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Opening Extract from...

Down to Earth

Written by Melanie Rose

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MELANIE ROSE

Down to Earth

AVON

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On the Number 52 – www.wisdomportal.com/Numbers/52.html

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Cancer Help UK – www.cancerhelp.org.uk

This book is for my clever, elegant, artistic and most beloved Mum, who taught me to put myself in other people's shoes and to see things from their perspective.
I miss you every day x

Chapter One

April 2002

Blood pounded in my head and I thought I might be sick at any minute. The parachute felt surprisingly heavy on my back as I followed Ingrid through the hangar doors and out into the bright, spring sunshine. Ingrid, who had been making little quips and jokes during the six-hour training session, had fallen ominously silent as we followed the jumpmaster towards a light aircraft, which was parked a short way away on the grassy field.

'Maybe we should have waited until more of the group could make it.' I swallowed nervously, wishing I was anywhere but here right now. 'The whole office signed up for this and now there's only the four of us.'

One of my mum's favourite sayings flickered into my mind; *be careful what you wish for, sometimes the cosmos is listening.*

Shaking the thought away with a tremor of unease, I glanced over my shoulder, pausing in mid-stride to let Graham, the red faced, rather rotund chief administrator catch up to us. I wondered briefly if he'd lied on his 'declaration of fitness' form. If not, he must have only just squeezed within the 15 stone limit for a solo static line jump. In Graham's wake dithered the angular Kevin, the youngest and newest

member of our group. He'd only joined Wayfarers insurance company a few weeks ago as an IT support technician and had been keen to sign up to what the boss had billed as a 'team-building charity parachute jump'. Looking at his pale face now, I wondered if he was questioning his decision.

Kevin definitely looked as sick as I felt, but before I could commiserate I realised his eyes were fixed miserably on the back of Ingrid's flaxen head. My best friend, in true Ingrid-fashion was sticking close to the jumpmaster and as she turned and tossed her silky hair, I could see her blue eyes dancing animatedly on his.

'She's nervous, that's all,' I managed a weak smile as Kevin lowered his eyes to the ground as if unable to watch his office crush flirt a moment longer.

'Yeah, right,' he mumbled under his breath.

Matt, our instructor and jumpmaster was helping Ingrid into the plane. As she disappeared inside the small white hull, he turned his grey eyes on me and held out his hand. My pulse quickened a little further as I placed my hand in his. He reminded me a little of the French footballer David Ginola, but younger, somewhere in his early to mid-twenties, around my own age, I guessed. He had been kind but thoroughly professional all morning as he'd put us through our paces. He gave my hand a light squeeze.

'Don't look so worried, Michaela, you'll be fine. The first time is scary, but I promise you'll love it.'

Yeah, right, sprang to mind again but as I looked into his eyes I found that I believed him.

'Just remember the briefing video and your roll technique for landing. And do everything I tell you, when I tell you. You have to trust yourself to me, OK?'

He fished a scruffy piece of paper from his pocket and tucked it into the breast pocket of my jumpsuit. 'My phone

number,' he whispered conspiratorially. 'Maybe you'd like to have a drink with me sometime.'

I thought fleetingly of my boyfriend Calum, the love of my life, waiting at home, but I nodded anyway; there was no harm in a friendly drink. 'Maybe – if I survive.' I stepped up through the hatch, catching the side of my hand on something sharp as I clambered into the plane and squeezed myself into the seat next to Ingrid who was fastening her helmet in place.

She grinned at me nervously. 'Cute isn't he?'

Gripping my hands in my lap to stop them from shaking I nodded again, realising as I did so that a thin line of blood was seeping from a small cut on the side of my palm. 'I suppose he is.'

Graham and Kevin were scrambling up in front of us and almost as soon as we were all seated the pilot revved the plane into life.

'What the hell was I thinking?' I said louder than I intended, shutting my eyes as the plane jolted and bucked over the short grass. 'I can't believe I'm doing this.'

'You'll be fine,' Matt yelled over the roar of the engine. 'It'll be the experience of a lifetime!'

Tentatively opening one eye to peer out of the open hatch, I glimpsed blue sky streaked with wispy, white clouds. The aircraft engine roared noisily in my ears and I wasn't sure whether my body was trembling because of the aircraft's vibrations or because of my heart, which was thumping wildly in my chest.

The pilot called out to Matt. The ground staff had just reported that the wind and our position were exactly right. We were over the drop zone; it was time to jump.

Graham, I noticed, despite his earlier bravado seemed to be praying silently and under the circumstances I decided

that praying wasn't such a bad idea. Scrunching my eyes shut I put aside the fact that I hadn't thought of God for a very long time and entreated the Almighty to forgive me for this folly, praying that I would survive the jump intact.

Whether his silent entreaties to God had given him strength or because he was ever the valiant leader, Graham inched towards the exit with a jaunty thumbs-up, and on the count of three from Matt, jumped blithely out into space.

I watched the wind buffet his jumpsuit as he leapt, catching a fleeting glimpse of his arms and legs spread wide as we'd been taught, before he disappeared from view. But before I had time to register anything else, Matt was guiding Ingrid to the doorway, where she lingered, fingers tightly gripping the edge of the hatch, her body rigid with fear.

'Three, two, one, now!' Matt shouted, and Ingrid leapt out after Graham with a screech of terror that resounded in my ears and rolled around my stomach like an express train.

Matt was beckoning me over but I shook my head. 'No, no way.'

'I'll go,' Kevin slid past me, balanced himself in the gaping doorway, and in a moment he too was gone.

Matt was looking at me.

'I can't do it,' I quaked. 'I really can't.'

'The pilot is coming in for another pass,' Matt called over the howling wind and the drone of the turning plane. 'You've done all the practice drills, you know what to do . . .' He reached out and lightly touched my arm. 'If you don't want to do it you don't have to, but I can guarantee you'll be disappointed with yourself later if you don't.'

Every instinct told me to grab his comforting hand and hang on to it for dear life, but I knew he was right. If I didn't jump I'd be letting my sponsors down. Not to mention the heart foundation who were expecting my contribution.

My colleagues would be on the ground by now, their jumps completed. 'Please, if there is a God,' I mumbled as I scrambled towards the doorway, 'don't let me die.'

'Now!' Matt yelled.

And, with a great gulp of breath, I tumbled outwards into the void.

Chapter Two

I fell like a stone, plummeting earthwards at an astonishing speed, the breath squeezed out of me as I tried to spread my arms and legs out in the free-fall stance I'd been taught. My terrified brain was still panicking; why hadn't the chute opened? Had something gone terribly wrong? But then the static line jerked abruptly and I felt myself yanked upwards as the parachute deployed miraculously above my head.

Opening my eyes I scanned the patchwork quilt of the countryside stretching away for as far as the eye could see. Below me lay bright green squares of young spring growth butting up against brown, neatly ploughed fields and in the distance, the distinct grey tarmac lines of a motorway, speckled with miniature cars moving like brightly coloured ants.

It was stunningly beautiful. My heart was settling back into a regular rhythm and I was thrilled at the feeling of being quite literally on top of the world.

And then the wind came out of nowhere and hit me.

Suddenly I felt the parachute buck and twist. It wasn't simply a blustery gust of wind; more a tidal wave of air, bearing down on me from above and engulfing me as I hung helpless in the sky. Dark clouds appeared and swallowed me up so that I could no longer see the ground.

I hung there, suspended within the giant wave, buffeted this way and that, breathless and terrified. Completely disorientated, I continued my downward spiral towards an earth I could no longer see. The training video certainly hadn't mentioned this eventuality and I had absolutely no idea what to do.

And suddenly just when I thought I was going to die from fright, the airborne tsunami hurled me to the ground, where I lay panting and gasping like a beached fish.

For a moment I lay motionless, trying to still my racing heart, but the wind was plucking at the parachute, threatening to drag my body through the long, damp grass where I had landed. Fuzzily recalling the drill, I unclipped the buckles on the chute and sat up, looking round in confusion. It seemed I was on the airfield, but it was so dark I couldn't make out the aircraft hangar or the adjoining buildings.

Pulling up the sleeve of my jumpsuit I peered through the gloom at my digital wristwatch. Nine thirty. But how could that be? I had left the aircraft hangar at three in the afternoon. Even allowing for the short wait before take-off and the second pass the aircraft had made after the others had jumped, no more than half an hour could have elapsed. Tapping the watch with my finger, I concluded it must have been damaged on landing.

I felt a pang of worry as I struggled to my feet. Even if my watch was broken, why was it so dark? And where were the airfield personnel who were supposed to take me back to the hangar?

'Get a grip,' I admonished myself as I stood trembling in the darkness. The rogue wind had probably blown me off course and I might not be on the airfield at all. Maybe the terror of the jump had confused me or perhaps I had bumped my head and lain here for hours while the parachuting

company had been searching the surrounding woods and fields for me. Slowly I realised that if they couldn't locate me, I would have to find my own way back to the airfield.

Taking a deep breath, I turned to gather up the silky folds of the chute, and, finding a depression in the soft earth I stuffed the parachute and my helmet in it, covering it with stones to weigh it down. Drawing another steadying breath, I noticed the outline of trees to my right and set off in what I hoped was the right direction.

Ten to fifteen minutes later a building loomed ahead of me, I could see enough to recognise the aircraft hangar and the one-storey buildings, which housed the small office, toilets and mess room where I'd had lunch several hours earlier.

I decided to check the mess room first. But when I reached out to open the door I found that it was locked. Rubbing at the filthy, cracked window pane with the cuff of my jumpsuit, I squinted into the dark interior. I hadn't noticed the window being quite this dirty earlier in the day and I was pretty sure it hadn't been cracked either, but anything could have happened in my absence. Moving to the next building I located the ladies' loo. The door was swinging gently on its hinges in the evening breeze. Pushing it open I saw that the fittings had been vandalised, the toilet seat was hanging to one side and the wash basin had been wrenched off the wall and was lying splintered on the concrete floor.

Wrinkling my nose in distaste, I decided to use the facilities anyway. This same toilet had been clean and tidy only a few hours before, with brightly coloured curtains hanging in the window which had now mysteriously disappeared.

Zipping up my jumpsuit I stood shivering in the moonlight, unsure what to do next. The hangar looked to be in complete darkness, but I did briefly wonder if this was all some kind of wind-up. Maybe Ingrid, Graham and Kevin

were hiding in the shadows waiting to leap out and shout 'You've been framed!' and spray champagne everywhere, while the airfield crew stood laughing appreciatively in the wings.

I walked towards the hangar only to find that the door wouldn't budge. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I noticed that the door had been kicked in, in one corner, leaving a jagged hole near the ground. Glancing round warily to ensure that no one was around, I lay down so I could spy through the hole into the interior.

The hangar was empty. Everything that had been in there earlier, the television screen on which we'd watched the information video, the padded mats we'd used to practise our rolling falls, the plastic chairs, the parachutes themselves – not to mention two light aircraft lockers, work benches and tools – had all simply vanished.

Completely nonplussed, I crawled onto my knees and scuffled round into a sitting position. Leaning my back against the cold hangar wall, I drew my legs up to my chest, gazing into the oppressive nothingness with wide-eyed fear. For the second time today I found myself muttering a desperate entreaty to the God of my childhood, while staring like a lost and lonely soul into the darkness.

Chapter Three

It took me some time to realise that although my fleece jacket and handbag (including my mobile phone) had probably disappeared along with the locker, I still hadn't checked the car park for my car.

Gingerly getting to my feet, I tried to hold back my tears and slowly walked the short distance to the car park with folded arms and hunched shoulders. I didn't really want to look. The thought of not finding my car sitting waiting for me was so awful that I didn't raise my head to look properly until the very last minute.

It was every bit as bad as I'd expected. Not only had the dozen or so cars disappeared, including my Suzuki Vitara jeep, but the gravel surface had gone too. A rusty tractor stood in the corner of a deserted field, but it might as well have been a spaceship for all the sense things were making right now.

There hadn't been many instances in my life when I'd been at such a complete and utter loss. Once, at school, when I was about ten years old I'd been asked to stand up in class and recite a poem. My mind had buzzed emptily rather like it was buzzing now and my throat had dried to the point where I could barely swallow. But it had been warm in that room and the teacher had come to my rescue by leading me back to my chair and saying kindly that I could try again later.

Here it was cold, and I was on my own. A chilly wind whipped my dark blonde hair around my shoulders, and I shivered, hugging the jumpsuit closely round me, glad of the extra layer of warmth over my jeans and thin T-shirt. I wondered if anyone was likely to come and help me now. I thought probably not. If there was going to be any sort of rescue, then I would have to do it myself. Whatever had happened here, my only recourse was to try and find some shelter, some food and some warmth, a place to collect my wits and plan how I was going to get home.

I remembered passing a village on the way to the airfield this morning. Perhaps I would find help there. I walked down the dark road for what seemed like hours while the wind howled mercilessly and blew dried leaves down from the trees, making me jump with every rustle. When I finally saw the lights of a pub, I could have cried with relief. Pushing open the entrance door, I blinked in the sudden brightness and paused to take stock.

There was a fire burning in the grate against the opposite wall, a long wooden bar counter taking up most of the space to my left and about fifteen people of all ages sitting at tables. Squeezing past them towards the fire, I was surprised by the complete absence of cigarette smoke. I'd always hated the way smoke hung in the air stinging my eyes and throat, making my clothes and hair reek for hours afterwards.

As I took a seat halfway between the bar and the fire, I eyed the couple sitting on bar stools nearby, wondering how I was going to ask for help. I had no money about my person, no personal details or any form of identification. Who would take me seriously?

'Can I get you anything, love?'

I glanced up to find the barman staring at me from behind the bar.

'Er, do you have a pay phone I could use?' I called back.

He pointed his head to the end of the bar. 'There's a phone out by the toilets, but you'll need a phone card.'

'Can I reverse the charges?'

He looked at me long and hard. 'Are you alright, love?'

I felt myself blushing under his scrutiny. The couple at the bar were looking at me now and several of the other customers had stopped talking to glance my way. I suppose I looked a bit out of place sitting in an ill-fitting blue jumpsuit with my tear-stained face and lack of personal belongings.

'I had an accident up the road there.' It wasn't too much of a lie, I thought. 'I need to ring someone to come and fetch me.'

'You look a bit peaky, are you hurt? Do you need an ambulance?'

'No, really,' I shook my head. 'If I could just use your phone I could get my boyfriend to come for me.'

'Where's your car? It isn't blocking the road or anything?'

'No.'

'And no one else was involved?' The barman had come round the bar to get a better look at me. He held out a glass of water. 'Here, drink this.'

He watched as I gratefully sipped the cool liquid. I hadn't realised how thirsty I was.

'You look familiar, somehow.' He looked at me closely. 'Are you from round these parts?'

I shook my head again. 'I drove down from Surrey this morning.'

He seemed to come to a decision. 'Come on round the back and you can use the house phone.'

'I can't pay you; I lost my handbag in the . . . accident.'

'Don't worry about it, love. Come on.'

I rose to my feet and followed him round the bar to a

hallway where a phone hung on a plainly decorated wall. The customers watched for a moment then returned to their drinks. I could hear the kindly barman return to the bar as I picked up the handset and punched in the number for the house I shared with Calum.

Calum and I had moved in together six months ago after a whirlwind romance. He was several years older than me and had a ten-year-old daughter called Abbey. Abbey's mother had died in a car accident eighteen months before I'd met them, and although things had been difficult between me and the resentful young girl for the first few months, we had gradually begun to gel into something resembling a family unit.

As I waited for him to pick up the phone, I thought about Calum's horrified reaction when I'd first told him about the parachute jump. 'Are you crazy?' he had demanded when I'd shown him the sponsorship forms. 'Don't you realise how dangerous it is?'

'People do parachute jumps all the time,' I'd soothed him. 'Nothing will happen to me.'

Over the next few weeks as I gathered sponsorship money, he had realised I wasn't going to back down and had reluctantly added his own name to my list of sponsors. 'I don't think you realise that you are one of the most important people in my world,' he whispered late one evening as we'd lain in bed. 'I just couldn't bear to lose you, Kaela. Promise me you'll be careful?'

I knew he was terrified that history would repeat itself and snatch me away as it had his wife. His reservations were understandable and I'd tried to reassure him the best I could. We'd made love with an intensity sparked by fear and afterwards I'd lain awake listening to his even breathing thinking about how much I cared about him, whilst at the same time yearning for this one last chance at freedom.

At twenty-five the responsibilities I had so willingly taken

on were more of a challenge than I'd expected. I was still trying to hold down my job as Graham's personal assistant and would-be apprentice. It had been a smart career move when I'd been single and independent, but now I was doing a daily school run, helping with Abbey's homework, shopping and cooking and cleaning for the three of us. More than once during the last six months I'd feared my parents might have had a point when they'd warned me about taking on a man of thirty four and his child.

'Are you sure he's not just looking for a new mother for his daughter?' my father had cautioned me. 'Is this really what you want to do with your life?'

'He's on the rebound,' my mum added. 'His wife has only been gone a year and a half; it's too soon.'

But infatuation had conquered all. Calum had wined and dined me and had seemed so much more mature and sophisticated than the boys I had dated in the past. He was kind and considerate and we'd taken picnics and long walks by the river discussing all kinds of highbrow subjects, instead of drinking and dancing the night away at bars and clubs.

After I'd moved in with him we'd tried to keep some sort of social life alive, but the pressures of our jobs and being full time parents meant that we rarely went out in the evenings any more.

For all my promise of a lasting commitment, the parachute jump had been a breath of fresh air, an adventure in the making and nothing Calum or anyone else could say would have dissuaded me from taking part. Now, as the phone went unanswered, I wondered if I was being punished.

He must have gone out, I thought, even though he'd said he would be there when I got home. And it was a school night, so Abbey should be in doing her homework. Perhaps Calum had taken Abbey out for a pizza.

Replacing the receiver, I rubbed my hands over my face. I couldn't stay here, that was for sure. Tolerant as the barman was being, I couldn't see him letting me spend the night.

Coming to a decision, I dialled the number for my parents' house. They would want to know why Calum hadn't come for me of course, and I waited for them to pick up with mixed feelings. But the phone rang and rang endlessly there too. Where had everyone gone? Normally my parents ate dinners in front of the television; it was unusual for them to go out unless it was some special occasion. Out of habit I glanced at my watch again, forgetting that it might be broken. Ten thirty. Perhaps they had gone to bed.

I was about to replace the receiver, when it was picked up and a woman's voice said, 'Yes?'

'Mum?' It didn't sound like my mother, but I couldn't imagine who else it could be.

'Who is this?' the voice demanded.

'It's Michaela. Is that you, Mum?'

'I'm sorry you've got the wrong number.'

I repeated the number I had dialled and the woman confirmed it was correct.

'This is Michaela Anderson, are you sure my parents aren't there?'

'Very funny,' the voice snapped waspishly. The phone went dead. I knew it had been unwise to press the point, but I couldn't understand why some stranger had picked up my parents' phone. I stood, rooted to the spot with the receiver in my hand, until someone nudged my elbow.

'Made your call?' The barman was looking at me strangely. He took the phone from me and replaced it gently on its cradle. 'Are you alright, love? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'I couldn't get through,' I mumbled, trying to shake off

the feeling of deep unease that was creeping up through my body. 'I need to try someone else.'

'Go ahead,' he said, turning away, 'let me know if you need anything.'

I tried Ingrid next, but her line seemed to be out of order. Leaning back against the wall I tried to think. I was over an hour's drive from home and I had no money for a cab, a train, or even a bus – should there have been one at this time of the night – which I doubted. Ice cold fingers of fear tightened around my chest which was feeling increasingly hollow and empty. I thought for a moment that I might actually faint.

Holding onto the wall for support, I clawed my way back towards the bar. There had to be a rational answer to all this. Maybe I was asleep and dreaming the whole thing. As I made my way slowly along the passage I glanced at the walls, which were covered from floor to ceiling with posters advertising various bands I'd never heard of, leaflets and personal messages stuck on top of one another forming a huge collage.

I paused as one particular leaflet caught my eye. There were several copies of it, some partially hidden by more recent stickers, others with pen marks and scribbles obscuring a face. Bold printed words asked: HAVE YOU SEEN THIS GIRL? The thing that made me stop dead in my tracks was the face itself: *my* face peering out from a washed-out photograph. A photo I'd had taken only the week before, and which, to my knowledge hadn't even been developed yet.

But it was not only the enormity of seeing my own face staring wanly back at me from the faded leaflets that made my blood run cold. It was the date printed boldly underneath the picture: 'Last seen 15 April 2002.'

Because 15 April 2002 was today's date. And I wasn't missing at all.

Chapter Four

The pub toilet wasn't the ideal place to hide. Apart from being less than hygienic, customers kept coming in to use the facilities to find me alternately splashing cold water onto my face and slapping or pinching myself in the hope that I'd wake up from this terrible nightmare. Most of the ladies coming in and out averted their eyes, though one or two looked at me sympathetically as they washed their hands or touched up their make-up.

Eventually the barman, who turned out to be the pub landlord, called me out and told me the pub was closing for the night.

'There must be someone you can call,' he said as he cleared the tables of glasses. I watched, perched on a bar stool as he picked up a discarded local newspaper and tossed it into a blue plastic bin.

'Don't throw it away!' I exclaimed, reaching for the paper and smoothing it out.

'I wasn't throwing it away, love, I was recycling it. Look, that's the recycling bin.'

I spread the paper out on the bar top and peered at the date. He hadn't struck me as a save-the-planet type of guy, but I didn't have time to wonder at his idiosyncrasies, because I was staring at the date printed in the top right

hand corner of the paper. 'Monday, 20 October 2008'.

'Where did this newspaper come from?' I demanded tremulously.

He shrugged. 'One of the customers must have brought it in.'

'Is it a joke or something?'

He stopped in mid-stride, his fingers full of glasses and stared at me suspiciously. 'In what way might it be a joke?'

'The date,' I whispered. Something in his expression stopped me from protesting further and I backtracked quickly, a plausible lie leaping to my lips, 'Sorry, I lost my reading glasses in the accident and I'm having trouble seeing the small print. This is today's paper is it?'

He came over and took the paper out of my hand. 'Of course it is. Look, love, I've got to close up and you can't stay here. I don't want to throw you out with nowhere to go, but what do you expect me to do with you?'

We stared at one another helplessly for a moment. No amount of prayer was going to help me now, I decided. Tears welled in my eyes and I blinked them furiously back, feeling in the jumpsuit pocket for a tissue, determined not to cry in front of this stranger. But it wasn't a tissue my fingers located – it was a crumpled piece of paper with a telephone number scribbled in pencil.

'Matt,' I breathed.

'Excuse me?'

'There is someone else I could try, if you don't mind letting me use the telephone one more time.'

He waved me towards the back. 'Be my guest, but make it quick will you?'

I dialled the number with trembling fingers. Matt had only given me his number a couple of hours ago, but those few hours seemed to have turned into half a lifetime.

'Please answer,' I begged, shifting from one weary foot to the other as the phone rang in the distance. 'Please, please pick up.'

And then there was a voice at the end of the line. 'Hello?'

'Matt?'

'Who is this?'

'It's Michaela. Michaela Anderson. You gave me your number and asked me to give you a call . . .'

The silence at the end of the line seemed to stretch into eternity. I thought for a moment I had lost the connection, but then his voice came again, hesitant but clear.

'Is . . . is it really you, Michaela?'

'Yes. You suggested going for a drink sometime, but something has happened and I don't know how to get home.'

'Where are you?'

'I'm in a pub near the airfield – the Royal Oak, I believe.'

'Wait right there. Do not move, do not talk to anyone. Give me ten minutes and I'll come and fetch you.'

The line went dead and I turned to find the landlord looking at me. 'Is someone coming for you?' he asked hopefully.

'In ten minutes,' I replied with the faint beginnings of a smile. 'I'll be out of your way as soon as he gets here if you don't mind letting me wait a little while longer.'

The landlord grinned with obvious relief, indicating a seat by the door. 'Be my guest,' he said.

It was nearer fifteen minutes when the door opened startling the landlord, who was leaning against a wall, waiting, key in hand, to lock up and go to bed.

My head, which had drooped wearily onto my chest, shot up as the door swung inwards and I saw a figure emerge through the doorway. A tremor of something indefinable flooded through me.

'Matt?' My voice came out as a hoarse croak. 'You . . . you've had your hair cut.'

I knew it was an odd observation to make, considering the circumstances, but not as odd as the fact that although I could see quite clearly that it *was* Matt, he looked older, had put a little weight on his slim frame and just seemed . . . different.

And he was staring at me as if I were a ghostly apparition.

'My God, Michaela . . . it really is you.'

I opened my mouth to speak, but closed it again in confusion.

He seemed to come to a decision and held out his hand. 'Come on let's get you out of here.'

I rose to my feet, ready to follow him goodness knows where but felt a sudden nagging doubt. What was I doing going off with someone I barely knew? I turned to the landlord, but he was holding the door open for me and I realised that I had little choice but to leave with Matt. 'Thank you so much for letting me wait here, it was very kind of you.'

'Don't mention it.' He yawned widely. 'I just wish I could remember where I've seen you before.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that he had several posters of my face stuck all over his back walls, but Matt had taken my elbow and was guiding me out into the dark night. He released me as soon as we were outside. I saw a black car parked at the kerb and Matt walked towards it and indicated I should get in.

I would normally never get into a stranger's car, but the alternative was to continue being lost and alone and that was something I could not contemplate a moment longer, so I slid onto the cream leather upholstery of the front passenger seat and clipped my safety belt into place. The driver's door

opened and Matt climbed in, started the engine and guided the car out onto the road.

'Where are we going?'

'I'm taking you straight to the police station.'

My insides gave an involuntary lurch. 'Why?'

He risked taking his eyes off the road to glance at me. 'Michaela, you've just turned up out of the blue after all this time. Everyone's been searching for you. We have to let them know you're back so that they can question you.'

So I had come down in the wrong place and they had been looking for me all day and all evening. My theory that I must have bumped my head and become disorientated was right. 'Couldn't it wait until the morning? I'm very tired and I'd rather just go home.'

'I'm not sure that's an option. It's been a long time, things have changed.' He shook his head and whistled through his teeth. 'The press are going to have a field day with your reappearance.'

My stomach clenched at his words and the dread I'd felt earlier began to resurface. 'Things can't have become that urgent in the space of a day, surely?'

Matt slowed down and drew in to a small lay-by where he let the engine idle as he turned to face me. His expression was kind, but his voice firm. 'People are going to want to know where you've been. The whole world is going to want to know what happened to you. Your reappearance is going to cause a sensation. Michaela, it hasn't been a single day. You've been missing without trace for six and a half long years.'