

Chapter 1 The Funeral

James turned off the main road into the tree-lined Avenue, and then it happened. His heart raced and sweat oozed from every pore. His eyes watered and he cried out as his chest tightened.

The next moment his car shuddered to a halt on the grass verge. His stomach churned and his throat burned. He threw open the driver's door. His fingers trembled as he mopped his brow. Slumped back in his seat a grey haze isolated him from the rest of humanity.

His consultant taught him to 'focus', to take deep breaths. He didn't take his pills, after breakfast, they fogged his brain.

He couldn't be late. James glanced at his watch, fifteen minutes ago he left the main road, but it seemed like a lifetime. He swayed to and fro as he tried to focus in the rear-view mirror. His crisp white shirt now creased, clung to the small of his back and the black tie jutted from the side of his shirt collar. His damp hair had developed a will of its own.

The faint scent of lilac mingled with the sweet, evocative smell of new mown grass, stirred memories of his last visit. His father's death, so soon after his mother, left him heartbroken. Divorce, Death and Depression had taken their toll.

Today he'd come to pay his last respects to a client and yes, a friend. He liked Patrick Brownloe from their first meeting, twenty 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. He tidied himself and checked his mobile phone then switched it to silent. He took several deep breaths as he eased his aching limbs out of his car. The fresh spring air might help.

With luck, he shouldn't meet anyone he knew.

He joined the tide of mourners winding their way to 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!"

His shoulders lowered as he turned. A faint smile brushed his lips, "Hello Mark, Hi Miranda."

James had never seen Mark in a suit. The pin-striped material was perfect for Mark as 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 eyes moist with sadness.

"They do try to make these sombre places look so comforting and serene."

James answered Miranda's words with a slight nod. In the ensuing silence James glanced down and saw a couple of errant hairs on the lapel of his dark blue suit. His hand flew instinctively to his head as he recalled the earlier state of his hair. A reassuring pat settled his mind, and he brushed the stray hairs from his lapel as he dropped his hand to his side.

Mark cleared his throat, "Have you met Patrick's family, James?"

"No, I haven't. He often mentioned his niece and her family. They appeared a close-knit group."

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

For a moment bright sunlight engulfed the crowd. Dressed in an array of jackets, coats and cardigans it reminded him of a field of wild flowers as they swayed to and fro in nervous anticipation.

A white-haired woman, with a slight stoop, gasped. She must have glimpsed 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 filed 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, glanced at the sad procession. 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 whom he met.

Outside, in the warm sunshine, heads raised; eyes dried and the hum of relieved voices resurfaced. Miranda turned towards James, "Stay with us; we'll introduce you to Patrick's niece and her family. "Flanked by his two companions James could not make the discreet exit he had planned.

"Hello Mark, good to see you Miranda. Thank you for coming; Patrick enjoyed your company so much."

Mark nodded and smiled in response to Charles Grosvenor's greeting. "Patrick was one of the most genuine people we have ever met."

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 mentioned you but more as a friend than an adviser," Charles grabbed James hand in a firm grip. "I must introduce you to Patrick's Niece Wendy, and our adorable daughters, Rebecca and Julia."

James shook hands with the two daughters but his wife was talking to another 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 he blinked several times. "I take it you've met before?"

"Yes! yes!" Wendy's cheeks glowed as she glanced at her husband.

"I'll catch you later, James," and smiled as she turned back to the group of mourners 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 and Wendy knew each other."

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

"Didn't you keep in touch?"

"At first we did."

James straightened his tie. His skin tingled and a goose pimple sensation spread along his arms. He had been a callow youth, from a staid background when they met. From that first day, she took good

care of him.

Charles moved back from the throng. He stood erect and motionless then raised his voice. "Shall we make our way to the Homestead in Findon?"

He turned away and took out his pocket-handkerchief to mop his brow. "Come on Miranda, Mark, James, you must join us; we'll see you there."

Wendy's warm greeting lingered in his subconscious. His plan to slip quietly away, forgotten.

They walked into the car park and James thought he saw a glint in Mark's eyes. "Do you know the way, James?"

"No, I don't."

"Don't bother setting your 'sat nav'. You can follow us."

James eased his Jag into the queue of cars behind the Cardwell's Volvo. His thoughts wandered back to the day he and Wendy met. His heart missed a beat and a tear ran down his cheek.

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.

Soon after they reached the dual carriageway the Cardwell's car slowed and signalled a left turn. Too late to run.

His first glimpse of the venue, brought a broad grin 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 at these mythical beasts and smiled. Was Patrick receiving a silent acknowledgement from these splendid beasts?

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

He joined Miranda and Mark as they headed for the main entrance. The faint aroma of warm food filled the air

Mark's nostrils flared, "Excellent".

Miranda turned to James and winked. "You can remove the chef from the restaurant, but you can't remove the restaurant from the chef."

Inside the Homestead 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 glanced at the open patio doors. A group assembled in the smoking-area in the garden.

He craved a cigarette. His smoking always 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.

James eyes tracked Wendy as she circulated among the guests. There was no sparkle in her eyes and she smiled through half-closed lips. Wendy smoothed the hair on the back of her neck as she sat down at a table with a group of elderly guests. She shuffled on her chair and her gaze flicked around the room. Her voice sounded high-pitched when she thanked everyone for attending. 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 back, and their eyes met. He'd never forgotten Wendy's beautiful big eyes. When he tried to speak a lump in his throat grew. His dry mouth made it difficult to clear his throat. When he managed to speak his tone was almost falsetto.

"I never realised the Wendy, Patrick often mentioned, was you."

"It never occurred to me either, and you'd not changed your surname.

A faint watery smile flashed along her lips

“James have you been ill?” You looked dreadful at the crematorium.”

"No, I'm fine."

Wendy frowned and fixed him with those big bright eyes

"Do you still live in 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, "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! However, I do 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?"

“Sorry but I've retired."

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

James drove home, his head so full of the day's events, ached in sympathy with his heart. At university, they were intellectual equals but her life skills far exceeded his.

Wendy with two daughters at university, a husband high up in the Civil Service, according to Miranda

His marriage to Amelia a disaster, a 25-year disaster. Her fixation with the climb toward the top of the teaching profession, dominated her every action. She had no time for motherhood.

What had happened to Wendy, the rebel, the anti-establishment figure and embryonic supporter of 'woman's lib'.

As his house came into view his thoughts focused on his own predicament and a deep pain-filled groan echoed in his ears.

After a day of high emotions, Wendy retired early. She tossed and turned, counted sheep then counted backward from 100. The funeral, her reunion with James, her heart missed a beat. Lips pursed, she fidgeted in her bed. She threw back the duvet as perspiration peppered her brow. "Oh Shit" she mumbled out loud as she contemplated tomorrow's early start. The girls must catch their train. Wendy couldn't allow herself to over-sleep, Charles needed to get to his office in Whitehall by eight o'clock, to brief for an important meeting at ten o'clock.

Early starts rattled Wendy, this was one of the reasons she left teaching. "Thank God for flexi-time."

The alarm clock roused her from her shallow sleep. She saw Charles as he bid farewell to Rebecca and Julia. An hour later she drove them to the station, in good time for the Southampton train.

Wendy still had a day's holiday left. 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, so the 'Telegraph' front page announced.

A smile crossed her lips as she offered a prayer, to thank Uncle Patrick for the fair weather he had chosen for his funeral. Wendy glanced through the headlines. 'Ex-Prime Minister Baroness Thatcher Dies'. Charles had mumbled something after the funeral but seeing it in 'black and white' brought a tear to her eye.

The newspaper tossed to one side, she took a deep breath, grabbed her phone. Her eyes still moist she began to dial.

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

Silence punctuated the conversation as the seconds ticked by.

"Ah....Hello....Ah, Wendy" .

"Let's book a table at Miranda's Bistro and toast Uncle Patrick in style!"

“Well ah.”

At once, she noted his reluctant tone.

“Excellent! See you at one o'clock.”

Another silence gave Wendy enough time to end the call. Her hands shook and her mouth went dry.

She stood transfixed with her finger on the button. “Yes yes yes” tore from her lips as she punched the air with delight at her mischievous action.

When James recovered the phone, which had slipped from his shaking fingers, he realised Wendy had hung up. He wiped his hands on his handkerchief, then mopped the sweat from his brow.

His eyes fixed on his phone as he licked his parched lips. His brain wanted to phone back with an inane excuse but his heart ruled his head.

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 rain lashed the windscreen like shards of broken glass. James had not checked the weather forecast and not thought to bring a coat. The only item he had, 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. His search for a parking slot had, no doubt, taken him further away from his rendezvous.

James had to park the car and make a frantic dash for the Bistro. As he left the car the onshore wind brought the characteristic scent of ozone, salt and seaweed far inland.

As he scurried from doorway to doorway, he jumped over puddles and skipped around streams of rainwater along his route. His sodden clothes clung to his skin and his body quivered. The lights of the Bistro flickered through the murk and he crashed through the door. He knew he must have looked a sight as he entered the bistro at full gallop.

Rain dripped from his face on to his sodden jacket and tie. He panted like an old greyhound as he stood by the entrance. He felt that every eye in the restaurant must be 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 phoned a few minutes ago. Her taxi has not arrived. She'll be fifteen minutes late."

"Thanks Miranda," James sighed then made a dash for the cloakroom.

Minutes later he sauntered back into the restaurant. A wry smile flickered across his lips as he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror behind the bar..

He handed the towel to Miranda, "Thanks, that's a lot better."

She led him to the table in the rear corner of the bistro.

"Wendy specially requested this table, James"

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

Had James imagined it or was there 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 he, not Wendy, who precipitated the end to their relationship with his stubborn and intractable stance.

When Wendy swept into the bistro, she paused like a model as she furled her umbrella and smoothed her hair. He rose to his feet as she approached and his damp shirt chafed his neck.

She greeted James with a fond embrace. In James' eyes, nothing could detract from her radiance as she took her seat.

“Sorry I've kept you waiting.”

She smiled at James.

“My, you did get wet, didn't you?”

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

"Oh James, I'm so sorry.”

Their eyes locked then she giggled as she had always done, in the face of misfortune. His heart ached as he remembered the fun and laughter she brought to his life. They lived together in a flat in South London as she started her teacher-training course, and he embarked on 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 sensed the heat rise in his cheeks, which made him fear he resembled a human traffic light sequence. Oh how he wished he'd never agreed to meet.

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

Turmoil scrambled his brain as it battled with the ache from his heart. 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 straightened his shoulders then cleared his throat, "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, "So, tell me, why have you retired?"

James frowned, "Oh, no real reason."

Wendy stared at him for a moment.

"At the Homestead, you told me, you lived alone."

"Yes I do. My parents died a few years ago. " He paused and placed his clasped hand on the table. " So how can I help with Patrick's affairs?"

She smiled and her eyes twinkled with a warmth he had forgotten over the years. Let's eat first, then we can talk.

Had he imagined it or had her nose twitched as it had done all those years ago?

They ate in silence. Wendy finished her meal, patted her lips with her napkin 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 spoken to me, since I arrived."

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

He couldn't allow his inner emotions to show and ruin everything.

“James, I realise I forced your hand.”

“Sorry.”

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

“Yes, I'd love that.”

“You're so defensive!” Her eyes opened wide as if the upper and lower lids had engaged in a bitter feud.

His gaze dropped, “Life has been difficult, of late. My wife, Amelia, had an affair with a colleague, and I didn't find out for almost two years.”

“Oh James!”

James raised his hand and swallowed hard.

“I suffered a complete meltdown. I couldn't concentrate on my work, and I found myself bundled into early retirement.”

“How devastating.”

“Please, I don't want sympathy. I want to explain that it is me, not you that is the problem.”

“Oh James!”

He looked deep into her eyes, “Let me finish, please!”

Wendy dabbed her eyes with a tissue and nodded.

“ I know I'm a pain sometimes, but I do so want your friendship.”

“James, 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. He took her outstretched fingers in his and the faint scent of Chanel sparked a tingle down his spine. That was the perfume He bought her the last Christmas they lived together.

“We all have regrets, James! Teaching in Germany was great, at first. The social life was hectic. 'Schoolies' always got invited to the Mess parties.”

He frowned and loosened his grip on her fingers. Wendy tightened her grip, “Please hear me out.”

“What the hell is a 'Schoolie'?”

She half smiled and then looked contrite, “It was the nickname for female teachers working for BFES.”

James sighed under his breath.

“Sorry! British Forces Education Services. One night at a leaving party for a colleague in Rhinedahlen I met Charles.”

“Oh, love at first sight?”

She shook her head, “James there's no point trying to help, when you're in this mood.”

Wendy downed the remaining content of her wine glass and snatched her handbag off the adjacent chair, “Don't worry, I'll settle up on my way out.”

James held his breath. The atmosphere was heavy with silence. Every eye in the restaurant would be fixed on him so he decided to sit it out. Gradually the hum of contented diners returned. He glanced behind him like a private detective in a third rate movie.

A second look behind him confirmed that Wendy had left. With a shy but polite nod of the head he acknowledged Miranda as he made a hasty dash for the door. He leapt through the door colliding with Wendy as she climbed into her taxi.

“For God sake James, haven't you done enough damage for one day?”

“Sorry, I'm.....”

“James stop now. I wish I'd never.....Ah!” With a purposeful slam of the door her taxi set off like a speed boat as it ploughed through the deep puddles and disappeared in its own spray.

Chapter 3 A New Dawn

Wendy's words circled his brain and pricked his consciousness, as if they wore running spikes. He tossed his car keys on the hall table and made for the study. “No messages, thank god!” He puffed up his cheeks as he slumped into his chair.

He rested his elbows on the desk and held his head in his hands. Self-pity and useless recriminations ruined 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 life unbearable.

James cradled a cigarette between his fingers. He paused then lit it and inhaled. His fingers tingled, his brain fog eased. He rocked to and fro in his chair. “One day, he would quit!”

The jangle of the front door bell invaded his thoughts, James froze. With luck they might go away. What if it was Wendy? In silence he crept behind the front door and peered through the spy hole. His expression softened as he unlocked the door.

“Elizabeth, it's ages, since I saw you.”

"Hello James. Whilst you were out, a courier asked if I'd take in this package."

She stepped inside out of the rain and wiped her feet on the door mat, then handed him the bulky envelope.

"The courier didn't want to damage it, forcing it through the letter box."

"How kind, thank you,"

"It was sad about poor Maggie, wasn't it James?"

"Yes, I heard it on the news."

He took the envelope from her and placed it on the hall table.

"I was about to put the kettle on, care to join me?"

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

James motioned to her to follow him into the kitchen

Faint rays of sunshine pierced the heavy overcast, which had followed the rain. James carried their mugs into the lounge and placed them on the small table which separated the armchairs.

"It's stuffy in here. I'll open the patio doors a fraction."

Elizabeth nodded in agreement as she settled into the armchair furthest from the kitchen.

James walked back to his seat with a laboured gait.

“I hope you will not take this the wrong way, but you look exhausted.”

“Sorry! Is it that obvious? It's the new medication the consultant prescribed”

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed as she gazed in his direction. He panicked at her directness.

"You'll never guess who I bumped into today?"

Her face went blank and her eyebrows almost met, “I don't know your friends, any more, James.”

"You must remember, Wendy?"

Elizabeth's blank expression softened and she grinned, "I remember a high-spirited girl you met at university."

"Right first time!"

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

"We met by chance."

"How marvellous for you," Elizabeth smiled, and clasped hands across her chest.

James' swallowed hard.

Elizabeth's feet fidgeted.

"Does Wendy live around here?"

After a few seconds he regained his composure.

"I'm so sorry. Yes, she lives with her two daughters and her husband in Worthing."

In the uneasy silence that followed, Elizabeth sipped her coffee and fumbled with her watch.

"How is early retirement suiting you?"

James told everyone he took early retirement. He never mentioned his Breakdown. His consultant was happy with his progress.

"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."

Elizabeth stared into space and her eyes watered. "I know what you mean. When my mother died, I found life impossible. After years of waiting on my parents hand and foot I relished the freedom to choose my routine. However, I drifted along without any real purpose."

She took a deep breath and paused before exhaling. "I'm sorry James; I tend to go on."

James looked on in complete silence, then smiled at her forthright attitude.

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

"James may I ask you a question, first?"

James looked at her wide-eyed as he stroked his chin.

"Ask away."

"Do you still smoke?"

"Yes I do, why?"

"I'd love a cigarette."

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

James returned with a bottle, two wine glasses and two ashtrays. At least the ache in his head had faded. His heart would take longer, "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 fixed her gaze on him as a parent looks at a naughty child. He poured the wine and returned to his chair with glass in hand.

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

She paused as she lit her cigarette, "Books became a form of escape. 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'."

"Please carry on Elizabeth while I close the patio window." He listened intently as she continued, "Our forefathers' writings show us that they weren't just savage warriors. Their manuscripts teach us that they cherished the same values; we have today."

The more he listened the more he admired 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.

Once he was alone he realised he had not eaten since his lunch date. He quickly made himself a

sandwich and settled in the lounge in front of the TV

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. 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 building.

That night sleep eluded James as he relived his school trip to Rome. 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.

But 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 had become history. Brighton teemed with nightlife. The Eurovision Song Contest in 1974, won by ABBA, reignited the Town's allure. Wendy had been eager to wallow in its ambience.

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. 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 fitful slumber. His watch showed it was not yet eight o'clock. Who could want him this early?

"Guess what I found last night?" Wendy's triumphal tone irritated him. He raised himself on one elbow and tossed aside the quilt.

"It's too early for guessing games, Wendy"

"Well," 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?"

"Do tell me." His flat tone conveyed as much enthusiasm as he could muster after his rude awakening.

The excitement in her voice reached a crescendo, "Remember the Summer of '85 when we went on our Camper Van adventure?"

James decided not to enter the conversation at this stage as Wendy continued 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 told me, it cost more to win than to buy. "

James realised it was time to add a suitable anecdote, but could only muster an inane. "That's so long ago!"

Wendy paused to catch her breath but appeared oblivious to his retort.

"You won't believe the outfits we wore! Must dash, I'm at a meeting in Arundel today. See you around five o'clock, then she hung up.

The last twenty-four hours had been surreal. He'd spent long days alone while off work on sick leave. After he retired he had vegetated. 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 an archetype spinster, last night emerged from her shell before his eyes.

As he reached the bottom of the stairs he saw the padded envelope. He glanced down at the table

paused, “I need a coffee first!”