoulders said, "Let's order lunch."

As Miranda left after she took their order, Wendy turned to face him. She leaned forward as a smile enlightened her face when she said, "so, tell me, why have you retired?"

"Oh, no real reason," he said without a trace of emotion.

"At the Homestead, you said, you lived alone."

"Yes I do. My parents died a few years ago." He paused with his hand across his neck before he said, "so how can I help with Patrick's affairs?"

"Let's eat first," she said with a sparkle in her eyes.

They ate in silence. Wendy finished her meal and sat forward on her chair. He noticed small beads of perspiration on her furrowed brow. "James, I realise you may regard this as impertinent, but why are you so quiet? You've hardly said a word to me, since I arrived."

"Sorry, I shouldn't have come here."

He realised he mustn't allow himself to become too open, for fear that his inner emotions might show and ruin everything.

“James, I do realise I forced your hand.”

“Sorry.”

“Don't be so apologetic. Let's be friends again, please.”

“Yes, I'd love that.”

“You are so defensive?” she said, her eyes wide open as if the upper and lower lids were on opposite sides in a bitter feud.

He lowered his gaze as he said, “life has been difficult, of late. My wife, Amelia, had an affair with a colleague, and I didn't find out for a couple of years. When I discovered the truth I suffered a complete meltdown. After the divorce, it was impossible for me, to function and I found myself bundled into early retirement.

"Amelia always managed to find fault in everything he said or did and he knew this made him more introvert. He sighed deeply at his thoughts. When his eyes met Wendy's gaze, he said. “ I know I'm a pain sometimes, but I do so want your friendship."

“You're the kindest, most considerate man; I've ever met.”
Wendy stretched her arms across the table and motioned him to hold her hands.

“Decide what you want from life and take action today.”

3 A New Dawn

Wendy's words still danced around his head. James settled into his favourite chair in his study, later that afternoon.

He now realised how self-pity and useless recriminations were ruining his whole life. Amelia behaved like a cow, but it takes two to cause a break-up. Pressures of work and the stress of his daily routine made him unbearable at times.

James lit a cigarette and inhaled, making his fingers tingle, which he found reassuring. One day, he would quit, he told himself.

When the front door bell interrupted his thoughts, James looked surprised to see his neighbour, Miss Silvester, on his doorstep. She must be in her late seventies, by his calculations. His parents used to refer to her as, the young lady next door.

She'd lived next door since before his parents bought the house, when he was still at primary school. Miss Silvester looked after her aged parents over many years. Still very erect in her posture, she appeared plumper than in her younger days. Her hair, now silver-grey, worn in a short bob, gave her a severe appearance. Since he finished work Miss Silvester, and he spoke more often and they had become good neighbours.

"Hello James. While you were out the Postman asked if I'd take in this parcel. With the heavy rain, he didn't want to leave it by the dustbin."

"How kind, thank you,"

He took the small parcel from her and said, "I've put the kettle on, care to join me?"

"If it doesn't stop you working, I'd love a drink."

James placed the parcel on the hall table and motioned to her to follow him into the kitchen.

"Tea or coffee?"

"I don't mind. You choose."

"It's coffee then."

They took their drinks into the lounge as faint rays of sunshine pierced the heavy overcast, which followed the rain.

"I'll just open the patio doors a fraction, if you don't mind, it's so stuffy in here."

Miss Silvester agreed with a wave of her hand, and they settled into the two armchairs.

"You'll never guess who I lunched with today?" James said as he rubbed his hands together in glee.

Her face went blank as she searched for an answer before she said, with her eyebrows almost meeting, "I don't know your friends now, James."

"You must remember, Wendy?"

Her blank expression softened as she said, "I remember a high-spirited, girl you met at university."

"Right first time!"

"I didn't realise that you two were still in touch"

"We met by chance and arranged to lunch together today."

"How marvellous for you," said Miss Silvester with a smile, her hands clasped across her chest.

James' silence made Miss Silvester hold her breath, and her face became flushed. She fidgeted with her feet before she said, "Does Wendy live around here?"

Engrossed in his own thoughts, James did not reply. After a few seconds he said, "I'm so sorry. Yes, she lives with her two daughters and her husband in Worthing."

With the conversation stalling, she said, "how is early retirement suiting you?"

James told everyone he took early retirement but did not mention his breakdown. His consultant expressed satisfaction with his progress and at last James started to cope with his divorce.

"I did find it difficult to adjust. The lack of purpose in my life created a void. Now I'm rebuilding my life, and I'm OK."

Miss Silvester stared into space and her eyes watered as she said, "I do know what you mean. When my mother died, I found it impossible. After years of waiting on my parents hand

and foot I enjoyed the freedom to choose my routine. However, I drifted along through life, without any real purpose.”

She took a deep breath and exhaling she said in a soft voice, "I'm sorry James; I do go on at times.”

James looked on in complete silence, smiling and admiring her openness and honesty.

“No, I'm interested to hear how it affected you, please do go on.”

“Can I ask you a question, first?”

James looked at her wide-eyed and scratched the top of his head.

"Ask away."

"Do you still smoke?"

"Yes I do, why?"

"I'd love a cigarette."

"I suggest a glass of wine is in order, with our cigarettes."

James returned with a bottle, two wineglasses and two ashtrays. The lines on his face, had faded His eyes and mouth now smiled together as he said, "All these years I have known you, this is our first real conversation."

"Well, You never appeared to have time for idle chatter in your busy life," she said fixing her gaze on him as a parent looks at a naughty child.

He pondered her words for a moment and said, "Let's start again. Can I call you Elizabeth. I know my mother did."

"Excellent suggestion, it makes me sound more of a friend than an aged neighbour."

"So how did you cope with life's difficulties, Elizabeth?"

"Books became a form of escape, while I cared for my ageing parents. I've always been an avid reader, and one day I remembered something my English teacher told me. 'Literature expresses life in words of truth and beauty and is the only history, of the human soul'."

He looked at Elizabeth with a new respect. He lifted himself

from his chair and shuddered.

"I'll just close the patio window, Elizabeth. It's getting cooler. Please do carry on."

"Our fore fathers' writings show us that they weren't just savage warriors. Their manuscripts teach us that they cherished the same values; we have today."

James became filled with admiration for Elizabeth. Despite her restricted lifestyle, Elizabeth enjoyed a life full of contentment. Her love of books took her on a journey of exploration. She showed no regrets and no unfulfilled longings.

The evening's revelations stunned James. He'd eaten well at lunchtime and never thought of food until Elizabeth left at seven-thirty.

James took his meal into the lounge and switched on the television. He flicked at random, through the channels, as he ate. One programme caught his eye. A view of a Roman Villa panned past the camera. Roman Britain became his special project at university and for a moment he thought he recognised the villa. He remembered a school visit to Fishbourne near Chichester, to see the Roman Palace. To this day, he still remembered his elation when he saw an actual Roman Ruin.

James drifted off to sleep that night recollecting his school trip to Rome. He was studying 'A' Level History when he took his

first trip abroad. His thoughts hopped from that special Mediterranean aroma of unfamiliar scents, dust and hot sunshine, to his first steps on Italian soil when he descended the aircraft steps.

He couldn't get Wendy out of his head. He knew there could be no future, but memories from their past spun around in his head. Her parents lived in Brighton. The Mods and Rockers of the sixties were history. Brighton teemed with night-life. The Eurovision Song Contest in 1974, won by ABBA, as he recalled, ignited the town's historic atmosphere. Wendy was eager to soak up this new excitement.

In the long summer holidays she worked, part-time, in a gift shop owned by friends of the family. This gave her a taste of independence, which she relished. Her freedom fuelled her rebellious nature.

He remembered the first time they argued. They had enjoyed a wonderful day together in Brighton and out of nowhere she exploded. Her sharp retorts haunted him for days.

The telephone rang and woke him from his slumber. His watch showed it was not yet eight o'clock. Who could want him this early?

"Guess what I found last night?" Wendy said in a triumphal tone.

"It's too early for guessing games," he said through tight lips

"Well," she said, and without even a pause for breath. "Charles needed to stay overnight in London and that left me to amuse myself. I decided to search through my old photos and guess what I found?"

With as much enthusiasm as he could muster, after his rude awakening, he said, "Do tell me."

Her voice rose by an octave as she said, "remember the Summer of 76 when we went on our camper van adventure?"

James felt he should not enter the conversation at this stage as Wendy in full flow.

"I found our photographs of that holiday, and you'll never guess what else I found. Remember the talking Teddy you won on the fairground, well he's here too. You said, it cost more to win than to buy. "

James realised he should add to the conversation with a suitable anecdote but could only muster an inane. "That's so

long ago!"

Wendy appeared oblivious to his retort. She paused to catch her breath and said, "You won't believe the outfits we wore; bell-bottom trousers, flowery shirts and our hair. Well, I'll keep that for later.

"Oh hell, is that the time, I must dash. I'm at a meeting in Arundel today. Charles plans to stay in London again. So, I'll see you around five." and she hung up. James felt high and dry and breathless.

The last twenty-four hours felt surreal. He'd spent long days alone while off work on sick leave. After he retired life became solitary. Now life had changed gear and careered off in overdrive.

His first true love now acted as though she was an older sister. Elizabeth Silvester, who he'd always regarded as a lonely neighbour, emerged from her shell before his eyes.

As he went downstairs to make a coffee, he remembered his parcel from work. He glanced down at the table paused and decided to look at it after he made himself a much-needed drink.