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Live the Dream

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Extract

CHAPTER ONE

For a long, regretful moment he leaned against the back wall, his tall, strong figure merging into the shadows, his heart aching, and his dark, thoughtful gaze intent on the house. It was such a beautiful house, he thought . . . so warm and inviting. *Like she used to be.*

His thoughts shifted to the woman inside. She was still beautiful, and sometimes, when she was afraid, her warm hand would slip into his. But that was all. There was rarely any passion in her gesture. Seldom a smile or welcome in her eyes.

She neither loved nor wanted him. But it wasn't her fault – he knew that. He still loved her, but he didn't know her any more, not in the way he used to.

He felt such deep regret, and yet, in a strange way, he was also relieved, as though he no longer needed to prove anything. There was no need. *There was no one to care.*

He had loved this fine house since that first day, seven years ago, when he had carried his wife through the wide, oaken doors and swung her round while she held on to him, laughing and happy, her beautiful face glowing with love for him and, oh, how he had adored her in return. *But that was then.* Now all he had left were the memories.

His heart ached for things to be how they once were.

But however much he wished it, there could be no going back.

With a deep sigh he made his way across the delightful garden, with its pretty, meandering paths and multitude of shrubs and trees. It was early February now, and here and there the buds were already forming. In another month or so, they would open and the garden would be filled with colour. Walking through it, you could imagine yourself to be in paradise.

Sometimes, when the symptoms of her illness became too much for him, he would come out here, and walk and think until his spirit was refreshed. Then he would go back inside, ready to deal with whatever came his way.

Today was Tuesday, and Tuesdays were very special. For a time he was free to follow his heart, to do what he wanted, to be whoever he wanted to be. Tuesday was *his* day. *His sanctuary.*

He quickened his steps towards the outbuilding. Here, he took out a bunch of keys, unlocked the door and let himself in. He threw back the makeshift curtain at the window, and a shaft of sunlight fell on the cloth-covered easel at the back of the room.

Sliding away the cloth, he revealed the painting of a beautiful, slender woman with chestnut-coloured hair flowing to her waist, and dark, sultry eyes. For a while he stood there, thoughtfully observing the face, with its exquisite features and soft, smiling mouth.

Reaching out, he traced the tip of his finger around her inviting, sensuous mouth. A great sadness took hold of him.

'I'm so sorry,' he murmured. 'If I could only change things, you know I would.'

A moment longer, then he covered the painting and strode to a large wooden chest and opened the lid. From where it was hidden beneath layers of paint-trays and brushes, he

took out a heavy iron key. It was his passport to another world.

He slid the key into his jacket pocket and left, securing the door behind him. Then he quickly made his way through the gardens and out of the side gate.

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From the bedroom window she watched him leave . . . that same woman he had painted so lovingly and whose portrait was hidden in the outhouse. She saw him carefully close the gate; she heard the familiar turning over of the engine, and in her mind's eye she imagined him driving the long black saloon he had bought only a few months ago. She heard the engine swell as it was driven away, and through the beech trees that lined the road she caught a fleeting glimpse of the car as it went from the house.

Even when she could no longer hear the engine, she remained, thinking and wishing, until, startling her, a voice from the door called her name.

'Sylvia! I've been looking for you everywhere.'

With a smile, she turned from the window. 'It's such a lovely day, don't you think, Edna?' But the smile was forced, because now he was gone and already she was lonely.

She often felt alone now – detached from her husband, from her sister, from dear Edna. No one came to visit. Too scared of her moods. The medication helped suppress the anger, but often her moods got the better of her. Sometimes the anger was preferable to the dulling effect of the drugs, and so on occasion she would hide the medicine and only pretend to take it. But there were days when she had no choice but to take it or lose control.

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As the distance lengthened between them, Luke's thoughts remained with her, the further he got from the house, the more he felt as though a great weight was being lifted from his shoulders. The frowns eased and his face softened; his dark eyes began to twinkle and his whole body relaxed into the seat. It was Tuesday, he was heading away, and a sense of freedom flooded his soul.

Today he would drive by way of the coast, some twenty-odd miles away. He liked the open sea and sky after the neat residential street in Blackburn, and the noise and sootiness of the factory on other weekdays. Afterwards, he would turn inland, to enjoy the special pleasures and freedom of his precious day off.

As he neared the beach, a flock of screaming seagulls descended, effectively blinding him as they flew across the windscreen of his car.

'Jesus!' Startled, he slammed on his brakes and screeched to a halt. Drawing on the handbrake, he climbed out of the car and watched the birds as they flew away, throwing their shadows over the morning sun. Anger subsided; a smile flitting across his thoughtful features. 'Free as a bird'. When they were mere specks in the faraway sky he momentarily closed his eyes, wishing he was up there with them.

His gaze flowed across the beach to the horizon. The sea was unusually quiet.

In the far distance, on the beach, a woman strolled with her two Labradors, one running ahead, the other trailing behind. She was a regular walker here. He had seen her tall, slim silhouette many times before.

His gaze travelled: to his left where the man was already opening up his tea-stall, and beyond him the flower shop was ablaze with spring flowers. Life goes on, he thought. *If only they knew.*

Getting back into his car he reminded himself that it was Tuesday. Put the dark thoughts out of your mind, he thought. He'd best get going, or the day would be gone before he knew it.

At the end of the road, he turned from the seafront and headed inland towards the fells and the Ribble Valley, every familiar curve and landmark a comfort to him.

The lanes became narrower and more meandering, until at length they disappeared altogether and he was bumping along a rough track that carried him deeper and deeper into the woods, beyond civilisation . . . beyond the burden of his duty and responsibility.

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Almost a full hour after leaving the house, he arrived at his destination, where thick woodland hid him from the world and high trees almost blocked out the skies above.

The winding, babbling stream glittered in the morning light, and look there! Excited, he inched forward to see two small deer drinking at the water's edge. This was what he needed. Through the week when he was driven by work and duties, *this* was the magic his soul craved.

He made his way towards the little log cabin, built by his own hand over two long, wonderful years. Afterwards, when it was finished he would sit on the covered veranda for many an hour, lazing and thinking, and though his troubles were heavy, he always found time to thank the Lord for his many blessings. The land had been owned by his family for generations, and he had spent happy childhood summer holidays riding, fishing and picnicking here, when visiting his grandparents nearby.

Taking the key from his pocket he slid it into the keyhole and opened the door. As always, when he came back after

a week away, the clammy, damp air instantly wrapped itself around him. Impatiently he threw back the wooden shutters and opened the windows to let the fresh air in. When that was done, he took a box of matches from his pocket and struck it against the stone wall surrounding the fireplace. When the match-head flickered into life, he set light to the carefully laid pyramid of paper and wood in the grate.

Soon, the fire was cheerily blazing, airing and warming the whole cabin.

He felt a sense of pride in his achievement. The place was strong, built to last, with a tiny bedroom, makeshift bathroom, and a large centre area providing a sitting room and kitchen. Serviceable and attractive, the cabin was ideal for his own modest needs.

The furniture itself had been hewn from the trees outside, before being lovingly shaped by his own hand, to provide all that was needed: a small, square table and two chairs; a strong, deep chest of drawers; a long settle against the fireplace, where he would sit of an evening and dream of a life he would never have.

Then there was the bed. Square and sturdy enough to take a man's weight, it was a handsome thing. Covered in a wine-coloured eiderdown, it was roomy enough for two. After all, he could dream . . .

Beside the bed stood a narrow wardrobe, not spacious by any standards, but enough to hold his most cherished possessions.

To use the bath and washbasin he would carry bucketfuls of water from the stream, and there was an earth closet in a separate little shack.

If he got hungry there was always a supply of tinned food in the larder, and titbits to be gathered in the woods, depending on the time of year. Running wild in those idyllic

childhood holidays had been excellent training for cabin life.

Now, with the fire crackling and spitting, he was ever mindful of the falling sparks, any one of which could burn the cabin to the ground; which was why he had built the deep stone hearth. He had also fashioned a makeshift wire cage, which he now placed in front of the leaping flames.

Having placed the guard before the now crackling fire, he went to the wardrobe. He took out the canvas and easel and carried them to the corner of the room. He did not uncover the painting. Instead he held it for a moment, his thoughts going to a cosy little café in the centre of Blackburn. That was another part of his secret life. Then he set the frame on the easel.

From the chest he took out a pile of clothes and draped them over the wire cage of the fire guard to warm and air, while he stripped off his suit, shirt and tie.

When he was dressed again the businessman was gone and in his place was an ordinary workman, dressed casually in brown cords, green check shirt and heavy black boots. The uniform of duty was discarded, and he was now a man at ease with himself.

Now was the moment he'd anticipated with pleasure since his last visit. With great care he slipped the cover from the painting.

When it was laid bare he gazed at it for a long, wondrous moment, his dark, smiling eyes roving its every feature.

Smiling back at him, the young woman with the tumble of hazel hair seemed almost alive. Her laughing eyes, blue as the darkest sapphire, were painted in such a way as to be looking at him wherever he went in the room. Her pretty, slightly parted lips seemed so real he felt she would suddenly

talk to him. But she never did, except in his dreams. She probably never would.

Yet he knew her well, that small, vibrant woman who had invaded his thoughts. A special part of his Tuesday life, she hardly knew of his existence.

Returning to the wardrobe he collected his paints and brushes. A few moments later he was stroking the tip of the brush over the curling ends of her brown hair. 'You don't know me,' he murmured fondly, 'but I feel I know you. I've seen how you light up a room when you walk into it . . .' Images of her came into his mind – going about her own Tuesday life, laughing with her friend – making him smile. 'And I know you have a wonderful sense of humour.'

Changing his brush, he worked on her cheekbones. 'You can't imagine how much I've been looking forward to seeing you.'

He paused, his thoughts going back to the house and the woman who waited there. 'Maybe it's just as well you don't even notice me,' he sighed. 'You see, Amy . . . a man might dream and hope, but dreams are not real, and life can drag you down. I do my best, but I'm hopelessly trapped. If only I can find a way to change how things are.'

~

That night as he sat on his veranda watching the stars twinkle and dance, a glass of wine in his hand and a great loneliness in his heart, he had no way of knowing how Amy was watching those same stars, and that in her heart were the same impossible dreams, and sense of awful loneliness.

Leaning on the windowsill, arms folded, her gaze raised to the skies, she wondered where Don was, and whether he ever thought of her. She did not wonder whether he

might come back, because his parting words had been that she would never see him again. And although for many months after he'd gone, she had prayed he might change his mind and come back, he never had. Now the pain had settled to a sense of loss and disappointment with the acceptance that what he had said was true. Earlier, when he had asked her to marry him, she had been filled with such joy; not knowing that it would end in her heart being broken. There had been weeks of planning and excitement when the date was set and the church booked. The bridesmaids were chosen, the bridal gown ordered and even the honeymoon arranged, before he confessed to her that he had never really wanted family or responsibilities.

Sometimes she wondered if that had been a kind excuse – a way of letting her down gently. He had been so handsome and such fun. Maybe she hadn't been good enough for him . . .

Amy had been devastated when he left, and even now the love she had felt for him still lingered.

Pressing her nose to the window she recalled the happy times they had shared.

'I don't hate you, Don,' she murmured. 'I could never hate you.'

She remembered his smile and the way he would hold her in his arms, and her heart was heavy. But she no longer fooled herself. It was over.

'Good night, Amy.' That was her mammy on the landing.

'Good night, Mam.'

'Don't forget we've an early start in the morning.'

'I won't.'

The sound of passing footsteps, then the closing of a door, and the house was quiet again.

Leaving the curtains open so she could see the stars, Amy went softly across the room and slid into bed.

She closed her eyes, shut out the memories and was quickly asleep.