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Opening Extract from...

In Her Wake

Written by Amanda Jennings

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PROLOGUE

I dreamt vividly the night she died. I've had this dream before. In it I am running. Always running. My heart thumps in my ears. My breath comes in short, painful gasps. It is dark and cold and the trees reach out to grab at me, as if they are alive, as if they are trying to capture me with their long, twiggy fingers. Their roots are thick and hidden and I trip repeatedly. I think my feet must hurt. I look down to see that I am wearing only one slipper.

When did I lose the other?

Fear has taken hold of me now. A rising panic fills me and I begin to struggle for breath. My chest is tight, like a giant's hand is squeezing and squeezing, making each gasp impossible. It is getting darker. I must keep running. And then, just when I think it's all over, there it is, a glorious sunrise appears ahead and forces back the darkness. She is sitting, as she always does, in the pool of light on the forest floor. A little girl in a white nightie, soft, golden curls framing her pale face. I run to her and she lifts her head. When she sees me, she smiles. I wave and she waves back and then I laugh because she is wearing my other slipper. We both have one bare foot and one slipper. How funny! *As soon as I laugh, the light begins to fade and so does she. I scream so loudly my lungs feel as if they might split open. I have to reach her before she melts away. But it's always too late. As I stretch my fingers out to touch her, she vanishes. My hand grasps at nothing, like catching smoke.*

Then everything turns black and the ground beneath me disappears. I am falling through a void, into a pit with windowless walls that stretch up for miles, walls that are slippery with darkness and impossible to climb. I am lost forever.

This is what I dreamt the night she died.

ONE

'You should stay in the car and let me speak to him first.'

I don't reply; it isn't a question, so requires no response.

I stare out of the half-lowered window at the countryside we're passing through, the sun flickering through the trees, throwing long, dappled shadows across the single-track lane and the unruly hedgerows. I draw in deep breaths of the air I grew up with, air still scented with rain-dampened grass, a hint of the farmyard a few miles beyond, the pungent cow parsley that swamps the verges. A feeling of foreboding gathers inside me as we round the familiar bends in the road and I wait for the *tick tick tick* of the indicator that will mean we've arrived.

The car slows and turns, then draws to a halt. I wait for The Old Vicarage to appear though the parting gates. But seeing the house is too much and I quickly drop my head to focus instead on my wringing hands. David reaches over and pats my knee, a brief and perfunctory gesture designed to remind me to hold myself together. I lean against his shoulder, wondering for a moment if he might take it upon himself to turn the car around and take me away from it all.

'I always forget how beautiful it is,' he says, as he drives slowly through the gates. 'Your mother might have been nuts, but she was bloody good in the garden.'

I want to tell him not to be mean about her, not today, not with tomorrow still to get through. But I don't. Instead I say, 'Yes, she loved the garden.'

He's right, of course. It's a beautiful house. A perfectly proportioned grey stone rectory, thickly clad with ivy the colour of wine bottles, set

in the middle of a magnificent garden enclosed by a high brick wall. Wild roses clamber around the front door. A Virginia creeper, now green and vibrant, but which glows a fiery red as autumn takes hold, pushes its tendrils into the eaves and guttering. There's a shabby charm about the peeling paint on the window frames and the weeds that grow between moss-patched pavers on the terrace. Inside are floorboards that have creaked forever and windows that rattle in the mildest of winds. It is a place of heady memories, memories of intense love, of bolted doors and claustrophobic loneliness, and as I reluctantly lift my head to look at it, I'm hit with wave after wave of rolling emotion. The house without her, I can't begin to imagine it.

Gravel crunches beneath the tyres as we pull up on the driveway. The trees around us seem to bow a disconsolate greeting. I see us then, me with my mother, wandering between them, my hand gripped in hers, as she taught me their names. I glance down towards the pond, at the weeping willow, its delicate branches trailing sadly in the murky water as if in mourning. The trees will miss her too.

'You'll be fine,' David says, tucking the hair that has fallen over my face behind my ear and brushing something off my shoulder. 'I'm here for you.'

I nod but don't say anything. My attention is taken by the front door, which has begun to open. My stomach churns as my father walks onto the doorstep. He stands, slightly stooped, arms limp at his sides. As we stare at each other through the windscreen, it strikes me how old he's become. When did this happen, this dramatic ageing? Was it a slow creep over decades, each day a fraction frailer, a fraction more withered? Or has it happened suddenly, in the last ten days, in the time passed since he greeted me in the hospital waiting room with nothing more than a solemn shake of his head.

I notice his maroon cardigan is pulled together on the wrong buttons. It sits skewed on his shoulders and my heart lurches. If I'd needed proof she was gone his badly fastened cardigan was it. Had she been alive, heart beating, it would have been rebuttoned with an impatient tut and a sigh as she neatened him for our arrival.

David climbs out of the car and I watch him approach the front door. He clasps my father's reedy hand between both of his and shakes it. He speaks a few words. My father gives a small, tight smile, nods, says a few words in reply. They both glance back towards me and I look away.

I'm not ready, I silently cry. I'm not ready to bury my mother.

When I look back at them, David beckons me to come, as if coaxing a timid animal from a cage. I take a breath and open the car door.

'Hello, Bella.'

My father sounds beaten. He lifts his arms towards me but then drops them. Maybe he sees my hesitation. Up close he is painfully frail. It shocks me. His eyes are faded, a pale liquid blue, the deep-purple puffiness beneath them like a pair of matching bruises. His face is gaunt and wan. My mother's death has clearly ravaged him. Neither of us speaks and I am aware of David staring at us, aware of him judging our relationship as he always does, our lack of affection, the emotional chasm between us. I force myself a step closer to my father. I should embrace him, that's the right thing to do, so in spite of my reluctance, I reach out and open my arms. For a moment or two he doesn't do anything and a self-conscious awkwardness creeps over me; but then, in one swift movement, he steps forward and grabs at me, pulls me into his body, holds me so tightly I grow rigid with alarm. He hangs on and as he does my anxiety seems to ease and I hold him back, clutch at the soft cashmere of his imperfectly buttoned cardigan, breathe him in, his musty bookish study mixed with Imperial Leather soap, the soap he's used forever. My mother and I use a different brand. Pears Glycerine. I take a kick to my stomach as I remember she's gone and that now it's just me who carries the scent of that soap.

As my father and I hold on to each other, everything else fades to nothing – the desolate willow tree, the house that looms over us, even David's silent judgement – all of it pales as the smell and touch of my father envelop me.

'I'm sorry,' he whispers, his breath warm on my neck. Then his body

stiffens and that rare moment of closeness is over. He steps backwards and gives a curt nod. 'Please, both of you, do come in.'

I hesitate for a moment or two, bracing myself for the eerie quiet that pervades the space held by the grey stone walls.

Inside, the house is cool and smells of stale air and furniture polish. I feel her all around me, in the worn flagstone floor, in the reproduction oil paintings that hang on the walls, in the absence of flowers on the console table. There was never a day when there weren't flowers in the house; she'd have hated that he's forgotten to cut some, and her stern disapproval eddies around us.

David and I walk through to the kitchen as my father locks the front door, first the Chubb, then the chain, then the top and bottom bolts, which clunk loud and familiar as he slides them home. I can hear the house whispering, blaming me for her death.

I couldn't have stopped it, I want to shout. Even if I'd stayed, she'd still be dead.

It's not my fault.

The kitchen curtains are open. My stomach clenches. I should like that, I know, but I don't. It feels wrong, as if my father is somehow being disloyal. I resist the urge to close them and sit at the table. I pass the flat of my hand over the grainy wood, pausing to scratch at an ancient mark from a felt-tip pen. This is where I did my schoolwork, every day, in this very spot, moving only for maths and science, the lessons I had with Henry in his fusty, book-filled study. My mother would sit next to me, her face serious, pencil in hand, using it to point at passages in various text books, her voice calm and firm. I loved learning. I never told her I preferred Henry's science lessons, of course. She'd have been terribly hurt. She was a good teacher, I think, and nothing gave me a greater thrill than making her so pleased with my work that she'd stick a shiny gold star to the bottom of the page.

I look over at my father as he comes into the room. There is still a part of me that half expects him to break into a wide smile and say, *Guess what? It's only a little joke of mine. Your mother isn't dead at all, just a bit poorly. Don't worry yourself. She'll be down in a jiffy.* But he

doesn't. Instead he takes the kettle over to the tap and I watch as he fills it. I want to tell him he's filling it too full, that it will take an age to boil, but the effort needed to muster the words is too great.

'All set for tomorrow, Henry?' asks David. 'Any last-minute things you need me to help with?'

My father's eyes stay fixed on the kettle. 'Oh, that's kind, David. But I think I'm more or less there. You've been so helpful already. She wouldn't have wanted a large affair. I've kept it simple.'

'Well, I'm here if you need anything. In a way it's good you've managed to sort it all so quickly. I think it's helpful to get these things over with and not let them drag on.'

Get these things over with? Did he mean to say that? I glance nervously at my father, but he doesn't seem to have noticed my husband's tactless choice of words; he merely nods and sets about making the tea.

Watching my father try to perform this simple task is painful. He appears hopeless as he stands in front of the pine dresser. He scans the shelves, then reaches hesitantly for a cup, which he walks to the table and deposits. Then he heads back for another. And again for a third. With three cups on the table in front of him he appears to run out of steam. I watch his confusion grow, hear him mumble that something is missing, that it looks different when she does it. A moment later a flicker of recognition crosses his face and he wanders back to the dresser, returning with a small stack of saucers, which one by one are paired with a cup. There's an extra saucer left in his hand, which apparently throws him. The kettle starts to boil noisily, spluttering steam and water all over the worktop. He turns to look at it in mild shock, then returns his gaze to his hand, perhaps hoping the redundant saucer might offer salvation of some kind.

He needs help, but I don't move. I sit there like a cold, mute statue and I loathe myself for it. It's David who places a hand on Henry's back and guides him to a chair. My father collapses into it as if he's run a marathon, shattered by trying to make three cups of tea. I turn my head away from him; I don't want to think about how difficult his life is going to be.

A few hours later, as David sits in the armchair in the living room and works his way through *The Times* crossword, I force myself to talk to my father. I find him sitting at the leather-topped desk in his study, the room where he's spent most of his time since retiring from general practice, reading medical journals and biographies from the Great War, and preparing my lessons. I try not to look at the portrait of my mother that hangs on the wall behind him. It bears little resemblance to her – far too regal, far too thin – and the look on her face, in her eyes, has always scared me.

'How are you doing?' he asks, as I close the door behind me.

'I miss her,' I say, as I sit down in the sagging armchair in the corner of the room. 'It feels peculiar without her, doesn't it? Like the house has no rudder. Does that sound strange?'

'No, not strange at all.' He leans back and rubs his face, sighing heavily. 'I should ask you, really,' he says. 'If you want to see her.'

'Sorry?'

'Her body. Do you want to – do you need to – see her one last time before the funeral? The undertaker said you could visit in the morning.'

A shot of horror passes through me as I imagine her lying dead and grey in a mortuary drawer next to other dead, grey people.

'No,' I say, barely concealing my shock. 'I don't need to see her.' I pause. 'Thank you, though.'

He nods and a film of tears glazes his eyes. My body tenses; the thought of him crying is almost as dreadful as the thought of seeing my mother's dead body. We fall into an uncomfortable, stilted silence and, in search of distraction, I let my gaze fall on the bookshelf beside me. On the second shelf are a handful of photograph albums, their spines carefully labelled with gold adhesive letters. I trace my fingers over them and select one that reads *Elaine and Henry, Summer 1977*.

I open the album and there she is. The photograph takes my breath. I touch my fingers to her face, then her hair, thick and blonde, the colour of honey. In the picture she wears it piled on top of her head, a few loose curls hanging down to brush against her shoulders. Her hair is so very different to my straggly tangle of mousy strands. I went

blonde once. It was when I was twelve, after Henry had insisted I take swimming lessons, telling my mother as firmly as he could that me learning to swim was imperative and that she would have to overcome her fear of large groups. The next day, grumbling and griping, she bundled me into the car and drove to the hairdresser.

'Why aren't you cutting it, Mama?' I asked.

'If you're going to take blasted swimming lessons you'll be meeting other children. You need a good cut and some colour. Children can be so very mean. I've told you that. We want you looking your best.'

And then in we marched.

'We need highlights put in,' she said, too abruptly, to the stylist. 'Chestnut and copper. And you're to be as quick as possible.'

'It takes as long as it takes, I'm afraid,' said the hairdresser.

'Just get it done.'

My mother, who rarely went out of the house, sat nervously tapping her foot with her eyes bolted on the door, unaware of the hairdresser conspiratorially suggesting to me that blonde would be a better choice. She made blonde sound so exotic, so thrilling.

'They have more fun, you know. Apart from that mother of yours. No offence, lovey, but she could do with taking that stick out her arse and getting a bit of fun in her life, couldn't she? Not blonde *enough*, maybe.' The woman laughed and gave me a wink. 'So? Blonde?'

I shrugged slightly and nodded. 'Whatever you think,' I managed to say, through my crippling shyness.

I can still remember the pleasure of looking at my new self in the mirror. Reflected back at me wasn't a timid, quiet girl with mouse-coloured hair, but another girl, a girl with beautiful blonde hair that lifted her features and drew attention to her eyes. I turned to my mother. I expected to see her smile. But she was crying. At first I thought they might be tears of joy, but they weren't. She cried all the way home, guttural sobs that shook her body and made me worry the car would spin off the road and kill us. My mother never told me what had made her so sad, so even though I couldn't be sure it was the highlights – they were her idea, after all – I didn't ever get them again.

I recall for a moment how her hair used to feel as I twirled my fingers into it while she read to me, wishing aloud that mine was as soft.

'Well, I wish I had eyes as beautiful as yours,' she would whisper, before kissing the tip of my nose. 'Pale green, the colour of sea-glass. Just like my grandmother's. So unfair you got them and I didn't.'

Something my mother and I do share, however, is our skin, milk-white and translucent, so translucent you can see the network of blue and purple veins that pump our blood.

Though not hers anymore, I think and my stomach seizes with a fresh bout of missing.

I flick through the rest of the album and there, on the last page, is a photograph I can't remember seeing before. She's on holiday, sitting on a towel on a beach. The yellows and reds of the heat and sand are exaggerated by the seventies' camera film. She wears a white bikini, its thick belt with a black plastic hoop buckle rests on her hip. Her hair is held loosely off her face and is flecked with grains of sand. She leans back on her hands, smiling brightly, her freckled nose ever so slightly wrinkled. I carefully lift the photograph from beneath the protective film and take it over to my father.

'When was this picture taken?' I ask, laying the photo on the desk in front of him. He picks it up and squints and the faintest flash of a smile dances across his face.

'Long before you were born. In Greece.'

'She looks happy.' I trace my fingertips across her face. 'I thought she didn't like to go abroad?'

He hands the photo back to me without a word.

'I'm sorry you have to be without her,' I say, in absence of anything more suitable.

'I'll manage.'

'You'll need help with the garden. Maybe a gardener could come in once or twice a week? It would break her heart to think of it becoming neglected.'

'The garden will be fine,' he says. 'I can look after it perfectly well.'

I shake my head. 'It's not only raking the leaves and mowing the

lawn, you know. I mean, you've never pruned a rose and there are hundreds of those.' I wait for him to say something but he doesn't. 'She'd hate the roses to suffer,' I say softly.

I turn my head to look out of the window. An evening haze has settled in. Night is approaching and soon it will be tomorrow.

Tomorrow we bury her.

'Bella?'

I draw the curtains closed and look back at my father. 'Yes?'

'There's something I need to say ... to tell you. It's ... important...' His voice is quiet and there's a gravity about it that feels at odds with his grief. 'I ... well...'

'Yes?' I say again, as his hesitation fades to silence.

His face has become wracked with sadness and he shakes his head. 'No ... no, not now ... It can wait.' His words, each syllable, are as heavy as lead, and his head collapses into his hands.

For a moment or two I simply sit there, waiting for him to regain himself. But he doesn't. There is no movement.

'Dad?' I ask softly. 'Are you OK?'

He doesn't respond and I stand for a moment wishing I knew what to say to him, what to do, wishing I felt able to help him.

'Would you like anything for supper?' The offer sounds thin and insufficient.

'Thank you, but no,' he says, finally raising his head to look at me. 'I'm not hungry.'

I'm shocked by the raw pain that hangs in his eyes. I don't want to be in his study any longer. I need to get out.

'Goodnight then,' I say.

He doesn't respond and I close the door behind me, feeling relief as I do. I stand outside his study for a while and find my mind wandering back to the photograph of my mother, the one on the beach. I should have pushed him harder about that. She hated the idea of going abroad. I'd always wanted to travel, and I'd been desperate to escape the walls of The Old Vicarage, to experience the world beyond. One day, on her birthday, shortly before I was due to leave for university,

I'd bought her tickets to France. She'd cooked a special meal for us and after we'd finished our apple crumble and custard, I slid the card containing my gift across the table towards her. The tickets had cost nearly all of the money in my savings account, money I'd been given by Henry instead of presents for birthdays and Christmases over the years, money I'd never had the opportunity to spend.

'Happy birthday,' I said. My stomach fizzed with adrenaline.

But when Elaine opened the card I saw her face drain of colour.

'They're for the Eurostar, Mum. We're off to France. To Paris.'

Henry stood to clear the plates without a word.

'I know you're nervous. I am too. But it'll be great. We'll go to the Louvre and visit the 'Mona Lisa'. We can walk down the Champs-Élysées and have a meal in some fancy restaurant where the waiters wear bow ties.'

She didn't speak. The only noise was the sound of Henry scraping food off the plates with a knife.

'I paid for them myself. From my savings. I want to do something together. Just you and me. Before I go to university.'

Elaine's eyes grew wide. Her body shook. I watched as her hand began scratching at her arm, her nails digging into her skin, raking over and over and over, so hard that welts and scratches began to appear.

'Mum. Stop it.' I reached for her hand, trying to still it. 'You're hurting yourself.' But still she scratched. Harder and harder. Blood seeped out of the self-inflicted wounds.

'Mum! Stop it. Please.'

Elaine looked at me as if she didn't know who I was. 'I can't go,' she said. Her voice was flat and gravelly, and shivers cut through me. 'I can't ... go.'

'It's OK,' I said. My heart hammered with growing panic. 'It was a stupid idea. Please don't do that to your arm. It wasn't supposed to upset you. I didn't think. I'm sorry.'

Elaine rounded on me with an anger I wasn't expecting.

'Promise me you won't go. Not *ever*. You can't do that to me. Promise me now.' She grabbed my hand and dug those scratching nails into me. 'Promise me, Bella!'

'Yes, I promise,' I said quickly, as her vice-like grip squeezed harder and harder. 'I promise!'

Then she pushed away from the table. Her chair clattered backwards onto the floor and she ran from the room. I looked over at Henry, who avoided my eyes as he placed the plate he was holding on to the worktop and followed her.

And there I was, left alone at the table, with only the relentless ticking of the clock on the wall to break the oppressive silence. I picked up the tickets and tore them into tiny pieces, while the walls of the kitchen inched slowly inwards as if trying to suffocate me.