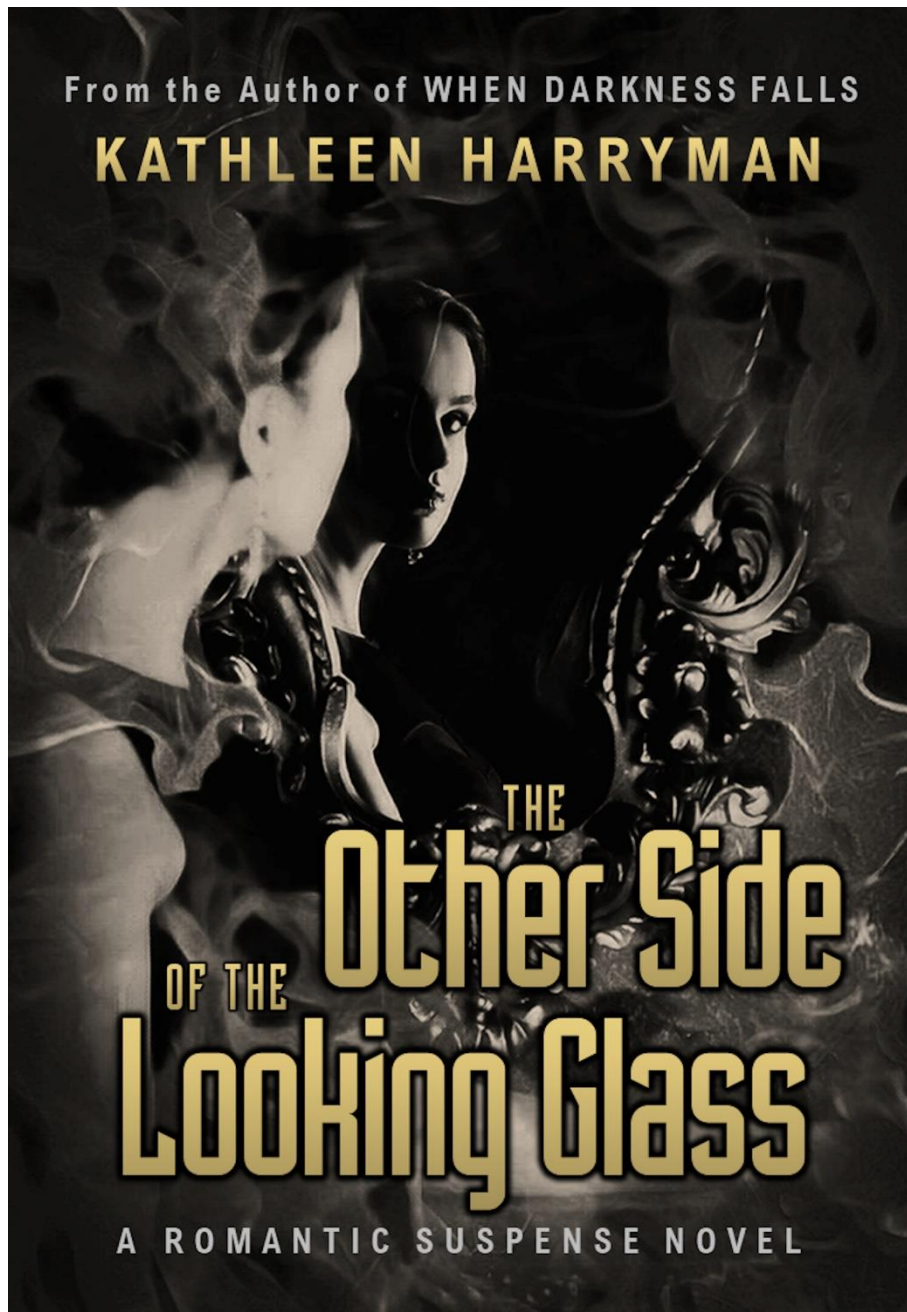


Excerpt from
The Other Side of The Looking Glass



Chapter One

KATE

The clinical smell of detergent penetrates my senses and my eyes flutter open. I find myself staring at a white-tiled commercial ceiling, questioning if I am awake or asleep – though it does seem like a rather strange dream to have. I blink. The ceiling remains. My senses give my brain a nudge and it fires up but provides no answers. Brows wrinkling in confusion, I begin trying to determine what is going on.

One thing I am certain of, is that my body is sore and stiff. Muscles aching, I remain as I am, twisting my head to the right. The sun glares through a wide, steel window. From the sun's height in the sky, I estimate it has been there some time.

A feeling of guilt settles over me. It appears sleeping in isn't something I indulge in.

To my right, between the bed and window, is a small white cupboard and a plastic-coated armchair. Sunflowers sit in a vase on the bedside cupboard. I like sunflowers. Though at this moment, I fail to recall why.

An irritating beep-beep sound comes from my left, and I swing my eyes in that direction, lifting my head slightly. Wires litter my body and a pink cellular hospital blanket covers me. The beeping begins to make sense, along with the plastic-coated chair and wires. I am in a hospital.

A sigh escapes my lips as I resist the urge to panic. Instead, I acknowledge my dislike of hospitals. Then again, name a patient or visitor who *likes* them. There is that clinical smell that lingers long after you have left, and they are full of sick people. At present, I am reluctant to place myself in the '*sick people*' category, even if my brain is screaming at me, telling me I wouldn't be here if I was fit and well.

Tentatively, I sniff the air. This hospital does smell nicer than the ones I have stayed in and visited before. At present, I am unable to *remember* ever spending time in or visiting a hospital, though I'm sure I have done so.

My eyes widen and adrenalin is released into my bloodstream. Hands shaking, my breathing quickens. Panic grips me. *Why can't I remember anything?* My eyes fly round the room, unseeing. *What has happened to me?*

If I am in a hospital, I am safe and cared for. Quantifying this fact allows reason to be heard. Though my heart still hammers, its beat is more regular than it was. My memories are in there, somewhere, I just need to find them. It's probably the drugs they have given me, clouding and confusing my brain.

Closing my eyes, I demand that my brain starts its cognitive processing. My demand falls into a black hole of nothingness. Not giving up, I decide to think about the sunflowers, as they'd triggered a feeling of happiness. Unfortunately, this simple request is met with vacuity, and a hollow feeling takes up residence in the pit of my stomach. The only mental input I receive is that sunflowers are bright, cheery plants.

My eyes fly open and I face the frightening fact that my life is a blank.

This notion sends my pulse hammering and a nauseous feeling erupts inside me. Cold sweat lines my skin and my hands begin to tremble. Reason's voice tells me there is nothing I can do about my loss of memory. It is temporary, caused by whatever event resulted in my being in the hospital. Scaring myself isn't going to help. I force my body to relax, taking deep, even breaths.

Time drifts as I concentrate on my breathing. When I feel in control of my emotions, I start to wonder about myself. *What do I look like? What colour are my eyes? Age?* This line of self-questioning is easier to rectify than trying to remember my whole life story.

Lifting my hands in front of my eyes, I stare at them for answers.

I am not a child, or a teenager, or even a young woman. Thirty-something, perhaps. There is a sense that this age *fits*. I tick off the question surrounding my age. My hands also tell me the colour of my skin, which is a rich, light brown. Not a tan. This is my natural skin tone.

I go through what I have learnt about myself so far. I am around thirty, and of non-white descent. Once again, I wonder about the colour of my eyes. A tiny buzz of excitement zips through me. I need a mirror. My fingers drum with impatience as I look around my clinical environment. There is no mirror within reach.

As it is hard to view eye colour lying in bed, I move my legs to the edge of the mattress. There is a heaviness in my limbs that I hadn't noticed before. Like wading through quicksand rather than bedlinen.

Something touches my skin and I stop moving, eyebrows raising in question as I wonder what it could be. My requirement for a mirror is side-tracked by the discovery that there is something between my legs that doesn't belong. Lifting the sheets, I look down into the semi darkness. The shadows allow for little visibility. My arms are heavy and start shaking as I try to push myself into a sitting position. Sweat coats my skin again and I feel like I have run a marathon. *Argh!* My arms give out and I flop onto the pillows.

Staring at the ceiling tiles, I notice a small stain from an old water leak. The shape comes in and out of focus as I work out my next move. One thing I become conscious of is that finding out what I look like has moved to the top of my *most-important-things-to-do-today* list.

Fingers drumming on the cotton blanket, I work at finding a solution to my current problem.

Ping! It comes to me. Hospital beds have switches to raise the patient to a sitting position. My fingers move, seeking out the control box. It takes a while, as some thoughtful person has hung it on the frame above my head. That I hadn't noticed it before amazes me. My mind has been busy, and my eyes with it. I reach for the controls. It takes me some time to work out what button does what, but once I do, I click down, and the bed moves. Impatience crawls at my skin at the slow mechanical motion. Once in position, I raise the cotton blanket. A pale-pink tube coils between my legs. I follow it as it disappears to my right. Stunned, I take another look. The tube remains. *What on earth is a tube doing there?*

I see this as a minor setback on my journey to self-discovery, but one that needs investigating further. The tube comes out from beneath the blankets, down the right side of the bed, where a bag of urine sits. My head falls back onto the pillows and, as my angle has now changed, I find myself staring at a dark-pink door rather than the stain on the ceiling.

It is clear that I have been here for some time, otherwise there would be no need for a catheter. There also appears to be no expectation I am going to bounce out of bed soon. *Just*

what happened to me?

A dull throb pounds in my head and I lift my right hand, massaging my temple. A needle sticks out of my left hand, and my headache amplifies. Soreness tugs beneath the skin of my hand.

There are two things I find upsetting. One – when I compare my right hand to my left, I notice that my left hand is twice the size of my right. I am positive I was not born with this deformity. I link the increase in size to the needle stuck in it. Two – a bandage is wrapped around my head.

Again, I question what happened to me.

This thought rattles round my brain for some time. Given my present predicament, there is nothing I can do but wait for someone to check on me. My brain isn't complying to my requests for clarity and the door to my memory is still sealed shut.

To pass the time and to stop myself from getting frustrated, I look about the room from my sitting position. The colour scheme is pink, from light to dark. Besides the door in front of the bed, there is one on my left. I make the assumption that one leads to the bathroom, the other to freedom. While the room meets my basic needs, it lacks any personal touches, other than a picture of a patch of grass with daisies. From my lack of appreciation for the painting, it is clear I am not into art.

Being in a room on my own, there is nothing to steer my attention from my current predicament. Though, as hospitals go, this is a nice place. I must have money.

Though my head hurts and my left hand is sore, I can find no reason why I would be in a room on my own. My injuries aren't life-threatening.

The door to the room opens and a nurse walks in. She makes her way to the foot of the bed. Her attention is taken up by the metal clipboard, and she doesn't notice I am awake.

“Do you have a mirror?”

The nurse jumps and I try to hide my smile.

Her pink hair sits on top of her head in a skewwhiff topknot. Some of the pins have loosened their grip and are hanging on to stray wisps of hair. From the lines around her eyes and the darkening patches under them, she is probably entering the last few hours of her shift. Her pale-blue dress falls above her knees, hugging her stomach and hips a little too tightly.

“You're awake.”

I present her with a tight-lipped smile, wondering if my request for a mirror has fallen on deaf ears.

“I'll go get the doctor.”

And with that, she is gone, and I am alone again, without a mirror.

My fingers beat against the blanket as my annoyance builds. While I understand the nurse's primary concern is my health, she didn't assist me in uncovering the truth about myself. There's a part of me that acknowledges I am being one of those *awful patients* nurses often speak about. I refuse to accept full responsibility.

I am unable to coax my mind away from obsessing over a mirror. I am haunted by the need to look at my reflection and to have the door to my memories open. To see recognition, or not. That is the scary part. How am I going to feel if the person in the mirror is nothing but a stranger? I refuse to allow myself to give in to these thoughts. I turn my mind to another

problem. My left hand.

Laying both my right and left together, I re-examine the difference in size. With gentle fingers, I touch the surface of my left hand. Pain explodes and I quickly remove my fingers from the sensitive spot.

My impatience with the nurse grows as my problems mount. Time is going by at a torturous rate, and I wonder if the nurse has boarded a plane due to the lack of doctors in England.

How do I know I'm in England? I glance at the rain now beating against the window. That alone is a clear indicator. It always rains in England.

As I seem to like making lists, I comprise a mental inventory of all the things that are bothering me at present.

1. Lack of mirror.
2. The size of my left hand.
3. Memory loss.
4. Where has the nurse gone...?

The door opens, preventing me from adding anything further. A man in a white coat walks in, followed by the wayward nurse. His lips are turned up and his expression is one of delight. His patient is awake, and that has to be good news for us all. His warm, brown eyes sweep over me as he makes a quick visual assessment before approaching the bed and looking at the chart on the metal clipboard.

There are no lines pulling at the corners of his eyes, and he radiates pleasantness and energy. His face is clean shaven, and I make the assumption he is just starting his shift. He reminds me of George Clooney. It is strange, the things I can remember. Whilst George Clooney is as gorgeous today as he was back in his *ER* days, I would prefer to remember more about me, not him.

The doctor's black trousers sit at half-mast. Given his age, I doubt they're too short because he's outgrown them. Maybe he washed them on a hot cycle in error. I have had my fair share of laundry disasters. Whoa... Hang on... Memory flash...

And that's it. Not helpful.

Perhaps my earlier assumption of being rich is wishful thinking. If I have money, I wouldn't have to do my own washing. Unless I have just inherited it.

The doctor towers over the nurse by a good foot. The fact that she's on the short side only makes him look taller, and he dwarfs her already-small frame.

"It's good to see you awake, Mrs. Thornton." His voice is deep, his words nicely pronounced, and I am surprised to find his deep twang appealing.

Mrs. Thornton? The name doesn't sound familiar, but – as there is only one patient in the room – the likelihood that he's referring to someone else is limited. My headache is getting worse due to the constant questions rattling round it. I latch on to my previous request for a mirror, if only to give my brain something else to focus on.

"Do you have a mirror?"

The doctor's eyebrows shoot up. My question has surprised him. He recovers fast and turns to the nurse. "Would you get Mrs. Thornton a mirror, please?"

She gives the doctor an adoring look before walking out the door.

"I'm Dr. Jonas. I've been looking after you since you arrived two days ago."

We do not shake hands.

"Two days!" I gasp.

The fact that I have been unconscious for two days is unsettling, and my heart responds in kind, its beat picking up. Shock washes over me and the muscles in my jaw pulsate. Fingers entwining around the cotton blanket, I am mindful of my rising nervousness. With deep intakes of breath, I try to calm the fear which has nibbled away at my mind since I woke up.

The lack of a wedding band on my left hand explains why it never occurred to me that I am married. Of course, there is the possibility that I am divorced, or even widowed, which would explain the 'Mrs.' without the ring.

While my brain whirs away, Dr. Jonas is busy checking my vitals. He's nodding, which I take as a good sign. The nurse's continued absence makes me wonder if she is back on the same plane she boarded to get the doctor. It seems to be taking her an abnormal amount of time to locate a mirror, and I am in need of the distraction.

The door opens and I sigh in relief.

Dr. Jonas has finished giving me the once-over, and as soon as I have the mirror, I will ask him if he can arrange for the catheter bag to be removed as well as the needle from my hand. My lack of energy is not going to stop me from using a toilet.

I look past the doctor, my hands outstretched, ready to receive the mirror, only it's not the nurse entering the room. A man in a well-cut dark-grey suit strides purposefully over to my bed. I watch his steps hesitate as he sees I am awake. A strange expression crosses his face. It makes me uneasy. He becomes aware that I am watching him. A smile forms and his eyes widen in surprise. I think the emotion he is trying for is 'joy'. His eyes fail to fill with pretend warmth, and my unease turns to suspicion.

Like a fruit bat spying a grape, he races over to me.

Incapable of any quick action, I hope the metal bed can take the force of him hitting it. Though he isn't a large man, and I would be hard-pressed to find any muscle beneath the expensive suit, his growing speed alone gives him mass.

Had I been able to, I would have leaped off the bed and shut myself in the bathroom. Or, better still, run out the door to freedom. As it is, I have no alternative but to brace myself for impact. Given that there is a doctor present I feel, perhaps mistakenly, I will be OK.

As the stranger pins me to his chest, he catches the needle in my left hand. I cry out as pain explodes. This doesn't alter the man's grip on me, and I worry that I am going to be suffocated by Armani. My hope that I'll die uneventfully in my sleep from old age, is slipping away from me. I press my right hand against his chest to push him off.

"Mr. Thornton! Mr. Thornton!" Dr. Jonas is yelling, and I am acutely aware I share the same surname as the strange man.

Dear lord, please don't say this is my husband.

The doctor places a hand on Mr. Thornton's arm, moving him off of me. Not far enough for my liking, but at least I can breathe.

The small distance allows me a better view of the man I'm hoping isn't my husband. 'Thornton' isn't an uncommon surname.

The stranger is clean shaven. His features chiselled, giving him a hawk-like appearance, and his eyes are shifty. At just under six foot, the man is of average height. No flame of remembrance ignites, and I don't feel a spark of attraction towards him. It is impossible for me to think I would marry this man.

"Sorry." His apology lacks conviction.

Mr. Thornton is well spoken, and his voice suggests that he is a well-educated man. He is a man used to getting his own way. I find myself disliking him without a reason. But instinct is all I have right now, and it's telling me this man is *trouble*, and not the enjoyable kind.

If we are married, are we getting a divorce? Perhaps I married him while inebriated, before the alcohol had a chance to wear off. It would make sense. I try and imagine myself so drunk I would marry the man in the posh suit. Nope, not happening.

My head hits the pillow and I stare at the pink door in front of me. Mr. Thornton continues to hover at my side. I can feel his displeasure. My silence isn't helping the situation.

Avoiding the stranger, I raise my left hand. "My hand hurts, and it's all swollen."

Both Dr. Jonas and Mr. Thornton look down at my hand. I raise my right one so they can see the size difference.

"Doctor?" It is strange how some people can make one word sound like a scolding. Mr. Thornton possesses the knack.

Dr. Jonas reacts to the clipped demand of the well-dressed stranger and begins removing the needle.

Mr. Thornton is a man of means. He smells of money, and lots of it. He oozes the stuff, right down to the stitching on his expensive suit, and the glint of his Sky-Dweller oyster and 18ct Everose gold Rolex watch. I remain unimpressed. At least I'm not shallow.

"Do you think you could arrange for the catheter bag to be removed as well?"

The nurse walks in, a small mirror clasped in her right hand. In one quick glance, she seems to take in the awkwardness of the situation, and the person causing it.

Dr. Jonas smiles over at the nurse. "Would you mind taking Mr. Thornton to the waiting area while we get Mrs. Thornton settled?"

The nurse nods. Extending her left arm, she guides him out of the room before he can voice his protests.

I point a finger at the closing door. "Why don't I remember him?"

The doctor looks at me, his features pinched. "What do you remember?"

"Nothing."

"Not to worry. It's probably transient global amnesia, due to the head injury you sustained. The amnesia is only a temporary episode. Symptoms last for around twenty-four hours. I'll order a CT."

The nurse walks back into the room and the doctor steps back as she draws the curtain and pulls back the bedlinen, exposing the catheter tube. Within seconds, the catheter is removed, and the curtain is whipped open.

The hand mirror sits on the bed, and my fingers trace the handle as Mr. Thornton walks back into the room. I get the distinct feeling he doesn't want to leave me alone with the doctor.

The pounding in my head gets worse. "Do you think I could have something for my headache?"

"Your medication will be here shortly. The nurses are just doing their rounds. Try to get some rest. Mr. Thornton." The doctor turns, nods at the stranger, and walks out of the room, nurse in tow.

I stare at the man as he takes a step closer to the bed. "I can't remember anything. I don't even know you."

His footsteps falter, and there is a sparkle in his eyes that wasn't there before. I get the impression my lack of memory makes him happy. It cements my earlier feelings that perhaps we are in the midst of a divorce and this momentary blip allows him to gain better control of the situation and me.

"Do you remember anything? The accident, me, our home?"

Despite the need to ask if he was listening to me, I shake my head. "The doctor says it's temporary, but he's ordering a CT scan to be on the safe side."

"You suffered a head injury, so what the doctor says makes sense."

The stranger appears more relaxed as he perches on the edge of my bed, taking my hand in his. His fingers are cool. What should be a comforting act agitates me.

The mirror is like a beacon. It's laughing at me for some reason. I try to relax and not pull my hand from Mr. Thornton's. I ignore the mirror's sniggers, waiting until I am alone to use it. Desperation is creeping in and I start wondering how quick I can get rid of him without appearing rude. Surely, he has a meeting to go to.

"I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "My name is Liam."

"Right. I take it we're married."

The smile becomes tighter. "Yes."

"I'm sorry. This feels really strange."

"Don't worry. I am sure, like the doctor said, it's temporary, and you will soon be able to remember me and our life together."

His words and body language are at odds, and my anxiety deepens.

"Can you tell me how I ended up here?"

Liam looks uncertain, as though calculating the risk. I am convinced the risk he calculates has nothing to do with my health. Perhaps I am being unkind. I can't remember the person in front of me, I am only surmising.

He takes a breath, expelling it slowly. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt. You were mugged at the carpark on Piccadilly. According to the CCTV, as the man grabbed your bag, he pushed you down the concrete stairs, where you hit your head."

"Wow." Shock replaces my earlier unease. "I can see why I would want to forget."

"You were lucky, Kate. Your injuries could have been a lot worse."

Silence fills the small gap between us. “Is that my name? Kate?”

The name sounds familiar. My mind’s reaction tells me I have a connection to it, though distant, not current. It could be that I am projecting this emotion.

Giving credence to the name would mean Liam is my husband, and I am not ready to accept him as such.

“Yes, that’s your name.” This time, his smile is genuine.

The door opens and a nurse walks in. There must have been a shift change as this one looks perky. Her hair is in a neat bun and her makeup is fresh.

“Hello. I’ve brought your medication.”

I turn to Liam. “Do you mind if I rest for a while? I’m so tired.”

He doesn’t look impressed by my request, but he nods. “I will come again tonight. Jenny is desperate to see you. I will bring her with me, unless you feel it will be too much.”

“Who’s Jenny?”

“Jenny is my sister, though she seems to be more *your* sister than mine. You’re close.”

I nod. “Right. This is crazy. My life is a blank canvas. I feel everyone knows more about me than I do.”

“It’s not forever, Kate. You will need to be patient.”

“You’re right. Let Jenny come with you. It might help clear some of the fog.”

As Liam gets up to leave, he leans over and drops a light kiss on my forehead. I try not to shrink away from him. Without my memory, he is nothing more than a stranger. One, it would appear, I am still married to and not divorcing.

The door closes behind him and my shoulders lose some of their tension.

The nurse remains standing by the bed, waiting for me to take the medication. Reaching over, I take the proffered pills, swilling them down with some water.

She smiles and walks out the door.

And, once again, I am left alone with my thoughts.

The mirror has stopped laughing at me. A feeling of control replaces some of my uncertainty. *I* make the decision to look at my reflection, at the person sitting in this bed, no one else. Fear is a funny thing and, although I am desperate to look at myself, I wait. Part of me recognises that my memory may still be lost to me, and the person in the mirror might remain as much of a stranger as Liam Thornton. I may not even, on seeing myself, know who I am. A shiver runs down my spine, and I let my gaze fall on the window. The rain has stopped and a rainbow streams across the blue sky.

I allow the medication to take effect before picking up the mirror. My heart beats rapidly and my hands shake. It started out as a good idea, threaded with impatience, but now I want to procrastinate further. In the past ten minutes, I have scolded myself several times. *It’s a stupid mirror! Get a grip, Kate!* (The name, though familiar, still doesn’t seem to fit me.) *Come on, you can do this!*

I raise the mirror and look at the white plastic casing. All I have to do now is turn it round. It takes another five minutes before I get the nerve to do it. My eyes snap shut as the mirror spins, and I have to force my eyelids apart.

My mouth drops open and I look at the woman staring back at me. She is breathtakingly beautiful. Chastising myself for my vanity, I take a closer look at my face.

The caramel skin, oval face, high cheekbones, silky black hair, and slightly slanted almond eyes emphasise my Asian heritage. My eyes are green, demonstrating my mixed race, though it is clear from my other features that my Asian heritage is stronger.

Lifting the bedlinen, I take note of my small but muscular frame. I must exercise on a regular basis. Running, perhaps – running feels right.

After a prolonged moment of twisting my head this way and that and admiring myself in the mirror (I am conscious of being vain) I have made no progress in kickstarting my memory. My mind is as blank as when I woke. The notion is depressing.

Placing the mirror on the cupboard by the bed, I turn to the pink door. It provides no enlightenment, though my continued stare makes my eyes heavy. Pressing down on the button, the bed lowers. Sleep soon claims me, and my dreams are as blank and dark as my life appears to be.

Chapter Two

JESSICA

“Are you sure this is going to work?” I look at Charles.

His hazel eyes soften at my distress. Pushing his leather chair back from the old mahogany pedestal desk, he walks towards me. His ink-black hair falls to the collar of his white shirt, his golden tanned skin standing out against the fabric. He is built like a rugby player. Broad shoulders and thick muscle on a six-foot-six frame. But, more importantly, he makes me feel safe, something I haven't felt in such a long time. Charles is an oncology consultant at York Hospital.

The thought of what we're doing makes me nervous – more than our affair. But we have gone too far to stop now. Only a few days remain, and I will be free.

“He trusts me, Jess. He'll never suspect a thing.” His hand brushes back my long black hair.

“I know, but still, it's the cancer part of our deception that torments me. I can't believe Liam bought it. But worst of all is lying about having cancer.” The cracks are beginning to eat away at me, and the severity of this particular lie makes me extremely uncomfortable.

“It's the only way he will let you go.”

I nod, recognising my desperation.

Liam is not the type of man you walk out on. People who betray or double-cross him have a tendency to die or disappear.

I am Liam's wife, and though I feel neither one of us ever loved the other, there was a time I thought I *could* love him if he had allowed me inside. For Liam, marrying me was about staking his claim. As his wife, I became his possession. Liam is a collector of rare and exquisite things. I see that now. Me, I was too confused at the time to understand what real love was about.

Liam is rich. I confused the gifts he gave me as love. When you have nothing, and are not used to having anything, it is easy to be overwhelmed when someone plies you with pretty items and attention. And that's what Liam did. I never stopped to think about what I was getting myself into. Liam, well, he got what he wanted – a beautiful and exotic wife to parade around his elite circle of friends.

I catch my reflection in the window as the early evening sky darkens. Soft almond-shaped emerald eyes stare back at me. My hair spills over my right shoulder and down my back. At five feet four inches, I am small, and my bone structure is delicate. My Asian heritage is easy to see, though my mixed cultural background is also evident. I hold a strong resemblance to mum, but my green eyes I get from my dad. Both my parents are dead. They died in a car crash when I was a little girl. Liam took advantage of my youth and innocence, as well as the pain of losing so much as a child. By the time I realised this, it was far too late.

Liam taught me how to dress and the etiquette required to move within the high-class circuit. By polishing away my rough edges, Liam ensured my acceptance in his inner circle, and I became the perfect Stepford wife. It didn't take me long to work out my mistake.

The pale-pink cropped Chanel trousers and white silk shirt I am wearing mean nothing to me – despite the price tag – other than serving as a reminder of the prisoner I have become under Liam's reign.

I am aware of the impeccable image we present as we circulate through charity events and walk with the elite. Men stare at Liam with unconcealed jealousy, and women are openly aggressive towards me. Liam soaks this up, like a man sucking energy directly from the national grid.

I knew when I met Charles Cavendish that there was an attraction. A spark between us. Charles is the closest friend Liam has. I knew better than to enter a relationship with him, to give in to my desires. But I did, and so did Charles, and I am not sorry. I feel no guilt over our affair. For the first time, I am loved, and it has nothing to do with the way I look and everything to do with the person I am.

My heart flutters as I look across at Charles. We never intended to fall in love. Charles isn't an easy man to resist. He is everything Liam isn't – quick to laugh, kind, and caring.

As he stops in front of me, I smile and trace a long delicate finger across his jawline.

His face lights up at my touch.

Sliding my arms over his broad shoulders, I wrap them around his neck. My feet nearly leave the floor as he hugs me to him. Breathing in his musky scent, I close my eyes and remind myself why I am doing this.

"It's going to be OK," Charles breathes into my neck.

I have no choice but to trust Liam will never find out what we are doing. He will kill us both if he does.

Liam has bought and manipulated his way through life. I am but a trinket to him, part of his expensive collection of fine art. And, like all of Liam's possessions, only *he* has the power to decide when one of them is no longer required. No one else plays with Liam's toys and lives.

My terminal cancer diagnosis relinquishes Liam's hold on me. Only death can free me – or, in my case, faking death. There are still a few things that Liam cannot control. Terminal cancer is one of them.

What Charles and I are doing is horrible but, as I said, we are desperate. I apologise daily to all those suffering from and who have died as a result of the disease. To the families whose lives have been ripped apart by cancer. But what is left for me to do? Do I accept that I have made my bed and now must lie in it, or do I take action and allow myself to live past my mistake and unhappiness?

Liam is my cancer, and I want rid of it. Selfishly, I want to live and be happy. To love as well as feel loved. While my morals battle with my actions, I find I want my freedom and happiness more than my principals.

I have been coming to Charles' clinic for a while now. The clinic not only adds to our cover story, but it is one of the few places we can meet without causing suspicion.

Charles is leaving York in two days to work at a clinic on the Isle of Skye, in Scotland. The clinic is new, and the opportunity will allow Charles and I to live together under my new identity.

Jake McCloud arranged for the papers allowing me to change my name and open a bank account in the name Jessica Ripley. Charles now calls me Jess rather than Kate, to allow us to practice using my new name. Soon, 'Kate Thornton' will be no more.

Liam trusts no one, not even Charles, despite them being friends since senior school. Charles says Liam was different back then, back when they were boys. I don't know what changed. I only know the icy thread of greed and fortune has a firm hold of Liam now. There is no longer room for true friendship, or love.

The memory of telling Liam my cancer diagnosis stays with me.

He looks as if he will combust with outrage on the spot. Grabbing my arm, he marches me out of our luxurious – if barren – home, into his Bentley, straight to the clinic.

As Liam throws open the door to Charles' office, Charles' receptionist rushes forward, panicking. Liam neither takes the time to acknowledge her presence nor answer her cries of indignation, demanding that Charles cure me.

Charles walks around his desk to greet us, motioning for his receptionist to leave, and closes the door. He indicates that we should take a seat, but Liam remains standing, a firm grip on my arm, forcing me to stay on my feet, too.

"I'm sorry, Liam, there is no cure. Kate has a rare form of cancer known as Hodgkin lymphoma. This develops within the lymphatic system. There were a number of treatments available to Kate, and I did recommend chemotherapy when Kate was first diagnosed. However, she refused. The latest chest x-ray shows the cancer has now spread throughout her lymphatic system and is present in her organs.

"I'm sorry, there is nothing medical I can offer, other than making her as comfortable as possible."

Liam's anger is like a storm threatening to unleash itself upon us. He lets go of my arm and paces the floor. Liam doesn't want a sick wife. Sympathy is not an emotion he cares to have directed his way.

I sink into a chair and rock back and forth, praying for forgiveness.

To survive Liam is to study him, to get to know and understand the monster who dwells within his impeccable appearance and the sharply cut, expensive two-piece Kiton suit. To a degree, I know how his devious mind works. The small insignificant signs that he tries to hide. It's good Liam has never taken the time to learn more about me. Otherwise, he might have noticed the small lines of worry creeping along my brow, or the nervous way my fingers twitch in my lap.

Charles has noticed. His hazel eyes tell me this will be over soon, and we will be free to start our life together. Seeing my inner torment, his fingers play with the pen in his hand, keeping them busy so they won't grab me and hug me to him.

"So, how long has she got?" Distain vibrates in Liam's voice as he nods his head in my direction, refusing to look at me.

"It's difficult to say, but I would estimate three months."

"Three months. Hmm, with such a short life span, there is no point prolonging the evitable with more treatment. The last thing I need is for her hair to be falling out."

Charles can't stop the way his jaw drops onto his chest at Liam's words.

Even as prepared as I am, I can't help feeling tossed aside as my usefulness disintegrates.

"Liam, Kate's your wife, not some..."

"And now she'll soon be dead," Liam bites out.

Charles' jaw snaps shut as Liam's attention swings in my direction.

"Find a clinic that will take her within the next few weeks. There's no point in her staying here. People will only talk, and I can do without that."

Looking at Charles, Liam runs a hand over the lapels of his suit. "Let me know the cost and I'll have the money wired over."

Shame engulfs me. It is one thing to know you are worthless, but to have it demonstrated so callously is hard to deal with, emotionally. Liam is unaware my cancer diagnosis isn't real, and I cannot prevent the shockwaves threading their way through my system.

The door slams behind Liam, and I bury my head in my hands and cry.

That day still affects me, even now. And though I know what Charles and I are doing is right, I can't embrace the fact that I have used cancer to gain my freedom.

However, I will not replace one prison for another. Thanks to Liam, there little time left before Kate Thornton makes her way to the clinic to 'die'. There is still a lot for me to sort out before Jessica Ripley can begin her new life.

Chapter Three

LIAM

Weeks after learning of Kate's cancer diagnosis, my outrage still simmers. Perhaps my anger is displaced, but I cannot believe what the bitch has done to me. My research confirms what Charles has told me about Hodgkin lymphoma. It doesn't lessen my anger, however.

I contemplate my misfortune as I sit in the courtyard at the Judge's Lodging, on Lendal, in the heart of York's city centre. The sun beats down on my navy two-piece ZILLI suit. Swirling my second gin and tonic round the glass, I am aware that there are only two days before Kate departs. I still have no solution to my current problem.

The other issue eating at me is my regret about making Kate my wife. Her low-class background is beneath me. My need to add her to my collection of exquisite objects overrode my judgement and distain of the lower-class. Giving in to my desire to own her, I have allowed her uniqueness to rule my head. Kate's beauty singles her out above women of every class and background.

When I orchestrated our first meeting, I already knew Kate's parents and adoptive parents were dead. Her aunt on her father's side had come forward, offering to care for her. How the social-care system deemed the aunt fit to care for Kate is a matter of debate, given the aunt's drug addiction.

As I rue my decision to marry Kate, I tap the brown file on the table in front of me. I often use the private detective services of Pete Townsend in my business transactions. It helps me remain a step ahead. Pete's report confirms the untimely death of both her birth and adoptive parents, and how Kate and her sister, Chrissie, were taken into their aunt's care. There is little information recorded in the file about Chrissie, other than that she went missing while she was living with her aunt. Social services and the police files provide no indication what happened to her. Her name, like so many, remains on the list of missing persons.

My desire to own Kate did not stop me from employing Pete's services. I hate surprises. Kate is no different than any business transaction. If you make just one exception, you open yourself up to failure. The money at my disposal is a tribute to the unemotional way I choose to live. Emotional attachments are foolish and costly, and I am above such things.

Death follows Kate. It is an oversight, on my part, that I did not recognise this. It is unusual for a child to lose two sets of parents. I chastise myself for not considering this at the time.

The ice is melting and the water content in the glass increases, diluting the gin further.

It is not Kate's cancer that bothers me, so much as the fact that it is taking her from me and therefore stripping away my control over her. I should have chosen to remain single, eliminating this kind of situation.

Changing the past isn't an option, so the question remains, what am I going to do about Kate?

Raising the glass to my lips, I empty its contents. It is time for me to take action. At present,

I am unsure what that action will be. Still, I cannot sit here all day.

As I reach for the file, I notice Kate walking down the street. Her long black hair swishes down her back, cascading from a high ponytail. My right eyebrow raises. The clothes are high-street trash, not the expensive designer names I like Kate to wear. I watch her turn, hooking her arm through that of the man walking at her side.

Kate looks happier than I have ever seen her. My anger spikes as I watch them. The bitch is having an affair! A snigger falls from my lips. Despite the cancer, I add her death to my to-do list. No, not only *her* death. Also the man she is having the affair with. And I will ensure that Kate understands she is responsible.

Removing my mobile from the inside pocket of my jacket, I place the file back on the table. I wait for them to come closer so I can get a clear photograph. I don't recognise the man, but I know a detective who will provide all the information I need to give my hitman, Jeff Green.

The phone rings. I send it an irritated glance. I'm about to ignore the call when I see Kate's name on the screen. My eyes cut back to the woman lazily walking down Lendal, and who is now kissing the man.

Accepting the call, Kate's voice filters through.

"Liam?" The woman in front of me continues kissing the man, confirming she isn't Kate.

I had to be sure. See the evidence before I make my next move.

"Not now." Kate is sputtering as I terminate the call. I take a picture as my brain processes what this means.

The woman passes, and I sit down. A waitress scurries over to the table next to mine, and I stop her mid stride, ordering another gin and tonic.

Opening the file, I look at Pete's report. While a sister is mentioned, there are no photographs, nor is there an age or date of birth. At the time, this missing information didn't bother me. Now, it sends anger slithering through my veins. The answer to the problem of Kate's coming death should have been contained in this file, not left to a chance encounter. The oversight is going to cost Pete, but for now, I smile. The sister isn't just Kate's younger or elder sibling. No, she is her twin. Her *identical* twin.

I flip through the photos I have taken, cropping and enlarging the woman's face on the screen. There is no telling them apart. For the first time since getting Kate's cancer diagnosis, my body relaxes.

The waitress sets my gin and tonic on the table and I dial Pete's number.

"I've sent you a number of photos. You need to start explaining why you failed to tell me that Kate has an identical twin sister."

Pete owes me, and I am collecting my debt – plus interest.

No one feeds me incorrect information without paying the price, and Pete is about to discover that price. With Charles leaving to go live in some godforsaken remote place in Scotland, there is no one to stop me.

The phone echoes with the urgent fumbling of a man not prepared to accept his fate. My lips grow thinner.

"Well, I haven't got all day. Frankly, I've waited long enough. How many years is it since you compiled the information on Kate for me?" I don't wait for Pete to answer. "I'll tell you,

Pete. Six years. *Six years*, and in that time, you never bothered to check that the information I paid for was complete. You know I'm not a tolerant man, Pete. Tolerance is for fools, and I will not be treated like a fool."

"You didn't specify how far back to go, so I only did a preliminary scan of the time before Kate was taken in by her aunt. I *did* inform you about the sister. The aunt sold her to a couple who couldn't have children. You weren't interested in the sister at the time."

I put down my glass with a thud. The occupants of a table near me look over but are soon engrossed in their conversation once again.

"Don't you *ever* try and weasel your way into thinking that this is my fault. It's not going to go away that easily. The issue here isn't whether I was interested in the sister at the time or not, it's that you should have done your job properly. You didn't, you were sloppy, and now you owe me."

"Mr. Thornton..." Pete stutters, and I can sense him gathering his excuses.

"I wouldn't go down that road if I were you, Pete. People like you are ten a penny. You have no living relatives, no wife or children. It's fair to say no one will miss you."

"Are you threatening me?" Pete sounds stunned.

The poor man really is stupid, despite being an excellent private detective. If he thinks his sloppy work won't have any consequences attached to it, he's a silly, silly, silly man.

"No, Pete, I'm not threatening you. I am *telling* you that you have twenty-four hours to finish getting all the information on Kate and her sister. And, to clarify – when I say *all* the information, I mean down to blood type and pimples, or you can kiss your existence goodbye. I hope I have made myself understood."

"Yes." Pete bites out the word like someone is holding a gun to his head and threatening to pull the trigger.

The image makes me smile.

"Good. I shall see you tomorrow at ten a.m. sharp, at my office."

"But that's only sixteen hours away." At least Pete can do the maths.

"Then you'd better get going, before I move our meeting forward." I hang up, leaving Pete spluttering into his phone.

Picking up my drink, I start working out my options.

First things first. I have to get the real Kate out of the way and into her final resting place. I will have to curb my impatience and ride out the forty-eight hours left.

The sun no longer feels unwelcome. Like my brightening mood, I find its radiance has a warming effect.