

Journey's End

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Extract

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PART ONE



Late March, 1954

The Telling

Salford, Bedfordshire

CHAPTER ONE

SHE WOKE WITH a cry. It was the same dream as before – the same place, the same faces, the same jolt of terror; real in her dream, real in her life. Would it never leave her be?

The sweat dripping down her temples and her whole body trembling, she clambered out of bed and went to the window, where for a moment she stood, regaining her composure, collecting her senses.

Drawing back the curtains, she peered into the darkness, thick and impenetrable, like the deepest recesses of her mind. Dismissing the nightmare, she returned to the question that tormented her.

Should she tell? Would it destroy lives and minds? Would they hate her or, as she desperately hoped, would they thank her? But then, why would they thank her when the news she had to reveal was so unbearably cruel?

‘Dear God, give me the courage to do what’s right,’ she prayed.

Maybe it would be better if the truth was never told. Yet that would be the coward’s way out, and she might be many things, but Lucy Baker was no coward.

She glanced at the clock; it was five minutes past three – another day beginning. Taking her robe from the back of

the chair, she slipped into it and sat on the edge of the bed, where she remained for a time. She sighed, a long, broken sigh. 'Oh, my dearest Barney, my joy, my life.' There was a murmuring of guilt, but never regret. 'I loved you then, and I love you still.'

Barney had been her only true love, and it was a love all-consuming, all-powerful. There was no way to describe how much she missed him. No words. Only memories.

The smile slipped away and in its place came a look of hatred.

While Barney had brought her joy, *Edward Trent had brought her tragedy.*

'Edward Trent . . . *monster!*' Her mouth curled with loathing, she spat out his name as though it was tainted with poison. His wickedness had caused such pain; she would carry the burden of it for the rest of her days.

Lucy was no stranger to nightmares. A thousand times, she had awoken terrified and sobbing, reliving the night when Edward Trent had kidnapped her little son Jamie, and caused him to drown.

In the sorrowful years that followed, Trent had haunted her every waking and sleeping hour. In the daytime she would be in the middle of a mundane task, like washing the dishes or drawing the curtains, and suddenly he was gnawing at her mind until she could hardly think straight. Then at night came the dreams which left her breathless and shaking. Eventually, over the past twenty and more years, she had grown used to them. Like the hatred, they had become part of her life.

In the dreams it was always the same: the darkness, the water, and the chase . . . that unforgettable chase, ending in such horror.

This time though, the dream had been different. There was no frantic chase, no rushing water as it tumbled down-

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stream, tugging at her ankles and throwing her off-balance; there wasn't even the soul-wrenching sound of her child crying. This dream was like nothing she had ever experienced.

She had seen only his face, that swarthy, handsome face, his mouth frozen in an easy smile. Unlike before, he was not threatening her, nor was he reaching out. There was only the smile. And those mesmerising eyes, utterly chilling. And the silence – eerie, absolute.

'Take a hold of yourself, Lucy,' she said aloud. Grabbing the crumpled corner of the bedsheet, she wiped the sweat from her face. 'It was just a dream. *He* can't hurt you any more.' So many times she had tried to convince herself of that. Even so, the fear never went away.

It never would.



In the adjoining room, in that lazy space between sleeping and waking, Mary lay in her bed and listened. She heard her mother open the curtains, and she heard her muffled footsteps as they paced the floor. The young woman did not attempt to go in: she knew that Lucy would not want that. Instead, for the next hour, she lay waiting, the only sound the ticking of the clock.

This was not the first time she had heard her mother agitated, unable to sleep. The first time was many years ago, when she was just an infant. The sound of Lucy sobbing had disturbed her deeply. In her childish manner, Mary had gone to comfort her, but her mother sent her away. Since then, whenever she heard her mother weeping in the night, Mary would keep vigil, desperately hoping it would not be too long before her mother went back to sleep; as she always did.

Mary had known there was some secret torment in her

mother's past; some fearful thing that touched all of their lives in some way – herself, her mother, and Adam, that dear kind man who had always been there to protect them.

Only recently, Adam had taken it upon himself to tell the truth of what happened all those years ago. In the telling, he had betrayed Lucy's trust and broken his vow to his old friend Barney. At the time he believed it was for the best. Now, he was not so sure.

Mary was shaken to her roots by the story he told. Even now it was not ended. There were others who had to know: the ones who had gone away; the ones who had never known the truth of Barney Davidson's sacrifice.

In Mary's far-off memories, she recalled her father, Barney, who had died when she was a tiny girl. He had been a special kind of man, frail in body but powerful in spirit. She recalled how he would sit her on his knee and create magic through his vivid fairytales; he made her laugh with his comical mimicry, and sometimes when she woke crying, he would hold her up to the window and show her the stars and describe the beauty and wonder of the world they lived in. He told her she must never be afraid, because there would always be someone looking over her.

She loved him so much, and then he was gone, and their lives were never the same again.

When she was satisfied that her mother had gone back to sleep, Mary turned over and relaxed. Tomorrow, there would be no mention of this night. Mother and daughter would smile and chat, and talk of everything else, and it would be as though the nightmare had never happened. Because that was how Lucy wanted it.

CHAPTER TWO

BY HALF PAST eight, Lucy was out of her bed, washed and dressed and sprucing herself in the mirror. ‘Not bad for an old ’un, if I say so myself!’ Laying down the hairbrush, she ran her two hands through her short cap of greying hair, teased out a few stray curls and thought how, if it wasn’t for the occasional lapse of memory and the age spots on the back of her hands, she could maybe pass for a young thing of fifty.

Sighing wistfully, she shook her head. ‘Wish all you like, my girl,’ she chided herself. ‘It won’t change the fact that you’re past your prime, so stop fancying yourself in the mirror. Before you know it, the doctor will be here,’ she frowned, ‘not that you need him, because you don’t – but it makes him feel wanted, so shift yourself, and be quick about it.’

She observed her image in the mirror. She did her best to keep what was left of her looks, but had not yet regained her strength since stumbling in the local churchyard a couple of years ago. The incident seemed to have sparked off a form of arthritis, but this was what you expected, wasn’t it, at her age. You had to slow down, whether you wanted to, or not.

She gazed critically on herself; the skin was not as glowing

as it used to be, and there appeared to be more of it which hung in little loose swathes round her neck, and there were lines round her eyes and mouth. But the small straight nose and heart-shaped face were still pretty, and the blue eyes as bright as ever. She had never been a beauty, that much was true, but she'd been better off than most women because, even though it was for a cruelly short time, she had had the love of a man like Barney Davidson.

Thoughts of her beloved overwhelmed her. She knew that Barney had never loved her as he had loved his wife, Vicky. In the end, Lucy may have filled his heart, but it was only ever Vicky who filled his soul.

Lifting the photograph from the dresser, she gazed down on herself and Barney, and the infant girl in his arms. It was a cherished picture, taken only a few months before Barney was lost to her, and even then, when the illness ravaged him, the goodness of the man, and his absolute joy of life shone out of his face – still a handsome face for all that.

Lucy choked back a sob. They had had so little time together, yet she thanked God for every second. They had shared everything – the anguish of seeing his wife and children leave him; the guilt and tears afterwards; the companionship between him and Lucy that grew into a kind of loving contentment, then the sheer joy and pride when Mary was born to them.

Through all the ups and downs of every passing day, they never forgot the others: Leonard Maitland, a man who had gone away knowing the truth, even though it meant he would never again have peace of mind, and Vicky and the children who had sailed with him, estranged from Barney and in total ignorance of the price he had paid for their new lives in America.

Lucy recalled the day when they left. 'There was no other way, Barney,' she murmured now. 'No other way . . .'

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The loud spluttering of a car engine brought her hurrying to the window. 'Adam!' The brightness of a spring day was startling, and the skies above were blue and cloudless. For late March, it was unusually warm. 'Adam, what's going on?' she called down.

Covered in muck and oil, Adam was standing before the car in the drive of Knudsden House. He had the bonnet up and the starter-handle lodged into position.

'The damned thing's been playing up again,' he called back, 'and now it's completely given up the ghost. I've done what I can, but I reckon she'll need a new engine.' Diving his head under the bonnet again, he fiddled with a few nuts and bolts, before returning to swing the handle for the umpteenth time. There was a shuddering and a spluttering, and a shout of victory when he thought he'd done the trick, but then the engine fell silent again. 'It's no good.' Defeated, he gave a shake of the head. 'There's no spark at all now.'

Lucy shouted down: 'Leave it! Come inside . . . Come on.'

His heart warmed by the invitation, Adam waved up to her. 'I'll be there in a minute.'

Closing the window, Lucy smiled to herself. No spark, eh? She hoped the day never came when they said that about her! Life might be a bit more of a challenge these days and her health was not as robust as she would have liked, but by God, she wasn't done yet. Not by any means!

By the time Adam showed his face at the kitchen door, both Lucy and Mary were seated at the table, Lucy enjoying her eggs and bacon, and Mary toying with her scrambled eggs. 'Look at the state of you!' Pointing to Adam's mucky face and hands, Lucy asked him sternly: 'Have you had your breakfast?'

'Not yet, no.' Because the car had been playing up the previous day, he'd got out of his bed early this morning

to work on the engine. 'There was no time for breakfast,' he explained. 'Two hours I messed about with that blessed machine this morning.' He groaned. 'I honestly thought I'd fixed it!'

Lucy felt as though she had known him forever. A loyal friend to them both, Adam Chives had been part of her life with Barney, and after Barney was gone, he had seen her through a bad time and remained ever close. Lucy had often wondered why he never married, until some time ago he confessed to her that she had always been the only woman he had ever truly loved.

Time and again Adam had asked her to be his wife and time and again she had gently refused. But knowing how persistent he was, Lucy was in no doubt that some time in the not too distant future, he was bound to try again.

Taking a gulp of her tea, Lucy discreetly regarded him. Homely, well-built, with thick greying hair and kind expressive eyes, Adam was an ordinary kind of man, but with an extraordinary sense of loyalty. When he made a friend it was a friend for life and when he fell in love, it was with heart and soul.

Over the years, Lucy had prayed that he might find a woman who would bring him the happiness he deserved; though in the beginning she had never believed it was herself he needed.

When some years ago, she expressed her hope that he might find a good woman to share his life, he told her he wanted no other wife but her. And that he would always be there for her as long as she needed him.

His confession had touched Lucy deeply.

'Right then, if you go and wash up,' she told him now, 'I'll see to your breakfast.'

'Thank you, Lucy, but no thanks!' Hungry though he was, he didn't want her fussing over him. 'I don't like to put you

to any trouble, especially when you've got the doctor coming this morning.'

Brushing aside his protests, Lucy took another long gulp of her tea, before pushing back her chair and standing up. 'Breakfast will be ready when you are,' she assured him. 'And don't worry about the doctor. I can handle him.' She laughed. 'He seems a bit nervous of me. No sooner is he in the door than he's itching to get out again.'

'I'm not surprised. Poor devil!' Adam chuckled. 'I've seen how you boss him about.'

'Only when he tries to tell me what to do!' she retorted. 'I know I'm not as young and foolhardy as I once was; my bones ache like the devil and there are times when I want to run and can only shuffle. Some days it's like going through a fog . . . one minute it's clear as a bell and I can go forward, then the next I can't find an easy way and have to slow down.'

She smiled into his eyes. 'So you see, Adam, the bad times come and go, but I'm not bedridden yet, thank God. If I'm tired I rest, and if I feel all right I'll do whatever I please.' She gave a wry little smile. 'Either way, I expect I'll pop my clogs soon enough.'

Rolling his eyes to the ceiling, Adam gave a boot-deep sigh. 'You can't be serious for one minute, can you? Whatever will we do with you, eh?' He knew what *he'd* like to do. He'd like to sweep her into his arms and carry her off. But you didn't do that with Lucy. She was stubborn and a law unto herself. But that was the nature of her, and he would not have it any other way.

'And don't leave the sink with a rim of oil round it neither!' Lucy's voice sailed across the kitchen.

'Right, boss.' Bowing slightly, Adam gave a mock-servile tug of his forelock. 'I'll make sure I leave it ready for inspection.'

Having put the plug in the sink and taken the kettle from the hob, he began pouring the warm water into an enamel bowl. Looking over his shoulder with a cheeky wink, he made Lucy smile.

Through all this good-natured banter, Mary had remained silent, but now she told Adam, 'Best do as you're told. You know she'll examine your hands back and front before you're allowed to sit down – oh, and don't forget to wash behind your ears, or you'll be made to stand in the corner.'

Lucy wagged a finger. 'Behave yourself, young lady. I may be getting on a bit, and you a grown woman now, but I'm still capable of clipping your ear.'

Mary chuckled. 'I'm sure you are!'

At the sink, Adam took a moment to think. Getting on a bit? In his mind's eye he could see Lucy Baker, as she then was, as a young woman running barefoot across the fields, her long flowing locks lifted by the breeze, and on her face a smile bright and warm as a sunny morning. Sometimes, before the world was wide awake, when he was out walking across the headlands, he would see her by the river, seated on a fallen log with her feet dipped into the water. He had loved her then and knew how, for the remainder of his life, he would never love another woman. What he felt for Lucy was a love that would endure forever.

'Nay, you're far too full of yourself to ever get old,' he said cheekily.

'Well, thank you, Adam,' Lucy replied. 'I shall take that as a back-handed compliment, shall I – though I think you are seeing me through rose-coloured spectacles.' Something in his voice and the look in his eyes told Lucy that he might be ready to ask her again if she would marry him, and just for the briefest moment, her heart seemed to turn over.

'They say beautiful women never really know they're

beautiful,' he added softly. 'I reckon that's true where you're concerned.'

'Get away with you, you old flatterer!' Strangely embarrassed, she took a forkful of leftover egg and popped it into her mouth, and astonished Mary by blushing bright pink.

Graciously refusing Mary's offer to cook Adam's breakfast instead, Lucy threw two more rashers of bacon and some mushrooms into the pan. In no time at all, they were sizzling away.

A few moments later, having finished washing at the sink and making sure he'd wiped it round afterwards, Adam seated himself at the table, where his breakfast was put in front of him. 'Cor! Look at that – a real feast.' He hadn't realised how truly hungry he was until the aroma of hot food flooded his nostrils.

'Thank you, Lucy.' He turned to Mary with a wink. 'Your mother's not only beautiful, she's a good cook into the bargain.'

Lucy thought one fine compliment was enough in a day. 'Food is for eating,' she said, placing a platter of toast before him. 'So stop chatting and get it down you, before it goes cold.'

Smiling to herself at the way these two seemed to fit together like a hand in a glove, Mary was already getting out of her chair. 'I'll make some fresh tea.' She knew how much Adam loved her mother, and she also suspected that, although she didn't yet realise it, her mother had come to love him back.

Leaving them to talk, she took her time making the tea, while occasionally glancing at the two of them, now deep in conversation and looking for all the world like any other husband and wife; though they were neither of them ordinary. They were special, at least to her.

A short time later, having set them up with a fresh pot of tea, Mary excused herself. 'Ben will be here soon,' she

explained. 'We're going into Shefford to look at a new tractor.'

'A new tractor, eh?' Lucy was delighted at how her daughter's friendship with Ben Morris, the owner of Far Crest Farm, had grown into a close and loving relationship. It had been her dearest wish for Mary to find a man who cared deeply for her, and she truly believed Ben to be that man.

'Talk of the devil, here he is now.' Adam looked out of the window and drew their attention to the dark-haired, good-looking man on his way up the drive; with his tall capable build and long, easy strides, he looked like a man who could handle whatever obstacles life put in his way.

A few years ago, emotionally and mentally drained by the break-up of his marriage, Ben had decided to uproot himself and build a whole new way of life. It was not an easy decision, but when he eventually moved to the area of South Bedfordshire, he kept in close touch with his only child, Abbie, who had a secretarial job in London and shared a flat there with friends.

On first arriving in Salford, Ben, a former architect knew next to nothing about farming. But thanks to his practical nature, and learning as he went, he now had a comfortable income and a way of life he couldn't have possibly ever imagined. And he had never been happier.

After the trauma and deceit that caused the end of his marriage to Pauline, he had not wanted another deep relationship. But then he met Lucy's daughter, Mary, and had soon come to realise that not all women were the same. Where his wife had been dominant and deceitful, Mary was kind and caring; though she did have a fiery side. Last summer while they were strolling across the fields, they saw a man kicking his dog, and before Ben could intervene, Mary had snatched the dog away and confronted the man with a passion.

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This incident had only served to convince Ben that he was a fortunate man, because here was a woman he could trust and respect. And he had come to love her so much, it frightened him.

‘BEN!’ Knocking on the window, Adam hoped to catch his attention, but the younger man was already out of ear-shot. ‘Don’t you two go running off before I’ve had a chance to see him,’ he said to Mary as she hurried from the room, ‘I want to ask the lad if he’ll have a look at the car. There’s nothing I don’t know about tractors, but I’m jiggered if I can fathom out what’s wrong with this blessed car!’

He frowned. ‘It starts then it dies away, coughing and spluttering. Ben knows his way round engines. With a bit of luck, he’ll be able to make more sense out of that damned vehicle than I can.’

‘Hey!’ Lucy’s voice followed them. ‘That’s quite enough of that cursing, if you don’t mind.’

Half-turning, Adam gave another tug of his forelock. ‘Sorry, boss,’ he said nervously. ‘I’ll not do it again.’

Chuckling heartily, Lucy returned to her tea.

A few minutes later, when she started to clear away, a feeling of total exhaustion overwhelmed her. Sudden pains shot down the back of her neck, and her spine felt as though it was being squeezed. This had happened before; thankfully, the attack always passed, though lately the passing seemed to take longer.

Resting a moment to recover, she rolled up her sleeves and was soon up to the elbows in hot sudsy water. It was a hard thing to come to terms with, growing old, and she resented the years rolling away behind her. Life was too short, and love too fleeting.

She thought of Barney wistfully. She would never again hold his hand or experience that wonderful surge of joy as he slid his arm around her when she least expected it. Life

could be so cruel. But she had Mary, and so she still had a part of Barney in her life.

Looking out of the window, she saw how content her daughter was. She saw Mary helping Ben off with his jacket, and she witnessed the way they briefly touched and held hands before he leaned into the car engine. They belonged together, Lucy had known that from the first minute she saw them together in St Andrew's churchyard all those months ago. That was why she had deliberately dropped her handbag there for Ben to find. When returning it to Lucy at her home, Knudsdon House, he had met Mary again, and their romance had begun on that long, fateful night. And neither of them had ever suspected her part in it!

Ben reminded Lucy so much of Barney – oh, not in his physique, for Ben was taller and bigger-built than Barney and their colouring was different. But the essence of the man was the same; they each had a certain commanding presence. They smiled with their eyes and had that same kind of trustworthy, open nature.

Lucy's heart swelled with love as she gazed fondly on her daughter. Mary would never know how thankful she was that the girl had found someone she truly loved, and who loved her back in the same way.

She couldn't help but compare Mary and her sweetheart, to herself and Barney. She had loved her father in the same way the girl loved her Ben, deeply and without reservation.

She could see it all in her mind's eye – herself, Barney and Vicky, his true wife, soulmate, and the mother of his three other children. It was a devilish triangle, destined to torment them all, and Barney the unwilling centrepiece of a cruel game that no one could ever win.

She had often wondered what she could have done to save them all so much pain, and the answer was always the same: there was nothing. She could not have prevented what

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happened, at least not without hurting Barney, and she loved him so much she would gladly have died for him. God help her, she loved him still with every fibre of her being.

Her eyes swam with sadness as she followed Mary's every move. Oh, I don't fool myself, she thought, because even though for a glorious time we were together and you, my darling, were conceived out of love, your father was never really mine.

Barney *had* loved her, in his own way, but it was Vicky of whom he dreamed. Even after he had sent her away, she filled his heart and soul. Lucy had always understood: Barney and Vicky were made for each other, and Lucy could never take the other woman's place, nor would she want to. Vicky had been his first and only love . . . *just as you were mine*, she thought.