Lovereading.co.uk

Tribute

Nora Roberts

Published by Piatkus

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

PIATKUS

First published in the US in 2008 by G.P.Putnam's Sons, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., New York
First published in Great Britain in 2008 by Piatkus
This paperback edition published in 2009 by Piatkus
Copyright © 2008 by Nora Roberts

The moral right of the author has been asserted

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental

All rights reserved
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-7499-0997-0

Typeset in Times by Phoenix Photosetting, Chatham, Kent
www.phoenixphotosetting.co.uk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Papers used by Piatkus are natural, renewable and recyclable products sourced from well-managed forests and certified in accordance with the rules of the Forest Stewardship Council.



Piatkus
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.piatkus.co.uk

Part One

Demo

The past cannot be presented; we cannot know what we are not. But one veil hangs over the past, present and future …

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

One

According to legend, Steve McQueen once swam buck-naked among the cattails and lily pads in the pond at the little farm. If true, and Cilla liked to think it was, the King Of Cool had stripped off and dove in post *The Magnificent Seven* and prior to *The Great Escape*.

In some versions of the legend, Steve had done more than cool off on that muggy summer night in Virginia—and he'd done the more with Cilla's grandmother. Though they'd both been married to other people at the time, the legend carried more cheer than disdain. And since both parties were long dead, neither could confirm or deny.

Then again, Cilla thought as she studied the murky water of the lily-choked pond, neither had bothered—as far as she could ascertain—to confirm or deny while they'd had the chance.

True or false, she imagined Janet Hardy, the glamorous, the tragic, the brilliant, the troubled, had enjoyed the buzz. Even icons had to get their kicks somewhere.

Standing in the yellow glare of sun with the dulling bite of March chilling her face, Cilla could see it perfectly. The steamy summer night, the blue wash from the spotlight moon. The gardens would've been at their magnificent peak and stunning the air with fragrance. The water would've been so cool and silky on the skin, and the color of chamomile tea with pink and white blossoms strung over it like glossy pearls.

Janet would have been at her stunning peak as well, Cilla

mused. The spun-gold of her hair tumbling free, spilling over white shoulders … No, those would have been spun-gold, too, from her summer tan. Gilded shoulders in the tea-colored water, and her Arctic blue eyes bright with laughter—and most likely a heroic consumption of liquor.

Music darting and sparkling through the dark, like the fireflies that flashed over the fertile fields, the velvet lawns, Cilla imagined. The voices from the weekend guests who wandered over the lawns, the porches and patios as bright as the music. Stars as luminous as the ones that gleamed overhead like little jewels scattered away from that spotlight moon.

Dark pockets of shadows, streaming colored lights from lanterns.

Yes, it would've been like that. Janet's world had been one of brilliant light and utter dark. Always.

Cilla hoped she dove into that pond unapologetically naked, drunk and foolish and happy. And utterly unaware her crowded, desperate, glorious life would end barely a decade later.

Before turning away from the pond, Cilla listed it in her thick notebook. It would need to be cleaned, tested and ecologically balanced. She made another note to read up on pond management and maintenance before she attempted to do so, or hired an expert.

Then the gardens. Or what was left of them, she thought as she crossed through the high, lumpy grass. Weeds, literal blankets of vines, overgrown shrubs with branches poking through the blankets like brown bones, marred what had once been simply stupendous. Another metaphor, she supposed, for the bright and beautiful choked off and buried in the grasping.

She'd need help with this part, she decided. Considerable help. However much she wanted to put her back into this project, get her hands into it, she couldn't possibly clear and hack, slash and burn, and redesign on her own.

The budget would have to include a landscaping crew. She noted down the need to study old photographs of the gardens, to buy some books on landscaping to educate herself, and to contact local landscapers for bids.

Standing, she scanned the ruined lawns, the sagging fences, the sad old barn that stood soot-gray and scarred from weather. There had been chickens once—or so she'd been told—a couple of pretty horses, tidy fields of crops, a small, thriving grove of fruit trees. She wanted to believe—maybe needed to believe—she could bring all that back. That by the next spring, and all the springs after, she could stand here and look at all the budding, the blooming, the business of what had been her grandmother's.

Of what was now hers.

She saw how it was, and how it once had been through her own Arctic blue eyes shaded by the bill of a *Rock the House* ball cap. Her hair, more honey than gold dust, threaded through the back of the cap in a long, messy tail. She wore a thick hooded sweatshirt over strong shoulders and a long torso, faded jeans over long legs, and boots she'd bought years before for a hiking trip through the Blue Ridge Mountains. The same mountains that rolled up against the sky now.

Years ago, she thought. The last time she'd come east, come here. And when, she supposed, the seeds for what she would do now had been planted.

Didn't that make the last four—or was it five—years of neglect at least partially her doing? She could've pushed sooner, could have *demanded*. She could have done something.

"Doing it now," she reminded herself. She wouldn't regret the delay any more than she would regret the manipulation and bitter arguments she'd used to force her mother to sign over the property.

"Yours now, Cilla," she told herself. "Don't screw it up."

She turned, braced herself, then made her way through the high grass and brambles to the old farmhouse where Janet Hardy had hosted sparkling parties, or had escaped to between roles. And where, in 1973, on another steamy summer night, she took her own life.

So claimed the legend.

There were ghosts. Sensing them was nearly as exhausting as evaluating the ramshackle three stories, facing the grime, the

dust, the disheartening disrepair. Ghosts, Cilla supposed, had kept the vandalism and squatting to a minimum. Legends, she thought, had their uses.

She'd had the electricity turned back on, and had brought plenty of light bulbs along with what she hoped would be enough cleaning supplies to get her started. She'd applied for her permits and researched local contractors.

Now, it was time to start something.

Lining up her priorities, she tackled the first of the four bathrooms that hadn't seen a scrub brush in the last six years.

And she suspected the last tenants hadn't bothered overmuch with such niceties during their stint.

"Could be more disgusting," she muttered as she scraped and scrubbed. "Could be snakes and rats. And God, shut up. You're asking for them."

After two sweaty hours and emptying countless buckets of filthy water, she thought she could risk using the facilities without being inoculated first. Chugging bottled water, she headed down the back stairs to have a whack at the big farmhouse kitchen next. And eyeing the baby blue on white laminate on the stubby counters, she wondered whose idea that update had been, and why they'd assumed it would suit the marvelous old O'Keefe & Merritt range and Coldspot refrigerator.

Aesthetically, the room was over the line of hideous, but sanitary had to take precedence.

She braced the back door open for ventilation, tugged rubber gloves back on and very gingerly opened the oven door.

"Oh, crap."

While the best part of a can of oven cleaner went to work, she tackled the oven racks, the burners, the stove top and hood. A photograph flitted through her memory. Janet, a frilly apron over a wasp-waisted dress, sunlight hair pulled back in a sassy tail, stirring something in a big pot on the stove. Smiling at the camera while her two children looked on adoringly.

Publicity shoot, Cilla remembered. For one of the women's magazines. *Redbook* or *McCall's*. The old farmhouse stove, with its center grill, had sparkled like new hope. It would again,

she vowed. One day, she'd stir a pot on that same stove with probably as much faked competence as her grandmother.

She started to squat down to check the oven cleaner, then yipped in surprise when she heard her name.

He stood in the open doorway, with sunlight haloing his silvered blond hair. His smile deepened the creases in his face, still so handsome, and warmed those quiet hazel eyes.

Her heart took a bound from surprise to pleasure, and another into embarrassment.

"Dad."

When he stepped forward, arms opening for a hug, she tossed up her hands, wheeled back. "No, don't. I'm absolutely disgusting. Covered with … I don't even want to know." She swiped the back of her wrist over her forehead, then fumbled off the protective gloves. "Dad," she repeated.

"I see a clean spot." He lifted her chin with his hand, kissed her cheek. "Look at you."

"I wish you wouldn't." But she laughed as most of the initial awkwardness passed. "What are you doing here?"

"Somebody recognized you in town when you stopped for supplies and said something to Patty. And Patty," he continued, referring to his wife, "called me. Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"I was going to. I mean I was going to call you." At some point. Eventually. When I figured out what to say. "I just wanted to get here first, then I …" She glanced back at the oven. "I got caught up."

"So I see. When did you get in?"

Guilt pricked her conscience. "Listen, let's go out on the front porch. It's not too bad out front, and I have a cooler sitting out there holding a coldcut sub with our names on it. Just let me wash up, then we'll catch up."

It wasn't as bad in front, Cilla thought when she settled on the sagging steps with her father, but it was bad enough. The overgrown, weedy lawn and gardens, the trio of misshaped Bradford pears, a wild tangle of what she thought might be wisteria could all be dealt with. Would be. But the wonderful old magnolia

rose, dense with its deep, glossy leaves, and stubborn daffodils shoved up through the thorny armor of climbing roses along the stone walls.

"I'm sorry I didn't call," Cilla began as she handed her father a bottle of iced tea to go with half the sub. "I'm sorry I haven't called."

He patted her knee, opened her bottle, then his own.

It was so like him, she thought. Gavin McGowan took things as they came—the good, the bad, the mediocre. How he'd ever fallen for the emotional morass that was her mother eluded her. But that was long ago, Cilla mused, and far away.

She bit into her portion of the sub. "I'm a bad daughter."

"The worst," he said, and made her laugh.

"Lizzy Bordon."

"Second worst. How's your mother?"

Cilla bit into her sub, rolled her eyes. "Lizzy's definitely running behind me on Mom's scale at the moment. Otherwise, she's okay. Number Five's putting together a cabaret act for her." At her father's quiet look, Cilla shrugged. "I think when your marriages average a three-year lifespan, assigning numbers to husbands is practical and efficient. He's okay. Better than Numbers Four and Two, and considerably smarter than Number Three. And he's the reason I'm sitting here sharing a sub with the never-to-be-matched Number One."

"How's that?"

"Putting the song and dance together requires money. I had some money."

"Cilla."

"Wait, wait. I had some money, and she had something I wanted. I wanted this place, Dad. I've wanted it for a while now."

"You—"

"Yeah, I bought the farm." Cilla tossed back her head and laughed. "And she's *so* pissed at me. She didn't want it, God knows. I mean, look at it. She hasn't been out here in years, in *decades*, and she fired every manager, every overseer, every custodian. She wouldn't give it to me, and it was my mistake to

ask her for it a couple years ago. She wouldn't sell it to me then, either."

She took another bite of the sub, enjoying it now. "I got the tragedy face, the spiel about Janet. But now she needed seed money and wanted me to invest. Big no on that followed by big fight, much drama. I told her, and Number Five, I'd buy this place, named an amount and made it clear that was firm."

"She sold it to you. She sold you the little farm."

"After much gnashing of teeth, much weeping, various sorrowful opinions on my daughterly behavior since the day I was born. And so on. It doesn't matter." Or hardly mattered, Cilla thought. "She didn't want it; I did. She'd have sold it long before this if it hadn't been tied up in trusts. It could only be sold and transferred to family until, what, 2012? Anyway, Number Five calmed her down, and everyone got what they wanted."

"What are you going to do with it, Cilla?"

Live, she thought. Breathe. "Do you remember it, Dad? I've only seen the pictures and old home movies, but you were here when it was in its prime. When the grounds were gorgeous and the porches gleaming. When it had character and grace. That's what I'm going to do with it. I'm going to bring it back."

"Why?"

She heard the unspoken *how?* and told herself it didn't matter that he didn't know what she could do. Or hardly mattered.

"Because it deserves better than this. Because I think Janet Hardy deserves better than this. And, because I can. I've been flipping houses for almost five years now. Two years pretty much on my own. I know none of them was on the scale of this, but I have a knack for it. I've made a solid profit on my projects."

"Are you doing this for profit?"

"I may change my mind in the next four years, but for now? No. I never knew Janet, but she's influenced almost every area of my life. Something about this place pulled her here, even at the end. Something about it pulls me."

"It'a a long way from what you've known," Gavin said. "Not just the miles, but the atmosphere. The culture. The Shenandoah

Valley, this part of it, is still fairly rural. Skyline Village boasts a few thousand people, and even the larger cities like Front Royal and Culpepper, it's far and away from LA."

"I guess I want to explore that, and I want to spend more time with my East Coast roots." She wished he'd be pleased instead of concerned that she'd fail or give up. Again.

"I'm tired of California, I'm tired of all of it, Dad. I never wanted what Mom wanted, for me or for herself."

"I know, sweetie."

"So I'll live here for a while."

"*Here?*" Shock covered his face. "Live here? At the Little Farm?"

"I know, crazy. But I've done plenty of camping, which is what this'll be for a few days anyway. Then I can rough it inside for a while longer. It'll take about nine, ten months, maybe a year to do the rehab, to do it right. At the end of that, I'll know if I want to stay or move on. If it's moving on, I'll figure out what to do about it then. But right now, Dad, I'm tired of moving on."

Gavin said nothing for a moment, then draped his arm around Cilla's shoulder. Did he have any idea, she wondered, what that casual show of support meant to her? How could he?

"It was beautiful here, beautiful and hopeful and happy," he told her. "Horses grazing, her dog napping in the sun. The flowers were lovely. Janet did some of the gardening herself when she was here, I think. She came here to relax, she said. And she would, for short stretches. But then she needed people—that's my take on it. She needed the noise and the laughter, the light. But now and again, she came out alone. No friends, no family, no press. I always wondered what she did during those solo visits."

"You met Mom here."

"I did. We were just children, and Janet had a party for Dilly and Johnnie. She invited a lot of local children. Janet took to me, so I was invited back whenever they were here. Johnnie and I played together, and stayed friends when we hit our teens, though he began to run with a different sort of crowd. Then Johnnie died. He died, and everything went dark. Janet came here alone more often after that. I'd climb the wall to see if she

was here, if Dilly was with her, when I was home from college. I'd see her walking alone, or see the lights on. I spoke to her a few times, three or four times, after Johnnie died. Then she was gone. Nothing here's been the same since.

"It does deserve better," he said with a sigh. "And so does she. You're the one who should try to give it to them. You may be the only one who can."

"Thanks."

"Patty and I will help. You should come stay with us until this place is habitable."

"I'll take you up on the help, but I want to stay here. Get a feel for the place. I've done some research on it, but I could use some recommendations for local labor—skilled and not. Plumbers, electricians, carpenters, landscapers. And just people with strong backs who can follow directions."

"Get your notebook."

She pushed to her feet, started inside, then turned back. "Dad, if things had worked out between you and Mom, would you have stayed in the business? Stayed in LA?"

"Maybe. But I was never happy there. Or I wasn't happy there for long. And I wasn't a comfortable actor."

"You were good."

"Good enough," he said with a smile. "But I didn't want what Dilly wanted, for herself or for me. So I understand what you meant when you said the same. It's not her fault, Cilla, that we wanted something else."

"You found what you wanted here."

"Yes, but—"

"That doesn't mean I will, too," she said. "I know. But I just might."

First, Cilla supposed, she had to figure out what it was she did want. For more than half her life she'd done what she was told, and accepted what she had as what she *should* want. And most of the remainder, she admitted, she'd spent escaping from or ignoring all of that, or sectioning it off as if it had happened to someone else.

She'd been an actor before she could talk because it was what her mother wanted. She'd spent her childhood playing another child—one who was so much cuter, smarter, sweeter than she was herself. When that went away, she'd struggled through what the agents and producers considered the awkward years, where the work was lean. She cut a disastrous mother-daughter album with Dilly, and did a handful of teen slasher films in which she considered herself lucky to have been gruesomely murdered.

She'd been washed up before her eighteenth birthday, Cilla thought as she flopped down on the bed in her motel room. A has-been, a whatever-happened-to who copped a scattering of guest roles on TV and voice-overs for commercials.

But the long-running TV series and a few forgettable B-movies provided a nest egg. She'd been clever about feathering that nest, and using those eggs to allow her to poke her fingers into various pies to see if she liked the flavor.

Her mother called it wasting her God-given, and her therapist termed it avoidance.

Cilla called it a learning curve.

Whatever you called it, it brought her here to a fairly crappy hotel in Virginia, with the prospect of hard, sweaty and expensive work over the next several months. She couldn't wait to get started.

She flipped on the TV, intending to use it as background noise while she sat on the lumpy bed to make another pass through her notes. She heard a couple of cans thud out of the vending machine a few feet outside her door. Behind her head, the ghost sounds of the TV in the next room wafted through the wall.

While the local news droned on her set, she made her priority list for the next day. Working bathroom, number one. Camping out wasn't a problem for her, but moving out of the motel meant she required the basic facilities. Sweaty work necessitated working shower. Plumbing, first priority.

Halfway through her list her eyes began to droop. Reminding herself she wanted to be checked out and on site by eight, she switched off the TV, then the light.

As she dropped into sleep, the ghosts from the next room drifted through the wall. She heard Janet Hardy's glorious voice lift into a song designed to break hearts.

"Perfect," Cilla murmured as the song followed her into sleep.

She sat on the lovely patio with the view full of the pretty pond and the green hills that rolled back to the blue mountains. Roses and lilies stunned the air with perfume that had the bees buzzing drunkenly and a hummingbird, bold as an emerald, darting for nectar. The sun poured strong and bright out of cloudless skies to wash everything in the golden light of fairy tales. Birds sang their hearts out in Disneyesque harmony.

"I expect to see Bambi frolicking with Thumper any minute," Cilla commented.

"It's how I saw it. In the good times." Young, beautiful in a delicate white sundress, Janet sipped sparkling lemonade. "Perfect as a stage set, and ready for me to make my entrance."

"And in the bad times?"

"An escape, a prison, a mistake, a lie." Janet shrugged her lovely shoulders. "But always a world away."

"You brought that world with you. Why?"

"I needed it. I couldn't be alone. There's too much space when you're alone. How do you fill it? Friends, men, sex, drugs, parties, music. Still, I could be calm here for a while. I could pretend here, pretend I was Gertrude Hamilton again. Though she died when I was six and Janet Hardy was born."

"Did you want to be Gertrude again?"

"Of course not." A laugh, bright and bold as the day, danced through the air. "But I liked to pretend I did. Gertrude would have been a better mother, a better wife, probably a better woman. But Gertrude wouldn't have been nearly as interesting as Janet. Who'd remember her? And Janet? No one will ever forget her." With her head tilted, Janet gave her signature smile—humor and knowledge with sex shimmering at the edges. "Aren't you proof of that?"

"Maybe I am. But I see what happened to you, and what's

happened to this place, as a terrible waste. I can't bring you back, or even know you. But I can do this."

"Are you doing this for you or for me?"

"Both, I think." She saw the grove, all pink and white blossoms, all fragrance and potential. And the horses grazing in green fields, gold and white etched against hills. "I don't see it as a perfect set. I don't need perfect. I see it as your legacy to me and, if I can bring it back, as my tribute to you. I come from you, and through my father, from this place. I want to know that, and feel it."

"Dilly hated it here."

"I don't know if she did, always. But she does now."

"She wanted Hollywood—in big, shiny letters. She was born wanting it, and lacking the talent or the grit to get it and hold it. You're not like her, or me. Maybe …" Janet smiled as she sipped again. "Maybe you're more like Gertrude. More like Trudy."

"Who did you kill that night? Janet or Gertrude?"

"That's a question." With a smile, Janet tipped back her head and closed her eyes.

But what was the answer? Cilla wondered about that as she drove back to the farm in the morning. And why did it matter? Why ask questions of a dream anyway?

Dead was dead, after all. The project wasn't about death, but about life. About making something for herself out of what had been left to ruin.

As she stopped to unlock the old iron gates that blocked the drive she debated having them removed. Would that be a symbol to throwing open again what had been closed off, or would it be a monumentally stupid move that left her, and the property, vulnerable? They protested when she walked them open, and left rust on her hands.

Screw symbols and stupidity, she decided. They should come down because they were a pain in the ass. After the project, she could put them back up.

Once she'd parked in front of the house, she strode up to

unlock the front door, and left it wide to the morning air. She drew on her work gloves. She'd finish tackling the kitchen, she thought. And hope the plumber her father had recommended showed up.

Either way, she'd be staying. Even if she had to pitch a damn tent in the front yard.

She'd worked up her first sweat of the day when the plumber, a grizzle-cheeked man named Buddy, showed up. He made the rounds with her, listened to her plans, scratched his chin a lot. When he gave her what she thought of as a pull-it-out-of-his-ass estimate for the projected work, she countered with a bland stare.

He grinned at that, scratched some more. "I could work up something a little more formal for you. It'd be considerable less if you're buying the fixtures and such."

"I will be."

"Okay then. I'll work up an estimate for you, and we'll see what's what."

"That's fine. Meanwhile, how much to snake out the tub in the first bath upstairs? It's not draining right."

"Why don't I take a look-see? Estimate's free and I'm here for that anyway."

She hovered, not so much because she didn't trust him but because you could never be sure what you might learn. She learned he didn't dawdle, and that his fee for the small task—and a quick check of the sink and john—meant he wanted the job enough that his estimate would probably come into line.

By the time Buddy climbed back into his truck, she hoped the carpenter and electrician she'd lined up for estimates worked out as well.

She dug out her notebook to tick her meeting with Buddy off her day's to-do list. Then she hefted her sledgehammer. She was in the mood for some demo, and the rotted boards on the front porch were just the place to start.