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Sleeper's Castle

Written by Barbara Erskine

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Sleeper's Castle



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The present day
Towards the end of September

'Take care of Pepper! Tell him I love him!'

Sue handing her the keys. Laughing. Giving her a quick hug then running down the steep uneven stone steps to the gate and her waiting car. 'You remember where everything is? Enjoy.'

The engine revs. She is gone.

Andy stands listening as the car takes the succession of Z bends down the steep single-track lane with its high banks and its wild hedges until the sound of the engine is swallowed by the silence. She is alone.

Slowly she turns and surveys her new home. A year, rent-free, in exchange for looking after an ancient house with mullioned windows and a moss-covered slate roof and an old and grumpy cat called Pepper. Overwhelmed with unexpected happiness she begins to smile.

'He's too old to go into a cattery, Andy. It would kill him. He needs to stay at home. He needs someone to feed him regularly

and make sure the house is warm. That's all. He won't need anything else. He's his own man. Well, his own cat! And he knows you.' Sue's voice was pleading, though she had already known that Andy would say yes.

Yes, the cat had met her. Once. For a couple of weeks when she and Graham had stayed here with Sue four summers ago. Andy's smile faded at the memory, then it returned. In her head, for a moment, the house was full of the sound of Sue's irrepressible laughter and Graham's deep guffaws.

Exhausted after the long drive, she sat down on the cold stone slab of the top step and, hugging her knees, stared down over the almost vertical wild rock garden which fronted the ancient stone building, down towards the parking space, no more than a lay-by really, off the narrow lane, occupied now only by her old Passat. She could see the low sun glinting on its dark blue roof, almost hidden by the tangle of autumn flowers. The car contained almost all she owned in the whole world.

She hadn't expected this – to be suddenly and irrevocably homeless.

'It's your fault he died!' Rhona Wilson, Graham's widow, shouted at Andy. 'If he had never met you we would have been happy. He would be alive now.' It took Rhona's sister, Michelle, to drag her away as Andy stood there, numb with shock, too overwhelmed with grief to move.

'Get out of our house!' Michelle almost spat the words at Andy. 'Go. Haven't you done enough damage here, stealing Graham away from us? Killing him!'

Andy backed out of the room, turned and ran down the stairs. She shouldn't have been surprised. She knew Rhona hated her. The woman had left Graham long before Andy had come into his life, run off with another man, left him as well and moved in with a second, followed that one to the States, come back with someone quite different, but never had she lost

her sense of ownership. She didn't want Graham, but she didn't want anyone else to have him either and she obviously didn't intend to let anyone else benefit, if that was the right word, from his death. In the past she had contented herself with the odd vitriolic phone call, occasional nasty letters and postcards, but in the past Graham had been there to protect Andy. Now he was gone and Rhona had found allies in her war of attrition.

Andy's life had been idyllic. She had lived with Graham for nearly ten years in his beautiful detached house in the quiet tree-lined street in Kew. She wrote her column for the local paper. She illustrated his books, fulfilling her contractual duties as his co-author by providing exquisite, tiny watercolours of the exotic rare plants he wrote about. That was how she had met him; his publisher had contacted her with a suggestion that she might be the person to illustrate his next book. She was happy. He was happy. Then the cancer came, swift and deadly, diagnosed far too late.

Within days of his death his ex-wife, technically still his wife, and her family had made it clear that Andy had no place, no rights, no security, no home.

She didn't even know they had keys to the house; they were in before she realised it. They tried to stop her taking even her own things, this vicious greedy cabal of women, his wife, her sister, her friends. They had supervised her packing, had checked everything as she threw her cases and bags into her car. They grabbed her sketchbooks and paintings. Graham had paid for them, they screeched, though technically they had not yet been paid for; she was contracted to his publisher. She didn't argue. Didn't fight back. Did not care. He was gone. She doubted she could live without him anyway.

But then the phone calls had started and the threats had continued even though Andy had left the house. Rhona was sure she had stolen things. But, if there had been theft it was not on Andy's side. Graham's will, and Andy had seen his will,

leaving his house and garden and books and manuscripts to her, had disappeared. The solicitor, Rhona's sister's husband, as it happened, said he had no copy and knew nothing of it. Andy gave up. She wouldn't, she couldn't, fight them.

To escape Rhona's vicious calls she kept her phone switched off. She slept on sofas and floors and drank a great deal of wine with her mother and her wonderful loyal friends as she tried to come to terms with the fact that she had no home, very little money, no future and, it seemed, no past. Without her friends to steady her, replace the rock which had been Graham, she would have been a wreck, if she had survived at all.

Then Sue had phoned. She had heard what had happened on the grapevine. 'I'm not sure if this would be a port in a storm, Andy. If you like the idea it would surely help me. I planned this trip to Australia to go to my brother's wedding and then spend time visiting the folks, blithely assuming I could get a tenant in time. I'd much rather it was you than a stranger, and Rhona will never find you in Wales.'

And so, here she was. Rubbing her face wearily Andy stood up, conscious of the roar of water from the brook that ran along the edge of the garden, plunging over rocks and between deep overhanging banks thick with moss and fern, under the bridge in the lane and on down towards the valley.

The house, with its wonderful romantic name of Sleeper's Castle, was in the foothills of the Black Mountains, a few miles from the nearest town. The countryside was huge and empty and the contours on the map had been, as she reminded herself on her way here, suspiciously close to each other, a clue to the presence of steep hills and deep secluded valleys. Sue called it her retreat. She had no neighbours. None close by, anyway.

Andy turned her back on the endless view of misty hills and the turbulent sky and she made her way towards the front door, past the rough wooden bench which stood with its back to the stone wall, facing the view.

Sleeper's Castle was not, never had been, a castle, but it had once been a much bigger house. The name Sleeper's, Sue had told her vaguely, came from something in Welsh. It didn't matter. It was perfect. Wild, unspoilt, magical, built on the eastern fringe of the Black Mountains, the remote, mysterious range at the north-easternmost end of the Brecon Beacons National Park, on the Welsh side of the border between England and Wales. Andy took a deep breath of the soft sweet upland air and infinitesimally, without her noticing, the first of her cares began gently to drop away.

Nowadays the downstairs of the house comprised only four rooms, the largest by far, which had once been the medieval hall, paying lip service to its duties now as a sitting/living room only by the presence of an enormous baggy inelegant sofa and a couple of old, all-enveloping, velvet-covered armchairs. Smothered with an array of multi-coloured rugs they had been arranged in a semicircle around a huge open fireplace built of ancient stone, topped by a bressummer beam, split and scorched from countless roaring fires over many centuries. At the moment the fireplace was empty and swept clean of ash but the sweet smell of woodsmoke still clung in the corners of the room and hung about the beams. The rest of the room, with its oak table, bureau bookcase, ancient kneehole desk and scattered multi-dimensional chairs served Sue as a potting-shed-cum-office. Andy gave a wry smile. She had lived with a plantsman for years, but never once had he allowed his garden to encroach on the elegance of his home. His wellies – and hers – stayed firmly in the utility room at the back of the house. Where hers still were, she realised with a pang of misery. Here, judging by the state of the threadbare rug, Sue still wore hers indoors. The fact that there was a mirror on the wall was somehow counter-intuitive.

Andy caught sight of herself and briefly she stood still, staring. Her shoulder-length wild curly light brown hair stood out round her head in a tangled mass, her eyes, grey and usually clear

and expressive, looked sore and reddened with exhaustion and misery. Her face, which Graham used to describe as beautiful, was drawn and sad. She was not a pretty sight. She stepped back with a grimace, turned her back on the mirror and with a last, affectionate glance round the room made her way through to the kitchen.

It took several seconds to absorb the shock of what she saw there. When she and Graham had stayed with Sue four years ago the kitchen had more or less matched the living room. Used. Scruffy. Barely, to be honest, even remotely hygienic. She remembered the ever-watchful cat strolling along the worktop to lick the butter when someone left the top off the dish, and Sue laughing at Andy's consternation when the same dish turned up on the table at lunch. But now it had all changed. Sue's kitchen had transformed, to Andy's astonishment and disbelief, into the epitome of every woman's dream. There was a butler's sink with brass taps, a large scrubbed refectory table and, joy of joys, an Aga like the one she and Graham had had in his kitchen in Kew, with next to it, a rocking chair, the only concession to comfort in the room and on the chair a large tabby cat.

'Hello, Pepper,' she said. Pepper, short for Culpepper, the herbalist.

He narrowed his eyes briefly then closed them, his expression bored but proprietorial. She got the message at once. His chair, his kitchen, his Aga.

She smiled as she walked slowly round the table, admiring every detail. On the dresser were two bottles of Merlot with a note.

To be taken x 2 daily with food. Enjoy. Sue xxxxx

It took several trips to drag her belongings up the steep steps from the car. Rhona's family had not been interested in her clothes, or the books she had time to rescue or, in the end, most of her painting gear. She had little jewellery, but what

there was – seeing which way the wind was blowing – she had hidden in a flower pot, to be tipped later straight into the boot of her car, and after that into a drawer in her mother's house. Only two or three of those pretty things had been gifts from Graham; he didn't see the point of jewellery when a live flower tucked into Andy's hair was so much more perfect. The rest of the rings and bangles had come from her family, but she doubted the Wilson clique would listen and believe her.

'Go to the police!' her friends had said, or 'For God's sake find a solicitor,' but she had shrugged and shaken her head and now, please God, hidden away here in the Welsh borders she would at last be free of Rhona and her family. Only three people knew where she was and they had sworn to keep her secret: her mother, obviously, and two of the friends who had come to her rescue, James Allardyce, a former university pal of Graham's, and his wife, her former school friend, Hilary, to whom Andy had introduced him. Oh, and her father, but he lived far away in Northumberland.

The thought of her mother and father sent her reaching into her pocket for her mobile but then she pushed it back. She was on her own. This was her new life. She had promised the others she would stay in touch, but she was not going to ring the second she got here. She had to establish herself, make herself at home and somehow retrieve her confidence and her sense of identity. The unaccustomed and overwhelming wave of happiness and relief that had swept over her on her arrival had been a first step in the right direction.

Andy's full name was Miranda Annabel Dysart. *Don't Go out of Sight, Miranda* had apparently been the title of one of her grandmother, Petra's, favourite books and when her mother, Nina, was a child, Petra had read it to her repeatedly. Nina had in turn read it to her daughter after saddling her with the name of the heroine. Andy couldn't remember the story at all – maybe she had blocked it, but the name Miranda had left her with a

sense of overwhelming melancholy. Not a good reason to endear it to her. Someone at school had named her Andy (after experimenting with Mandy and, even more unfortunately, Randy) and it stuck. She liked it. And so did her father. It was a neutral name, slightly ambiguous, rugged. Strong. It distracted people from the fact that her initials spelt MAD, something which her scatty parents had not considered at her christening but which mercifully she had learned to enjoy.

She couldn't remember either the time her parents had split up. It had been while she was very small and they seemed to have managed it without rancour or complications. They had remained friends as far as she, their only child, could tell. Her mother lived in Sussex, her father, long ago remarried and father to three more children, had settled in Northumberland. Perhaps the distance between the two counties made it easier for them.

The knock at the back door took her by surprise. She had just poured herself a glass of wine as prescribed and was wandering round the kitchen, finding her way around, touching things lightly, proprietorially, opening and shutting drawers, shuffling through the books on the dresser – all cookery or herbs – when the sound broke the intense silence of the house.

Nervously she glanced at the cat. He hadn't moved. If this was an unexpected or threatening sound surely, like her mother's cat, he would have bolted off upstairs to hide. She set down the glass and went to the door.

The woman on the step was of middle height, slim, middle-aged, she guessed, with a rugged wind-burned complexion and greying hair. She was wearing a heavy pullover against the autumn chill and muddy rubber boots with shabby cords. She stared at Andy in surprise. 'Sue around?'

'She left for the airport a couple of hours ago. I'm sorry.'

The woman sighed.'Ah, I saw her car wasn't there. Australia, right? Hell and damnation! I hoped she wasn't going for a while yet.' She half turned away, staring up at the racing clouds as

though seeking inspiration, then turned back. 'I don't suppose she left anything for me, did she?'

'You being . . . ?' Andy let the question hang.

For the first time her visitor smiled. She held out her hand. 'I'm Sian. Sian Griffiths.' In spite of the Welsh name her accent was English. She paused as though expecting the name to mean something. 'I live over in Cusop Dingle.'

'Ah?'

Cusop Dingle, Andy remembered vaguely from their holiday, was a narrow, thickly wooded valley to the east of the range of hills where Sleeper's Castle nestled, separated from it by a high ridge and then a vertiginous plunge down to a fast-running brook. It was on the outskirts of the nearest town, Hay-on-Wye, and seemed to consist of a long winding country road, heading up towards the open hillside and lined with houses, a few of them large, secluded behind high hedges and ancient trees. They had visited someone there with Sue on that wonderful summer holiday, but not, as far as she could remember, this woman.

'Come in.' Introducing herself, Andy held the door open.

Kicking off her boots and leaving them outside, Sian accepted a glass of wine and pulled up a chair at the table.

'I'd better explain,' Andy said, reassured that Pepper seemed to know her visitor and had still not moved from his chair. 'This was a last-minute piece of serendipity. As you probably know, Sue hadn't found a tenant and was beginning to think she would have to cancel her trip, and I was in need of a roof. I'm self-employed with no immediate ties . . .' Her voice wavered but she managed to go on. Just give enough information to explain her presence here, no more. 'We made a lightning decision. I didn't give myself time to think.'

'Brave.'

Now she was inside and sitting opposite her, Andy could see that the woman was probably in her mid to late fifties, older than she had first thought. Her face was weathered with deep

laughter lines at the corners of her eyes, eyes that were bright Siamese-cat blue. 'I'll leave you my phone number,' she said. 'If you need anything, you have only to ring. This house is pretty isolated if you're on your own. Your nearest shops and signs of civilisation are in Hay, did she tell you? You'll get most things you need there.'

'I'm looking forward to exploring.' Andy took a sip of wine. 'I have been here before, for a holiday. But it was in the summer.'

Andy had a momentary flashback to those warm, seemingly endless days strolling on the hills and mountains, happy evenings in local pubs, excursions down into the local market town of Hay, attractive, compact, famous for its bookshops and its castle and of course for the majestic, beautiful River Wye which cradled it in a constantly changing backdrop. It had been a glorious summer.

Now it was late September, with winter already a hint in the air, and she was on her own. She didn't say it out loud. It made her sound pathetic and needy, which she was not. She glanced towards the window where high clouds were streaming across the sky. 'What was it Sue was going to leave for you? Maybe it's here and she forgot to tell me.'

'Maybe.' Leaning back in the chair, Sian was watching Andy with an interested, narrowed gaze. 'Is she still planning to stay away for a year? She was afraid she would have to cut the visit short.'

'A year is what she told me,' Andy agreed. 'I hope Pepper can cope with that.'

Sian smiled. 'I'm sure he can. She had two main concerns when she was planning this trip: Pepper and her car. Last I heard, the idea was that she would leave the car with a friend who lives down south. He was going to pick it up from Heathrow and take care of it for her. And you have clearly solved the Pepper problem.'

Andy smiled as a spatter of rain rattled against the window. 'So no worries then. I can just imagine her saying those words! She was gone the second I arrived. I think she had more or

less resigned herself to changing her plans then someone told her I might be in the market for a new home urgently, she rang and we settled it then and there. She got a cancellation on a flight. There was virtually no time to discuss anything.'

'The gods were with you both.' Sian gave a thoughtful smile. 'There are very few people she would entrust Pepper to.'

They both looked at him. As if overwhelmed by the unexpected attention he stood up, stretched and jumped off his chair. He walked to the door and with great dignity pushed out through the cat flap. 'I hope she's left food and instructions for feeding him,' Andy said. 'We didn't even have time to talk about that. It took longer than I remembered driving here, so I was very late. She was terrified of missing the plane.'

'I'm sure she made it.' Sian smiled again. She stood up, walked over to the dresser and pulled open one of the drawers. Inside were boxes of tuna and rabbit biscuits, little trays of gourmet cat food and a couple of cartons of cat milk.

'So Pepper is catered for.' Andy was relieved.

'And here are your instructions.' Sian had found a piece of paper on the worktop. *Pepper*, it said. *Breakfast, lunch and supper.* 'Quite the spoiled brat, our Culpepper.'

Andy took the paper, grateful that her visitor seemed to know her way round. 'This kitchen has changed so much since I was here last. I couldn't believe it when I saw it.'

Sian gave a snort of laughter. 'She was left some money by an ancient relative and she couldn't decide what to spend it on. Sue is one of those incredible people who has everything she wants in life. Her herbs are her life. She is extraordinarily self-contained. I think she consulted Pepper, who decided an upgrade of kitchen would be good.'

'I can believe that.'

'And you're not regretting coming up here, now you've had time to reconsider your impulsive decision?'

Andy shook her head. 'Hardly. I've barely been here a few hours.'

'Not everyone is as independent as Sue.' Sian hesitated. 'Old houses can be a bit spooky.'

'It's certainly atmospheric,' Andy reached for her glass and took a sip.

'And utterly beautiful.'

'But you find it spooky?'

'Sorry, that was a silly thing to say. I meant, it's a bit isolated if you're on your own. No, I don't think it's spooky. If there ever was a ghost here I think it would have been far more afraid of Sue than she would be of it. She would swear roundly in Australian and tell it where to go.' Sian laughed again and ran her finger round the rim of her glass. 'So, do you believe in them?' The question was almost too casual.

'Ghosts?' Andy pulled a noncommittal face. 'Actually, I made a bit of a study of them once.'

Once. She caught herself using the word with something like shock. Before Graham. So much that she had once thought important in her life had been before Graham. Their life together had absorbed her totally, taken up every second, monopolised her existence. She hadn't been aware of how much. For the first time since his death she realised that in every sense she was free now. Was she frightened or exhilarated by the thought? She wasn't entirely sure.

Sian was still studying her and Andy looked away, embarrassed that her face had betrayed too much. 'One of those things one pursues frenziedly in one's youth and then life and perhaps a certain cynicism kick in and the books get put away.' She gave a rueful smile.

Ghosts had been her father's passion and she had grown up enjoying his stories, his theories, the frissons they had shared on ghost-hunting trips. She had never been quite sure whether she believed in them herself, but the study of phenomena of a ghostly kind had absorbed her for a long time. Those books had been left with her mother. Graham had not liked ghosts. They gave him the creeps and therefore could not be discussed even

in the abstract. Ghosts and meditation and psychology and anything he considered even remotely out of the ordinary on the paranormal scale of things had been out of bounds.

Sian nodded sagely. 'It's sad how one's early enthusiasms wane.' She changed the subject abruptly. 'That's Sue's strength and blessing. She has retained her childlike passion for her herbalism.'

That was how Andy and Sue had met originally. Sue was an old friend of Graham's, a plant contact and fellow author. Andy and she had liked each other instantly and become great friends. Although they had only ventured here, to Wales, once, Sue used to stay with them whenever she was forced to visit London and they had exchanged many long phone calls over the years.

Andy gave a wistful smile. 'I'm surprised she can bear to leave her garden. Especially to me. I paint flowers, I don't grow them.'

'You won't have to. She has someone to help her; I would imagine he will still be coming?' Sian glanced up at her again. 'Didn't she tell you?'

'No.' Andy felt ridiculously cross. She had thought she would be here alone; safe. Unbothered.

'Maybe I got it wrong.' Sian was backtracking hastily again. She seemed to be able to read Andy's every thought.

'No. I hope she has. I am not fit to be trusted with her garden. When the subject came up she just said it could look after itself for a while.' It was Andy's turn to study her visitor's face. 'Was it a herbal potion she was making for you?'

'For my dogs.'

'If I find anything, I'll let you know.'

Sian seemed to take the words as a dismissal. Draining her glass, she stood up. 'I should be on my way. It will start getting dark soon and I've a long walk home.'

Andy watched from the window as the woman ran down the steps and out of sight. The rain shower was over as soon as it had come. Sian's dogs, she saw, had been waiting for her

outside, a border collie and a retriever. She wondered what Culpepper made of them.

Andy decided against taking over Sue's bedroom even though it had obviously been made ready for her. She and Graham had shared that room on their holiday and she didn't think she could bear to sleep there again, alone. A small neat indentation on the counterpane showed where the cat had made himself comfortable earlier in the day, unaware that his beloved Sue was about to abandon him for a whole year. Instead she chose one of the spare rooms. It was in the oldest part of the house, dark with ancient beams, its window mullioned in grey stone, facing across the valley where the sun was setting into the mist. There was a brightly coloured Welsh blanket on the bed and a landscape on the wall of the hills she could see from the window, the racing shadows picked out in vermilion and ochre and violet. She looked round the room with a sense which she realised after a moment was a feeling of coming home. The room felt relaxed and safe; it smelt of wood and something indefinable – herbs and polish and maybe, a little, of dust. Circling once more, and giving a final glance out of the window, she laid her hand on one of the crooked beams in the corner, then she trailed her fingers across the ancient stones of the wall. What memories they must hold.

It took for ever to lug her cases and boxes upstairs and spread some of her belongings on the chest and along the shelves. Finally she threw her jacket on the chair, an almost symbolic gesture to take possession of the room before she went back downstairs, hungry for the first time in ages. Tomorrow she would drive down to Hay and stock up the fridge. For now Sue had left her milk and bread and a pasty with salad. Outside it was dark. She drew the curtains and turned on the light. Behind her the cat flap opened and closed with a swish and a click as Pepper pushed his way through and leapt onto his chair. He

sat and gazed at her. She felt that mentally at least he was tapping his wristwatch to make sure she knew that the hour for supper was approaching. She smiled at him broadly. 'I think we're going to get on fine, Culpepper, my friend. But if I make mistakes, you will have to tell me.'

On her past experience with cats she was sure he would.

She tossed and turned, unable to sleep. Climbing out of bed she pushed open the small casement in the mullioned window. Through it she could hear the sound of the brook hurtling over the rocky ledges at the side of the house and cascading down towards the road. Staring out into the dark she was very aware of how black the night was. She was used to streetlights and the headlights of cars probing through the curtains and crossing the walls of the bedroom she'd shared with Graham.

She had left her door open a crack so that Pepper could come and sleep on her bed if he felt so inclined, but when she turned off the kitchen light he had stayed where he was on the chair beside the Aga. If she had been at home in Kew she would have crept out of bed, careful not to wake Graham and gone out into the garden. She could do that now but she felt strangely intimidated at the idea. The garden here was huge and full of noise and wind and water; she hadn't got her bearings there yet.

Climbing back into bed she sat, propped against her pillows, her hands clasped around her knees, gazing into the darkness. In her mind she let herself travel back to Kew. She knew she shouldn't. She should put Kew behind her, but she couldn't stop herself. She pictured herself opening the French door which led from the kitchen and walking down the short flight of wrought-iron steps onto the decking of the terrace where they so often used to sit in the evenings or at lunchtime to drink wine and eat and talk and laugh.

The garden below the terrace had a pale reflected light from the lamppost in the road, diffused through the branches of the

trees. It smelt fresh and cool and it was very still. In her imagination she stood for a long time looking round, listening. In the distance she could hear the faint drone of traffic on the nearby A307 and, once, the closer sound of a car engine as it turned into their road. It stopped nearby and after a minute a door slammed. She took a step or two onto the lawn, which was wet with icy dew. It soaked into her shoes. She was aware, as she always was at night, of how close Kew Gardens was, dark and deserted behind its high walls. From there sometimes she could hear the call of owls.

Behind her a light came on in the house. It was in one of the spare rooms on the first floor. She watched as the curtain twitched and moved and the silhouette of a head and shoulders appeared peering down into the garden. How strange. Was Rhona living there? She shivered and in her imagination she turned away and strolled towards the high wall at the back of the garden where a collection of shrubs and climbers wove their magic of autumn colour, leached to silver by the lamplight.

She heard the window behind her rattle upwards. 'Who's there?' Rhona's voice echoed into the silence. 'I can see you!'

The vision vanished and abruptly Andy opened her eyes. Her memories had been interrupted and spoilt by the intrusion of Rhona's harsh voice; Rhona had no place in her daydreams, Rhona whom she had only ever met once before that awful day when she had walked into Andy's life and blown what was left of her composure apart. She was someone best forgotten as soon as possible.

Andy grabbed her dressing gown and made her way downstairs and into the kitchen. The rocking chair was empty; there was no sign of Pepper. Pulling the back door open she overcame her misgivings and stepped outside. The contrast to the silent enclosure in the moonlight in Kew could not have been more marked. This garden was full of noise; the rustle and clatter of autumn leaves, the howl of the wind and always, above all else, the sound of rushing, thundering water. Shivering she

stepped away from the comparative shelter of the back door and felt the push of the wind, the furious tug at her hair as she turned to face it. It was exhilarating, elemental, exciting. Deep inside herself she felt something stir, something that in her ordered, neat and organised life with Graham had not surfaced for a long time. It was a sense of freedom.

When, breathless and cold, she let herself back into the kitchen she found herself laughing. There was still no sign of Pepper. Well, he could look after himself. She put on the kettle and made herself some tea, leaning against the Aga rail as she sipped from the mug, cupping her hands around it for warmth.

She did not sense the silent figure in the corner of the room, watching her from the shadows, the figure which between one breath and the next had faded into nothing.