



Watch For Me By Candlelight (Hartsford Mysteries #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: A love that burns for eternity . . .

1885. Following a bad skating accident in Hartsford village, Catriona Aphrodite Tredegar is nursed to health by blacksmith Will Haddon. Her attention soon turns away from her sprained ankle to this handsome man.

With the promise of mending her ice-skates, Catriona excitedly reunites with Will. But will this be the last time they meet?

Now. As the manager of the Folk Museum in Hartsford village, Kate Howard surrounds herself with many intriguing artifacts.

When she dusts off an old pair of Victorian ice-skates inscribed with CAT, Kate becomes intrigued by their history.

Fate has led Kate into the path of Theo Kent, but now she must unravel their own connection to the mystery of the past . . .

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Her foot was twisted at an unnatural angle and she had a deep cut on her forehead. He prayed it wouldn't scar — she was too beautiful to be scarred like that. She was too wild and adventurous, too perfect for this world she lived in, but she couldn't leave it like this — she couldn't.

'I'll get you to the cottage,' he told her, 'I'll look after you. Only please wake up, please wake up. I can't bear it if—'

A bark from behind him, his dog running in mad circles in the snow.

'I know, I know. We'll get her warmed up. She'll be well in no time. No time at all.'

His heart pounded and his breath came in little puffs of air as he hurried back to the cottages.

He had to believe that all would be well or else . . .

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The streets of Hartsford village were always at their best this early in the morning. Kate Howard stepped out of her front door and headed away from the Folk Museum, a long, low building made up of a row of old stone cottages. She was the museum manager and also lived upstairs, in a flat made up of a couple of attics knocked together.

If she headed towards the bakery, she'd just be in time to get a batch of fresh rolls, still warm from the oven. Then she could fill one with hot, sizzling bacon for her breakfast.

She walked along the old streets, with Hartsford Hall a backdrop to the Suffolk village which took its name from the stately home. As she turned a corner, lost in her thoughts and anticipating the smell of bread that always greeted her when she entered the bakery, she walked straight into someone. A man clutching a paper bag printed with the name of the bakery. He'd obviously had the same idea as her, and quickly put his hand out to steady her as she barged into him.

'Oh! I'm so sorry!' Kate blushed and side-stepped him.

He smiled down at her, his dark eyes flashing with mischief. 'That's okay. My breakfast is safe, that's the main thing.'

Kate laughed. 'Definitely. There's not usually many people around at this time in the morning. Again, I'm so sorry. I must still be half asleep.'

'I know that feeling well. Have a good day, anyway!' His smile widened for a moment, and he paused, looking as if he was about to say something else; then he

nodded and walked away.

Kate stared after him — he wasn't local; his accent told her that, and she would have known him had he lived in the village. Still, there was something oddly familiar about the way he strode along the main street and disappeared around a corner. Something about the set of his shoulders, and the way his light-brown, sun-streaked hair was tousled and a little too long, that had her wanting to call after him and ask where they'd met before.

She definitely seemed to know him — her body told her that with a little fizz of excitement or recognition, as if she'd seen him quite recently, or maybe not — perhaps it was a long time ago? She waited another moment, then shook her head. How strange.

Then she turned back towards the bakery, and continued on her way, still feeling the gentle touch of his hand on her arm.

* * *

Later that morning, the front door of the museum slammed open. Kate, her fingers poised over the keyboard of her computer in the reception area, found herself staring at her best friend, Cassie Aldrich. The museum wasn't due to open for about half an hour, but unfortunately, Cassie knew Kate kept the door unlocked from the moment she set foot in the place. And obviously, Kate was never late.

'I've got to get something vintage for the weekend!' Cassie was bright red in the face and clearly panicking.

'Vintage as in . . . ?' Kate asked, amused. 'Clothing? Wine? Motor vehicle? And which weekend are we talking about? It's Friday already. Or is it the very special weekend you've been working towards for Elodie?' Cassie's brother Alex — the

current Earl of Hartsford — and sister-in-law Elodie owned the Hall. Cassie was organising a Living History weekend for them, to take place in August. It was currently the very beginning of June.

‘Yes. That weekend. And a vehicle. Yes. I think a vehicle might describe it.’ Cassie threw herself onto one of the old church pews in the entrance and sighed dramatically. ‘Goodness knows why I took this on.’

Kate smiled at her friend. They’d had this conversation before. ‘You had a moment of weakness and volunteered to help Elodie. You’re just too nice. Cuppa?’ She swung her legs around and jumped off the stool.

‘You’re such a doll. Thank you. Tea would be marvellous.’

‘A doll? In what respect?’

Cassie shrugged. ‘Well, you know. As in kind. Nice. Sweet. Sorry.’ She leaned forward and tucked her chin in her hands. ‘I’m living and breathing this flipping Country House Party Weekend and some of it is rubbing off on me.’

‘Oh, you’re getting there.’ Kate dipped her head so Cassie didn’t see her smiling. The whole village had heard about Cassie’s trials and tribulations. By all accounts she hadn’t done very much actual organising yet. It was usually Elodie’s task, but as Elodie was heavily pregnant with twins it hadn’t quite panned out the way it normally would. So Cassie had decided she would help out.

From what Kate understood, Cassie was beginning to realise organising an event on that scale wasn’t quite as simple as she’d thought it would be.

‘I’ve been doing some research,’ Cassie told her, ‘and I believe that men on ice-cream bicycles were rather popular in those days. My grandfather always used to talk

about one that he chased when he was a boy. There was one that used to go around the village and I think it was old even then.’ She accepted the steaming cup of tea with a grateful smile. ‘So basically, I want a man on an ice-cream bicycle.’

‘A bicycle actually made out of ice-cream? Or one that sells ice-cream?’ Kate sat down at the other end of the pew and Cassie gave her an accusatory glare.

‘Stop mocking me, Kate. You know exactly what I mean.’

Kate laughed. ‘I’m just teasing. Sorry. Anyway, it just so happens I’ve got the very thing in the museum for you to borrow. Come on, I’ll take you through. You can bring your mug, it’s fine.’

‘Seriously?’ Cassie’s face split into a huge grin. ‘I knew I could count on you.’ She stood up. ‘Which house are we going to?’

‘It’s not in one of the houses, it’s in one of the barns. But we’ll take a short cut through the cottages. I know how much you love them. Just don’t spill the tea. I’m trusting you with my exhibits, okay?’

Cassie nodded, clasping both hands around her cup. ‘Ready when you are.’

‘Fine follow me.’

Kate led the way through the terrace, Cassie chattering about the fabulous weekend she envisaged and the inordinate amounts of cream scones and strawberries she thought might be required.

‘They are so popular,’ she said, but Kate wasn’t absolutely certain whether ‘they’ referred to the snacks or the weekends. From Cassie’s perspective, it might have been either; she loved her cakes and loved dressing up to fit the theme of the Living

History weekends too.

‘Oh,’ Cassie continued, ‘and if there’s anything else you think I can borrow, I’m hoping to revamp the pool area as well. And the tennis courts. Our things are dropping to pieces.’ Kate sensed her friend had slowed down and she turned around to see where she was. She was correct. Cassie was ogling one of the museum displays — a pair of Edwardian tennis racquets in a press. ‘They are so much nicer than the ones we’ve got,’ she said covetously.

‘I’ll consider it,’ Kate said.

‘And those! Can I have those? Please?’ She was hovering by Kate’s favourite things in the entire museum; a pair of Victorian ice-skates, made out of soft white leather which laced up around tiny pearl buttons. Inked on the smooth leather interior of each boot was the word CAT.

Kate had no idea what the word meant, although she suspected it was a name. Perhaps they’d belonged to someone who had to write their name in so they didn’t get confused with anyone else’s skates. That was the beauty of living so close to the museum collection — if the real story wasn’t available, Kate liked to make up one that suited, just for herself. In this case, she quite liked the idea of perhaps a “Catherine” owning those skates; which was possibly another reason why she was so possessive over them.

‘No, you absolutely cannot have those!’ Kate was adamant. ‘For a start, the weekend celebrates the 1920s and 30s, doesn’t it? And the skates are Victorian. As well as that, it’s going to be August Bank Holiday, so the very last thing you want is enough ice and snow to be able to use the skates.’

‘The very last thing I want is a health and safety incident around the pool area,’ said Cassie wryly. She sighed, gazing at the skates. ‘But they are beautiful, aren’t they?’

‘They are, but your bicycle is out here. Tada!’

Kate threw the front door of the last cottage open and gestured for Cassie to take a walk to the other side of the pond and head over towards the barns, which faced the terrace.

‘The big barn?’ she asked.

‘No, the little one. The one we keep all the odd bits in. I’m afraid the bike’s not in the best condition, but we’ve got time to sort it out.’

‘What, so it’s got a couple of flat tyres? Needs a coat of paint? No problem.’ Cassie was practically bouncing along beside her. The tea, Kate noticed, slopped over the top of the mug and down the side but they were outside so it didn’t matter that much. The resident ducks and geese ran over to them, curious to see if they had any bread, but Kate shooed them away.

Cassie wasn’t far wrong when she suggested the bicycle needed a coat of paint and a tyre pump, but as Kate climbed over the rope and eased it out of the corner, she knew that it really wouldn’t take much to sort it out.

‘Oh, that’s perfect!’ Cassie unhooked the rope and pulled it to one side so Kate could wheel the bicycle out — well okay, bump it fairly roughly out — and soon they had it in the courtyard, in daylight, and could study it properly.

‘I think it’s probably the original bicycle your grandfather talked about.’ Kate ran her hand lovingly across the old wooden box on the front. A splinter came away and embedded itself in her finger. She frowned and sucked at her fingertip, trying to remove the thing but it wouldn’t budge. ‘But I didn’t realise the wicker basket was so rotten.’

‘It’ll be fine.’ Cassie balanced her cup on the wooden box, then swiftly removed it as she saw Kate glare at it. ‘Whoops. Sorry, just imagining what it’ll be like with ice-cream in it.’

‘Always the food products.’

‘With clotted cream on the cones, I think,’ continued Cassie. She was practically drooling.

‘With clotted cream.’ Kate had to admit that it did sound rather appealing. ‘I’ll need to see how we can refrigerate the ice-cream.’ She lifted the lid of the box up and inspected it. A money spider scurried across her hand and she shook the tiny arachnid off. ‘I guess we can use one of those little plastic cool boxes or something. I’ll have a think about it. Technology has moved on a bit now and as long as it’s hidden, we shouldn’t have anyone complaining that it’s not authentic enough.’

‘You know, Kate, you’re far too practical,’ sighed Cassie. ‘All I’m thinking about is what colour we can paint it.’

‘I disagree. You’re thinking about how many flavours we can squeeze in.’ Kate grinned.

‘Maybe.’ Cassie laughed. ‘Are we going traditional with the colour scheme then? I mean the colour of the bike; not the ice-cream.’

‘Of course, you do,’ Kate replied insincerely. ‘I suspect it would be white, with swirly bits in blue and pink.’ She stood away from the bicycle and surveyed it.

‘Yes. It’s a bit grubby at the moment, isn’t it?’ Cassie also surveyed it. The paintwork was in a sorry state, now they had it in the sunshine. The white was flaking off and there were scratches everywhere.

But: 'It'll be fine!' they said together.

'Fantastic.' Cassie patted the bike affectionately. 'Who can we sub-contract to do it up then?'

Kate gave her a funny look. 'Well, me of course. It's not going to take much to up-cycle the thing, is it?'

'If you think you can do it,' said Cassie in awe.

'What do you mean, think ?' Kate said. 'I can.'

* * *

Kate wheeled the bicycle back to the reception area as best she could. She didn't go through the cottages, obviously, but Cassie did.

'Don't pilfer my ice-skates!' Kate yelled after her as she disappeared through the end cottage.

'Tra la la!' Cassie called back. But when they met again in the reception area, she didn't have them with her, so Kate was grateful for small mercies.

'You can borrow the racquets,' Kate told Cassie as her friend put her cup in the tiny sink and, she noticed, pinched a Kit-Kat from Kate's biscuit stash, 'but I have to insist you keep them out of the public's way. Nobody can be touching the exhibits, okay?'

'Okay,' Cassie agreed. 'Let me know how you get on with the up-cycling. Oh, no!' She slapped her hand across her mouth in horror. 'I need to organise the ice-cream, don't I? And the actual man. Who's going to drive it? Who's going to be my ice-

cream bicycle man?’

Kate looked at Cassie and slapped her hand across her mouth, copying her. ‘Oh, no! What on earth happened to equal rights and women’s suffrage and feminism? Who says a man has to drive the bicycle?’

‘Please! Don’t rip off your bra and burn it!’ cried Cassie. ‘Nobody. Nobody says a man has to drive it. But it’s traditional!’

‘Yes, well. Sometimes we have to stuff tradition. I’ll get the ice-cream and the clotted cream and I’ll drive the thing. Don’t you worry about it.’

‘Thanks,’ said Cassie. Suddenly she looked very young and very terrified. ‘Really. I mean it. Thanks. I think,’ she admitted, ‘I may be in over my head.’ A wobbly sigh and a shrug of the shoulders. ‘If it all falls through the floor, I shall let you know so you don’t waste your time or your paints.’

‘Ah, it’ll be fine.’ Kate gave her a quick hug. ‘You just get on with organising everything else. If it doesn’t come off, then at least I get a nice bicycle out of it. It might come in useful for here anyway. We could do with some refreshments.’

‘Don’t let Delilah hear you say that.’ Delilah owned the tea shop in Hartsford village and her cakes were splendid.

‘I’d never even contemplate taking that crown off her. My refreshments would go no further than ice cream. And as far as I know, she doesn’t sell that, does she?’

‘No. Only as an accompaniment to puddings and crumble and things.’ Cassie would know that fact, if anyone would. ‘Okay. I must go. I have tons to do.’ She sighed and trailed off towards the door. ‘See you later. Hope you have a busy day.’

‘Likewise,’ Kate told her. It was always good to see tourists in the village — and the day promised to be warm and sunny, so she hoped their predictions would come true.

And maybe, just maybe, that man she’d bumped into earlier would decide to visit the museum. The thought sent a delicious shiver of anticipation through her.

Yes, anything could happen on a lovely day like this.

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Kate's day was indeed busy. She had quite a few people through the door all morning, and by the time Jenna, her part-time assistant, came in at eleven, she was just finishing off dealing with the latest queue.

'Oh, my,' Jenna said, blinking big brown eyes and sliding in beside Kate at the reception desk. 'What's going on here?' She had one of those throaty voices that some men find really attractive. Kate suspected it was more the result of her social smoking, and the fact that she spent most nights shouting over music in bars, than anything natural.

'It's the end of the half-term holiday. People making the most of it before school and work on Monday, I guess.'

'I suppose,' Jenna said, switching a smile on as she relieved the final couple of the entrance fee. They had two small children with them and, by the looks of it, another one on the way. 'You'll want a guidebook as well, won't you?'

She directed her question to the man; knowing, Kate suspected, that the woman's mind was already on herding her children up and that she would have more to do than read a guide book when she was on her way around the museum. The man, however, had no such qualms and eagerly handed the money over.

Kate shook her head after them as they made their way into the first cottage. 'You're unbelievable,' she told Jenna. 'Like they'll have time to read it?' The man had already scooped his little girl up and the guide book was now sticking out of his back pocket like a baton.

Jenna shrugged and swept her glossy dark curls over her shoulder. 'Not my problem.'

'Yes, but you're not on commission.' In fact, she was only working with Kate because her usual assistant, Maeve, was doing some sort of research project in Scotland. Apparently, they'd found a stone crannog — an ancient man-made island which people used to live on — in the Outer Hebrides, and she was up there helping to excavate it.

Jenna's father was the museum board's Chair and had pulled strings in order to secure this temporary assignment for his twenty-year old daughter. She hated the job with a passion — 'old stuff is, like, so boring!' — but was doing some sort of penance there for defrauding her father's credit card. The girl was, in Kate's opinion, a silly, spoiled brat; extremely pretty and used to snapping her fingers and getting whatever she wanted. But this time, Daddy had been pushed too far — and as Kate was desperate for some help in Maeve's absence, Jenna was sent to fill the gap.

Jenna had no compassion for people. Kate would never try to hard-sell a guide book to anyone. They were on the table and if visitors wanted one, fine. There were plenty of information boards up if not. What she often found was that customers came back to get a book afterwards as a souvenir because they'd enjoyed the museum so much. Jenna didn't see it that way, sadly. Kate thought she was doing business or marketing and was, she supposed, very good at the mechanics of turning a profit. But she had no people skills, unless the people in question were men.

'No. I'm not on commission and I think I should be,' Jenna said, looking dead serious.

Kate frowned at her. 'I think not.'

They barely tolerated one another until about one o'clock, when Kate simply had to get out of there before she said something she regretted. Jenna had sold seven guide-

books and flirted with twice that many men. Kate didn't quite know how she did it.

'I'm off to find some lunch. Would you like anything from Delilah's?' It was Friday, after all. Kate reckoned she deserved something from Delilah's.

Jenna pulled a face. 'No. I'll just have a coffee and a ciggie later. I'm not hungry.'

'Okay.' Kate didn't bother to try and persuade her. 'Catch you later.'

Kate squeezed out behind Jenna and headed out of the cosy little reception area. The cottages were stone-built and the entrance to this first one was all nice and white-washed, and Kate liked to keep it as welcoming as possible, even though it could be a little dark and crowded at times. There was a lovely collection of clocks around the walls, from wall-clocks to a big grandfather clock which had come from the Hall. Most of them told the right time. Two didn't. One was stuck at 11.15 and the grandfather clock was stuck at 3.27, holding memories of long-forgotten hours on long-forgotten days. A beautiful phrase was written in gold on the bottom of the grandfather clock's face, under the Hartsford coat of arms; *Hodie est tempus nostrum*. Today is our time.

But, as Kate told herself, at least those clocks were right twice a day. And she loved the co-ordinated ticking of them all. It was such a comforting sound; but thank goodness she'd disabled all the chimes, bar that of the cuckoo clock. She adored that cuckoo. He reminded her of her Great-Aunt's house when she was small; Kate and her older brother Tom sitting in the less formal 'back room' and Kate hoping she'd be there long enough to see the cuckoo peek his head out and say hello.

She wandered through the village to Delilah's tea-shop and saw that it was pretty busy too. Hartsford was doing well today. For such a small place, they were certainly on the tourist trail. It helped, she knew, that the Hall was on the list as one of the 'Top Ten Tourist Attractions of Suffolk.'

Once inside Delilah's, Kate spotted a box full of scones and cakes labelled up with the word 'Hall' and suspected that they had put a call in for extra treats up there. Delilah supplied the Hall with food for the Garden Kiosk and the Gypsy Tea Caravan and it all worked perfectly. Cassie had been right — she could maybe get away with ice-creams at the museum, a vending machine serving coffee and tea at the very most, but no way could she or would she even try to compete with Delilah.

Kate shuffled her way to the front of the queue, trying to decide on a jacket potato or a toasted Panini.

'Hello Kate!' said Delilah as she approached the counter. 'It's nice to see you.'

'Well it's Friday.' Kate smiled. 'Can't resist a treat on a Friday. I'll have a ham and cheese Panini, please, if that's okay.'

'Takeaway?' asked Delilah, making a note.

'Yes — I'll have to dash back with it. I can't leave the place for too long.' Kate pulled a face.

Delilah mirrored her expression. 'Is she still up to her tricks?'

Kate nodded. 'Yep. Seems like she's here for the duration. I'm hoping Maeve's Scottish project doesn't take too long.'

'I completely understand. Look. I'll toss in a fairy cake for you as well. Make you feel better, eh?'

Kate laughed. 'Oh, Delilah. This is why I love Hartsford so much! You lot are just awesome.'

“‘You lot’?” repeated Delilah, her eyes twinkling with mischief. ‘And by that you mean . . . ?’

‘The locals.’ Kate leaned forward and spoke in a stage whisper. ‘You know. Because I’m not one.’

Delilah laughed and shook her head. ‘I know!’ It was a standing joke between them that one rather unpleasant tourist on a bus trip had asked Kate, quite snippily, how she could even run a Suffolk folk museum, when she wasn’t a Suffolk girl — because she didn’t even sound like she was a local. Kate had lived in Cambridge most of her life and didn’t think she sounded that odd, or that alien to the area, but to some people she must, clearly, sound un-local.

‘Thanks for this, anyway.’ Kate held up the little paper bag. ‘I’ll just wait along here for my sandwich.’ She paid and sidled to the edge of the counter. But yeah, she couldn’t help it. She opened the paper bag and scoffed the cake while she was waiting.

* * *

It had been her hair that caught his attention at first — and one of the main things that had struck him about her this morning, when they’d collided on the main street. The other thing that had struck him was that he knew her from somewhere. But perhaps that was just wishful thinking; he’d always had a thing for red-heads and this particular red-head was also very nicely packaged up in a pair of skin-tight jeans.

There didn’t look as if there was a lot of room inside those jeans for the cake she was demolishing, but apparently there was enough. She finished the little pink thing in a couple of bites and it was quite impressive to witness.

She looked around as if checking to see if anyone had seen her; and that’s when she

spotted him, looking at her. She blushed and Theo Kent couldn't help but laugh.

The girl hesitated a moment, then smiled and shrugged. 'I recommend the fairy cakes.'

'I'm glad to hear it! How did you get on at the bakery?' She was standing next to the bureau where the spoons and the sugar were. Theo moved towards her with his takeaway coffee and she made room for him.

'Oh! Fine thank you. Again — I'm so sorry for almost mowing you down.'

'As you can see, there was no lasting damage.' He ripped the corner off a packet of sugar and tipped it in the drink. 'Enjoy your day.' He nodded at her. Then he grinned suddenly. 'I hope we bump into each other again.'

She crumpled the bag up and laughed. 'It's a small village. We're bound to. You have a good day too!'

'Your Panini's ready my love,' called the lady behind the counter. She held up a polystyrene container and the girl hurried over and relieved her of it.

Theo stirred his coffee and watched until the red-head dashed out of the coffee shop and across the road. He wondered where she was heading and also, idly, whether she was single.

Not that it really mattered; he had other things to worry about.

He adjusted his backpack. He needed to finish his lunch, head back to the campsite and get sorted. Then he was hoping to make it to the Folk Museum before it closed. Maeve had said he'd find it interesting. He only had a few days in Suffolk, but he was hoping to squeeze a lot in. And he wouldn't get much squeezing done if he loitered

here instead of re-reading his map to find out where the hell he was supposed to be going.

* * *

Kate had her lunch at one of the picnic tables next to the duck pond. Her feathered friends squawked over to her, gabbling incessantly about how starving they were, and she tossed some crumbs down for them, lobbing the scraps as far away as she could. Those ducks had been known to clamber up onto the tables before now and terrorise the visitors.

It really was a beautiful day. Not too hot, but just right. Kate stretched her legs out in front of her and wiggled her toes in her sandals. It wasn't hot enough for her to shed her jeans yet, but at least she had lost her trainers. It was progress.

Kate looked up at the first cottage where the reception was and again cursed Jenna. It was just as well Jenna wasn't that interested in the rest of the museum, as Kate would have been particularly offended to have her anywhere near the ice-skates — or, even worse, the last house. The one that was done out as an estate cottage. It had been the blacksmith's home once upon a time; there was a horseshoe on the front door and a pile of crumbled stones not very far along the road. Within the ruin, they had located evidence of a possible furnace and it all made sense. It was, according to some old maps of the area, his forge. Kate liked horses and she thought that being a blacksmith would have been quite a nice job. It would have been a fairly steady one as well, seeing as the Hartsford family had always loved their racehorses.

Anyway, it was two o'clock and Kate's lunch break was over. She couldn't dwell on how lovely it must have been to work with horses; it was time to get back to the museum. She weaved her way between the rabid ducks and wondered if she could get rid of Jenna a little bit early. She couldn't be bothered with her for the next few hours anyway and she was pretty sure Jenna wouldn't object. Maybe if she just covered

until the lunchtime rush had abated? Which — Kate checked her watch — would be about now.

In fact: ‘Jenna, do you want an early finish?’ she asked as she walked back in. ‘I’m sure it’ll die down now and I’ve got nothing else planned. You might as well take advantage.’

The girl was twirling her hair around her fingers and posturing somewhat. ‘Oh. Kate. Hi.’ She had the courtesy to look away from the man leaning on the nearest wall. ‘He was just waiting for you.’

‘Oh. Hi, Chris,’ Kate said, thrown a little.

‘Hey, Kate,’ her boyfriend said.

Chris leaned over and kissed her. ‘Surprise!’

‘Indeed, it is a surprise. I thought you were busy this weekend.’ Kate kissed him back. Chris lived and worked in London as a management consultant and they didn’t get to spend a lot of time together. Kate had lived down there with him, and worked at the British Museum for a while, but she’d never really settled into the City life at all. Then the job at Hartsford came up, and they’d made the decision that she should go for it, and see how it went. It had been successful so far — she enjoyed Suffolk, and Chris, apparently, enjoyed devoting more of his time to work. He’d never complained too much about her not being there. The long-distance thing seemed to be working, and they had more or less settled into a routine — of sorts, anyway.

Occasionally, he made noises about a virtual world and how you could work anywhere and how it might be interesting to branch out into Suffolk — but the noises never seemed to come to anything more. There was always a new contract to work on, or a different customer to please. Kate had begun to doubt it would ever happen.

‘I put my bags upstairs. That’s fine, right?’ He smiled at her, knowing she’d never normally object to that. He had a key after all and it made sense.

‘Yes, no problem all.’ Kate smiled back. ‘It’s good to see you.’

‘And you. Dinner tonight at the Green Dragon?’

‘Don’t see why not.’

‘The Green Dragon’s for old people,’ interjected Jenna. ‘I think you’d be better off at the wine bar, to be honest.’ She was, Kate noticed, addressing Chris, not Kate.

‘Ah, Kate likes the Dragon.’ Chris shrugged apologetically. ‘Says the meals are nicer.’

‘Yes. Yes, I do,’ Kate said. ‘And it’s not a meat market, which is why I happen to like it.’ She couldn’t quite believe she’d said that — but she was right. People like Jenna went to the wine bar. People like Kate went to the Green Dragon. Did that make her old? She was twenty-eight, which was hardly ancient.

‘Have it your way,’ said Jenna with a shrug. She stood up and stretched. ‘Well, that’s me done for the day then. My lunchtime cover has covered. I’ll be off now. And,’ she turned to Chris again, ‘I’ll be at the wine bar later. Guaranteed.’

‘We’ll be at the Dragon,’ Kate confirmed. ‘Because we’re old. I’ll see you tomorrow, Jenna.’

‘Yeah. Tomorrow. TTFN.’ She wandered out and Kate felt the atmosphere lift.

‘Thank God for that,’ she muttered and slid into her place behind the desk. ‘She’s too much at times.’

‘Ah, she’s fun,’ said Chris with a smile at her retreating back. ‘Not to worry. Anyway, I hope I’m not interrupting anything this weekend by coming up?’

‘No, I have nothing planned but work. Did you see the bicycle outside? I was going to do something with that. Cassie wants it for an event she’s doing up at the Hall, but it needs some TLC first.’

‘A bicycle? No, I didn’t notice. Sorry.’ Chris smiled his half-lazy, half-arrogant smile, and leaned against the edge of the reception desk, his hands in his pockets, his legs crossed at the ankles. ‘God, I need a break after this week. I have to tell you about this client . . .’

Chris clearly had a gem that he wanted to share with her, but as his professional life was a world away from Kate’s and Kate was anxious to get to the bicycle, her attention started to wander a little. Her eyes drifted towards the door and she wasn’t proud of that fact; but she really, really wanted to start on that bike.

‘. . . so like I said to him, it was never going to happen.’ Chris was still talking. ‘In fact, I just need to check the emails to see what they said about it. I’m pretty certain the figures they quoted were wrong. Forgive me, Kate?’

He pulled his mobile out and started messing with it.

‘No worries; take your time. Give me a shout when you’re sorted. I just need to look at that bike, okay?’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ Chris’s attention was taken by something on the screen, his brows knitted together over his sharp, grey eyes. ‘You sort the bike out. I just need to . . .’ He was lost to her.

Kate sloped out, sneakily happy that she could check the old bike. It really was in a

sorry state.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Theo found the campsite: a field was probably the best way to describe it. It was a decent enough field and pretty flat so it was easy to pitch his tent and get unpacked. But it was, at its heart, just a field.

He'd been in worse places. Fields with bunged-up portaloos and shower blocks inches deep in scummy water. Or fields with no portaloos and no showers. But this one, at least, seemed to have some proper facilities. Not that he minded a bit of roughing it. He'd travelled all over the world as a student — backpacking, hitch-hiking, camping. Everything had been an adventure to him and he appreciated it all.

One trip, rather more recently, had taken him to the Outer Hebrides; and that had led to meeting a group of people from Suffolk, among them Maeve. Maeve told him about Hartsford and the Folk Museum; and when they said goodbye, Theo decided to visit those places.

He had a feeling he'd love them. Maeve had told him about the pace of life in Suffolk; the little villages, the coastal areas, the heaths. From what he'd seen, the place had delivered on those promises already. It was all good, and exactly what he needed, just to take some time and get away from everything.

Theo checked his watch. It was two thirty. The Folk Museum wasn't too far away. He could walk there in about fifteen minutes and scope it out, so he shrugged on his backpack and set off.

He was right. It didn't take him long to get there, and soon he was standing outside the museum. It was a novel little place, a whole row of neat, stone cottages, just as Maeve had described.

There were some mangy-looking ducks running around a pond, and a circular green, and, opposite the terraced houses, a collection of barns which looked to contain old-fashioned farm equipment and tools. There was also some sort of vintage bicycle marked 'Ice-cream' outside the cottages. The bike was a bit of a sight, the sunlight showing up every little scratch and flake of the paintwork. It was what you might call a fixer-upper.

A girl was kneeling by the side of it. Her red hair was pulled back in an elastic band now, but there was no mistaking it was the girl from the café.

Theo walked up to her and stood beside the bicycle. 'Is that how you transport fairy cakes around here?'

She looked up, startled; but then she laughed. 'Hello again. Yeah. I could fit a few in there, couldn't I? Delilah does make the most awesome fairy cakes.'

'I was quite impressed with my own lunch, I must say. I went back for a slice of red velvet cake. You'd gone by then, so it was nice not to worry about anyone walking into me and wrecking it.'

'Good choice. It's lucky that nobody spoiled that experience for you.' She stood up and wiped her hands down her jeans. 'Sorry, did you want to come into the museum?'

Theo was thrown for a moment. 'Yes. I do,' he replied.

'Okay. Come on then. I'll get you a ticket.'

He was still slightly confused, but he followed the red-head and her jeans into the reception area.

She went behind the counter and Theo suddenly realised. ‘Aha! You work here.’

‘I do indeed. It’s a bit late, you know. Are you sure you want to come in? We close in about an hour. It’s four o’clock on a Friday.’ She looked up at the multitude of clocks that surrounded her.

‘An hour is fine,’ Theo told her.

‘Well, if you’re sure.’

‘I’m sure.’ Theo noticed a man sitting on an old church pew to the side of the room, his legs stretched out in front of him, inspecting a smartphone.

‘The signal doesn’t get any better here, does it?’ the guy said, directing his comment to the red-head.

She shook her head, concentrating on the till. ‘Nope. It doesn’t. You can use the laptop if you want.’

‘Thanks Kate. I’ll nip up now.’

‘Yep, you know where it is. There.’ She looked up at Theo and stapled his receipt to a little fold-out leaflet with a map on it. ‘If you follow the markers you can’t get lost. And if you don’t see it all, come back tomorrow. I should be on the desk until lunchtime at least. If I’m around, I’ll just let you back in.’

‘Thanks.’ He took the ticket from her. ‘You’re positive the boss won’t mind?’

She laughed. ‘I am the boss. It’s all mine. Well, I look after the place. It’s not mine, actually physically mine. You know?’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘Well if you’re the boss and you say it’s okay, it clearly is. So I start through here?’ He indicated the door to his left. It seemed to take him into the cottages and, he assumed, would lead him through the whole terrace if he kept on going.

‘Yes, start there. I’ll be out front if you need anything, just next to that bicycle. A friend wants to borrow it, but it’s in no fit state at the moment.’ She stared at the doorway thoughtfully. ‘I have plans for it though.’

‘Great. If I can’t find you, I’ll just ask your colleague.’ Theo nodded to the side-door where the man had disappeared.

The girl — Kate — laughed. ‘You can ask him, but he probably can’t help you. He doesn’t work here. He’s my boyfriend.’

For some reason Theo felt a bit miffed at that. She had a boyfriend. Oh, well.

‘Okay. I’ll just look for you.’

‘I’m not hard to find,’ she replied with a grin. ‘Oh! Can I ask you to leave your backpack behind the counter here, please?’

He had to agree with the “not hard to find” comment. He’d found her three times already today and he hadn’t even been trying.

‘Sure.’ Theo swung the backpack off. He handed it over to her and she dropped it onto the floor.

‘Like I said, just find me when you’re finished.’

‘No problem,’ he said and smiled at her.

* * *

Kate watched as the visitor disappeared through the door into the first cottage. Theo Kent. She'd read the name on his credit card. It was an automatic thing she did. Her poor customers; she knew more of them by name than they probably realised.

She looked at his backpack and saw it was pretty well-used and battered. He was definitely outdoorsy; the sort of guy you could envisage running up a mountain before breakfast and kayaking across an ocean after lunch. Kate couldn't quite comprehend that level of physical activity for herself, but some people apparently thrived on it. And she had to admit it did wonders for their physique. Not that she should have been noticing such things, but still . . .

She headed back outside and squatted down by the bicycle. She had acquired some sandpaper from the tool store and thought she might as well try to take some of the flaky paint off. She'd need a bit more time and some proper equipment to stabilise the chassis and deal with the tyres though.

As it turned out, Theo Kent was the last customer of the day. Kate was a little startled when one of the clocks from the reception area struck four and she looked up. None of the clocks ever went off except the cuckoo clock; that bellowing ding dong ding dong was anything but her little wooden bird popping his head out. She dashed into the reception area and saw Theo looking as confused as she was.

'Hey,' he said. 'I just came back through to get my bag. And your clock went off.' He nodded over at the big grandfather clock from the Hall.

Kate frowned. 'It shouldn't have done. I'll have to check it later.' She reached down and retrieved the backpack. 'There you go. It's not as heavy as it looks, is it?'

'Thanks. Yeah, it's not too bad. I've left most of my stuff at the campsite. I've only

got the weekend in Suffolk, but I'll try and get back tomorrow if I can. I promised myself I'd do Sutton Hoo, though.'

'Sutton Hoo is wonderful. If we don't see you tomorrow, enjoy the rest of your weekend, okay?'

'Will do!' he said and flung the backpack easily over his shoulder.

Kate followed him to the door, ready to lock up. He walked across the car park towards the main road and turned briefly to face her. He raised a hand in farewell, then continued on his journey. She found herself waving back.

Something bothered her about that whole scenario and she puzzled over it as she brought the bicycle into the reception area for the night. It bothered her as she went across to the barns where the indoor picnic area and the smaller, antique farm equipment was displayed, and made sure everyone had left before she closed the doors. And it bothered her as she retraced her steps through the cottages, casting a glance at the ice-skates hanging up in their case. She half-smiled, remembering Cassie's avarice this morning.

It bothered her until she stepped outside the blacksmith's cottage to do a head-count of the monstrous ducks.

Kate looked in the direction he had gone and the road was empty, snaking off towards the countryside. And she realised that she'd seen that gesture before. Him — or someone very like him — had waved her farewell before.

* * *

'You're quiet tonight,' said Chris. They were sitting in the Green Dragon, an empty bottle of wine between them.

‘Just enjoying the old people’s pub.’ Kate grinned. ‘At least we can get a seat here. And the portion sizes are much better. Bob’s a sweetie too, deep down.’ Bob was the barman — his reputation went before him. If you got a free drink at the Dragon, you were fortunate indeed.

‘Yeah, that wine bar has a completely different sort of clientele.’ Chris laughed.

‘You’ve been there?’ Kate asked, curious. He certainly hadn’t been with her. She despised the place.

He smiled. ‘Your Jenna likes it.’

‘She’s not “my” Jenna,’ Kate corrected him. ‘I tolerate her because I have to.’

‘Okay. Jenna likes it.’ He smiled again, and Kate had the fleeting idea that he hadn’t really answered her question.

She dismissed that thought and frowned. ‘She certainly seems to enjoy it there. Chris, have you ever fancied camping?’ She didn’t know where that came from, but there it was.

‘Camping?’ Chris stared at her as if she was mad. ‘Why on earth would I want to huddle under canvas when I can have a nice warm bed in a centrally heated hotel? Or a centrally heated flat, even . . .’ He left the sentence hanging rather suggestively and reached over. He trailed his finger down her cheek. ‘We should make the most of our weekends, you know.’

‘I know.’ Kate forced a smile. ‘Forget it. Camping’s rubbish.’

‘Yep. So — fancy a slow walk back to the cottages?’ asked Chris. ‘We could go via the wine bar if you like?’ He winked.

‘I don’t like. Let’s just head home.’

‘Great. Tell you what, I’ll buy another bottle of wine here and we can take it with us.’

‘Sounds good,’ Kate said. ‘But don’t expect a discount from Bob.’

* * *

It was one of the beautifully quirky things about her flat that Kate had the use of two staircases — pretty logical as it was comprised of two attics knocked together. One staircase led into the museum’s reception area and one into her little walled garden at the back of the terrace.

And on that particular evening, as Kate might have imagined, one thing led to another. She had let them into the cottages by the garden entrance and went up the back stairs to her flat. They had stumbled and staggered, a little bit giggly, into the flat and headed straight to the bedroom, Chris grabbing two wine glasses on the way.

It was as they lay there, Chris in a deep sleep, his dark hair tousled on the pillow, that Kate heard the cuckoo clock from downstairs signal it was midnight.

It signalled it was midnight, and then some; closely followed by a set of matching chimes from the Hall clock. She let it go until they had cuckooed and chimed fifteen times before she swore and dragged herself out of bed and down the stairs into the museum.

She padded through the reception and was just about to fiddle around with the damn things when they stopped, with a very clangy and resonant echo. The echo bounced off the walls of the room as she stood there, completely baffled. Unfortunately, the little cuckoo had stopped outside his door and Kate moved over to push him back inside as she always felt sorry for him when he dangled like that.

There was still a sound of chimes coming from far away though. She stopped and listened carefully. The musical tone was dancing through the terrace and she realised it was from way along the corridor — perhaps from as far away as the blacksmith's cottage.

The thing about where the museum was located in Hartsford, was the fact that it was such a dark and quiet area. It was at the far end of the village, with nothing but fields backing onto it and the River Hartsford tumbling along at the edge of those; so noise carried. It didn't bother Kate that the terrace was fairly lengthy and full of exhibits that belonged to long dead people. It didn't bother her wandering through there at night. The most shocking thing was suddenly hearing the rabid ducks start a midnight argument.

But in the three years she'd been there, she'd never heard anything chime in the blacksmith's cottage. It was cause for further investigation and she was heading along there before she'd even stopped to think about it.

* * *

It was a beautiful night. The sky was clear and the stars were bright. The moon wasn't quite full, but it was full enough to light her way, picking out a trail through the leaded casements. One particular beam of moonlight shone right onto the ice-skates, making them glow and almost come alive.

There they were, on a rocking chair in the blacksmith's cottage, twinkling invitingly and Kate smiled. She reached out for them, thinking she'd return them to the display case on her way back and—

Her fingers closed over the skates, just as she realised they had already been in the case when she'd done her lock-up at four o'clock.

And while she was there, what on earth was going on with that little clock on the mantelpiece? That was the one she'd heard chiming; but it didn't belong there. She'd never seen it before.

Kate spun around, the skates in her hands and the room wavered in and out of focus. There was heat on the back of her knees from a low fire and a chill swept through her as the back door opened. A blast of icy air swirled in and took her breath away. A sharp pain shot up from her ankle and her leg buckled beneath her.

'I told you to sit down,' said a man who looked extraordinarily like Theo Kent. He grinned at her. 'I've just fetched some more wood and I'll have the fire going better in a moment. Please — rest awhile. I told you it would hurt if you stood up, didn't I?'

* * *

Theo woke up with a start, his heart pounding. He'd had the weirdest dream.

He knew that red-headed Kate was in it, and he thought they were in the Folk Museum. She was in the middle of a room — it looked a bit like the one at the end, but different, if that made sense? He knew it was winter because it was damn cold and they had a fire going.

The thing was, it was so bloody cold, it woke him up. He realised at that point he was still in the tent and although it was June he was shivering. He lay on his back for a while and stared at the roof. There was an incessant drip drip drip on the fabric and he wondered if it was raining.

But the more he heard the noise, the more it resolved into an irregular tap tap tap ; perhaps how hammering on metal would sound?

It was a very weird dream. He turned over and closed his eyes. He had a busy day

tomorrow.

He realised just as he drifted off that of course he'd heard tapping — he lived right next to the forge, didn't he?

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Kate just stared at the man, her heart pounding as she wondered what the hell was going on. She was dreaming, she had to be. She reached out her hand and hung onto the side of a table, the skates dangling from her fingertips. She couldn't put her foot down without it being agony and she felt sick and dizzy with the pain.

'Go on. You know he'll not bite.' He nodded towards a mongrel sort of dog that was doing that doggy-smile thing at her and wagging its tail.

'I know.' And funnily enough, she did know. 'It's all right, boy. You're friendly. You're lovely.'

The dog moved out of the way of the chair and Kate got herself over to it with a great deal of difficulty. She sat down, rather heavily, and was surprised to feel a weightiness as her skirts gathered up around her. She'd come downstairs in Chris's shirt. Where had it disappeared to? If this was a dream, it was a bad one and she wasn't impressed. She dropped the skates onto the floor and surreptitiously pinched herself; but all it did was hurt. Tendrils of fear began to creep up her spine. What on earth was happening to her?

Kate cast a glance over at the wall, where not five minutes ago she'd walked in from the school-room exhibit. There was no door; just a clean, bumpy, white-washed wall.

Shaking, she pressed her hands against her skirt, feeling soft wool beneath her fingertips. The firelight played on the fabric and she saw the skirt was dove-grey with some sort of patterned piping on it. It was also soaking wet around the hem and all down one side, with a huge tear in the material from hem to calf.

‘Here,’ said the man. Hefting the basket of wood under one arm, he dragged a footstool over to her and indicated she put her foot up on that. He stood up and looked around. Kate followed his glance and saw that there was a crochet blanket on the back of a second chair. ‘Are you warm enough?’ he asked. ‘I can bring the blanket over.’

‘I’m warm enough.’ She bit her lip. She had to ask him; she knew it was ridiculous, but still . . . ‘What have I done? To my foot. Or my ankle. Or whatever.’ The pain was coming over her in waves and she still felt horribly sick.

The man smiled and all of a sudden she knew his name. This was Will. William Haddon. And he lived here. Kate blinked, wondering where that information had come from.

Will Haddon poked at the fire. His arms were strong and muscular. His loose white sleeves were pushed up and the firelight seemed to be showering his forearms with golden sparks.

‘I’m not quite sure, MissCatriona. I think you’ve done yourself some nasty damage. I would suspect it’s either twisted or sprained or broken.’ He frowned. ‘Perhaps you’d like some brandy? Would that help?’

The thought of something strong and alcoholic was very welcome. She wasn’t sure if she should be blaming Bob’s micro-brewery ales for this or not. He’d encouraged them to try his latest one out — and it must have contained a hallucinogenic. It had to. And if it hadn’t, it clearly didn’t mix well with the wine they’d had afterwards.

Kate nodded. ‘Yes, please.’

‘Very well. It may not be what you’re used to up at the Hall but it’s not too bad.’

The Hall? She swallowed. 'I don't often drink brandy. I prefer wine.' It wasn't a lie. She did.

'Then you won't know the difference,' he said with a wink. 'Here.'

She held her hand out and received an enamel mug with a little bit of amber liquid in the bottom. She really wanted to glug it all down in one, but she had a feeling that wasn't very seemly, so she sipped at it, watching Will move about the room, fussing the dog here, adding logs to the fire there.

'Please. Sit down yourself,' she said, finally losing patience with him.

He looked startled. 'Me? Sit down?'

'Why ever not?'

'It's just . . .' He shrugged. 'It's not "done" is it? Me sitting with a lady.' He grinned. 'And anyway — I don't want to sit down because you gave me too much of a shock, and I can't settle.'

'I don't give a damn what's "done" and what's not! I want you to sit down and tell me why my ankle hurts like hell!'

'MissCatriona!' Will looked shocked. 'I never thought I'd hear you use that sort of language!' His eyes twinkled. He was teasing.

Catriona Aphrodite Tredegar . That was her name. The information hit her like a proverbial brick, straight into her consciousness. Aphrodite, disgustingly enough, because the story was she'd been conceived in Greece.

'Just tell me, Will!' Kate said again. 'Stop teasing. It's not funny. It's never funny

when you tease me.’ The words came too easily; he did this all the time. The knowledge made her feel faint — or the pain did. One of the two made her feel faint, anyway.

Kate pulled her skirt up and looked at her ankle. Dear God — what a mess. It was swollen to about three times the size and was black and blue. Her foot was at a really dodgy angle as well and this time she really did start to panic.

‘I’m not quite sure myself,’ he began. He sat, or perched rather, on the end of a chair. ‘I was taking Hector for his walk by the River and I just saw you fall. You came down with such a crack.’ Will shook his head. ‘I was fearful because you’d hit your head and now—’ He looked at her curiously. ‘If you don’t mind me saying so, I think you might have done more damage than I thought. I’m going to get you seen to, just as soon as.’

Oh, well, a crack to the head was good. A crack to the head would be an excuse for her to have forgotten what she was doing here. She could work with that.

She rubbed her head as if it hurt and nodded, adding in a wince for good measure. ‘I think I did hit it, just a little maybe. Where? Where did I fall?’

‘On the river itself! Come on Cat, you must remember that!’

Cat? She’d never been nicknamed Cat in her life, but here it seemed to fit. She took another slug of brandy and blinked as her head went woozy. Perhaps she had hit it after all.

‘So what happened after I fell?’ The words tumbled out, as if she was trying to stop herself listening to her thoughts. The fear of what was really happening here had to be kept at bay and if she concentrated on Will, perhaps she could stop herself from panicking.

‘You really can’t remember?’ He looked at her curiously.

She shook her head; then she wished she hadn’t. It was hurting dreadfully. Kate pressed her forefingers to her temple and there was a definite swelling. ‘Um — do you have a mirror? So I can see if there’s a bruise?’

‘Certainly.’ He jumped up. ‘But you’ll not like what you see. I don’t like what I see.’ He went over to the wall and unhooked a little shaving mirror. He handed it to her and for a moment their fingertips connected. Kate made an involuntary little sound, and stared at him. She thought he might have felt it too, that little current of electricity, because he took a step backwards. His eyes widened and then he quickly looked away.

Kate cleared her throat and held the mirror up in front of her. She looked like Kate — she had the same face and everything, the same blue eyes and pale, freckled complexion, but her hair was different. It was all ornate and curly, piled up on top of her head but with strands coming loose around her cheeks.

‘Good grief,’ she murmured. She angled the mirror to take in her temple and sure enough there was a horrible bruise there and, she was gutted to see, a fairly nasty cut oozing blood. She swore under her breath and handed the mirror back to him. Shaking again, she lifted the enamel mug up, but it was empty. Reading her mind, Will took it from her and poured another little measure in. Kate took it back gratefully.

‘It’ll heal,’ he said. ‘I’m more worried about your leg. From what I saw, you managed to tie your legs up in a great big knot and just went down. You ripped your clothes too. It must have been the blades getting tangled. I’m surprised you didn’t crack the ice. It’s not often it freezes over that much.’

Kate plucked the torn skirt away again and stared at the offending limb. It really did

look awful now.

‘So after I fell and hit my head?’ she prompted. ‘You brought me here? How? I obviously didn’t walk, did I?’

Will shook his head and there was a spark of amusement behind his eyes. ‘I helped you. I wish I’d had one of the horses down here. I could have slung you on its back and sent you on your way. It would have saved me the job of carrying you.’ He was clearly enjoying teasing her, but there was a look behind his eyes that told her his jokes were more about relief than banter.

And one of the horses? Well, they were in the blacksmith’s cottage so that kind of made sense. Come on, you know he’s the village blacksmith. The notion rushed into her consciousness. Of course he is! How silly of me to forget. I must have really bumped my head hard—

A flash of memory: I’m being carried across a frozen field, half-conscious, my leg dangling, the pain unbearable. My skates are broken; I’ve snapped the blade in two, on the one I’ve gone over on. The other blade just needs reattaching to the boot and—

The image was gone; but:

‘My ice-skates?’ Kate had to ask.

‘They’ll mend. I’ll take care of them for you.’

She tried to reach down to inspect the skates properly, but the movement was too awkward for the position she was sitting in. She tried again and gasped as the pain shot through her leg. Will was there in an instant, picking the skates up and handing them to her.

‘Thank you,’ Kate said, a little stiffly. She was used to being independent — not having things brought to her or having things delivered to her. She didn’t think herself and this leg were going to get on very well if it was going to impede her like this. Damn skating accident.

Kate turned the poor old skates over in her hands. As she had imagined, one was absolutely wrecked and the boot of the other one was hanging off the blade, horribly scuffed. They looked so much newer, though, than the ones in her museum. How bizarre.

‘I’ll get you home just as soon as you’ve finished your brandy,’ Will said, breaking into her thoughts. ‘I don’t like the look of that leg at all. I’d bring the doctor here but I think you’re better off at home. I’ll go for him once I’ve taken you back.’

‘Home?’ Kate repeated. Where on earth was home? She looked up, too sharply, and Will wavered in and out of focus. The little clock on the mantelpiece began to chime again and by the time it had finished striking, she was standing in the middle of the museum cottage and the ducks were quacking outside as if nothing untoward had happened.

Her leg was fine, her head wasn’t sore and Chris’ shirt was still in place — and it wasn’t made of soft, grey material.

She was, however, clutching the ice-skates — perfectly presented and not a broken blade to be seen.

What had just happened? Kate stared at the ice-skates, glinting now in a shaft of moonlight, and held them up. She felt frozen to the core, as cold as that icy river must have been, and terrified. But it couldn’t have been real. No way.

She’d clearly had a wine-induced dream and she’d probably just dozed off in the

cottage. Yes, that had to be it. Anything else was . . . impossible. But it still didn't explain the fact that she was sure those skates hadn't been in the room when she'd locked up. Unless Jenna had put them there for some reason and she'd missed them?

It was only as Kate turned to leave that the cogs went 'clunk' in her brain and she hesitated. CAT. The name inked inside the skates.

Catriona Aphrodite Tredegar . Cat.

It might have been her name — or it might have been her initials, but it was both.

Dear God, how could she possibly know that?

* * *

Theo woke up the next morning feeling quite un-rested. He normally slept like a log, but that tap tap tap- ping was bothering him.

As he went about cooking breakfast on the little camping stove and boiling up a pan of water for coffee, he contemplated the noise and came to the conclusion it had been a woodpecker. It had to be. It hadn't rained at all and there wasn't a forge on site so it was just one of those things. It was so weird what your mind could come up with during night time.

Theo looked at the guide books and leaflets he'd brought with him for his trip and decided Sutton Hoo was definitely the destination of the day. He had toyed with the idea of Hartsford Hall and then nipping back into the Folk Museum — but then an image of Kate's boyfriend flitted into his mind and he thought again. Some things were sacred, even if he had to be chivalrous to keep them so; because even though he told himself it was the exhibits that he wanted to see again, his heart told him that those exhibits wouldn't be half so appealing if the curator wasn't a five foot six red-

head with bright blue eyes and a great smile.

Theo pushed the bacon around in the pan thoughtfully, watching it crackle and spit as it turned crispy and brown. No, he'd stay away. Be the gentleman and all that. It wasn't fair on anyone to get mixed up in his life at the moment, anyway. And Sutton Hoo — well, it was an incredible place. Ghostly Viking ships appearing at the bottom of a lady's garden and phantoms telling her where to excavate? And then she found a ship burial and all sorts of amazing things in the very soil of her garden. Awesome.

He flipped the rashers decisively and slid a couple of slices of bread into the pan to fry alongside them. Sutton Hoo it was. The Hall and the Folk Museum wouldn't run away.

It was a good excuse to come back to Suffolk later in the year anyway.

A little voice in the back of his mind said: Good plan. Do you think she'll have ditched the boyfriend by then?

But the chivalrous part of him refused to listen to it.

* * *

Chris was twiddling with his phone again, and Kate was staring at the ice-skates, which she had placed on the reception desk in front of her.

She'd inspected them quite thoroughly and could almost tell herself that one blade looked slightly less worn than the other, and the boot attached to the worn blade was quite clearly doubly-secured.

But that was just stupid.

‘Chris?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Did you hear the clocks all chiming last night? The cuckoo clock and the grandfather clock? They went off just after midnight.’

Chris shook his head. ‘Nope. I was fast asleep. As you should have been.’ There was a wicked twinkle in his eye and she knew that he was implying his love-making skills should have worn her out considerably more than they did.

Kate didn’t like to correct him. ‘They woke me up.’

‘You like the cuckoo clock though. It’s never bothered you before.’

‘True.’ It had never gone off fifteen times in a row before either. Then: ‘Chris?’

He sighed and looked up from his phone. ‘Yes?’

‘Do you think these skates look broken?’ Kate pushed them across to him and he swept a cursory glance across them before shaking his head. ‘No. They look fine. For their age, I mean. They’re a bit battered.’

Kate was slightly stung. But, of course, he was right. They were pretty old.

‘I wonder if they came from the Hall?’ she mused. ‘Maeve would know. She’s been here longer than me.’ The word “home” from that weird dream last night was bugging her. She had come to the conclusion it had to be a dream. Anything else was preposterous, but a shiver snaked down her back just the same.

‘Is Maeve still in Outer Mongolia?’ asked Chris. She hoped he was trying to be

funny; anywhere north of the M25 was foreign to him.

‘Outer Hebrides,’ she corrected him. ‘Yes. So I can’t really ask her, can I?’

‘Nope, because if she has a phone signal up there, it’s more than what you’ve got down here.’ He tossed his phone aside and scratched his head. ‘Sorry, Kate. It’s just that there’s stuff going on at work and that client causing problems. They—’

Kate looked at him and raised her eyebrows. He had the grace to laugh. ‘Yeah, you don’t want to know. Anyway, I thought I’d escape it this weekend, so I came here, but it’s still going on.’

‘On a Saturday?’ Kate was surprised his consultancy was open on a weekend.

‘We’ve gone multi-national — I told you. We’ve had to open up on a Saturday and I think a Sunday won’t be long in coming.’ He frowned. ‘That’s going to be a problem, isn’t it? With you up here working and me down there working. We won’t even have the time we’ve got now. It’ll be a rota for the staff, I expect, for weekends. I can’t see any other way around it.’

Kate couldn’t recall the multi-national conversation at all. She was pretty certain it would have been something she did listen to — working weekends would affect their relationship even more than his job did now.

‘And there’s no way you can avoid the weekends, perhaps? There’s got to be plenty of people without commitments who can cover?’ It was worth a shot.

‘It can’t be helped. They don’t have the experience. Perhaps once we’ve got it off the ground, it’ll free me up a little more?’

‘It’s not going to be great in the meantime, though, is it?’

He came over and hugged her. ‘You know what my job’s like. I promise, once it’s running smoothly and I’ve got the technology, I’ll be up here like a shot. I’m looking into it, I really am. So much is virtual now. It’s just an interim measure.’ He kissed the top of her head and nuzzled into her hair. ‘I have to go back after lunch. I’m so sorry.’

Kate hugged him back and sighed. ‘Okay. Go and sort out your client. And your staff, if it comes to that.’

Chris laughed and stood back. ‘Is it okay if I—’

‘—use the laptop,’ she finished for him. She nodded towards the staircase. ‘You know where it is.’

‘Thanks, Kate.’ He hurried off up the stairs, collecting his phone on the way.

Which just left Kate contemplating the ice-skates again. She decided that if Maeve wasn’t around, it might be policy to speak to Cassie about them. Well okay, Cassie probably wouldn’t have a clue, but Elodie would. Elodie might be the Countess of Hartsford, but she was also rather OCD about the history of Hartsford Hall. Kate knew she’d been boxing up a tonne of stuff and calling it “the archives”, so she held out some hope that Elodie could help her. She just needed to wait until her own staff came in for their shift before she high-tailed it up there.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

‘Jenna, thank you for joining us,’ Kate told her, somewhat sarcastically, when she eventually turned up, late.

Chris had left an hour ago — after lunch as he had planned. Kate had been manning the desk, getting more and more annoyed, as the time went on.

Jenna was wearing dark glasses and the haze of expensive perfume that hung around her failed to disguise the smell of day-old wine. Her hair was tousled in a very fetching way. She looked as if she had just crawled out of bed, where she’d had an awfully good time.

‘Got distracted,’ Jenna murmured and smiled, sultry and kitten-like as she sidled, carefully, around the reception desk, keeping her head very, very straight.

‘Get yourself a coffee before the after-lunch customers come in.’

Jenna muttered something affirmative and sat down as Kate picked up the skates. ‘Now you’re here, I’m popping over to the Hall. And please, have lots more coffee if you need it.’

Kate may have gone into the Hall grounds the back way. She may have walked along the banks of the River Hartsford which backed onto the fields near the museum cottages, and clambered over a fence that said ‘Private Property. Do Not Enter’. But she might not have done. It was best not to elaborate on that theory.

She ended up in the Hall grounds and was heading through them when she spotted Elodie drifting out of the gift shop. She looked gorgeous, swathed in a long, floaty

maxi-dress. She had a circlet of flowers on the top of her head and was a whole lot rounder than when Kate had last seen her. Despite the beautiful hippy-dippy outfit, she didn't look very comfortable and certainly wasn't drifting very fast. There was a definite grace-less waddle to her movements.

'Good grief, where did that come from?' Kate asked, her eyes widening as she walked up to her, her attention drawn inexorably to Elodie's stomach.

'This?' asked Elodie, running her hand across her huge tummy. 'God only knows.' She looked at Kate pathetically. 'Tell me it'll be over soon?'

'When are they due again?'

'August. Two more months.'

'They might come earlier.' Kate was unable to tear her gaze away. 'Good God, I hope I never have twins.'

Elodie laughed — she wheezed a bit too. She had terrible asthma and carrying all that extra bulk around wasn't particularly good for her lungs. 'I think this might be it for me too. How's things with you?'

'Oh, not too bad.' Kate frowned. 'Chris just left to go back to London. He might have to start working weekends.'

'Oh, no! That's not good. You don't have that much time together anyway.'

'Yeah, well. It can't be helped. Elodie, can I have a chat for a few minutes? If you're not too busy.'

Elodie shrugged and flicked her long blonde hair back. 'I'm quite happy to have a

chat. But can we sit down for it?’ She smiled ruefully. ‘Sorry. My feet are twice their usual size today and my back is giving up the ghost.’

Elodie was quite small — in height and build — so Kate imagined pregnancy wasn’t the best of experiences for her in some ways.

‘Oh — yes. Of course.’ There was a nice shady bench outside the front of the Hall and they headed — slowly — towards that. ‘You’re so lucky living here,’ Kate told her. ‘Do you ever miss London?’ Elodie had lived there for a while with her first husband when she worked as a costume designer in the West End. Kate sometimes thought Hartsford might be a little bit tame for Elodie, even though she’d grown up there and had known Alex all her life. If Kate thought about the boys she’d known at school, it usually turned her stomach, so she couldn’t quite grasp how Alex and Elodie had ended up married; but they had and they were perfect for each other. Everybody knew that.

‘I sometimes miss London,’ Elodie said, sort of groping behind her for the seat before carefully lowering herself down in a very bizarre fashion, ‘but at the minute I’m happy not to be sitting on a tube or crushed on a bus trying to get to work.’ She grinned. ‘It’s much easier just to roll out of bed in the morning and be here. “Roll” being the operative. Look at me — I can’t even sit down without it being a performance.’

Kate laughed — she had to agree. ‘We’re happy you’re here as well. Which brings me to this. Do you recognise these at all?’ She lifted up the ice-skates and showed them to Elodie. ‘Not literally, of course. I don’t expect you to know their history — I was just wondering if you’d seen anything in your archives. Like if you thought they might have come from the Hall. There’s a sort of name in them if you look closely.’

‘Oooh,’ said Elodie, leaning forward as best she could. ‘Very nice. May I?’

Kate handed them over to her. ‘Of course. Tell me if you spot anything odd about them as well. See the name? It says “CAT”.’

‘Oh, I do. How lovely. It makes me wonder who Cat is.’ Elodie looked at the skates, turning them around and putting her head to one side. ‘But I think,’ she said, pointing with one peacock-green-tipped finger, ‘that this boot has been re-attached. Look at the stitching. It’s different and not so ragged as the other one.’

Kate peered where she was pointing. ‘I’m inclined to agree, but how on earth did you spot that so quickly?’ she asked in awe.

‘When you’ve worked with costumes and stitching and unpicked God knows how many doublets you get to know these things. It’s astonishing how many clothes have to be altered throughout a run of a show. In my experience, the actors either give up eating or over-indulge in hotel food. It all changes the size of their costumes.’

‘I’d never considered that! You learn something new every day. Anything else?’

Elodie laughed and turned the skates over again. She held them out in front of her and squinted. ‘I don’t know. That blade looks odd. The other boot. I know they’re a pair but I think there’s been some repairs done or some replacements. “Curiouser and curiouser” as Alice in Wonderland says.’

‘Alice is a really pretty name, isn’t it?’ Kate’s eyes were drawn again to Elodie’s tummy. ‘Any thoughts for names yet?’

Elodie shook her head. ‘Alice is nice. It’s a family name, but I don’t know. If one of these is a girl—’ she brushed her hand across her enormous bump, ‘—I think she needs her own identity.’

‘Very true,’ Kate replied, not really wanting to go too much into shared identities,

considering her experience last night in the blacksmith's cottage. Which part of her still insisted was a dream. Another part of her still wasn't sure, but didn't want to think about it. That was too scary.

'I'll be able to check my archives for you,' Elodie said, 'just as soon as I can escape from Alex.' She frowned. Elodie had said her husband was way too fussy at the moment, and she wasn't a woman who appreciated fuss. 'I'm not ill, I'm pregnant!' she kept telling anyone who would listen; usually just before she gasped for breath and collapsed in a heap somewhere. 'My archives are all in the attics. I need to have a good old rummage in the boxes,' Elodie continued, 'but bending's not exactly easy right now. As soon as I can, I will, okay?'

'Okay. Thanks for having a look at the skates anyway. I might see what I can dig up myself. I can always use Google or some of those academic journals. In my experience, they can be a little obscure, but you sometimes find a gem in the articles.'

Elodie nodded. 'Good luck. I'd be interested to see what you find out. I'd start around the 1880's if I was you. They look like that style of boot.'

Kate had no idea how Elodie knew these random facts, but she was rarely wrong. Instead of questioning her, she simply trusted her and stood up, holding her hand out to Elodie. Elodie took it and Kate hauled her up, off the bench, then relieved her of the skates.

Kate gave Elodie a quick hug — well as much as she could, given her circumference — and told her, 'It'll soon be over. August will come really quickly.'

Elodie blanched a little, pressing her hands into the small of her back and looking pained as she tried to stretch a bit. Poor soul. She wasn't dealing with this well at all. 'And then I'll have two babies, Kate. How on earth will I cope?'

‘You will. Plenty of people do. Thanks again. I’m going to grab a quick coffee and have a wander across the Faerie Bridge, I think. Go back the long way.’

‘The Gypsy Tea Caravan’s up that way,’ said Elodie. ‘I’m not sure who’s manning it today.’ Despite being a pregnant Countess, it was Elodie’s job to man it, but clearly she had a day off, swollen ankles and all. Alex would be happy; Elodie wouldn’t be. ‘Get your coffee up there. In fact, just tell whoever’s in it that it’s on the house.’ She smiled and adjusted her circlet of flowers.

‘Oh, no,’ Kate said, feeling a little guilty that not only had she — possibly — skipped in without paying, but she was getting a free coffee as well. ‘I’ll pay. It’s fine.’

‘Whatever.’ Elodie shrugged. ‘The offer’s there if you want it.’

‘Thanks.’ Kate looped the skates back over her wrist and headed off up towards the old packhorse bridge that spanned the river.

As luck would have it, it was Cassie who was sitting in the caravan today, dispensing hot water from the tea-urn.

Her face broke into a smile as she saw Kate. ‘I’ve decided on three flavours of ice-cream,’ she said. ‘Vanilla, strawberry and chocolate. Then we can sell Neapolitan ice-creams, topped with clotted cream as a special offer.’

‘Great choices. I’ll get on the case for you. Three’s probably enough — there’s only a small compartment to keep them in. It’s not like I’m lugging a full-size freezer about with me. I might have to store some at the Hall, if that’s okay?’

‘That’s fine by me. And are you sure you’re happy to do it?’ Cassie asked.

‘Absolutely. I’m just heading back to have another go at it. I sanded most of the paint

off yesterday and I'm going to try and put an undercoat on if I get the chance. Chris has gone back to London so I can just get on with it. It's a nice enough day. Jenna can stay inside, in the dark, and nurse her hangover.'

'Another one?' Cassie grimaced. 'I don't know how she does it. They wipe me out completely.'

'And me.' Kate put on a sniffy, mock-disapproving voice. 'I think I'll simply purchase a coffee from you instead, my dear.'

'You're very welcome, Madam. Enjoy it. On the house, darling,' replied Cassie in an equally hoity-toity accent.

They both giggled as Kate shook her head. 'No. Please, take my money.'

'You snuck in again, didn't you?' Cassie squashed a lid onto a takeaway cup and handed it over. 'I keep telling you, just come the front way. The volunteers all know you. You know they'll let you past.'

'Yes, but it looks really bad if you've got customers waiting to pay.' Kate dug in her pocket and pushed some coins over to Cassie. 'And anyway, I can neither confirm nor deny my nefarious entry tactics.' She winked. 'Thanks for the coffee.' She raised the cup to her lips, the ice-skates clinking together.

'Oh, you decided I could use them? Thanks!' said Cassie.

'No. No I didn't!' Kate shook her head. 'These were for something entirely different. I needed to ask Elodie about them.'

'Okay.' Cassie sighed, theatrically. 'But I still get the tennis racquets?'

‘You still get those. And the bicycle. Catch you later!’ She turned and went towards the Faerie Bridge. She could cross that and walk down the other side of the river, then use the stepping stones further along to get back to her cottages. It was a lovely day for a walk and she was on her afternoon off after all.

* * *

Theo arrived at Sutton Hoo for its opening, wandered around the site for a good part of the day, then decided to explore the surrounding area.

It was all incredible and he loved it. He loved Felixstowe as well — he stood out on the pier imagining what was over the horizon and how it must have been years ago, when it first became a fashionable seaside resort and a bustling trading port. Just south of there was Harwich, where you could sail to the Netherlands and from there travel into Europe. It was all magical and exciting, and it was with some reluctance he turned and headed back to Hartsford. Maybe on another trip, he could look into where he could go from those places. Currently, he would prefer to be anywhere else than Derbyshire, where he lived, and Suffolk was fitting the bill nicely. At one point, he had simply wanted to sit in his car, and drive — just follow the road wherever it took him. Anything, to get away.

But today, his destination was Hartsford and a return to the campsite. Strangely enough, the closer he got to the village, the faster he wanted to drive the car. And he still had time to visit the Folk Museum, he realised with a happy jolt of his heart; so he swung the vehicle towards the museum’s car park and pulled into a space facing the buildings. The old bicycle was outside but there was no sign of Kate.

Theo got out of the car and walked over to the first cottage, just in case she was inside. He’d try his luck with that ticket again, see if she’d remembered he could re-visit the place today.

He stepped into the reception area, his eyes adjusting to the gloom, and wondered if they'd had a power outage.

'Can I help?' A girl emerged from the shadows, long dark hair, shiny and tumbling in gypsy curls, a pair of enormous sunglasses perched on the top of her head. She was stunning in what you might call an 'obvious' way. He smiled at her and she smiled back.

'I was looking for your boss,' he said. 'She said I might find her here today.'

'She disappeared. She was here until just after lunchtime then left. I was a bit late — I don't think I'm in her good books for that. There's just me now. Even the divine Chris has disappeared — back to London.' Her smile grew wider and her glance slid away from Theo momentarily.

'Fair enough.' He shrugged. 'It'll wait.' So he'd tried and failed; no biggie. Well, actually, yes it was. It was very annoying.

'She'll be in tomorrow. I don't work a Sunday morning.' The woman leaned forwards on the desk, crossing her arms and displaying a fair amount of cleavage. 'We tried it for a few weeks but it didn't really work. There's this wine bar and it's dangerous, you see.' She smiled, mischievously. 'I'm fine by the afternoon though.'

Was this vixen flirting with him?

'A wine bar?' Theo asked. 'Nice, is it?'

'I like it. It's better than the Dragon. See, they don't serve much food at the wine bar, so it's more lively. You don't end up watching old people eat.'

'I wouldn't know. I've only been to Coffee Cream Cupcake.'

‘Delilah’s place.’ The vixen nodded. ‘You need to expand your horizons.’ She stood up, stretching her back like a cat and arching her ample bust towards him. ‘So are you staying locally?’

‘I’m just here for the weekend. I’m camping and I’m going back home tomorrow.’

‘I can tell Kate you called in, if you like. What’s your name?’

‘She’ll not know my name. It doesn’t matter.’

‘The Divine Chris from London I just mentioned?’ She grinned. ‘That’s her boyfriend. Just so we’re clear. Having said that . . .’ Her eyes sparked for a moment, ‘I don’t think it’s particularly rosy with those two at the minute. But who am I to judge?’

‘Yes, I’ve seen him. But I thought he worked here. Stupid me.’

‘No, I work here — I’m Jenna. But like I say, I’m not in tomorrow morning. So I’m out tonight. You should come along — have a drink and fill your night in. You’re on holiday. That’s what people do.’

‘They do indeed. But I’m camping. I didn’t bring a suit.’ He smiled to take the edge off his words. He also cast around for an escape route. He hadn’t come here to be seduced by a vixen.

‘A suit,’ she scoffed. ‘Do you have clean jeans and a t-shirt?’ The woman was tenacious, he’d give her that.

‘I do.’

‘Fine. I’ll meet you at the wine bar at seven then. I’ll give you the address. X marks

the spot.’ She extended one black, glittery-tipped talon and dragged over one of Kate’s little museum maps. On the flipside of the map was a cartoon rendering of the Hartsford village showing the Hall and the coffee shop and various other points of interest. Jenna took a pen from a pot next to the till and placed a big “X” next to a black and white Tudor looking building. She pushed the map over to him and smiled. ‘Don’t be late.’

‘I’ll see what I’m doing.’ Theo folded the map up and tucked it in the pocket of his cargo-shorts. He had no intention of going, but it seemed he had to at least pretend — just to shut her up, if nothing else.

Despite that, he left the reception area amused. He’d got more than he bargained for there. It was a shame about Kate. To be honest, if she’d been there and had asked him to go for chicken in a basket at an old peoples’ pub, he probably would have jumped at the chance.

It only served to strengthen his resolve to come back here soon.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Kate noticed there were a couple of cars left in the museum car park as she came over the stepping stones with her empty coffee cup.

It was some distance away, but she could see a vehicle drive off as she headed across the fields and she wondered if Jenna had been very busy. Fridays through Sundays were sometimes quite hectic, which was why she needed Jenna. The museum was closed on a Monday and Tuesday and she managed fine the rest of the week. But their busy days were full on.

Kate intended to just go straight up into the flat and collect her paintbrushes to continue working on the bike, but as she approached the door she couldn't resist.

She stuck her head in the reception area and Jenna jumped to attention. 'It's fine,' she said. 'You don't need to check up on me.'

'Jolly good,' Kate said, sounding like a school teacher. 'The clocks haven't gone off today have they? We had some issues yesterday.'

'No, they've behaved themselves. Oh — someone came in looking for you, but they said it didn't matter.'

'Okay. Not helpful, but thanks. Are you sure you're all right? Headache better?'

'Much better,' Jenna said, a little defensively.

'Good. I'm going to head upstairs and then I'm going in my garden. I'll take that bicycle through and have a go at it in peace. Nobody'll stop to ask me questions if

I'm hiding in the garden.'

'Sure.' Jenna examined a fingernail. 'Stay out there. Makes no difference to me. I can lock up and pop the keys through the door. To be honest, the end of the day here can't come bloody soon enough for me. You can go off and get covered in bike oil and crap if you want to, I'll be fine.'

'Very generous,' Kate replied sarcastically. What she really wanted to say, of course, was no, you can't try to lock up ten minutes early and do you really feel that guilty about coming in late?

But some battles you just have to lose to win the war and this, she thought, was one of them.

* * *

Kate spent a good few hours in her back garden working on the bicycle.

By around seven, she had undercoated it and completed the first layer of white on the box. She'd pumped up the tyres and sorted out the chain and the brakes, and was covered in oil and splattered with paint. And she was ready for a glass of wine.

She headed up her back staircase and rinsed out one of the glasses she and Chris had used last night. It was still a little annoying that he'd had to head back to London, and they'd only had the briefest of telephone conversations whilst he was running from the tube station to the office for some "damage limitation", as he called it.

It was so frustrating. It had turned into a beautiful evening and they might have enjoyed a walk along the river tonight. Instead, Chris was back in his end-of-terrace house in Chiswick, close to the Thames, and Kate was gazing idly out of the window at the River Hartsford. A solitary car remained in the museum car park, and she

suspected someone had decided to have a walk anyway. Oh, well. Wine called to her and she'd done enough walking for one day, even if some of it had been illegally skulking around the Hall grounds.

Kate decided she might as well take the wine downstairs and enjoy the evening in her garden. She could admire the ice-cream bicycle if nothing else. It was coming along very well and she was sure it would look fabulous at the Living History Weekend. Yes, she was feeling quite self-satisfied as she poured a glass of white wine and sipped it appreciatively.

The wine was cold and the evening was warm. All she could hear was the odd bee buzzing around and the manic quacking of her ducks out front; but even they gave up after a while. The scent of roses and lavender was strong. Her little garden was slightly weedy but full of flowers. Golden marigolds nestled amongst alstroemeria and freesias, and it was summer in Suffolk. What on earth could have been more perfect?

Kate settled down in a battered old wicker chair and put her feet up on a plant pot. If she closed her eyes, she could just relax and—

That clock was chiming again. The one from the Hall. Kate opened her eyes. She had to sort that out, once and for all.

She went to stand up; and realised she couldn't actually do it . . .

* * *

Her leg, the one that was injured when she'd fallen over on the ice-skates, was in some sort of splint. It was sticking out in front of her, her toes poking out from beneath a ruffled pink cotton skirt, trimmed with rose-pink embroidery. She'd abandoned the traditional bustle. What was the point? She was sitting down all day

and it wasn't exactly comfortable.

Ice-skates? Splint? Oh, no, what was happening here? It couldn't be . . . but how could she doubt her own eyes? She touched the skirts spread out around her and they felt real enough. And her leg hurt every time she so much as wiggled her toes. Kate was torn between swearing loudly and dealing with a huge sense of fear that she had somehow dropped through time again. Why hadn't she checked out the historical stuff before settling down with her wine? It might have helped her makes sense of her experiences at least.

Kate moved slightly in the wicker chair, panicking whole-heartedly, and it wobbled underneath her. She had wheels. Interesting. And rather terrifying. In fact, the whole thing was terrifying. Why did this keep happening to her?

'You made your way down here again, I see.'

She squinted against the setting sun. A tall figure was silhouetted there. Golden light was dappling his light brown hair and throwing the sun-lightened streaks into stark relief.

She looked past him and saw faint tracks on the dusty lane where, quite possibly, a wheelchair had trundled along. It was odd, but the main thing she thought was, gosh, just as well we live in such a flat area. The Hall, she knew, was at the end of that track. It was more or less the same way she'd walked this afternoon.

'I've come from the Hall,' she said, trying not to make it sound too much like a question.

'I know you have,' said Blacksmith Will — for indeed it was that man who now squatted down in front of her and took hold of her hands. 'And I've told you, Cat, you should be more careful.'

Kate looked at the offending foot and frowned. 'Because of this?'

'No.' He squeezed her hands and it felt very real; and very nice. 'Because you don't know who's watching and because you'll make your hands all rough pushing yourself around. You're a lady and you should have soft hands.' He kneaded the pad of her thumb with his. 'I don't want you getting callouses from wheeling yourself down here. If you want my help, you send someone to get me and I'll come to you.' He grinned. 'I just hope my special privileges last a little longer. They're still quite grateful to me for looking after you when you fell, but it won't last forever. I want you to get better, but at the same time, I don't really want you to go home.'

'But I am home,' she said, confused. She was sitting in her own garden, wasn't she?

'Not properly, you're not. Seems to me you're just visiting and we might not have a lot of time together.'

It was a strange statement and could have had more meaning than he realised. If Kate wasn't home, then where did she live? She tried to wiggle her toes again. They felt weird.

'How long has it been now?' she asked. 'Remind me. It seems like an absolute age.' It did as well but not for the same reason as he probably thought she meant. 'And when will I go — back? Back home properly as you say?'

'Back to London?' He shook his head. 'I don't know. And we know you did that almost two months ago.' That meant, Kate quickly calculated, that it must be springtime now. He nodded at her foot. 'It's hard to believe you've been stuck in that chair for so long. But maybe spiral breaks take longer to heal. You twisted yourself up good and proper on that ice.' He shuddered. 'I hated them resetting your leg. I wasn't allowed in there with you, of course, but I sat in the garden until they told me it was done. I could hear the screams from out there. But I never left, not for one

minute.’ He smiled and it seemed to Kate that the sun shone a little brighter; her stomach did a sort of gloopy thing and she blushed. ‘But I’m pleased they had chloroform for you,’ he continued. ‘They reckoned it would have taken the edge off, even if it hadn’t put you to sleep.’

This time it was Kate who shuddered. Thank God she hadn’t experienced that part of Cat’s story. She knew a bit about Victorian surgery and bone-setting. They had an ‘interesting’ display of medical equipment in the museum. Her heart lurched. A compound fracture would have meant, more than likely, that they would have chopped her leg off and Cat was, to be honest, quite lucky she hadn’t died during the administration of the anaesthetic either. Five minutes of breathing in that stuff on a rag before it took effect — she could only imagine how she’d cried and fretted and begged that they let Will in, because he had to stay right there beside her, even if it took all night to put her to sleep. Or was she imagining that? Had it actually happened that way? It was hard to know.

‘I can’t say I remember any of it,’ she said.

‘Just as well.’ Will reached up and tucked a strand of her unruly hair behind her ear, his breath soft on her skin as he leaned forward, ‘but it’s a fine April evening and we need to enjoy the weather while we can, not dwell on such things as broken legs.’ He stood up, releasing her other hand and moved around to the back of the chair. ‘Come along, my lady. I can’t send you back hungry or thirsty, so I’ll see what I can do. I’ve got some new bread and some fresh milk — oh, and cheese from the dairy as well, so we can have a feast . . .’

Kate let his words wash over her as they bumped along the track behind the cottages. She realised the little stone wall had disappeared and the gardens just opened out onto the fields. So technically, then, she hadn’t been in her garden here, had she? She’d been in the middle of a field in a Bath chair, wearing a long dress with only one functioning leg.

If this was another crazy wine-induced dream, it felt very real. But good grief, she hated having no mobility.

They went into his cottage at the end of the terrace. Well, to be fair, he parked the Bath chair out the back door and lifted Kate out of it.

He carried her into the cottage and deposited her on the comfortable seat which she remembered from her last visit. The footstool wasn't far away and he brought it across. He lifted her leg up tenderly and put her foot on it.

'Blanket?' he asked, his mouth twitching at some private amusement. Kate understood this was obviously some routine that had developed between "them" and she wondered whether her answer today would buck the trend or not.

She shivered a little, noticing the fire wasn't very high and Will laughed, seeing her. 'It's not so warm in this old stone house, is it? I should park you up by the furnace. I know too well what you're like. Hector,' he commanded the big lollopy dog who had appeared beside them out of nowhere. 'Your duty, please.' Hector huffed a bark out and trotted over to what Kate now saw was a trunk under the window. The crochet blanket was folded neatly on top of it and Hector clamped his jaws around a slightly chewed corner and dragged it over to her. He dropped it on her lap and smiled his doggy smile at her, his tongue hanging out.

'Clever boy,' Kate said, delighted. Automatically, her hand went to a little pocket in her skirt and brought out a biscuit. Hector huffed a thank you, and took the delicacy daintily from her fingers. He carried it over to a trestle table and squeezed beneath the furniture, the biscuit trapped between his paws as he considered the best way to deal with it. He decided to nibble at the edges which made Kate laugh again.

'And he's loved that spot since he was a puppy, I'll warrant,' she said, watching him.

‘Indeed, he has,’ replied Will. ‘Time was, he used to be able to stand up beneath it and still have a space for his head. Now, I would think he’ll take the whole thing with him. Let me just set this kettle to boil, my love, and I’ll be with you soon. Why don’t you close your eyes and have a rest while I arrange our feast? Then I’ll have to smuggle you back. You really shouldn’t be here. I don’t know what your family would think if they knew.’

Kate smiled. ‘I don’t really care what they think.’ She closed her eyes, and laid her head back. It was so cosy in the cottage, she could stay here forever.

As she drifted off to the sound of the logs crackling and popping in the fire, and the kettle beginning to hiss, and the slow chomping of Hector as he worked on his biscuit, she heard that little clock on the mantelpiece begin to chime again . . .

‘I wondered if you’d gone back down to London too, when I didn’t see you earlier.’

Kate opened her eyes and blinked, wondering where she was for a minute. She squinted against the setting sun. A tall figure was silhouetted there. Golden light was dappling his light brown hair and throwing the sun-lightened streaks into stark relief.

Hang on — this wasn’t the first time she’d seen that image tonight. She sat upright, her limbs fully functional and her stone wall firmly in place. She was gratified to see she was wearing her jeans as well. Yet part of her was annoyed at the fact she’d left Blacksmith Will and her pretty dress behind in her dream.

‘Can I help?’ She asked the question stiffly and formally, her heart beating way too fast as she looked at Theo Kent on the other side of her wall.

‘Not really.’ He grinned. ‘I heard snoring. I came to investigate.’

‘Seriously?’ she asked, mortified.

‘No. I’m joking.’ He nodded towards the car park. ‘I left my car here tonight. I’m heading back to the campsite and took a shortcut back to it. It just so happens the shortcut took me behind your museum. Sorry. I caught you napping, didn’t I?’

‘You caught me doing more than that,’ she muttered. This was slightly embarrassing. No way could she let him know she’d just been dreaming about him.

* * *

It really was too perfect. Theo had indeed nipped around the back of the museum to get back to the car. It was an added bonus that red-headed Kate was there, napping away in her garden.

There was an empty wine-glass next to her and half a bottle of wine on the grass.

‘Had a good evening?’ he asked. He checked there was only one wine glass and there was, so that was very good. ‘Jenna said you’d disappeared after lunch. Like I said, I wondered if you’d gone back to London with your boyfriend.’

Kate shook her head; she grabbed what looked like a growing-out fringe and pushed it back over the top of her head, frowning. ‘No. He had work to deal with. Something about multi-national clients and damage limitation.’ She looked confused. ‘Sorry. I think I fell into a wine-induced sleep. So yes. I probably had a reasonable evening. What are you doing in the village then? Campsite not lively enough for you?’ He got the impression she was trying to change the subject — it was something to do with the way her words all rushed together and directed the focus of conversation to his activities rather than her own. Oh well; no harm in playing along.

‘It’s not lively at all. It’s a field and I like it like that. I just thought I’d have a wander around the village. I got a nice little map earlier.’ He smiled, still amused. ‘I also got an invitation to the wine bar, but I didn’t take her up on it.’

Something shifted in her expression and her eyes hardened. ‘Oh, yes? That would be Jenna’s invitation then.’

Theo grinned, remembering Jenna’s attempts to spend the evening with him. She wasn’t his type — he preferred women with a little more substance to them. ‘You could say that. I popped in here earlier and she sort of asked me along.’

Kate rolled her eyes. ‘Typical. Oh!’ Her eyes widened. ‘Were you the one who came in to see me when I was out?’

‘That would have been me,’ he admitted. ‘I was hoping to hold you to the extra visit on the one ticket. I’m sorry it failed.’

‘You clearly got a much more exciting offer.’ She smiled to take the edge off her words.

Theo laughed. It was nice talking to Kate, with the evening settling around them and the warmth holding in the dusty track and the grass nearby. He leaned on the dry-stone wall and felt the rough texture beneath his fingertips, the softness of the lichen in fluffy green patches here and there. It felt easy and it felt familiar.

‘Yeah, well. I decided against it. Apparently the food’s not great, and I’d kill for something to eat.’

Kate’s eyes slid across to the track behind him and she studied the pathway silently, seemingly wrestling with something beyond his comprehension.

‘I was just about to make a cup of tea and some cheese on toast,’ she said. ‘You’re welcome to have some if you want. If you’re still hungry.’

He wasn’t completely sure who was the most shocked at that offer. She stared at him,

her eyes wide, as if she was just about to apologise for even suggesting such a thing.

But something inside him told him that this was a perfectly natural thing to do. In fact, it was something they had done many times before. It was the oddest sense of déjà vu.

‘Yes,’ he said slowly, ‘I would love that. Thanks.’

She nodded, a little stiffly. ‘Good. Come in through that gate then. You can wait here while I sort it all out.’

And she stood and hurried over to a door which must have led up into her flat above the museum.

He wasn’t going to argue. He was very happy to have cheese on toast and a cup of tea with Cat.

Cat? No. He meant Kate. Of course.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Kate's cheeks were burning. Had she really just suggested a snack to a complete stranger?

It's not a snack, it's a feast, a little voice told her; and he's not a stranger.

Regardless, she took the steps up to her flat two at a time in case she suddenly began to regret her offer. She grabbed two mugs from the dresser and flicked the switch on the kettle to boil. She put a teabag in Theo's mug.

Will likes his tea strong. Don't forget, it's three spoonfuls of sugar and a fair drop of milk.

The cheese on toast, meanwhile, was bubbling away nicely under the grill and she slathered a good dollop of Worcestershire sauce onto both their suppers. It's not to everyone's taste, but we both like it. He introduced me to it and I—

'Stop it!' Kate dropped the spoon into the sink and pressed her hands over her ears, muffling the clatter. She clearly hadn't woken up yet — her subconscious was still in the dream and she was still in — well — in a relationship with Blacksmith Will. No, she wasn't; it was Cat. But how was it possible for her to know that? This was really creeping her out. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she opened her eyes, flung the kitchen window wide and leaned out. Theo was standing in her garden, his hands clasped behind him, staring out at the fields and the river.

'How do you like your tea?' she shouted. She was steadying herself by holding onto the window frame and therefore he wouldn't be aware that she was crossing her fingers, half-dreading the answer.

Theo turned and looked up. ‘Quite milky. Fairly strong. Three sugars.’

Kate swallowed. ‘Great. And you do like Worcestershire sauce, don’t you?’

‘I love that stuff!’ he called back. ‘Thanks.’ He smiled and her tummy did a funny little leap thing.

‘Me too.’ Kate was fairly certain that came out in a squeak, but Theo didn’t seem to notice if it had. ‘I’ll be down in a second.’ She was sure her smile was brittle as she closed the window and leaned against the counter, staring at the cups — the perfect tea and the cheese on toast just how he liked it.

‘Good grief.’ The smile slid off her face. She wasn’t quite sure where this was going. Her gaze travelled across to the corner of the room where a light on the laptop was still blinking, indicating that Chris had possibly left it on sleep mode after he’d used it earlier today. Chris, her boyfriend.

And here she was, entertaining a stranger who was camping up the road, and making him supper exactly as he liked it.

Her hands shook as she carried the tray carefully downstairs and out into the garden. She set it down and Theo came over from the wall.

‘Maeve said it was a lovely spot,’ he told her. ‘She said that I should pay a visit here. She didn’t tell me the catering rivalled the coffee shop’s though.’

‘You know Maeve?’ she asked, surprised. ‘Really?’

‘I know her quite well. I met her at the Outer Hebrides dig. I was one of the divers that found the site of the crannog. I had to take her out to the spot in a boat, throw myself into the water and feed some film back to her. That was a wild day — didn’t

stop raining for hours.'

'Oh!' Her heart was suddenly lifted. He wasn't a complete stranger then, really. Not if she took a particular view of the situation. He knew Maeve. Maeve had probably mentioned him to her. She'd certainly mentioned the dive. Kate was probably entertaining one of her friends, as a courtesy to her. That sounded better. 'Didn't she have to huddle under a makeshift marquee on the deck of the boat?' Kate asked, remembering an email Maeve had sent her just before she started the dig.

'She did indeed. She wasn't very happy about it.'

'She doesn't like boats much.' Kate settled down with her tea. She picked up a slice of toast and bit into it, the hot melted cheese burning the roof of her mouth a little. 'Yet she's happy to dig around in holes. I don't get her at times.'

This was much easier — they had common ground. Kate didn't feel quite so disloyal to Chris now — even if she was having awfully interesting dreams about someone who looked awfully like Theo Kent.

* * *

They talked for what seemed like hours. The sun had set completely and the little solar lights she had dotted around came on one by one. There was a string of them along the wall and they looked very pretty, twinkling away.

It was surprising how easily they managed to chat to each other — as if they had known one another for years. Sometimes, Theo thought, you get that though, don't you? A spark of recognition and suddenly you're talking away like old friends. It was like that with her.

At length, and very reluctantly, Theo stretched out in the wooden chair he had been

sitting on and sighed. 'It's time for me to go, I guess. I'm just at that point where I know I have to make a move, because I've got a car to drive back and a sleeping bag to crash into.'

'Not literally, I hope,' said Kate with a smile. 'I wouldn't like to think about you physically driving into your tent and annihilating your sleeping bag. There are cows for that sort of thing.'

Theo looked at her, and laughed. 'Tell me they don't do it on the Hartsford camp site?'

'All I'll tell you' she said, wagging her finger importantly, 'is that Hartsford campsite is right next to Hartsford Dairy Farm. Just saying.'

'Thanks for that! So when I'm trampled in my sleep, it's the dairy herd I have to blame?'

She stood up and stretched. 'Yep. The dairy herd. But don't worry. They tend to get locked up in the evening. You're more likely to be trampled during the day.'

'That's it, then. I'm investing in a campervan. I'm not going to be party to a cow trampling incident. At least I've only got tonight, then I'm packing up and going home.'

'You could have pitched up on the field out back.' Kate nodded to the grassy expanse beyond her wall. 'I suspect nobody would stop you. But there aren't any toilet blocks. And then you'd have to face the rabid ducks instead.'

As if on cue, a cacophony of duck quacking began, then ended shortly afterwards.

'They're always arguing,' said Kate. 'They have about three squabbles a night, all

around this time, then mainly settle down. I think they fight for the best piece of grass or something to sleep on. Silly birds.'

'Noisy birds,' Theo said. 'Well, thank you for the snack. It was just what I needed. That and the chat of course. It was nice to meet you again.'

'And you.' She smiled again. 'One day you'll have to come back and see the exhibits you missed.'

'One day I will. I need to go and keep my clients happy though, so it can't be any time soon unfortunately.' He frowned. 'In fact, I've got a job tomorrow afternoon, so I'll be making an early start. Yes. I'd best go.'

'Can't keep clients waiting.' Kate looked at him a little curiously. 'I didn't ask. Where do you work?'

'Anywhere that needs me. Riding schools, stud farms, family homes, normal farms. Wherever horses are. Oh — museums. I do museums. Shire horses and Shetlands and pit ponies are ever popular in those places. Animal sanctuaries. There's another one.'

Kate's voice sounded a little strangled when she said her next words: 'Are you a blacksmith, then?'

'Almost right. A farrier. I do a little bit of tending to injured feet and limbs as well. A little bit of veterinary care. It's good work. Always busy and very satisfying. It's nice to see the animals running around happily when you've finished with them. My grandfather was a farrier too. I got the bug from him — loved spending time in his forge. It was immensely exciting for a little kid, being allowed to hammer hot metal and make things out of it. Then I like to go diving too when I have free time — that's how I met your friend Maeve. I got the chance to visit Scotland and do some work on the site they discovered. It was incredible. Really fascinating.'

‘I bet it was,’ said Kate, faintly. ‘And you sort out injured feet and limbs too. Jolly good. Right! Okay. Have a safe journey home and — well — good luck with the horses.’

‘Thanks. The job’s near Malvern, so it’s not too far from home.’

‘Lovely. A nice part of the country.’

‘Very nice. Thanks again, Cat.’

He remembered too late he’d called her the wrong name, but she didn’t correct him.

She just smiled a little and said, ‘Nice to see you again Theo.’

* * *

Will came out of the forge, stripped to the waist, the sweat standing on his skin. He had a mallet thrown over his shoulder and he had tied his hair back for once. It was a hot day and it was even hotter in the forge.

‘Hello, Blacksmith Will.’

‘Cat!’ He saw her sitting on a little wooden stool outside his cottage. She made to stand up, leaning heavily on a stick she’d procured from somewhere.

He was at her side in an instant, throwing the mallet to one side, shrugging his shirt on, taking her hand. ‘What are you doing here? Did you walk here?’ He looked around for the Bath chair.

‘I did. Didn’t I do well?’ She smiled up at him as he supported her and then laughed as he swung her up and cradled her in his arms.

‘What have I told you?’ he asked, teasing. ‘Come on. Shall we go to the river? It’s so hot, we can maybe find a patch of shade up there.’

‘I have the most terrible urge to dip my toes in the water,’ Cat said. ‘Shall we?’

‘I don’t see why not. I’ll take you to the stepping stones. We can sit on those.’

He carried her around the side of the cottages and was gratified to feel her arms tighten around his neck. It stirred all sorts of dangerous feelings up and he tried not to think about what his body was urging him to do. That wasn’t seemly and he could never think of her like that. Not until—

He forced his mind to stop that train of thought. He had been about to add the words ‘after they were wed’. He shouldn’t be so daft. She’d never think of him like that.

‘Here we go,’ he said, eventually setting her down. ‘Can you stand?’

‘Of course I can stand!’ she almost scoffed, but he saw her face blanch as her leg gave way a little. ‘Come on. Help me onto the stones.’

She held her hand out and he took it, leading her towards the lazy current and the sun-warmed stepping stones. ‘You’ve done too much,’ he scolded her. ‘What devil took you, that you might decide to walk all the way down here?’

‘You. You’re the devil,’ she replied, teasing. ‘I can’t stay away from you.’

‘I hope you’re not blaming me.’ He laughed. ‘I’ve been naught but an angel with you.’

‘Very true. Shall we sit here?’ She manoeuvred herself into a sitting position on one of the wide, square blocks of stone.

Will dropped to his knees on the stone next to her and took her leg gently in his hands. ‘May I? I’ll undo your boots, and then you can feel that water on your toes.’

‘Would you? Thank you.’

He carefully unlaced the sturdy little boots and saw with a start that her feet were bare inside them.

‘It was simply too hot for stockings,’ she said, blushing.

‘Makes no difference to me. How does that feel?’

‘So much better.’ She shuffled around and dipped her feet into the water. ‘Oh! Oh, that’s wonderful.’

Will shuffled into a sitting position too, and pulled his boots off. He put his feet in the water next to hers and they sat, enjoying the water flowing over their skin, listening to the distant noises of animals in the fields and the lazy breezes rustling the top of the trees.

‘I could stay here forever,’ said Cat on a sigh. ‘It’s just perfect.’ She leaned forward and scooped up a handful of water. Letting it dribble through her fingers, she moved her feet and swirled the water around.

Will leaned down too and stared into the crystal depths. ‘When I was a boy, I used to tickle trout. In a river just like this, near the Malverns. I lived with my grandparents, and my grandfather gave me his love of horses. He apprenticed me to a blacksmith in Norfolk, who already had a Scottish lad working for him — Cameron, who was coming to the end of his learning. After my apprenticeship was done, I worked in Norfolk for a time; then I came here.’

‘I don’t quite know where I belong,’ said Cat, ‘but I like to think I belong here. My family officially lives near Primrose Hill in London. Our illustrious neighbours have included poets and photographers galore.’ She smiled and looked up at Will. ‘SirHugh Clough? Roger Fenton?’

Will shook his head blankly. ‘No. I don’t know them.’

‘No matter.’ Cat returned her attention to the water while Will cringed a little inside. Should he know about poets and photographers to move in Cat’s world? ‘I know of Byron,’ he said suddenly. ‘And Keats. Shelley.’

‘The Romantics. I adore their work.’

Will squirmed in case she pressed him for more information. He knew a few lines of each poet, at the most — apart from one. His heart pounded — he hoped he could remember it properly.

“‘The fountains mingle with the river’,’ he began slowly, “‘And the rivers with the ocean. The winds of heaven mix for ever, With a sweet emotion’”.

Cat looked up at him, a spark of respect in her eyes. ‘Shelley. Love’s Philosophy . Go on.’

He smiled, the words coming more easily from some long-buried memory of school days. “‘Nothing in the world is single; All things by a law divine, In one spirit meet and mingle. Why not I with thine?—’”

He felt himself colour. Cat’s hand crept over to his, and she took up the words where he left off. “‘See the mountains kiss high heaven, And the waves clasp one another; No sister-flower would be forgiven, If it disdained its brother; And the sunlight clasps the earth, And the moonbeams kiss the sea: What is all this sweet work worth, If thou

kiss not me?’”

They stared at one another as the words died on her lips. Will found himself leaning down towards her, her little face upturned like a flower, and her eyes fixed on his—

‘Catriona Aphrodite Tredegar!’ The voice bellowed from the opposite side of the river, and they pulled apart, Will dropping her hand as if it was a burning coal from his forge. The Earl of Hartsford was standing up in his carriage, screaming at them, while his wife moaned and flapped a handkerchief in front of her face. It would have been bloody comical had it been someone else on the receiving end.

‘Uncle Harry!’ Cat stared at them. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I should ask you the same thing, child! Get in this carriage now. Now !’

‘But—’

‘No buts. You, MrHaddon, should be ashamed of yourself. She’s not right in the head, she’s clearly still suffering from the accident. I will not have her taken advantage of!’ The Earl was ranting on and Will scrambled to his feet, horribly aware of his bare feet. He was just thankful he’d pulled his shirt on.

‘I’m sorry, Sir, she felt a little faint with the sun, and I was trying to help her cool down before I brought her back to the Hall.’

‘Cool down! Good God, man, you’re the one that needs to cool down. You—’

‘Papa!’ LadyAmelia’s soft voice carried across the field and startled them all as she appeared from behind the cottages. ‘How wonderful to see you! We won’t have to walk back after all! Here Cat, here are the flowers I said I’d pick for you. I was just around the corner.’ She smiled across the river, her dimples appearing innocently and

beautifully in her cheeks. ‘You don’t think I would have let her come all this way on her own, do you?’

Will stared at the girl, who was indeed clutching a bunch of wildflowers, looking as innocent as a new born lamb.

‘Amelia Violet Hartsford, is that the truth?’ The Earl was clearly in a terrible temper if he was giving the girls their full names; but Lady Amelia’s presence had already begun to soothe him, and he at least sat down again.

‘Of course it is. Look, Mama, you can have some of these too. There are plenty. I think these ones are meadowsweet.’ She buried her nose in a fluffy white plant. ‘Or it may be yarrow. I don’t know.’

Will was aware of a movement below him, and he saw that Cat was already forcing her feet back into her boots. ‘I’m afraid I can’t get this one on,’ she said, struggling with the one she’d broken. ‘My foot is all swollen up.’

‘Oh Cat, I did tell you.’ Amelia was there at the edge of the stepping stones. ‘Mr Haddon, would you be an absolute darling and help her over the river to the carriage?’

‘Certainly, Lady Amelia.’ Will wasted no time in helping Cat to limp across the stones. It seemed to take an inordinately long time as she was having difficulty putting any weight on her leg; but he didn’t dare pick her up as he yearned to do.

Once they had Cat in the carriage, Amelia touched his arm. ‘Thank you, Mr Haddon,’ she said, her bright blue eyes boring into his.

‘No. Thank you, Lady Amelia,’ he said. ‘It was fortunate that—’ He didn’t quite know how to complete the sentence; so Amelia did it for him.

‘—that we decided to come here. I know Cat very well. I knew exactly where she should want to go on her walk.’ She lowered her voice so only he could hear. ‘It was doubly fortunate that I decided to follow her, wouldn’t you say?’

Will could only nod. He was more than aware of the situation. He went hot and cold, thinking about what might have happened otherwise. He’d be out of work, that was for certain.

He helped LadyAmelia into the carriage, and watched it rumble on its way. Cat turned slightly in the seat and their eyes locked with unspoken emotion until she was out of sight.

Will closed his eyes and raised his face to the sky. If he had a guardian angel, they had been watching out for him that morning; and he’d never been more grateful for anything in his life before.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Kate watched Theo disappear over the fields and vanish into the dark. A few minutes later she heard a car door slam and an engine start. The car drove off and the headlamps arced over the fields briefly, driving away towards the campsite.

He'd called her "Cat". A strange slip of the tongue, given her current dual situation . . . But not unexpected — Kate, Cat. Whatever. It was an easy mistake to make. And yet, it made her uncomfortable. It was just too much of a coincidence. That and all the other things. Something seriously freaky was going on here and she didn't like it. Not one bit.

Her thoughts returned to Theo himself. She wondered whether she'd ever see him again or whether he'd just hover on the edge of her consciousness forever, nudging her every time she thought about horses or blacksmiths. Or even cheese on toast. She really felt as if she knew him, as if they'd known each other for years — either that or she had a slight obsession with him that had manifested itself into those bizarre episodes with Cat Tredegar. Kate didn't even know who she was. She certainly didn't know why her brain was making up visitations to what she oddly thought was Cat's life. She might be spending too much time in the environs of the Folk Museum, she supposed. Immersed as she was, living and working amongst things steeped in the lives of other people, it was only natural that sometimes the imagined past would intrude on the present. She'd taken on a lot more after Maeve had left, so it was just as well she loved her job really.

Putting all that aside, though, her mind told her it was highly unlikely she'd see Theo Kent again.

Her heart, however, had her daring to hope otherwise; it took a lot for Kate to admit

that to herself, but it was true. So she thought it best if she buried that idea rather quickly and tried not to think about Theo any more.

Instead, she would head upstairs, wake up that laptop and do a little research. The thought of Blacksmith Will and Cat Tredegar wasn't going to leave her in peace anytime soon. She swept the crumbs from the plates onto the grass, and picked up the cups and crockery. Another quick trip down to the garden had her collecting the glass and the wine bottle. There was a peculiar sort of atmosphere to her little garden when she went down the second time — it seemed almost too still and too peaceful, and her senses tingled as she stood on the lawn and looked around her. She half-expected to see a Bath chair trundling down from the Hall; the sound of hammering from the forge and the whinny of a horse. She shivered and decided not to linger down there.

She hurried back upstairs and sat down at the laptop. She took a deep breath and started trawling around any resources she could find. She must have searched for about half an hour, getting distracted by all sorts of interesting information — but then she saw it. A newspaper report in a local paper about a heavy freeze in February 1885. It must have been a slow news day, but she was unutterably grateful for that; because within the report was a snippet that made her shake and her palms sweat:

“It is our unfortunate duty to report that Miss Catriona Tredegar, a relative of the Countess of Hartsford, was today seriously injured in a fall on the ice during her stay at the Hall. Miss Tredegar, the only daughter of eminent traveller and historian Andrew Tredegar and his botanist wife, Matilda, is expected to convalesce at the Hall for the foreseeable future. Please be aware that the River Hartsford is not usually prone to freezing and this demonstrates that reckless behaviour and challenging the laws of nature do not meld well together.”

Despite the rather pompous tone of the article, Kate was mesmerised by an illustration of the River, all frozen and beautiful and a figure sprawled face down on the ice. It was an artists' impression, that was all, but the Faerie Bridge was in the

background and it was, in its own weird way, magical. At least it proved Cat had stayed at the Hall. Kate's head was pleased she had found something solid to back her experiences up in some way — but her heart knew she didn't need back-up. Not really.

Her eyes drifted outside and she imagined Theo snuggling down in his sleeping bag, perhaps just in his t-shirt and boxers. She imagined his arm resting on the top of the cover, the muscles firm and well-defined and his dark brown eyes closed as he slept, his lashes dark against his tanned cheeks—

'Shut up !' she told herself angrily. She looked back at the laptop and wondered if she'd be able to trace Blacksmith Will at all. He might be more difficult — but she had resources in the museum, didn't she? Maeve had told her the cottage was the Blacksmith's, but it had never really seemed that important before to see it written down and to see his name in front of her.

Kate sat back in the chair and thought hard. Had Maeve ever told her this story? This legend about the family? Might it be that she knew it all subconsciously? It was a thought, but she didn't know why Cat and Will's situation had suddenly started haunting her.

Because the stars are aligning and it's time again.

The words were whispered somewhere very close to her ear and she jumped. There was, of course, nobody near her and she stood up, scraping the chair back across the floor, looking around. She wasn't even sure if it was a man's voice or a woman's.

Whatever it was, the words sent her hurtling downstairs, straight into the room that held the ice-skates. There were, she knew, some records of estate staff and handwritten notes there, amongst some other little exhibits from the Hall. If she searched through them, she might be able to see his name . . .

Kate unlocked the cabinet with shaking hands and riffled through the documents — notes about dinner parties, guest lists and menus jostled for space next to orders for fabric from London and cheerful letters from guests thanking the Aldrichs for their hospitality. Kate was just beginning to despair, when she picked up a letter from Henry Aldrich, Earl of Hartsford. He was apparently writing to a friend within the horse-racing fraternity, raving with delight at the fact one of his horses had won at Newmarket in 1884:

“If Vane-Tempest can get George Stubbs to paint Hambletonian after his win, I say it is not outside the realms of possibility that I engage Heywood Hardy to paint Rowland after his win, what say you? I suspected the animal may have injured itself after the run, but young William Haddon, the estate blacksmith, checked and the steed is, thankfully, no worse for wear!”

Kate sank down onto the floor, holding the letter. George Stubbs had been a famous artist and she had seen that very portrait of Hambletonian, a beautiful, big brown race-horse, in Ireland.

‘You really did work here, Will,’ she whispered and looked up, along towards his cottage. And Cat — Miss Catriona Tredegar had been a guest here at the same time, and had an accident on the River, after ‘reckless behaviour’ on the ice.

Part of her was thankful that she’d discovered all that. But another part, the bigger part of her, was absolutely terrified. The cottages didn’t feel sinister in the slightest, far from it. In fact, as she sat on the floor and clutched the letter, she had never felt more as if she belonged there.

But she was terrified because she didn’t know how things were going to progress for Cat and Will, two people who should never get together, never be allowed to fall in love; and she had a feeling that she was going to find out.

* * *

It had been a couple of weeks since her discoveries, and Kate hadn't shared any more incidents in Cat's life. She didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but her real life had to continue and was continuing, and as such she was heading down to London.

Chris had ended up working weekends, as he'd intimated, and it wasn't intolerable as such, it was just more difficult. Fortunately, with the museum being closed Mondays and Tuesdays, she had the chance to pop down to Chiswick, more than he had the chance to come up to Suffolk; but considering he often worked those days in the office, or was out and about seeing clients — sometimes not even in this country — it was by no means a regular arrangement.

However, Kate was going to London not just to see Chris, this time, but to see her brother. Tom was a historian too; his speciality was the Tudors, surprise, surprise, and he was always off doing learned things. Just like their parents, who were academics, Professors at Cambridge University and archaeologists first and foremost. Their children had been an inconvenience they had to suffer to keep the family name going — or so it had always seemed to Kate, who sometimes felt like the odd one out in her family. She was happy to settle in Suffolk and didn't really want to go anywhere else. She didn't have that Howard wanderlust, but Tom did.

'I've got a couple of days in London,' he had told her via a crackly Skype call. The museum Wi-Fi had a horrible habit of dipping in and out as well as the mobile signal. 'I'm staying over before I head to France. You fancy joining me?' He was on the trail of Mary Queen of Scots apparently, going off on one of his Tudor tangents. He'd been to Scotland and was working his way down the country in her footsteps or something.

'Don't mind if I do. And the parents?'

He'd rolled his eyes. 'Busy on a dig. Can't make it.'

That had made Kate think of Maeve, and then almost immediately of Theo Kent — as it always did. She'd tried to put him to one side, in a little box in her mind labelled 'Theo', but sometimes she couldn't help taking the lid off and peeking into it. Today, however, she squashed the Theo thoughts down firmly. It seemed extremely disloyal to be thinking of him when she was planning to see Chris, but it was something that just seemed to happen without her being conscious of it.

Anyway, Kate hadn't seen Tom for months, so she was looking forward to the trip. It did make it a lot more convenient that she could stay at Chris's and not have to pay for accommodation. And despite the fact that Chris was working, the intention was that the three of them would all head out for dinner that evening, so that would be nice too.

Kate walked down the front stairs on the Sunday evening, all ready to throw her suitcase into the back of her car and start the journey down to Chiswick. As she turned the key in the lock, the clocks started chiming again in the reception area. She hadn't heard that for weeks — not since Theo had driven off to his campsite.

Kate unlocked the door and stuck her head back inside, her heart hammering against her chest. But there was nothing to see, and certainly nothing to hear. Everything was ticking away nicely, the cuckoo behaving himself and the Hall clock sitting there all smug.

She had to admit it — she was a little disappointed.

* * *

Chris's house had always felt wrong to Kate. It was an Edwardian two-bedroom end-of-terrace house — very nice and very beautiful. It had an en-suite bathroom and a

private back garden with a high fence. It also had perfectly polished floorboards in a big, airy bay-windowed lounge, and a downstairs cloak room.

However, at the back of the house was a great big glass extension, which seemed very out of place to Kate. It was possibly because she was a stickler for history and the way things should look traditionally, and to walk into what should be a kitchen and be faced with nothing but a massive glass wall always threw her. It was super-clean and super-clinical as well. Much different to her little kitchen, which usually smelled of burnt toast and permanently had a pile of dishes on the draining board. If she got her breakfast dishes washed and put away before the next morning, it was something of an achievement. Having said that, if she had a cleaner like Chris did, then maybe her kitchen would not be so hovel-like.

The terraced house had looked quite different when she lived there. It was almost as if every trace of her had been eradicated, and she had been pushed to one side. She cringed as a memory came into her mind of one of Chris's interminable business dinners just after she'd left:

'Oh, yes, Kate used to live with me, she used to work in the British Museum, you know? Yes — I know. I have no idea why she decided to move up to Suffolk .' An amused, sidelong look at her. 'Kate's a country girl at heart, I think. I know! She won't find very exciting exhibits up there, but it's what she wants to do, so . . . ' A shrug of the shoulders and an apologetic smile. ' I've got to support her, haven't I?'

Ugh . It had caused a massive argument when they got home, but he'd talked her round and apologised, and she'd reluctantly forgiven him.

And his terrace was a beautiful house — just not to her taste, unfortunately.

Kate's mind drifted back to the blacksmith's cottage at home. She'd always felt comfortable there, and she'd always felt welcomed by the Hall, whether she'd gone

in as a paying guest or popped in to see Elodie or Cassie in the private wing. She had thought it odd how a person could just connect to some places and not others.

She unlocked the door to Chris's house and carried her case in. She didn't dump it in the lounge as she usually did at home; she kicked her shoes off and carried the case straight upstairs. There she unpacked everything, hanging her clothes up in the wardrobe, shunting along the stuff she already had there, folding other things neatly into the drawers. Her toothbrush was still there, and she had her own toiletries, along with some bits and pieces of make-up so she didn't feel like she was packing for a holiday, just to see her boyfriend. She didn't bother with make-up much at home; just a slick of lip-gloss and some mascara, along with a dusting of blusher and she was good to go. They usually went out for dinner when Kate came to stay with Chris though, and she felt as if she needed to make more of an effort in that respect.

Only when her case was unpacked and hidden in the spare bedroom Chris used as a study, did she go downstairs and shed her coat. Chris had texted her and said he'd be in about seven o'clock. It would be a quick turnaround as their meal was booked for eight-thirty, so Kate's plan was to have a shower — well, go on, a nice, deep bubble bath, as he had the most amazing bathroom — and pamper herself until he came home.

Kate looked at her mobile and wondered whether she risked phoning him to tell him she was here. It would only go to voicemail if he couldn't answer; it wasn't as if he would be disturbed in a meeting.

The phone rang three times before he answered it. 'Kate?' he asked, sounding flustered.

'The very same.' She frowned. 'Is everything okay? I only called to tell you I'm here. If it's a bad time I can call back.'

‘No, it’s not a bad time, exactly.’ He laughed, a little shortly. ‘It’s just not a great time. I’m supposed to have a conversation with this client in the US and my computer has crashed. The tech guys are here now. I can’t really risk letting the client down, so I feel a bit screwed, to be honest.’

‘Is it Skype?’ Everything seemed to be Skype at the moment — Kate’s brother was a great advocate of it; and to be fair if he’d never told Kate about it, she probably wouldn’t have known what it was herself.

‘Yes. That’s right. Hang on.’ There was a crackle and a thump as, Kate assumed, the mobile was thrown onto the desk and Chris began a muffled conversation with someone who sounded as if their native tongue was Russian or something. A tech guy, perhaps.

‘Chris!’ Kate shouted down the phone. ‘Helllooooo! Chris!’

She had hung on for a few seconds feeling really silly, when he eventually came back to her.

He sounded pretty panicked. ‘The mother board’s gone, he says. I’m well and truly shafted. Bloody hell. Bloody, bloody hell —’ That was followed by some rather less innocent swear words. Then, finally, ‘Look — I’ll have to go and see if I can sort this out. I’ll see you later . . . Oh, God — that’s what I meant to tell you — I can’t get home for seven. I’ll meet you there. Just get a taxi. It’s The Arch, Great Cumberland Place, okay? The taxi-driver will know where he’s going.’

This wasn’t altogether unexpected. It happened on a regular basis. Kate had, in fact, acquired a sort of pet taxi driver who she usually asked for when she rang the company. She knew she could trust him and he always took the shortest route, which was obviously excellent news for her.

‘Okay.’ She tried not to let the resentment show in her voice. ‘I’ll see you there.’

‘Yep, see you. Sorry — I’ll have to go. Bye.’

‘Chris—’ she said, but he’d already hung up.

So much for exploring new technology for a virtual office in Suffolk — he couldn’t even cope when it failed in London when he had a raft of tech guys to sort it all out for him. He’d probably have a heart attack if the Wi-Fi dropped out in Hartsford and be on the first train down to London to get a more reliable signal.

* * *

The taxi driver dropped Kate off in front of what had originally been a row of Georgian houses. They’d been converted into a boutique hotel, not far from Mayfair, and looked stunning. She was to meet her brother in the champagne lounge, then Chris was meeting them in the restaurant.

The foyer was large and modern, belying the quaint exterior of the hotel. Kate’s heels echoed across the floor and she nodded to the girl on the reception desk as she headed through the bar into the champagne lounge. The place was quite busy, residents and guests lounging on the comfy sofas and chairs, indulging in one of the nicest pleasures there is — a crisp, cold, bubbly glass of champagne.

Only one of the banquette areas had the silky, silver curtain closed and Kate grinned. Knowing her brother—

‘Good evening, Thomas,’ she said as she pulled the curtain back.

‘Katie!’ Tom sat there, half-cut already on fine champagne and smiling at her in genuine pleasure. He was the only one who ever called her Katie. ‘How did you

know I was here? I was hidden so very, very well.'

'Not well enough.' She slid into the booth and leaned over to kiss him. 'You're hairy. What happened?

'I forgot my razor.' Tom rubbed his fingers across his strawberry-blond beard and frowned. 'Never got round to buying one. So — you didn't answer me. How did you know it was me?'

'I guessed. It was the only one closed and there was only one shadow behind it.'

The curtains were quite translucent and gauzy. Tom was thin and rangy, all arms and legs. She'd seen his shape behind the curtain and knew he was always early for his appointments. Plus, he had quite a sense of humour and would have enjoyed hiding out in there. He also liked to factor in plenty of time — so she knew he'd be here already. And he was really good at keeping in touch, so if he was going to be late, he would have told her. It was hardly rocket science. Whatever, it was good to see him.

'Chris is going to be late,' Kate informed Tom.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. 'I'm saying nothing.' He pushed a glass towards her. 'Here, have some champagne.'

Kate knew Tom's opinion of Chris. Her own was pretty close to Tom's right now, in fact. She reached out and took the glass, glugging back a huge mouthful. The bubbles fizzed and burst in her mouth and damn, it was good.

Tom leaned over and squeezed her hand. 'It's not like you see each other regularly. He could make the effort.'

Kate sort of agreed, but then, giving him the benefit of the doubt, they were both busy

people. Busy in different ways. Her job was hardly as high pressure as Chris's, but she still had responsibilities and customers to keep happy.

'You're a fine one to talk,' Kate said, defensively. 'You're showing no signs of settling down. You're not making any effort to see anybody.'

'My point exactly,' replied her brother. 'It's much better for me just to enjoy the moment. No commitment, no regrets and no promises.'

'Listen to Lothario Howard.' She was faintly offended by his comments. He'd had a brief fling with Cassie, and it had ended as all his relationships did — on good terms, and with no malice.

'I've had no complaints,' Tom poured another glass of champagne and topped up her glass as well. 'Like I said, no promises. They know what the boundaries are when they walk into it.'

'You are a vile human being,' Kate sighed. 'What if someone was treating me like that? You'd not think they were a nice person, now, would you?'

'No.' Tom sipped his champagne thoughtfully. 'But then, you would have been given the facts before the very first kiss, so . . .'

He shrugged and she knew he had a point.

'Well I know the facts about Chris and it's shit but I'm a bit stuck tonight.' She hoped to end the conversation there. 'Now, tell me about your travels.'

'Ah! Yes — it's fascinating. You see . . .'

And he was off. Her brother was like a wind-up toy. Set him going on his favourite topics — himself and his research — and he'd talk for hours. Kate only half-listened to him, as always, and instead let her attention wander around the champagne lounge.

The room had, she suspected, been part of a house originally, but she wasn't sure which room it might have been. She squinted a little bit, trying to imagine it without the stunning furnishings and the guests and the quirky champagne-themed graffiti on the ceiling. In fact, she leaned her head back to read some of the quotes better, and then sat upright again when she felt herself drifting off to sleep. An empty stomach, champagne, a two hour plus drive from Suffolk, a taxi ride for nigh on half an hour across London — she was done in . . .

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Great Cumberland Place had been awfully like that street she'd visited with her brother Charles a few months after her accident.

The carriage had drawn up in front of a huge Georgian terraced house and she looked at it curiously. Charles slipped out the door and held it open for her.

'This is rather nice,' she said. 'It's a shame we weren't here for the Season this year — damned broken leg. I missed being in London. I missed the parties.'

'Cat!' Charles was shocked. 'You've been spending too long with that blacksmith. You can't walk into a place like this and use language like that.'

'I'm having difficulty walking anywhere,' she moaned, easing herself out of the carriage into Charles's arms. He set her down gently onto the pavement and steadied her, then took her arm and guided her slowly across the pavement. 'I swear I'm still limping.' They'd had to abandon the Bath chair today, as it didn't fit into the carriage. She was starting to get annoyed with it anyway and would have been quite happy if it had rolled away down a hill and ended up in the Thames.

'You are still limping,' said Charles. 'Any fool can see that. But it takes time. You were lucky it's healing as well as it is. Now here we go — this is my friend Edward Mountfort's house. You remember him, of course—'

* * *

Kate snapped her eyes open and she was sitting in the champagne lounge, back with her historian brother who had reached Bolton Castle, in Yorkshire, on his reported

journey.

‘I see,’ she said. ‘Fascinating.’

‘Isn’t it?’ he replied, oblivious. ‘Do you know, they had to borrow tapestries, rugs and furniture from other families to make the castle fit for a Queen?’ There was another full glass of champagne before her and someone had brought another bottle over as well. God, she was going to be merry tonight.

‘Astonishing. Look, excuse me for a moment, would you. I need to find the bathroom.’

‘Sure, sure,’ said Tom, expansively. ‘I’ll tell you more when you come back.’

‘Super.’ She gritted her teeth in a smile. She sidled out of the booth and fought her way through the curtain which was doing this awful clingy thing to her, and then staggered somewhat towards the ladies’ room.

Feeling much better after her ablutions, Kate headed back to the booth, and stopped short. The whole place had changed. She was standing in a large reception room and there was a huge aspidistra blocking her way. Two gilt-framed mirrors hung on the wall, bouncing light into one another and there were bright white lace curtains at the window.

Two men were standing in the room. One was her brother — the one who’d lifted her out of the carriage a little earlier, not Tom. She would have known him anywhere, in any timeframe.

‘Charles?’ she ventured, her voice coming out as no more than a croak. She clutched instinctively at her skirts, feeling the heavy weight of a bustle and a train behind her. The blue and grey striped dress set off with a cream watered silk sash was, of course,

her favourite day gown. It wasn't doing her much good lurking behind a pot plant though. 'Charles!' she said, more loudly.

Her brother looked quite dapper. He was wearing a three-piece suit, with a waistcoat and a jacket, the collar of his stiff, white shirt folded over and pressed into neat little wings. He had obviously taken some time with his grooming as his moustache was trimmed and his hair brushed until it shone a lustrous reddish gold. He was deep in conversation with the other man.

Kate touched her own red hair and twirled a ringlet around her finger. The curl was hanging down the back of her neck and was annoying her intensely. She hated having her hair half up and half down, but that was what suited her best, apparently.

She coughed, quite loudly. Both men turned to face her and her heart lurched. She recognised the other man as well as she recognised him in her modern-day life. Still clean-shaven, his dark hair was parted at the side and he looked tall and confident, his hands thrust into the pockets of his frock coat. His shirt too was pressed and very white; but he sported a tie of some sort. He walked towards her, removing his hands from his pockets and stretching them out to her in welcome. She should have been very, very attracted to him; but instead, she looked at him dispassionately, noting the slightly arrogant look around his mouth, and the hardness in his eyes which wasn't alleviated by his smile.

This man was Edward — Edward Mountfort, who she and Charles had come to visit. He just happened to be almost the double of Chris.

'Catriona! You've changed.'

'I know you,' she blurted out, ridiculously. 'You've changed too.'

Edward laughed and nodded. 'Yes, it's been too long — we've both changed. For the

better, I hope. You, on the other hand, are still as beautiful as ever.'

Too long? What planet was the man on? She'd seen him a few weeks ago. Oh — no, she hadn't. She'd seen her version of Chris three weeks ago; which, granted, was a little longer apart than usual. But this version of Chris — Edward Mountfort — had clearly not seen Cat for years. This was too confusing and that champagne certainly wouldn't be helping. God, how was she going to wing it with this one? She had half-expected this — weirdness — to happen again in the cottages. She had never expected to have it happen in London. It was frightening to think her delusions or daydreams or whatever they were could interfere with real life whenever and wherever they decided.

Thrown into a bit of a panic, Kate longed for the easy time she'd had meeting Blacksmith Will, and a little pang touched her heart. She had really missed Will. Whatever incarnation he appeared in.

'What — what are you doing now?' Kate asked Chris — sorry, Edward . If this was real, if she didn't wake up quickly, she would have to separate the two men in her head somehow. She technically didn't know this man from Adam and even her scalp was prickling with foreboding.

'I've taken over my father's business,' he said. 'Wine importing and exporting. We've got the estate ready in Suffolk and I shall be moving there soon. It's easier to be closer to the vineyards, you know?'

'Er . . . have you got any vineyards abroad?' she asked, for want of anything else to say. Importing and exporting wine at least sounded more interesting than Management Consulting.

'One or two.' He looked amused. Okay, maybe she was supposed to know that but if, indeed, she was talking to someone from eighteen hundred and something, she had

literally just dropped in here and what the hell was she supposed to know? Panic streaked through her again. This was impossible. It couldn't be happening. But it was. Damn!

'I mean, of course, have you expanded any further,' Kate blagged, feeling her cheeks flush as she wondered if she was supposed to know that as well.

'Well, I still have the ones in France and Italy, of course, but we are looking towards Spain and Portugal as well. Come, sit down. Charles told me about your accident. Would you like a footstool?'

'No, just a seat would be enough, thank you.' He took her hand and guided her to a wide sofa. Kate was annoyed to discover that she — or Cat — was indeed limping, and whatever she did, however she walked over to that sofa, she couldn't seem to mobilise herself properly. Her movements were slow and awkward, and Edward's hand was cool in hers, and there was none of that spark she'd experienced with Will. She ought to be feeling something really, shouldn't she?

'I'm sorry.' She threw herself onto the mercy of the cushions. 'I'm not usually so ungraceful.' It was true. Kate had done ballet for most of her life. She'd only stopped when she got the job at Hartsford. She kept meaning to go back to it, but Hartsford didn't exactly have a ballet school and to be honest she didn't really have the time. Chris hadn't encouraged her to continue either and had moaned every time she'd suggested going to see The Royal Ballet when she'd been in London. The fact remained, though, that Kate was quite a graceful person — in her own timeline, anyway.

'It will take time. You'll still be healing. I heard you had quite a bad time of it.'

'I think if Will hadn't found me, it would have been much worse.' That sounded like quite a reasonable assumption.

‘Yes, from what I hear, you are correct.’

Charles decided to chip in at that point. Kate couldn’t stop looking at Charles’s moustache; she was ready to swear it was waxed.

‘I was there when they reset it,’ Charles said, conversationally. ‘It was utterly ghastly.’

Kate frowned at him. ‘I do know. I was there, after all.’ Well, she must have been. ‘Will told me the tale as well. I don’t think I want to hear it again.’

Charles raised his eyebrows at her, a classic ‘Tom’ movement, whichever decade he happened to be strutting around in, clearly. ‘Oh, but I like to tell it. I like to talk about how the bones cracked and—’

‘Stop it!’ she snapped. ‘You’re horrible!’

Charles laughed. ‘Maybe.’

‘Now, now,’ said Edward. ‘Behave, my friend. It’s been far too long since Catriona and I had time to talk properly. I think I am counting in years, rather than months, so I want to find out what she’s been doing in the meantime — apart from crippling herself, that is.’

What had she been doing during the forgotten years with Edward? She must have done something. What did young ladies do, apart from have balls and visit people?

‘This and that,’ she bluffed. ‘The usual. I’ve enjoyed a few balls over the years and I’ve realised I’m not very good at ice-skating,’ There were a few memories of her dancing, now she came to think about it — vague images of swirling around a ballroom while the champagne flowed and the music played and the stars twinkled

outside.

Edward nodded. 'I understand that your friends at Hartsford Hall are arranging a ball. And as I believe you'll be staying there again, I'm sure you'll be invited.'

'Oh, Edward!' said Charles in mock horror. 'It was supposed to be a surprise. She doesn't know we're going back there.'

'Back to the Hall?' Her heart leapt, remembering those Bath chair tracks that led to Will's cottage.

'Yes, indeed,' said Charles with a grin. 'The air up there is better for your recovery, so they say. I think the honest answer is our parents have decided to travel to Venice and don't trust us in the town house alone.'

Some things never changed. Their parents had always been swanning off places and leaving them with various friends and relatives. Kate weighed up Charles and considered him next to the brother she knew properly. She wondered whether the way their parents had been while they were growing up was why her Tom shied away from commitment — and maybe why she was anxious to maintain relationships.

Then her gaze drifted towards Edward. Chris had seemed a reasonably safe option when she got together with him — a good job; a nice house which she moved into after six months; a simple, uncomplicated relationship that meant they both had their space. But over time, she'd noticed things changing. Chris was reluctant to commit properly; he had practically shoved her out of the door to Suffolk with the promise he'd come and visit her. Then it had been three weeks before she saw him, as he needed to close a deal first. Then there was, as he always said, another client, another promotion to chase, another crisis in the office to contend with that interrupted their time together.

She wondered, fleetingly, if safe wasn't quite enough anymore?

But after just over three years and two very busy careers — maybe a shift in attitude was to be expected. Kate sighed, nostalgic for the old days.

A clock on the mantelpiece in the Victorian lounge began to chime.

'Would you like a drink?'

The voice came from her left. She blinked and looked up.

* * *

She was back in the champagne lounge in her own life. The guests were chattering and laughing, the champagne flowing more freely as the night went on. 'Her' Chris was standing there, looking as if he'd rather be anywhere else than The Arch. 'Sorry — the Skype thing went on longer than I'd anticipated. I'm horribly late. I don't know if I want to eat now. Shall we just get some olives or something?'

Kate looked at her watch. It was almost ten o'clock and her tummy told her she was probably beyond hungry. Plus, she hated olives and he should know that. To be honest, she wanted to be back in her flat above the museum, trowelling cheese on toast with a dollop of Worcestershire sauce on it. And truly, what right did Chris have to dictate they wouldn't eat, just because he wasn't hungry, when she'd driven over two hundred miles to see him? Her tummy may have concurred, but really ?

'It would have been nice if you'd called me,' Kate said coldly. She cast a surreptitious glance at Tom who was strategically pouring the last of the champagne into her glass. They must have been too polite to start eating without Chris.

'Didn't have time,' he replied shortly. 'I told you, Babes, I was busy.'

Babes? Really ?

‘Okay. Fine.’

But she wasn’t sure it if was “fine”. And that thought concerned her a little.

* * *

They hadn’t eaten. Tom and Kate drank another bottle of champagne between them and Chris had ordered olives and, just for some variety, peanuts.

Kate detested peanuts even more than she detested olives so she wasn’t the happiest bunny when the taxi poured them out at Chris’s house. They’d left Tom at the hotel and he’d given her a huge bear-hug, his bristly face rubbing against her cheek.

‘Cheer up, Katie. You can go back home tomorrow.’ Which was exactly the sort of flippant comment she loved him for.

Despite the fact her evening had turned into a food-less farce, Kate sniggered. ‘I think I might still be drunk tomorrow. Don’t really want to drive far.’

‘Me too. I’m pleased I’m going by train.’ They both found that inordinately funny and giggled like a pair of children. In fact, Tom was heading to France on the Eurostar, and it was probably a very sensible thing to do whether you were drunk or sober.

By the time she and Chris had arrived back in Chiswick, though, the levity of the situation had left Kate somewhat.

‘Chris, I’m actually quite hungry,’ she said as she waited for him to unlock the door.

He looked at her, genuinely confused. ‘But there were snacks. You didn’t touch any of them.’ The door clicked open and he stood back to let her in first.

Automatically, she kicked off her shoes before heading into the lounge where she sat on a very upright designer chair she’d always hated, while he locked up and kicked his own shoes off.

‘I don’t like olives and I don’t like peanuts even more.’ Kate knew the syntax was all wrong and the words were slightly slurred, but she was trying to speak reasonably.

‘Oh no! I forgot!’ Chris threw himself onto the sofa and shook his head. ‘I’m so sorry. I just couldn’t face any more food. You see, we had a big catered event thing after the Skype call and—’

‘You didn’t mention a catered thing!’ Kate interrupted, her voice rising dangerously. ‘You just said Skype! When you came in late. At the place. The hotel place.’ She waved her arm around angrily. She couldn’t recall the name of it.

‘Ah, yes, I forgot it was on, the catered thing. I finished the call and then they had this meeting. I was only supposed to stay for a little while, but it was a really good networking opportunity, and Saffy had organised it so—’

Kate stopped listening. She tried to slouch in the chair to make herself comfortable, but it was impossible — she knew Chris would tell her all about the networking opportunity for quite some time. He absolutely loved his work. But he was supposed to love her as well.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Kate was still annoyed by the next morning. She'd turned the situation over and over in her head and had eventually managed to go to sleep in the early hours of the morning. When she did doze off, her dreams were full of images that just didn't relate to her life as she knew it. They were more in keeping with the Victorian daydreams she'd been having — because they couldn't have been anything more than daydreams. Could they? Working in a museum consumed a person — you got used to the old things you were surrounded with, and it was only a small leap of the imagination to visualise the lives and loves of the people who had owned them.

Or so she tried to tell herself. But part of her didn't quite believe it. There were just too many strange things happening to her.

Kate half-listened out for the chimes or the cuckoo-clock; with her eyes closed, she could almost imagine she was back at home and she could walk downstairs and see Will, in whichever guise he decided to appear in . . .

* * *

'Will, I heard a rumour you were leaving Hartsford. It's not true, is it?'

She was sitting in the little garden behind his house. He'd brought a stool out for her to perch on, still concerned, she suspected, about her leg. She was clutching a bunch of wildflowers and buried her nose in them. He'd picked them for her on a little walk — or a little hobble, in her case — along the riverbank. To her mind, they were the nicest bunch of flowers she'd ever had.

'I'm not sure where that rumour came from.' His voice was guarded and she looked

up. Their eyes met and she saw something in his expression that she couldn't quite place.

‘Why not? You must have an idea. Rumours are usually based on fact.’

He shook his head, then his easy smile broke out across his face. ‘I can't tell you for sure, Cat, my love, because even I don't know where they came from.’

‘I'm a captive audience, so you can tell me how these wicked tales started, because I can't really run away very fast.’ She nodded to her legs. The hated Bath chair was parked up at the side of the cottage. She hadn't managed to discard it completely yet, but she was still trying her best. That blasted walk the other week hadn't helped. If it hadn't been for Millie rescuing her — she felt sick at the thought. That's why Millie was skulking around today. She'd been the one to bring her here, after all. Millie was the best friend anyone could ever want. ‘I just know I don't want the rumours to be true. I like you being here. I like being here with you. Look — Hector agrees.’ The dog wagged his tail and flumped down next to her, his boxy head resting lovingly against her legs.

Will reached over and smoothed her hair away from her face. She could feel his warmth, feel the tenderness in the touch of his rough fingertips and it sent a shiver down her spine.

Kate parted her lips on a little sigh and leaned instinctively towards him. He moved closer to her until he was so near to her, she thought she'd died and gone to Heaven. His eyes were inches from hers and—

* * *

Kate woke up with a start, her twenty-first century heart pounding as fast as her nineteenth-century one had done. She blinked into the darkness, realising that the

glow coming through the blinds was a streetlight, not the warm, Suffolk sunshine she'd been enjoying in her dream. That might have been the point she also realised the look in Will's eyes had been regret.

She couldn't get back to sleep after that.

Eventually, when it was a reasonable time to get up, she did so. She padded over to the en-suite and stared at herself in the mirror over the sink. Her hair was all over the place and she was white and drawn, her freckles standing out hideously — her usual hangover face. Not a good look. As she cleaned her teeth and switched the shower on, she couldn't even fathom out what was going on in her own head — never mind what had been going on in Cat's mind during the dream. Was she really Cat? Had she been Cat in a previous life? She half expected to see a bunch of wildflowers lying by the sink; but there wasn't one. Kate wasn't quite sure if she was disappointed or relieved.

A little later, over coffee with Chris in the big, open kitchen, Kate wondered again how disloyal those fantasies might be. And she smiled stiffly through her hangover and agreed to walk to a little deli café where Chris promised her breakfast and the best Eggs Benedict ever; from there, he would head into work. There's this client from Canada, you see and . . .

She was more of a bacon sandwich girl, really. He should know that by now.

* * *

That walk the other week had set back her recovery like nothing else. Here she was, practically crippled again, pitching up at his cottage defiantly. He knew she'd been the one to instigate it, and LadyAmelia, God love her, had brought her.

Cat closed her eyes and parted her lips, and her face was inches from his. He just stared at her for a moment, marvelling at how this girl had come into his life like a

whirlwind. Then he closed the gap between them.

He had just intended to kiss her gently, scared in case he frightened her. But once their lips met, it was as if their two souls became one. The chaste sentiment disappeared as their tongues met, seeking each other, as if it they were always meant to. And Will couldn't have stopped kissing her if his life had depended on it. But eventually, he ran out of breath and had to.

Her arms were around his neck, stretching up from her sitting position, pulling him towards her. He leaned down, his hands gently on her waist, then buried his face in the sweet, sweet curve of her neck and drew her closely to him.

‘Oh, Cat. I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry? What for?’ She pulled away and stared up at him, confused.

‘I ask one thing from you. If I ever should leave here, will you keep me in your memory? No matter what happens?’

‘So you are leaving?’

‘I didn’t say that. But if there should come a time where I’m not here, will you do that for me?’

‘Will. I’ll never forget you. It would be like forgetting myself.’ She searched his face, her eyes puzzled. ‘I—’

‘Cat!’ A shout from the riverbank, and a slim, blue-clad figure hurtling towards them. ‘Cat! You have to leave, I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Will, but she has to come back now. Right now !’

‘LadyAmelia!’ Will pulled away from Cat almost guiltily. It was madness; LadyAmelia had already seen them together. She knew exactly what was happening; she was pretty and giggly, but he knew that she was sharp as a tack and would have been standing sentry, lurking somewhere near the Faerie Bridge and watching the Hall whilst they spent this time together.

‘Charles has brought Edward Mountfort home. I’ve just seen the carriage pull up and I ran as fast as I could. Oh, my goodness.’ She bent double, clutching her side. ‘I have a terrible stitch! Please — Cat. You have to come home.’ The girl stood up and swept over to the Bath chair. She prised the brakes off and wheeled it hurriedly towards Cat. ‘Come on. Will, would you help her? Would you?’

‘Don’t talk about me as if I’m not here!’ Cat complained. ‘I’m perfectly capable of getting back into that thing. I — oh!’ Will didn’t give her time to say anything else.

He gathered her up in his arms and held her close as he placed her gently back into the chair. ‘Go now. It’s safest.’

‘But Will . . .’

‘But nothing.’

He kissed her again as he settled her in the chair. ‘I’ll see you soon. But you have to go now.’ He looked at LadyAmelia. ‘Do you want me to help? I can push her to the bridge.’

‘That would be wonderful. Thank you.’

‘Will . . .’ Cat protested again, but Will just took hold of the chair and headed towards the bridge. He hated doing it. He felt he was, in some way, handing her over to this Mountfort man like a parcel, all neatly packaged up in her fine gowns and

ready to be unwrapped and put on display. A red-hot arrow shot through him at the thought. He recognised it as jealousy. He didn't like himself for it, but he damned well couldn't help it.

* * *

Theo had a couple of hours to spare between jobs, so he decided to waste some time — sorry, use it productively — and plan his next camping trip.

He had quite liked that field near Hartsford, and he wouldn't be averse to going back there. It was a nice village — friendly, welcoming and lively enough if you wanted it that way. Or, apparently, you could avoid the wine bar and go to the country pub if you wanted to relax a little more.

He sat back at his desk and put his hands behind his head. The more he thought about it, the more appealing the idea seemed. He'd had a really odd dream about the place as well a few nights ago. He was living in the museum and talking to Cat in the back garden but it was all a bit vague. Cat? He'd woken up and corrected himself. He meant Kate, of course. It might have been because he'd had cheese on toast for his supper and it made him remember her.

Actually, to tell the truth, he hadn't needed any reminders, because he hadn't been able to get her out of his mind in the first place. Images of her had been popping up whenever he least expected it and he knew this yearning to go back to Hartsford had nothing to do with the village itself. It was her, Kate, who drew him.

Theo's mind drifted a little and he wondered if Hartsford was one of those places which were lovely from the outside, from a tourist perspective, but not so lovely if you lived there. He didn't get that impression. He would really like to go back to the Folk Museum as well. Theo smiled to himself thinking again of red-headed Kate and her penchant for Worcestershire sauce. He wondered if she would even remember

him if he went back? It had been a few weeks and he was sure she would have seen and forgotten plenty of faces by now.

It was the beginning of July, but as his job also depended a little on the tourist trade, he knew he would soon be even busier than usual. As he'd told Kate, he often worked for museums and animal shelters and they wanted everything in place by the time the summer holiday crowds started visiting. The horses had to have new shoes, and the carriage rides through the grounds of the stately homes all depended on the horses being prepared for the job.

It was impossible, really, for Theo to take so much as a weekend off. He'd lose too much money. Which was why the fact that he'd had an email fifteen minutes ago asking him to help a friend out with a job in Newmarket had seemed like the hand of Fate shoving him out of the door and onto the motorway. Or, more precisely, encouraging him to hammer his tent pegs into the ground.

He clicked the mouse button a few times, and found himself Googling Hartsford and the surrounding area. There were quite a lot of other horsey places around there — race-courses and animal sanctuaries, including some dedicated just to horses. And, of course, there were museums down that way as well. Then he saw something very interesting that made him smile.

It might be a busman's holiday, but — Theo looked out of the window at his van — sometimes you had to put yourself out there, didn't you? He'd call into the Hall as part of his trip. There was no reason not to visit Hartsford again, was there? Kate's face floated in front of his mind's eye again and he smiled. There was, on the other hand, a very good reason to visit it.

* * *

'Your costume's here!' Cassie's voice was unmistakeable on the telephone.

Kate heard her as, perhaps, did most of Suffolk. Her voice reverberated around the reception area of the museum and an old lady blinked in astonishment. Kate smiled apologetically at her.

She held the phone away from her ear until Cassie had calmed down a little and stopped shouting so much, then spoke to her.

‘What did you get me?’ Kate was half-expecting something ridiculously outlandish, so she should have been grateful when Cassie told her it was a 1930’s style trouser suit.

‘It’s striped. And the blouse is belted and the legs are lovely and wide. You will look super.’

‘So I’ve got a wide-legged trouser suit and I have to ride a bicycle around the estate. Don’t you think the fabric might get tangled up in the chain?’

‘Oh, I never thought!’ cried Cassie. ‘Damn. It’s too late to get anything else now. We’ve only got a few weeks and you have to get them sorted so far in advance. Oh, buggeneration. I don’t suppose . . . bicycle clips? No? Oh dear.’

Kate rolled her eyes and shook her head. ‘It’s okay Cassie, I’ll manage. I’ll push the bicycle if I have to. I’ll find a spot and stay there. Where had you thought of putting me?’

‘I think the pool area?’ she replied, sounding contrite. ‘Please?’

‘The pool area will be fine.’ It was no secret that Cassie was revamping that part of the estate and bringing back the old idea of it being the Spa. Her plan was that the visitors could plunge into the old swimming pool or have a game of tennis if they wanted — and even indulge in strawberries and champagne as well. Kate could think

of worse places to be stationed with her ice-cream.

‘If you’re sure you won’t mind?’ Cassie said.

‘It’s fine,’ Kate repeated. She checked the multitude of clocks around her. ‘I’m expecting Jenna in any minute. I’ll pop over and collect the costume as soon as she gets here, all right?’

‘Sure. Gosh thank you for being so understanding Kate!’

‘I’m just glad you didn’t get me a pencil skirt. Now that would have been impractical.’

‘I couldn’t see you in a pencil skirt. Too severe a look for you. I did consider it, very briefly though, I must admit.’ She sounded amused at, potentially, the image of Kate in a skin-tight skirt trying to mount a bicycle.

‘Then I’m glad I got the trouser suit. Where will I find you when I pop over?’

‘In the ballroom. I’m on clipboard duty today. Sneak in through the gift shop to find me — I’ll tell Margaret to expect you. She’s in there today.’

‘Okay. But just give me time for Jenna to turn up.’

Jenna eventually wandered in sucking a lollipop, which was a sight and a half. It was one of those little round red ones, and she was making it look very Lolita-esque. Kate was pleased no men were in the reception area; she thought they might have had difficulty functioning.

‘Good afternoon, Jenna.’

‘Mmrrf,’ she replied through fifty calories worth of pure boiled sugar.

‘I have to go to the Hall. I need to collect my outfit for Cassie’s weekend. You have remembered that you’re working that weekend too, haven’t you?’

Jenna removed the sugar-fest from her mouth with a little pop and stared at Kate. ‘Of course. I’ve told my friends I can only have a couple of drinks when we’re out. I’ll be fine.’

Kate closed her eyes briefly. ‘Dear Lord,’ she murmured under her breath.

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Margaret waved when she saw her coming through the door. ‘Come on, Kate. This way.’ She lifted the hinged part of the desk and ushered Kate through. ‘You know where you’re going. Cassie said she’ll see you in the ballroom?’

‘That’s right.’ Kate smiled gratefully as she passed through the barrier. She continued along behind Margaret, and pulled open a door that connected the gift shop with the main body of the house. It took her into the stone-flagged corridors that led along past the kitchen, the laundry and all the other behind the scenes things it took to make a house the size of the Hall function in its heyday. From there, she went up the servants’ staircase and into the state rooms.

Kate wound her way easily through the rooms, nodding at the volunteer guides in each one. They were all villagers and did the job for love alone. Laura was normally in the ballroom, so Kate assumed she must have been busy today and left a gap that Cassie had to fill.

‘Kate!’ Cassie waved at her from her spot on the window seat. ‘Laura couldn’t make it today, and I had to take over. Sorry — or I would have brought your costume to you.’

‘That’s okay.’ Kate looked around — she’d always loved this room. It was airy and spacious and it didn’t take much of an effort to imagine a ball taking place. The Aldrichs of old had been famous for their Solstice Balls. They’d had one at Midsummer and one at Midwinter and a few of the oddments at the museum were related to those events — invitations and dance cards or even, in one of the display cases, a Christmas card, containing ‘all best wishes from the Aldrich family and our thanks to you for attending the Midwinter Ball.’ It was little treasures like that which

made the exhibits at the Folk Museum so unique; and also why people often stayed longer than they had anticipated. There really was a lot to see there, but that didn't stop Kate thinking about ways to encourage more visitors.

'It's been quiet today, actually,' said Cassie, looking around the room herself.

'You'll be turning them away during your Living History Weekend. Send your overflow to my place. It'll keep Jenna out of mischief.'

'Is she still as bad?' Cassie stood up and, as always, towered above Kate.

'It's not really her fault.' Kate tried to be diplomatic. 'She's quite young, she's been horribly spoilt and she's a party girl. I don't know if she's really suited to museum work, but neither of us had a choice. I think she needs something more vibrant. Still,' she shrugged, 'it'll only be for a few more weeks hopefully and I'll get a proper replacement. She's making noises about going back to Uni when she's repaid Daddy what she owes him. We can but hope.'

Cassie raised her eyebrows. 'You're only twenty-eight. There's not that much of an age difference between you.'

'Maybe not; but there's a world of difference in our attitudes. Working for me is her punishment — supposed to give her some responsibility.' Kate rolled her eyes. 'It's just giving her an excuse to drape herself around any man that comes within three feet of the reception desk.'

Cassie nodded. 'I have to agree with that one. But you — I really think you need to loosen up a bit more at times. You seem so intent on being in your comfort zone, with, let's just say, men—' she cast a sidelong glance at Kate, '—that you're happy to be settled with someone like Chris. You're scared of adventure.'

‘Chris and I . . .’ But she couldn’t think of a single excuse to defend herself.

Cassie continued with a small, all-knowing smile. ‘Can you see yourself being the hostess of endless dinner parties for his colleagues while they all go on about investment banking—’

‘—management consulting.’

‘Management consulting, then. Whatever. Is that what you envisage in your future?’

‘I don’t know.’ Kate couldn’t really tell Cassie that her own childhood had been so Bohemian, in some ways, that perhaps an orderly, suburban life was what she was hankering after. A life of how it “should” be.

‘Let’s put it another way,’ her friend persisted. ‘Don’t you ever want to see what it’s like to be with a different sort of man? Someone a bit more . . . adventurous.’

‘Cassie!’ Kate cast a quick look around the room, but thankfully nobody was in earshot. ‘We have no issues in bed, thank you very much!’ But then she blushed. Yeah — that was a lie, wasn’t it? Hadn’t she planned a week’s meals the last time they’d been together and she’d been staring at the ceiling, zoned out?

‘I didn’t mean that!’ Cassie laughed ‘No, I just meant someone who’s not quite such a workaholic.’

‘He’s just a very busy person with a very responsible job. That’s all. He has to behave a certain way and work silly hours to do that job.’

‘Okay.’ Cassie gave up. ‘It’s just I don’t see you as a London Latte Mummy in the future, that’s all. Because the 2.4kids will have to come as well, you know. I just think you’re too independent to be subsumed by that City Wifey stuff. It didn’t work

out when you lived down there last time. However — I shall shut up now and I go and get your costume, if you don't mind sitting here with the clipboard for a bit. All the answers to peoples' questions are in the notes — or at least the usual ones are. See you shortly.'

Cassie thrust the clipboard at Kate and danced off. Thwarted — and somewhat railroaded into being a temporary guide — Kate sat down in the window seat and looked out across the estate. It was a beautiful day and people were dotted amongst the green and gold of a Suffolk afternoon. It was peaceful in the ballroom, and the sun was warm through the glass. It didn't take her long to imagine what the famous Hartsford balls had been like, and how bustling and busy and vital this old house would have been hosting them.

She wondered if Cat Tredegar had ever attended any balls. And no sooner had the thought entered her mind, than the answer came to her in a series of images as she felt herself slipping comfortably back through time, held safe in the arms of the Hall.

* * *

She was finally ready. Her gown was a heavy, gold satin with huge emerald roses embroidered on the sweeping train and bodice. The bustle was similarly detailed and the skirt had clusters of roses around the hem, the pattern disappearing into pure green satin as it moved up towards her waist. The sleeves were trimmed with little puffs of green lace, and two side panels of the same stuff fell down to the floor, one at each side of her hips. This was, by far, the nicest dress Kate had seen yet. But of course — this was the Midsummer Ball, wasn't it?

Her hair was, unfortunately, primped and curled and piled up on her head so she barely dared do anything except stare straight ahead in case she disturbed the coiffure. She sat carefully on the edge of the bed, wondering whether she'd be walking gracefully into this thing or lurching along on her dodgy leg. It must have

been four months or so since the accident? Perhaps, in these times, that wasn't enough time to heal properly? There was a knock on the door and Kate's heart thudded. There was still so much to be apprehensive of in these moments.

'Come in,' she said, without moving. It would only be Charles. Or Millie .

Kate's eyes widened. Millie. Finally she got to meet her properly.

'Cat!' It was Millie. Lady Amelia Aldrich to those who didn't know her that well.

Kate suddenly knew that Millie had been her dearest friend for more years than she cared to count and she knew their conversation would be easy. Charles and Cat were always removed to Hartsford Hall when their parents were away on a botanical expedition. Cat's mother and Millie's were second cousins and the children were just part of the extended family. That's why Cat had been there during that 1885 winter Kate read about in the paper. They'd spent Christmas there, and just never went home.

'Isn't my gown beautiful? Do you think Fred will like it?' Millie spun around in her ballgown — bright, peacock blue with a white underskirt. She looked gorgeous. Her hair was fairer than Cat's, almost a strawberry blonde, and her eyes were the same bright blue as her dress.

Kate was thrown for a second, but she managed a smile. 'I'm sure he will love it.' She literally had no clue who Fred was. It must be someone Millie wanted to impress. He mustn't have made much of an impression on Cat, whoever he was.

Millie threw herself onto the bed next to her. Her skirt swished and the bed bounced as she sat down and smiled. She had two little dimples in her cheeks and Kate smiled back, understanding instinctively how she was such a good friend. Kate had a feeling she would love her in her own life, not only in this one.

‘And just who do you plan on signing your dance card for you?’ Millie nodded at Kate’s wrist, where a little card hung from a white ribbon. ‘And don’t say Charles, because he won’t want to spend all night with you! He’s more interested in Louisa Dacre and her gaggle of beautiful friends. Mark my words. Oh!’ She grabbed Kate’s wrist. Her hand was soft and warm and very small. ‘I know who will sign it. He’s absolutely desperate to, or so I’ve heard.’

Kate wanted to ask if it was Will, and her stomach did a flip-flop; then she realised he most certainly wouldn’t be an invited guest; not a mere blacksmith. ‘Who?’ She crossed her fingers, the ones on the hand Millie wasn’t grabbing, just in case, and hid them in the folds of her dress so they couldn’t be seen.

‘I don’t know if I should tell you.’ Millie had mischief dancing in her eyes. ‘Because if you do know who it is, you’ll simply act all coy and silly with him, and then he’ll know that you know and it could become embarrassing.’

‘Millie!’ Kate said exasperated. ‘You can’t let me go down to that ball and not know!’

‘Oh, all right,’ she said, pretending Kate had forced the issue. Kate knew of course that she would have told her anyway — Millie was no good at keeping secrets from Cat, although she was doing a damn good job of keeping Cat’s friendship with Will secret from the rest of the family. ‘It’s Edward Mountfort.’ Millie’s eyes widened. ‘Papa invited him because he knows he will be moving to Suffolk soon, and my father said the ball is an ideal way to introduce him to the neighbours. Now, I know how you feel about William, but you should take this opportunity to enjoy some time with another handsome young man. It doesn’t mean you feel any differently in your heart about William.’

Talk about coy — there was nobody more coy than Amelia Aldrich when she knew half a story and made up the rest.

Great. Just great. Edward Mountfort. Not Will, even though he had rescued her and everyone should still be grateful to him . . .

‘Millie?’ Cat asked, suddenly curious about something.

‘What is it?’

‘My accident. With the ice-skates. I can’t remember much about it. What I want to know is what happened to me that day. Properly.’

‘All I know, Cat, is that you decided to go skating, on your own, and without an escort.’ Millie sniffed. It had clearly been disapproved of. ‘You really will take the most dreadful risks. You’re quite wild, I’ve always said so.’ Quite wild? Hah, Cassie Aldrich — I was wild and adventurous, once upon a time. ‘Anyway, you headed over to the pond, tangled yourself up somehow and did yourself some very nasty damage. You quite ruined your dress, darling, I’m sure you remember that well enough. However, we found out from William that he had rescued you. He brought you back to us, half-conscious. He had to carry you back, and you were almost passing out from the pain. We were so worried about you. And when you woke up, you had such a dreadful headache. He’d kept you at his house until you had recovered from the initial shock — then you took a turn for the worse. Poor thing.’

Privately, Kate wondered if the semi-conscious state and the headache had a little to do with the brandy Will had plied her with as well as the accident. She supposed the brandy had done her a favour though. It must have been excruciating if the injury was as bad as they said. Actually, she remembered exactly how painful it had been. Kate wiggled her foot experimentally and it didn’t really move much at all. She wondered if the bones had fused back together in a weird way. A fun ball this was going to be. She preferred to think quietly about the fact Will had carried her back to the Hall. Kate didn’t particularly like being labelled as a helpless female, but she had to admit, it might have had some advantages if she got to snuggle into Will.

There was another knock at the door, and they both turned to look.

‘Come in,’ Kate shouted.

The door opened and Charles poked his head through, with Philip bobbing drunkenly behind him. ‘Good evening, you beautiful girls! We’ve come to escort you to the ball!’

Again, great. Just great. She’d much rather be with Will.

Charles had installed her on a seat in the ballroom, and returned with Edward in his wake. They were laughing together, and it was plain for all to see the evidence of a wine-sodden, carousing, university-based friendship.

Kate suspected a woman ought to be led to a man and introduced; but given her situation, they must have thought it easier and perhaps less humiliating, for Edward to come to her.

‘Catriona.’ Edward bowed slightly as he stood before her. That arrogant look was back in his eyes, a sense of privilege and entitlement almost oozing out of him. ‘Your brother warned me that you might not feel like dancing tonight, but would you consider one dance, at least?’

They all knew that if a man asked a woman to dance, she had to accept.

‘Oh! Please, excuse me.’ Charles suddenly grinned. He bowed and looked across the ballroom. ‘I’ve just spotted Louisa Dacre. I must go and sign her card before it gets filled up.’ He melted away into the crowd and left Edward and Kate staring at each other.

‘Ah. Louisa Dacre.’ Kate nodded. Now she understood. The girl Charles was heading

towards had hair the shiny colour of horse chestnuts and a complexion like rich cream.

‘His current Affaire de Coeur , I believe.’

‘His latest conquest, then. Nothing changes.’

‘Let him have his fun. Now — will you consider a dance, Catriona? Please?’ He offered her his arm, his expression confident, knowing already what the response would be.

Kate had no choice but to accompany Edward out onto the dance floor — it was protocol, after all; even if she’d be lurching around after him with this damned leg.

She had the most miserable, awkward, uncomfortable dance she thought she’d ever experienced in any life. But eventually, the final notes of the music died away and thank goodness for that, because the pain was almost crippling her. They had stopped within range of a cluster of girls and chaperones, simpering and blushing at the men who had sparked conversations with them. One of the girls stood self-consciously, clutching a glass of punch. Her head-dress was so elaborate and her dress so frothy and pink, Kate wondered what features she was hoping they’d detract from.

The girl reddened as they stopped and Kate suspected that, if she could have run away, she would have done. Her eyes were darting around everywhere and Kate suddenly realised that this girl had quite a fancy for Edward. Despite the agony of her leg, Kate dropped her head and smiled a little — well, that girl was welcome to him; she didn’t want anybody except Will. Kate looked up at Edward under her lashes, expecting, possibly quite vainly, that he would have eyes for nobody but her. However, she was a little surprised to see he was watching the girl, a small, amused smile playing around the corner of his lips.

‘Ah, the delightful Maria. Always looks so awkward at these things!’ Then, with one glance, he dismissed her and turned his attention back to Kate. ‘I’m sure I can easily beg you for another dance later, if you don’t mind?’

Kate was a thrown for a moment, but recovered herself quickly. ‘I’m sure you will give it a jolly good go,’ she said, wryly; and then, at long last, thank God , a clock began to chime.

* * *

Kate felt like Cinderella, dressed in her rags as midnight struck. The Midsummer Ball melted away and Edward faded into those forgotten hours.

She swore under her breath. She found herself sitting in the window seat of the ballroom in the present-day Hall, clutching a clipboard and watching visitors file past her, all in exactly the same positions they’d been in, guided by the ropes and the signage. She’d visited a Midsummer Ball and danced with Edward Mountfort in the blink of an eye. The Aldrich’s guests would have come to the ballroom from the reception room where Edward had been standing waiting for her, and she gazed over at the door, still half-seeing the past encroaching on the present.

Her modern-day version of Edward wasn’t there now, obviously.

A faint suggestion of a man wavered in and out of focus in that doorway though — a man of a different build and a different height, dressed much more informally. Kate blinked, then he came sharply into focus.

‘I thought that was you,’ said Theo Kent with a smile. ‘How are things? You look half-asleep. It is warm in here, though, isn’t it?’

* * *

The light was spilling out of the Hall, and the sound of the bright, joyful music was everywhere. Will stood in the shadows at the edge of the garden, Hector lying at his feet. He stared, unseeingly, at the big, leaded windows as the last of the evening sun cast a rosy glow on the old stones and tinted the glass with gold. She was in there, more than likely being dragged around the floor by some hifalutin fellow, who would as soon forget her in the morning.

Will wrapped his arms around himself, still watching the figures move and blur behind the windows. The big set of doors was thrown open wide onto the balcony, and every so often, people crept outside and stole kisses or lingering touches out of sight of their chaperones and friends. His eyes scanned the balcony hungrily for her, for Cat. If he could only see her, just to know she was having some sort of fun in there, it might not be so bad.

He toed the soil, heaping it into a little pile of leaf-mould and tiny sticks and pebbles. He transferred his gaze briefly to his sturdy work boots and his serviceable trousers. He hadn't long finished work — one of the dray horses for the brewery had lost its shoe, and it had been something of an emergency.

How could Catriona Tredegear ever truly look at him in the way he looked at her? How could she ever feel the same way as he did? She lived in a different world — a world of parties and champagne and lilting music. A world of taffeta gowns and rustling silk. All he had to offer was horse-sweat and fire; coal dust blowing out of the furnace and covering everything with a sooty black glaze. A world of late-night hammering, and the hiss of metal cooling on an anvil; the scent of hay and muck and old leather. It was not a world for her, and her world would never welcome him: a mere blacksmith, paid to serve her family.

And then he saw her, a vision in green and gold, limping painfully over to the window seat, sitting down heavily and reaching down — possibly to rub her ankle discreetly. His heart twisted as he thought of the day he'd rescued her and the mess

she'd been in. At that moment, he had known. He had known he loved her and would do everything in his power to protect her and look after her.

He made a move, Hector jumping up and wagging his tail encouragingly. He began to walk towards the Hall determinedly. He'd get to her somehow — he'd take her out of there and just ask her to sit with him in the garden and talk to her. God knew he'd be hopeless at dancing, but he could at least keep her company.

Will had just come to the edge of the lawn, when a taller figure approached her and leaned down. She looked up at him, and, hesitantly, raised her hand. The man pulled her to her feet and she stumbled a little as her leg gave way. Will automatically moved forward, his arms outstretched as if to catch her. The man she was with, however, seemed to have his attention elsewhere, and she put one hand out to steady herself on the wall, seemingly composing herself before he turned again to her.

Then he led her away somewhere, out of sight. Will stopped, a sense of utter despair and anger flooding through him.

Their worlds would never match. They collided in the worst way possible. Why the hell would she want a life with him, when she already had a life like that ?

'Come on, boy.' He addressed Hector quietly; then turned his back on Hartsford Hall and, melting into the shadows, walked towards the cottages.

He had gone no further than a few steps, when a figure moved out of the shrubbery, an orange light flaring as he apparently lit a cigar.

'Will. Good evening.'

Will started. It was Cat's brother, Charles. He'd always had a lot of time for Charles, and reckoned him as close to a friend as he could get, that far up the social ladder.

‘MrTredegar. Good evening. Shouldn’t you be inside?’

‘Oh God, just call me Charles, will you? I hate all that bloody formality. And yes, I should be inside. There are a lot of young ladies I have yet to have the pleasure of meeting. But there’s one young lady in particular I want to talk to you about tonight.’

‘Ah.’ Will looked over Charles’s shoulder. He had an idea where this was going and didn’t much like it.

‘My sister. Catriona.’

‘Yes. What of her?’

Charles moved out of the shadows and sat on the corner of a stone plinth.

He looked at the house and smiled a little, then transferred his gaze back to Will. ‘I like you, Will Haddon. I like you a lot. And I love my sister beyond words. I want her to be happy, and at the moment, she is very happy. Can you think why that might be?’

Will shrugged. ‘Because she’s at a ball? Because she can walk again?’

‘Probably yes and yes. Although, I think the walking is more important to her.’ Charles laughed. ‘She’s a terrible patient. Absolutely dreadful. As you know.’

‘I do know.’

Charles nodded. He took another drag of the cigar. ‘I have to be honest with you. My Aunt and Uncle are quite determined to make a match for her very soon.’

‘A match?’ Will’s stomach somersaulted. ‘As in a wedding? A betrothal?’

Charles nodded. 'The very same.'

'Well then.' Will wrapped his arms around himself again. 'Thank you for telling me.' He nodded and made to walk off before he punched the man delivering the news to him.

'Wait. Will. Edward Mountfort is the man they've marked out for her. I think I ought to tell you that in good time.'

'In good time? In good time for what ?'

Hector growled softly, seemingly aware of the temper rising within Will.

'In good time for you to do something about it.' The cigar flared again and Charles locked eyes with Will. 'I'm drunk, Will. It's social suicide to tell you this, which is why you didn't hear it from me. But if you perhaps think of a way to win her, that would be a good thing, wouldn't you say?'

'I don't need to win her!' protested Will angrily 'She's not a possession ! A prize at a fairground. For God's sake!'

'You do need to win her.' Charles leaned forward. 'Cat and I — we aren't as high status as the Aldrichs. We're not Earls or Ladies, but we do have that connection to them. And Cat can't marry a blacksmith. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is. It doesn't mean I agree with it, and Cat would fight that concept until her last breath. But the fact remains, it's what we live with. The family would never agree to a match with you at the moment.'

'So what the hell am I supposed to do?' hissed Will.

'What you've been talking about doing. Go and do something that means you can

come back for her with some money in your pocket and a way of supporting her in the life she's used to. Cat deserves that.'

'The only reason I haven't gone anywhere is because of her ! I've enough money put by to go abroad tomorrow. I've been checking passages on ships and opportunities abroad. But so long as she's here, and I'm here, then we have that hope, and besides that — I didn't want to leave her.'

'I understand. But Edward's here now.' Charles looked at the house and shrugged. 'I have to take some of that blame upon myself. I perhaps shouldn't have re-introduced them, but I had no idea what the family was planning. Let's just say it was particularly bad timing on my behalf.' He looked back at Will. 'I can only do so much here to delay it. Millie knows as well. I know through her what you've all been up to. I'm just trying to help, that's all. One man to another.' He stood up and held his hand out. Will hesitated then took it, and they shook.

'Promise me you'll consider it, at least.' Charles tugged the edges of his waistcoat together and smoothed the fabric down. He stubbed the remains of the cigar out on the stone plinth and tossed it to the ground. 'For now, I have somewhere else I need to be, and someone else I need to be with.' He nodded at Will and strode off towards the Hall.

Will watched him go. He had some thinking to do — a lot of thinking.

* * *

Kate looked a little bit stunned to see him. She was curled up very comfortably in the window seat of the ballroom and as he walked over to her, her eyes focussed properly on him — she had seemed for a minute as if she was miles away.

As he approached, she stood up. 'I didn't know you'd be here.'

Theo glanced down at the clipboard. 'It was a bit of a last-minute decision. Have you become a tour guide?'

'No. I'm selling ice-creams. From a bicycle. For Cassie's Living History weekend. I was only supposed to be collecting an outfit today.'

The pieces fit together with a small click in his head. 'That bicycle you were working on outside the museum? That's great!'

Kate nodded and hugged the clipboard to her chest. 'Yes, it's going to be parked up at the pool area. Cassie ordered me a highly unsuitable costume which means I can't cycle very far. But that's Cassie. She's never been the most practical of people.'

'Cassie's just the person I'm looking for, actually. The lady in the gift shop said she was up here. She let me through the back way.' Theo looked around, then leaned in towards Kate. She smelled delicious. Lowering his voice, he continued: 'I feel a bit of a fraud slipping in that way, but the lady said it would be quicker if I came through the kitchen corridor and they didn't charge me an entrance fee.'

'I did the same.' There was a hint of a smile playing around Kate's lips and it was lovely. 'So what do you need to see her for?'

'She was supposed to take me up to the stables. I have to meet Hughie and check him over for the Living History weekend. See if we're going to get on or not. I'm planning on camping in the area again in August, so I thought I'd offer my services, kind of thing, for Cassie's weekend.'

'That's very convenient.'

'Google is a wonderful thing,' Theo said, quite evasively. 'The Country House Party weekend fell at a very convenient time for me.' This little red-head didn't need to

know how well-planned this whole thing had been; how he'd basically pimped out himself and his services to Alex Aldrich for a smidgeon of the fee he'd usually charge. Theo called it an investment in his future; and a good reason to escape from things he had no control over again. 'Anyway, I'm pleased I saw you. I was wondering if my late ticket was still good for the Folk Museum?'

'Maybe.' She smiled suddenly. 'Cassie shouldn't be long if you want to wait for her. You can pop over later on. After Jenna's gone. I'll give you a guided tour.'

'Sounds great.'

'It does, doesn't it? Not many people get that privilege. You're lucky.' Kate sat back down in the window seat. 'But you need to see Cassie and you're best off waiting here, especially as you haven't paid.' She cast a quick glance up and her expression showed him she was teasing.

'You haven't paid either,' he replied with a grin. He stood next to her, looking out into the ballroom. 'Imagine what this place would have been like when they hosted balls.' He stared around. 'I can't dance for toffee. I'd be no good in a situation like that.' He slanted a glance down at her. She was staring out at the space as well, the smile slipping off her face; her mind and her memories seemed very far away.

'I can imagine it very well.' She looked up at him again. 'It can't have been much fun if you couldn't dance, though — for whatever reason.' She looked down at her feet and gave them a little wiggle, as if she was testing them out.

'I suspect I wouldn't even have got as far as an invitation. My reputation would have preceded me. Oh — is this Cassie?'

Kate followed his glance and nodded. 'That's her. And that, I believe is my costume. Dear Lord.' Kate stood up again as the tall, dark-haired young woman Theo had

spotted hurried over to them, slightly breathless. She was clutching a pile of striped fabric and grinning. One trouser leg dropped down from the pile and more or less swamped her.

‘Here it is! The legs are really wide, aren’t they? I didn’t properly notice until now. Sorry again.’ Cassie came to a halt in front of them and directed a professional smile at Theo. ‘Hello, is Kate looking after you? If there are any questions she can’t answer, I’d be happy to help.’

‘Yes, actually there is something she can’t help with.’ He smiled at Cassie. ‘I’m Theo Kent, the farrier. I’ve been speaking to you about working over Bank Holiday weekend? Kate says she can’t show me to the stables if she’s busy in here, so I was wondering whether you could release her from her duty to do that for me?’

‘Theo!’ Kate looked shocked. She looked at Cassie. ‘Sorry, Cassie. I said nothing like that at all. I haven’t volunteered to take him anywhere. Except maybe to my museum.’

Cassie looked from one of them to the other and he caught a hint of mischief in her eyes. ‘Now, now Kate. No need to try and cover for yourself. I know you love the stables and I’m going to be stuck here for a while now.’ She looked at her watch. ‘My break is over and Laura couldn’t come in, so I’ll be here until five. MrKent—’

‘—please, call me Theo.’

‘Theo,’ amended Cassie. She nodded. ‘Okay, I’ll just have a quick word with you over here about the work, and then I’ll take over from Kate. She can walk you up to the stables. Jenna will manage, won’t she, until you get back?’

That last comment was directed at Kate. Theo lowered his head so she couldn’t see him smiling.

‘Jenna can not manage,’ said Kate. ‘She won’t even have fed my ducks and—’

‘Oh, those bloody ducks!’ interrupted Cassie with a dismissive wave of her hand. ‘They can look after themselves. They’re all but vampiric anyway. They’ll survive on small children until you get back. Come on, Theo.’ She looked around and took his arm. ‘Over here. You just stay there Kate; we won’t be a minute.’

And with that, she moved them smoothly into the far corner of the ballroom, beneath a portrait of a stern Tudor matron which, Theo guessed, was stuck in the darkest corner because she appeared to be so disapproving of anybody having fun.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Cassie had that look in her eye that meant she was up to something. They had moved over to the corner, next to the portrait of Countess Elizabeth, a harridan from the fifteen-hundreds who could scare an army off.

‘Go get them, Lizzy,’ Kate muttered, hoping that she would step down from the portrait and smack Cassie with her fan for being so obvious — but of course she didn’t. No, this place had its ghosts, but Elizabeth wasn’t one of them.

Cassie said something to Theo and laughed, then they came back over to her. ‘Kate — can you take Theo up to the stables now, if you don’t mind? It won’t take you too long.’ Cassie was ditzy and thoughtless at times, but she was also a force to be reckoned with when she put her mind to it. Kate caught sight of Lizzy again on the wall and it was almost as if the woman was smirking at her. Yes — she has my genes , she seemed to be saying. She’ll have it her way, my dear.

Kate sighed and thrust the clipboard back at Cassie.

‘Okay. I’ll take him.’ But a little part of her fizzed with excitement at the thought of officially spending some time with Theo.

‘And don’t forget your trouser suit!’

‘Oh, I won’t forget that . How can I cycle around the estate without it?’

Kate left the room, clutching the voluminous trouser suit and Theo tagged along, walking beside her with his hands in his pockets.

‘Thank you for volunteering to take me. And I’m looking forward to my guided tour as well.’

Kate opened her mouth to respond, then saw that he was teasing her and trying not to grin. Her own mouth curved into a smile. What was the point in trying to sound as if she didn’t want to be with him?

‘You’re welcome,’ she said, instead.

* * *

Theo walked alongside Kate, and suddenly she slowed her pace a little and looked up at him. ‘If the museum suffers this afternoon, because of Jenna being in charge, can I blame you and Cassie?’

Theo smiled down at her. ‘You love that place, don’t you?’

‘I do. I know I’m rather over-protective of it at times, but it’s a huge part of my life. I suspect you feel the same about your anvil or whatever you use.’

‘My van. Yes. That’s the biggest part of my livelihood. If I don’t have the van, I don’t have the equipment and I can’t do my job.’

‘So have you brought that down with you?’ she asked. ‘Because you had a car, didn’t you, last time?’

Theo was quietly pleased that she’d remembered. ‘I did. But luckily I managed to squeeze my camping gear into the van. Call it a dry run for August. And anyway, it’s an adventure.’

Kate faltered in her step a little and something flashed across her face. ‘An adventure.

Yes, I suppose.’ She cleared her throat. ‘So would you describe yourself as adventurous then?’

Theo shrugged, looking out at the estate whilst he thought about it. ‘Perhaps. I like to explore new places. I like to meet new people. I take risks sometimes.’ He glanced down at her.

‘I don’t really do risky,’ she said. ‘Cassie doesn’t think I do adventure either. To me, it was a big thing changing jobs from the British Museum and moving up here from London; and even then I had to have everything sorted out and ordered nicely before I did it.’

Theo laughed. ‘Anything can be an adventure if you look at it with the right eyes. Your ice-cream bicycle, for example. Launching yourself into doing it up to help your friend out, and tolerating an impractical outfit as an added extra. Being in charge of all that history at the museum; and definitely moving up here, on your own, to do it. I’d call that adventurous.’

Kate laughed. ‘If you put it that way, then I suppose you might be right!’

‘You see, then. You are adventurous,’ he said with a grin. ‘Is this the stable block?’ He stopped and indicated a building made of the same stone as the house. In fact, it looked like a smaller version of the house, even down to the carved details beneath the gutters.

‘Yes, that’s it. The Aldrichs have always been big on their horses. This was the entrance to the estate, years ago, and visitors used to think this was the house. I imagine it was all very cleverly planned out for maximum impact. But the horses and the grooms had nice enough accommodation, so I bet nobody complained.’

‘I bet. I’ve broken in a few horses, you know. It’s a service I offer in addition to the

usual things. I would have loved to work with some of the animals from these big houses.’ Theo shook his head, still in awe at the stable block.

‘We’re quite close to Newmarket here,’ said Kate, ‘so there’s been a lot of racing going on for many years. Someone with your skills could have done very well down here.’ There was the briefest of pauses before she added, ‘One of the Earl’s horses won a race at Newmarket in the 1880’s. I found a letter in the museum where he was boasting about it and wondering whether to get a portrait commissioned for his horse. His blacksmith — the one who lived in the cottage at my museum — was mentioned in it. They were worried the horse was injured, but he was fine.’

‘That’s good. Someone with my skills probably still could do well. Which makes it all the better that I’m working at Newmarket currently. Hartsford isn’t too far away, so I factored in a bit of a diversion.’

‘That’s great.’ Kate nodded. ‘It’s nice to see you again.’ She cast a quick glance up at him, then looked away as their eyes met. ‘Anyway,’ she said, walking ahead of him. ‘This is Hughie. Hughie, this is Theo.’ She introduced Theo to the big, black horse that was eyeing him just as curiously as Theo was looking at the horse. Hughie pulled a mouthful of hay out of the feeder and chewed it, his eyes never leaving the newcomer.

‘Hello, Hughie.’ Theo held out his hand. ‘That’s right, boy. It’s a carrot. You can have it. I’ve got plenty more.’

‘Where did that come from?’ asked Kate in surprise.

‘My pocket. I tend to carry them around with me. It’s useful when you’re dealing with horses.’

Kate smiled. She reached out and patted Hughie’s nose. He whinnied softly and

rubbed against her. 'He's a lovely horse, but Elodie's still wary of him. He bit her when she was little and I don't think she'll ever forgive him.'

'Elodie?'

'Oh, she's Alex's wife. You'll see her on the advertising leaflets.' Kate laughed. 'She hates that photo. It was taken ages ago.'

'What, the blonde with the scones? That's the Countess?' He remembered seeing a picture of a very attractive, curvy blonde on the leaflets Kate had mentioned. She was holding a plate of scones out in front of her, in a very come-hither manner. 'I'm not surprised the place is so busy! They probably all hope that they'll see her!'

Kate grinned. 'Yes. Alex loves that picture, funnily enough. Elodie wasn't Countess then though, but it's such a great photo that I don't think they'll ever change it.'

'They probably shouldn't if it's bringing the trade in.' Theo patted Hughie and opened the stall door. 'I'll just give him a quick check while I'm here. That should be okay, shouldn't it?'

Kate nodded and stood back. 'You know what you're doing. Do you want me to wait for you, or can you find your own way back?'

Theo shut the door, trapping himself in the stall with Hughie, who obligingly shuffled over to the side and lifted his front leg up elegantly.

'Look!' said Kate. 'It's like he knows what you're going to do!'

Theo smiled and took hold of the animal's leg. 'They all know. It's a gift I have. Anyway, I don't think I can remember the way back, so if you don't mind, would you be so kind as to wait for me?'

Theo gave her his most innocent look and she narrowed her eyes. 'Are you sure? It's a straight path. We didn't turn any corners and it's right back down the same way.' She pointed outside as if to demonstrate how easy it was to get back on the path.

'I have a terrible sense of direction,' he lied. 'I really need you to help me.'

Kate shook her head and laughed; Hughie snorted as if he was joining in too.

'Well make it quick, please! I have to get back to my museum, you know. I've got to give a tour soon.'

And she headed out of the stables, leaving Theo and Hughie smiling to themselves.

* * *

Kate leaned against the stable block walls, one leg bent behind her, with her foot resting on the old stones. She looked out over the estate and contemplated the fact that this was a view that Cat would also be familiar with.

Certainly, Will would have been familiar with it too. He would have worked here; walked the horses down to the cottages and shod them, bringing them back to the stables and perhaps examining them as lovingly and carefully as Theo was tending to Hughie.

Kate placed her foot back on the ground and peered into the stables. Theo was absorbed in his work, the familiar smell of hay and leather polish making her nose tickle. She ducked back around the doorframe as Theo stood up, and tried to look nonchalant when he finally came out of the stables. She peeled herself away from the wall and fell into step beside him as they walked down the path, back towards the Hall.

He grinned and looked down at her. 'So what are you up to for the rest of the day, then?'

'Well, work, of course. Then I don't know.' She shrugged. 'I'll probably try this thing on.' She lifted up the costume. 'And I might Skype my brother. He's just come back from France.'

'You're close to your brother?'

'Yes, I guess so. Our parents are pretty hopeless so we were thrown together a bit.' That made her think about Cat and Edward and the ball again. Where had Will been that evening? Probably in his cottage, with Hector.

'My parents gave me more than enough freedom, but I always knew they'd be there when I got back,' said Theo.

'I'm envious. Mine are digging up something archaeological at the moment. I have no idea what, it may be Roman, it may be Egyptian; but,' Kate shrugged, 'they're happy.'

'Are you happy?' Theo glanced at her.

'Of course.' She hugged the fabric of the ridiculous suit closer. 'What's not to be happy about?'

'If I lived here, I think it would be pretty easy to be happy.'

A very tiny portion of Kate's mind wanted to respond: 'I think I'd be quite happy if you were here as well.'

But then, maybe she was fixating on Will the blacksmith and not thinking rationally;

so she deliberately thought of Chris, and made an effort to consciously chase all those other images out of her mind.

* * *

‘LadyAmelia! MissTredegear!’ Will walked out of the stables and started. She was coming up the path, LadyAmelia pushing her in that damned Bath chair. She was scowling and her face was thunderous. He bowed quickly to them.

A thousand emotions assaulted him at once; he saw her in the green and gold dress from the Midsummer Ball last night, the obvious pain she had been in and the way she had been led away by that other man — Edward Mountfort, more than likely — and he worked hard to stop the anger and jealousy showing on his face. He wanted her for his own; and he had done nothing but think of her since last night, and think about what her brother had said. He would die for her, he knew that; but leaving her for any length of time, even if it was to make his fortune so he could marry her, would kill him. It was a vicious circle indeed.

LadyAmelia giggled as she stopped before him, and Cat — well, he had to ask her. ‘Why has that appeared again?’ He nodded at the chair. ‘Dare I ask?’

Cat shook her head and gripped the armrests. ‘It seems as if I’m not quite ready to dance the night away, MrHaddon.’ He dipped his head and hid a smile. She sighed lustily and twisted around, to bring LadyAmelia into the conversation. ‘Wouldn’t you agree?’

‘You tried your best, darling. It’s not your fault.’ LadyAmelia looked at Will and dimpled her sweet little smile. ‘She quite fell into a heap at the end of the ball, MrHaddon. Charles — I mean, my cousin, her brother, MrTredegear,’ the girl blushed, ‘had to pick her up and carry her.’

‘Did he now?’

‘Yes. It was extremely fortunate that he wasn’t entirely inebriated.’

‘I suspect he would have collapsed in a heap as well, had he been in such a condition,’ said Will, mock-seriously.

‘I suspect he would never have been able to find his way to Cat’s bedroom.’ Amelia smiled down at the top of Cat’s head. ‘I thought she could do with a trundle up here. I know how much she loves the horses. And anything pertaining to the horses. Excuse me one tiny moment, MrHaddon. May I just get her a little closer? Thank you.’ LadyAmelia pushed the chair a little further past Will, then let go of the handle, and stepped away. ‘It’s quite exhausting, actually, pushing such a heavy lump as Cat up here. There you go — at least you’re right inside the stables now. Right before I collapse.’

The girl did look flushed and exhausted. Will put it down to a late night at the ball and bowed again. ‘I’m more than happy to push the chair back to the Hall. Unless MissTredegear wishes to stay here for a little while?’

LadyAmelia shrugged prettily. ‘I’m so tired, I’m going to have a little sit down behind the stables here. I won’t be far.’

‘And you’ll be looking out for anyone coming, won’t you?’ asked Cat, smiling suddenly.

‘Oh, I don’t think there’s any need for people to worry. I’m here. Right outside.’ And, just like that, LadyAmelia melted away.

Will wasted no time. He knelt in front of Cat, and she leaned forward, putting her hands on his shoulders and looking straight into his eyes; straight into his soul.

‘Oh Will, I wish you had been there last night. It was so awful. So many dreary people, and none of them being particularly themselves , you know?’

‘I know.’ He nodded. ‘I was there, though. Me and Hector. We saw you through the window.’ He raised a hand and twisted a curl around his fingers. ‘You looked beautiful. One day, I’ll dance with you at a ball, I think. We’ll hold our own ball, and only invite people we like. How does that sound?’

‘It sounds perfect.’ She captured his hand and pressed it to her cheek briefly. ‘But Millie’s right. I do love the horses and the stables. So I always feel so much better up here.’ She smiled, mischievously. ‘And somehow, I feel even better now.’

Will straightened up and smiled down at her. ‘That’s because your horse has just been shod. Look.’ He nodded towards a pretty, palomino mare. ‘I think she’s missed you, these last few months.’

Cat raised her hand and Beauty dipped her head and pushed her nose into her palm, swishing her white tail expectantly.

Cat laughed. ‘I don’t have anything for you today. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t believe her. She’s just had one of my finest carrots,’ said Will with a smile, running his hand down the golden coat. ‘Why don’t you sit on her for a little while? It’ll make you both feel happier.’

Cat laughed, bitterly. ‘I would most certainly do that if I could walk properly today. But I wouldn’t be able to mount her and I wouldn’t embarrass myself by trying.’

‘Ah, you don’t need to do much work. Can you get on your feet at all?’

‘Yes, of course.’ Cat was stung. ‘It’s just once I’m on my feet I’m entirely stuck.

Unless I hop.' She frowned, as if contemplating it.

'Come on, then.' He held his hand out. 'I've got you.'

She looked at him for a moment, then struggled out of the Bath chair.

Will helped her get her balance, and then steadied her. 'Now. Let's get on that horse,' he said, and picked her up.

Cat shrieked, then started to laugh as he hefted her onto the horse, bareback. Beauty shifted a little, but he held onto them both as Cat settled herself in an awkward parody of her usual elegant side-saddle. She leaned forward and stroked Beauty's white mane. 'Oh, I've missed you so much,' she murmured. 'Hello, Beauty. I'll ride you again soon.'

'You can ride her now. Here, let me just get a leading rein on her.' Will found some rope and deftly tied it onto the horse. He clicked his tongue and the horse put her beautiful head up and whinnied. She trotted out of the stable, with Will walking alongside. He looked up at Cat and the sun was glinting off her hair, turning it to flames before his eyes. He realised that her smile not only lit up her face, but made his life worthwhile.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Jenna had been flicking through a fashion magazine, looking eminently bored when they reached the museum. Kate wouldn't have minded so much, had she not been lying full length on the church pew and padded a cushion out of a jacket that had been left on a picnic bench earlier that day.

The girl didn't even look up guiltily or try to sit upright or anything like that. She just gazed lazily at Kate and licked her finger to turn the page. Then her eyes moved to Theo and flared, momentarily. 'Hello, Theo. Great to see you again.' It was only then that she stretched and sat upright. 'What brings you here?'

'I've got business in the area and I had half a ticket to use up.'

'Oh. I'm afraid that's quite unusual, and I don't think I've ever experienced that before. Let me see it. Just for proof.' She put her hand out expectantly, completely ignoring Kate.

'Jenna, you can leave now.' Kate was curt. 'Theo doesn't need to prove he's got a ticket. I can remember selling it to him.'

'Of course you can.' Her voice was smooth, creamy and completely insincere. 'Oh, well. If you don't need me, I'm happy to go. There's nobody left on site anyway. I'm not surprised. This place is dull as ditch-water. I'll be glad when I finish my penance here. Bye, Theo. See you soon.' She stood up and grazed a fingernail gently down his chest. 'I'll be at the wine bar later.'

Theo just smiled and stepped to one side, allowing Jenna to slither out.

‘Jeez,’ muttered Kate as Jenna vanished into the late afternoon, eyeing up Theo’s van as she passed it in the car park, assessing it, Kate thought bitterly, as if she was planning to lie full length in the back of it. ‘I don’t mind anyone having a bit of fun, a bit of downtime, but she’s so . . . nasty with it. She doesn’t want to be here, and I don’t want her here. If her father wasn’t the Chair of the Board . . . anyway. Here we are.’ She swept her hand around expansively. ‘You can see what a marvellous collection of clocks we have. My favourite is the cuckoo clock.’ She smiled and pointed to the little wooden clock on the wall.

Theo nodded towards it. ‘Does it still work?’

‘Oh, yes. He still pops out and says “hello” to me. And strikes the hours. I adore him. But come on. I’ll lock up properly and then I’ll take you through into the proper museum. Hurrying around an hour before closing is fine, but nothing beats really looking at it.’

* * *

Theo followed Kate into the first room. She led him over to a case filled with little bits of paper and other oddments. She smiled. ‘This is lovely and wasn’t here last time you came — it’s things they found when they were renovating the old school building. Ephemera that must have dropped out of pockets or been stuffed in the floorboards by bored children.’

She pointed out sketches of airplanes and soldiers, and explained that during the war, evacuees were assembled there before being farmed off to families in the surrounding countryside. She showed him old chocolate bar wrappers and scrappy bits of schoolwork that had been lost to time; and, comically, one boy’s school report. He hadn’t done very well, and Theo wasn’t surprised he’d ‘misplaced’ the report before it got home.

‘They should really be in the school-room exhibit, but they’re sort of in-transit. Like I say, they’re quite new to us, and we haven’t got the space sorted out yet. But it was a shame to not display them.’

Kate continued to show him other interesting things that visitors might just skip past if they hurried through — love knots made of plaited corn, tiny Elizabethan embroidery scissors, pearl-buttoned gloves, and a miniature of someone alleged to be Catherine Howard, Henry VIII’s fifth wife.

‘This has never been verified, of course.’ Kate ran her fingers lovingly over the glass-topped display. ‘But as she was from Norfolk, and had lots of lovers, you never know.’

Theo suddenly laughed. ‘She was a Kate too, in some quarters!’

‘She was. And in fact, we actually have the same name — but it’s spelled differently. I’m Kathryn Howard, K-a-t-h-r-y-n. My brother’s Tom. Thomas. Our parents have a warped sense of humour!’

‘Wonderful! What’s this?’ Theo pointed to something that looked like an instrument of torture. ‘It’s like a pair of scissors with something weird on the end!’

Kate laughed. ‘Eyelash curlers. They look painful, don’t they? Just wait until we get to the medical equipment. Oh, and the dental things.’ She grinned. ‘One of the cottages further through is like a kitchen, you might remember? There’s strange stuff in there too — hand whisks and butter pats and the most fantastic sugar scissors for snipping off bits of sugar from a proper sugar cone. Makes you glad to have modern conveniences.’

Theo followed her through the museum, through the kitchen and the promised medical equipment, fascinated by the things she was telling him. It was much better

than his whizz round the first time he'd been here. He had missed so much. 'So what's your favourite thing in here?' he asked as they stood in the room that led into the school room, and beyond that into the cosy-looking cottage at the end.

'Ah, you asked me in exactly the right cottage. These.' Kate pointed to a pair of ice-skates; rather battered looking and clearly repaired, residing next to a display of invitations and calling cards Theo could see were from the Hall.

He pointed at the blades. 'That one's been sort of soldered together. Can you see?'

'Do you think so?' Her voice was slightly strangled, and Theo looked at her quickly. She was staring at the skates, and had gone white. 'I thought they had. I'm just surprised you—'

'You'd never know unless you worked with metal all day,' he replied, casting an expert glance over them. 'I think if they were being worn at the time, it might have caused someone a bit of agony, if they tumbled over and managed to smash them up that well.'

Kate nodded, still staring at the skates; then she surprised him again. 'Would you like to hold them? I always think you get a better idea of an object if you handle it.'

'Could I?' He cast another glance at the craftsmanship and nodded. 'If you wouldn't mind.'

'Certainly.' She looked up and pointed through the cottages to the cosy one at the end. 'Do you want to go in there and wait while I get them out of the cabinet? I need a key.' She smiled. 'Make yourself at home. It's the Blacksmith's cottage, the one I mentioned from the Earl's letter; but his furnace still needs some attention. It's just rubble outside the cottages at the minute. You might remember it as a big pile of stones from when you were here before.'

Theo meandered through the school room, and smiled at the board and the tiny ink wells. He paused by the long, low row of wooden desks, and bent to a slate. Unable to resist, he picked up the stubby pencil lying beside it and scratched a meaningless squiggle onto the black surface, joining numerous other squiggles and carefully written children's names. Then he headed into the end cottage.

Almost immediately, a feeling rushed over him that was at once warm and familiar and welcoming. The last time he had been here, it had just felt like another museum room; but then, he reasoned, he hadn't known Kate and she seemed to be making all the difference.

He smiled around at the room, and imagined it how it must have been, all those years ago. He walked over to the window and peered out at the grass and the river beyond, then moved over to the little wooden back door. He tried the handle and it turned easily, so he pushed the door open and stared out at the late Suffolk afternoon.

It was beautiful out there. He looked to the right, expecting to see Kate's little walled garden further along, but the grass just ran up to the edge of the stone cottages. He shrugged. Her garden must be on the corner or hidden by the overgrown shrubs he saw in clusters on the grassland.

From the left, he heard a tap, tap, tapping sound and the gentle hiss of bellows. Then a whoosh, as a flame burst into life, heralded by the whinny of a nearby horse. Excellent. She'd managed to go some way to restoring the old furnace building at least; and she must have one of those recordings in the building to add some atmosphere. He closed the door and stepped back inside the room, smiling.

He looked down, sure he'd caught something as he moved. He expected to see a footstool or something, but there was nothing obvious, just the sound of a dog sneezing somewhere behind him. He turned, surprised, wondering if one had snuck in when the door was open. He scanned the room; nothing was out of place and the

white-washed walls gleamed back at him, softly reflecting the flames in the grate. He looked up at the door he'd come through, and stared, thrown for a minute. The wall was smooth, and there was no doorway to be seen. And the fire? Had that been burning when he came in? He hadn't noticed. If she was closing up, it would need damping down—

He spun around, to see a cold, empty grate, and turned again to the connecting door. Kate was just coming through it, smiling apologetically. 'Sorry,' she said. 'It took me a few minutes to find the keys. Jenna had put them back on the wrong hook. Here they are. Our ice-skates.' She held them up for his inspection.

Theo shook his head, blinking to clear the image of the fire and the blank wall that had invaded his mind. This place was certainly very atmospheric.

'Hey. Thanks.' He smiled, dismissing the images as his imagination working overtime. 'I love what you've done with the furnace so far. I was just looking outside and heard the recording.'

'What recording?' Kate frowned. 'I haven't done anything with the furnace. It's still a pile of rubble.' She pushed her hair out of her face, nervously, he thought. 'There's nothing there. Although this is the old blacksmith's cottage, like I said. He's got a horseshoe on the door, which I like to think he made himself.'

'But I swear I heard the noises of someone working there.' Theo was confused and looked around him. The atmosphere had shifted a little and it no longer felt the same as it had a few minutes ago. 'Look — I'll show you.' He headed over to the door and took hold of the handle. He turned it, and was met with resistance. 'Strange. It was fine before,' he murmured, and tried to turn it again. Still nothing.

He looked at Kate, perplexed. 'I'm so sorry. I think I must have locked it.'

Kate was staring at him, a little oddly. She shook her head. 'No. It's been locked for ages. We don't keep it open in case people try to sneak in the back way — without paying, you know?'

'Without paying,' he echoed. 'Right. Fine.' He let go of the door handle and nodded over to the fireplace. 'And do you light that up regularly?'

Kate shook her head without taking her eyes off him. 'No.' She sat down, and looked up at him, her face pale and her eyes wide. 'It's never lit.'

'Oh. Okay.' He wrapped his arms around his body and stared around the room that felt so familiar and so homely. And so right with Kate sitting there.

He realised she was holding the skates up to him. 'Do you want to have a look at these then?'

Theo nodded and took them from her.

There was a flash, like some sort of scene exploded into his mind; as if the gesture had thrown him back one hundred years or more ago and the cottage was lived in and warm and his . . .

He ran his finger down the blades and held them up to the light, squinting a little to see if the repair was noticeable. 'I think these should be fair to use again,' he told her. 'I didn't do too badly, if I may say so. I'll warrant that only someone in my line of trade could tell.'

She was sitting in the room, the blanket covering her legs and a mongrel dog lying heavily against her. 'I don't think I'll be using them for some time.' She looked miserable and white and sickly, and her red hair lacked its usual lustre.

He knelt down beside her and took her hand in his. ‘You will be. You’ll be dancing soon. I promise you.’

‘Do you think I can be fixed as easily as those? It hurts. It hurts so much! It’ll never be better! I’ll be stuck like this forever!’

He laughed, loving her for her dramatic despair. ‘Bones heal. Breaks mend. Skates — can be repaired. Next winter, I promise, you’ll be on that ice and you won’t fall down again.’

‘Will I not?’

‘No.’ He lifted her hand to his face and laid it gently against his cheek. ‘Because I’ll be there to catch you. I promise.’

Theo gasped, and suddenly he was back in the little museum cottage, holding the skates, with Kate looking up at him.

* * *

‘Are you all right?’ Kate got to her feet and touched his arm. ‘Shall I take these away?’ She removed the skates and put them behind her back. He looked completely stunned and was staring down at her as if he’d never seen her before in his life. ‘Theo?’ She started to panic — maybe he’d had an apoplexy or something? Maybe he needed a doctor? He really seemed to have been somewhere else for a moment. The idea curled into her mind — maybe he had been somewhere else.

‘Kate?’ He blinked and turned slightly, and faced the chair she’d been sitting in. His eyes swept the area, as if he was looking for something. ‘Yeah.’ He scratched his head and looked around. ‘Was there a dog in here by any chance?’

Kate shook her head. 'A dog used to live here, I think. A mongrel sort of thing. It had a bit of boxer in it. He was called Hector.'

'Hector.'

'Yes. Are you sure you're okay?' She tried a reassuring smile. He looked like he needed one of those. 'This cottage has a bit of a — reputation. A bit like the Hall.' She leaned against the mantelpiece. 'In my opinion, these buildings know who they like and they make it pretty well-known.' She laughed, self-consciously. 'I wonder if the cottage knows you?'

'It certainly seemed to know me.' Theo looked around and his gaze settled on a point behind her. The doorway.

'Hmm. Did it disappear? The door?'

Theo snapped his head back to her. 'You could say that. And with the furnace and things. Well now.' He shivered.

'Perhaps you're just a little more sensitive to things about — blacksmiths — working in your industry.' Kate forced a smile. Pointless unloading the whole Cat Tredegar thing on him. She might never see him again; and that sort of information might disrupt both of their lives in unthinkable ways.

Then she realised he was looking at her strangely, and his eyes scanned her from the top of her head down to her legs and his gaze hovered around her ankles. She felt herself blush, not privy to whatever he'd experienced so briefly there in the cottage. But she wondered — a tiny, treacherous, hopeful part of her wondered — whether she, or Cat, had been part of it.

His eyes fixed on hers again. She noticed how dark and dangerous they were and the

atmosphere seemed to fizz and crackle around them as she clutched the skates tightly behind her. There was a pull towards him that she was finding increasingly difficult to resist; and by the way his eyes flared as they met hers, she suspected he felt it too.

‘I think I should probably leave,’ he said in a low voice. He cleared his throat and stepped backwards, breaking the connection.

‘Should you?’ she asked. Treacherous indeed. Her heart had started to pound at a million miles an hour.

‘I think it’s best.’

‘Perhaps.’

Because what about Chris ? She dragged her gaze away from Theo and stared at her feet instead. It was wrong that she should feel so unsettled, just because she was putting too much stock into the past, or into whatever daydreams she was coming up with that were pretending to be the past.

‘I need to tell you though, that I don’t want to go. But I think we both know why I should .’ Theo’s voice was soft, and interrupted her thoughts. It made her stomach somersault, imagining what that voice might sound like whispering love to her; perhaps reciting love poetry, unsure of the words but meaning every one of them, on a sunny afternoon while she dabbled her toes in the cool water of the River Hartsford . . .

Kate looked at Theo quickly. His eyes were perfect and honest. He wasn’t flirting or teasing; he was being completely truthful.

She thought about denying how she felt about the situation, but she couldn’t.

She looked away, back at the empty fireplace and sighed. 'I do know.' She put the skates on the mantelpiece and touched them gently. 'Were they definitely repaired then?'

'Yes. You can see how the blade was broken in half. It took some skill to do it, but he did a good job.'

'He? The blacksmith?' She smiled, sadly. 'Not everything that's broken can be repaired so easily, though, can it?'

'No.'

There was a brief silence.

'I really should go. The longer I stand here, the more difficult it is to remember I just came in for a guided tour. I didn't expect this. Although,' he half-smiled, 'I'd be lying if I said I didn't hope for it.'

Kate felt wretched. This time she nodded. 'I understand. I feel the same. I'll let you out the front door. The one with the horseshoe on.'

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When it came to it, they stood, facing each other, in front of the cottage, sunlight glinting off the horseshoe so carefully nailed to the door, not really knowing what to do.

‘Kate—’

‘Theo—’

They spoke together.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she whispered, shaking her head. ‘I somehow feel responsible for whatever happened in there. I hate that it’s made you sad. I hate that it’s made you want to leave. That sort of thing — if it’s what I think it is — it’s happened to me before and it does freak you out.’

Theo smiled. ‘I don’t know if it was the same sort of thing. But don’t be sorry, regardless. I think it’s just been a strange sort of day.’ He reached out and crooked his finger; put it under her chin and turned her face up towards his. ‘Don’t be sorry,’ he repeated, quietly. ‘But, as a matter of interest, how long have you been with Chris?’

‘Three years, just over.’

‘I truly wish I’d met you three and a half years ago, then.’ He looked into her eyes, sadly. ‘It would have saved so much heartache for everyone. I’m not quite sure what happened in there myself, but something happened. I don’t know — I believe we meet people when we’re supposed to.’ He laughed, humourlessly. ‘If that’s the case, I should have met you years ago.’

‘Maybe you did. Somehow,’ she whispered. ‘Which is why, right now, right this very moment, I’m sorry that we met again. Because I can’t right now. I need to — I have to — it’s just because—’

And then he did it. He silenced her with a kiss, frightened that she would tell him exactly why she couldn’t — didn’t want to be with him. ‘I know,’ he whispered, half-regretfully.

Strange as it seemed, he did know.

He felt as if he’d known her all his life, known her even before. They had, in another time, been together. He was as certain of that as he was of the fact he just had to be patient.

The kiss was pretty spectacular. Not just a short, sweet one as he had intended. Once their lips met, it was as though they moved of their own accord, fusing them together. Two mouths, perfect for one another; two souls becoming one. Their tongues met, seeking each other, as if it they were always meant to. And Theo couldn’t have stopped kissing her if his life had depended on it. But eventually, he ran out of breath and had to.

And by God, it hurt when she hurried away and disappeared into the leafy shadows, leaving him standing alone, staring after her — wishing that things could be very, very different.

* * *

Automatically, her mind whirling with thoughts she couldn’t quite put words to, Kate checked all the doors on the way past the cottages — they’d all been locked up, but she checked again. Anything to stop her thinking of Theo standing outside Will’s cottage as she escaped back into the museum.

She cast a glance around the reception area. Jenna had left it reasonably clean and tidy, she noticed now, apart from her ‘ Naughty but Nice ’ mug which she had hidden behind the cash register. Kate picked the mug up and dropped it into the sink, cold, beige coffee dribbling down the plughole. The mug could stay there until Jenna was next in. Kate just wanted to head upstairs, and try to work out her feelings.

She ran up the stairs, and hurried past the computer in her flat. It made her think of Chris again. She hadn’t heard from him since she’d phoned him briefly the other day. And she realised he hadn’t even asked how her day had gone during that phone call. She’d had an email from Maeve that afternoon and even a one-line “how are you, we’re fine” email from her parents. But nothing else from Chris. Not even a text. He could have made time for that, surely. But she shook the thought away.

Kate started her shower off, deciding she’d call his mobile later on, just to say “hi” and ran through it seemed, at least, fifty scenarios which may or may not happen during their conversation. Afterwards, she dried off in her largest, fluffiest towel and slipped into some grey flannel joggers and a white sleeveless top. She padded, barefoot, across the slate floor of the kitchen, her hair damp on the back of her neck.

Kate picked up her mobile phone and headed back down the stairs into the garden. It seemed horribly disloyal to hide inside, away from the sunshine. She went to the top of the garden and sat on the wall, facing the river with her legs dangling outside of her boundary. Balancing her bare feet onto a natural shelf in the dry-stone, she dialled Chris, the extraordinarily loud quacking of her ducks breaking the peacefulness of the late afternoon.

His phone rang four times before he answered. Kate was slightly taken aback; she had kind of expected it to go straight to answerphone. She had her polite little message all prepared to leave. Hey Chris, call me when you’re home! Or words to that effect.

Instead, he caught her off guard. ‘Kate? Kateeee! Katie-kate!’

She rolled her eyes heavenwards. He sounded completely drunk. He never called her those silly names unless he was half-cut — and there were definitely sounds of a party in the background; music, laughter, giggling. Hang on — giggling ? That implied girls at the party and from the group of women Kate understood worked at his office, they were definitely the sort of girl who worked hard and played hard.

‘Are you out with work?’ she asked.

‘Yeah — yeah I am. We closed a major deal today. Got to celebrate. Whoah! Saffy! Stop it. It’s Kate!’

He laughed and there was a shriek from somewhere close by. Yes, Saffy. Of course. She was bound to be one of the women who liked to “play”.

‘So what time did you close the deal?’

‘Uhhh — eleven? Yeah. Something like that. Amazing!’

‘And you’ve been partying since eleven?’

‘Pretty much, yeah. God, I am so drunk. But it’s so worth it. Saffy! No.’ There was more laughter and Kate clutched at her phone tightly, the anger bubbling up inside her.

‘I need to talk to you, Chris. When can we get together?’

‘Sweetheart, I’ve been drinking. I can’t drive up to the Wilds of Wanney.’

‘I’m not asking you to come here right now. And don’t call me “sweetheart”.’

‘No, no, sweetheart. I knew you’d be busy. I’ve been busy too. Or I would have been up sooner.’ He was clearly attempting to sound soothing, yet only succeeding in sounding very drunk. ‘Didn’t want to cramp your style.’

‘You couldn’t cramp my style if you tried.’ She focussed on the river and traced the course of it to the right, where she knew, upriver, the Faerie Bridge would be straddling it, squat, mellow and sturdy.

‘Yeah, yeah.’ He clearly wasn’t listening to a word she was saying. So what was new? ‘Look, I have to go now. I think we’re moving onto another bar. Don’t want to lose them. Okay — so maybe next week you can pop down? I think I’m free Sunday, so if you come Saturday afternoon we can go out for dinner, then have Sunday together, yeah? Hey!’ He must have moved the phone away to shout after someone as there was another bout of raucous laughter followed by a faint comment on where the best cocktails were. There was a crackle, then he came back on the line. ‘Right. I have to go. Seriously, this has been such a great day! It’s going to get messy.’ He laughed and there was another shriek. ‘Okay, I’m coming! So Katie-babes. See you next week?’

‘I work weekends, remember? I’ll be down—’ she began. But he’d already disconnected the call.

* * *

Kate passed an absolutely hideous night. She kept replaying Theo’s kiss in her mind. It had been so perfect, so absolutely what a kiss should be, and she hadn’t wanted him to stop. Ever. And yet, she shouldn’t have allowed him to kiss her at all. Torn as she was between guilt and lust, the hours ticked by as she watched the bedside clock; and she was dreading that somewhere a clock would chime and she’d drop into one of those little scenes again and witness something that would tie her even closer to Cat and her lover, just to confuse her even further. But nothing happened.

It was no surprise, therefore, that she was up at the crack of dawn, heading off to the bakery to get half a dozen rolls. She might have thought she'd bump into Theo by doing that. Or she might not have thought that at all.

But she did think, very hard, about Chris. If one kiss from Theo made her feel like that, and she truly didn't seem to give a damn if Chris was out getting inebriated with Saffy — or half of London, come to that — then should she really be hanging onto this relationship? It was going nowhere, and it hadn't been going anywhere for a long time.

* * *

She pulled up in front of the house in Chiswick and wiped her sticky hands on her denim skirt. It was that very same day, the day that she had wandered hopefully to the bakery and lingered a little too long outside. It was now late afternoon, and Chris had no idea she was coming.

To be honest, Kate had no idea how she even got to Chiswick, or even at what point she finally made the decision to go there; but before she knew it, she was on the A12 looking for her exit onto the M25. Two hours had never passed so quickly or so mindlessly and she was still a little astonished she had made it.

Kate got out of the car, walked up to his front door and put her key in the lock.

Instead of the key turning easily and the door sliding open as it always did, it stuck in the lock and wouldn't move; he had his key in on the other side, which meant he was in the house. That wasn't surprising, considering the binge he'd had yesterday. She wondered how many of his friends had called in sick today to nurse their hangovers.

Kate rapped on the door. There was no answer, but that would make sense if he was in the big, glassy kitchen. Or fast asleep in bed.

‘Chris!’ She leaned over and pushed open the letterbox. ‘Are you in there?’

She peered through the gap and could see a rectangular view of his hallway, clean and white and empty. She squinted, trying to look into the recesses of the back rooms, but there was only a slab of light falling through the open doorway from the glass walled kitchen.

‘Chris!’ She tried again. After a moment, she stood up and got her phone out of her bag. She dialled his mobile, which was switched off, then the house phone which echoed from behind the locked door. The phone was picked up and Kate was greeted by silence. ‘Chris! Open up. It’s me!’ The only thing that happened was that she heard the soft click as the handset was replaced and she was left listening to the hum of the disconnected tone.

Well, at least he was in. Kate hunkered down and propped open the letterbox, fixing her sights on the slab of light at the end of the hallway. A shadow blotted out some of the light and she knew from experience that the phone was in the corner of the room, so Chris must still be standing next to it. She redialled his number, and the shadow cleared, as if he was moving back towards the phone; but he didn’t answer.

He’d mentioned some issues with his broadband recently — one of the many reasons why it was so hard to stay in touch — and Kate cursed, wondering if the phone line was affected. She leaned further forward; if the flap of the letterbox had suddenly dropped, she would have been minus a nose and be the bearer of two very nice black eyes. Fortunately, it didn’t and she managed to peer to the left, towards the shoe rack and the umbrella stand and the coat hooks on the wall.

‘What the—?’ Unless Chris was a secret cross-dresser and the reason he was ignoring her was because he was wearing a basque of some description, she could think of no logical reason why a pair of cerise, six-inch heeled Manolo Blahniks — she could see the imprinted name on the sole — were lying at a crazy angle by the shoe rack, or

why a matching belted raincoat was hanging on the coat hooks. And let's be honest, the raincoat was like Barbie doll size — a size 6 at the most. And Chris' feet were much, much bigger than those tiny, doll-like shoes.

This might make things a whole lot easier. She stood back from the letterbox and let the flap slam shut, her heart pounding, and looked around helplessly, as if someone from the street would just appear and say, 'Hey, here's a handy jemmy; let yourself in, Kate.'

She didn't have a jemmy, but by God she had the back door key as well. Or rather, the key which opened the glass monstrosity. Clutching the bunch in her hand like a talisman, she walked around the side of the house. There was a very, very narrow gap between his house and the start of the next block. Kate turned herself sideways, sucked in her tummy, thanked the Lord her boobs weren't any bigger, held her arms out gracefully and ballet side-stepped along the cold, dank passageway. She prayed there would be no rats scurrying out and only dared to breathe again when she was through into Chris's garden.

Kate peered around the corner of the house, hugging the walls, feeling exactly like a cat-burglar might, until her breathing steadied and she felt confident enough to try the key in the door.

This time, it turned and she slid the doors smoothly to the side. She crept inside the house and stood in the middle of the kitchen.

The place was deserted. Kate stared around her, listening carefully; and then she heard it. The soft creak of a floorboard in the hallway. She looked up sharply, and saw the door was closed — the one that had been open when she had been peering through the letterbox, the one that had been letting the light through.

She was in no mood for playing cat and mouse.

She stomped up to the door and flung it open. 'Christopher Buchanan. I know you're in here. You'd better tell me what's going on before I call the police and tell them you're a missing person!'

It wasn't the most sensible of challenges; but it had the desired effect.

'He's not in,' said a female voice in round, Queens' English. 'But he'll be back shortly.'

A vision of polished, blonde professionalism peered around the door. Kate's first thought was, God isn't she short ? Her second was, that woman has an attitude . Her third was, why the hell is she wearing my dressing gown?

'I'm Kate,' she said, placing her hands on her hips. 'And that, I believe, is mine.' She pointed to the pink, fluffy bathrobe.

The girl — Saffy, obviously — pulled the edges of the robe closer and stared at her defiantly. 'I know. That's why it's too big for me.'

Kate was stunned into wordless rage. This woman looked different close up. She'd only seen her bent over her work in the office on the odd occasion she'd gone into the building to meet Chris.

'I've just got up. Sorry I can't be more welcoming.' She yawned elaborately. 'It was a long night. How awkward.'

'I trust you didn't use my toothbrush.'

'Oh, Kathryn. I use my own. Not yours. Don't you worry about that.' The use of Kate's formal name, as well as the way Saffy addressed her, as if she was a five-year-old, riled her.

‘You hung up on me when I rang. You’re alone in his house.’

‘I doubt he was expecting you. He said you’ve been busy with your little job in the countryside. I hope the weather was nice. We didn’t see much daylight.’

Her little job? They saw no daylight? The bitch !

‘I sometimes wish I had a job that was more fun than this one,’ Saffy continued. She shrugged. ‘But mostly it’s good. We’ve been so busy it’s unreal. You know, with work and — other things. Chris had a hell of a hangover. He’s gone for a walk to clear his headache and said he’d bring a latte back.’

A latte? She looked more like an espresso sort of woman. In fact — Kate studied her more closely — she looked a bit familiar. A vision of the Midsummer Ball drifted into her mind — Cat Tredegar’s Midsummer Ball. There had been that girl in the corner, the one with the elaborate head-dress and the frothy pink dress . . . Maria. Of course .

‘You’ve never changed, have you?’ Kate murmured. Saffy was the double of that girl. The one who had been staring lustfully at Edward. Kate recalled a friend once telling her that her nemesis from high-school was ‘really rather plain, if you take away the bleach and the make-up’. Saffy, she was afraid to say, also met that criteria very well.

‘Are you all right?’ Saffy asked, quite sarcastically. ‘You’re very quiet.’ She tugged the robe closer, and something within Kate finally snapped.

‘You’re welcome to him. Just give him a little time to get bored of you — a few more drunken nights out, and you’ll be nothing but some slapper he once made use of. Chris is only concerned about himself and his work. You’re probably a reasonable distraction — but just remember all the times he’s been to visit me, he’s done the

same to you . He's slept with me — and, now I think about it, probably my assistant Jenna as well.' Kate suddenly laughed. It wasn't funny, really, but she just knew the unanswered questions, the skirted-around comments about where he had or hadn't been with Jenna pointed in that direction. And hadn't there been a few occasions when he'd left and Jenna had turned up looking smug a couple of hours later? 'God, I actually pity you. Just think about that next time he's on a business trip and invites someone else from the office instead of you.'

Saffy's face flickered and Kate smiled. 'Oh — I see. It's happened already then. How awkward.' Kate took advantage of the uncertainty in the woman's demeanour to indicate the passageway behind her. 'Do you mind?'

The blonde stepped away mechanically and Kate walked past, her head held high and her shoulders back. She got a whiff of expensive perfume as she passed.

She was halfway up the stairs before she realised she hadn't taken her shoes off. Oh, well. It hardly mattered now.

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It didn't take her long upstairs. She took a clean duvet cover out of Chris' airing cupboard and shook it out. She then proceeded to empty the en-suite of her toothbrush, hairbrush, hair drier, straighteners, odds and ends of make-up — in fact, everything that spoke of her, Kate Howard.

She dropped the items one by one into the duvet cover and systematically eradicated, properly, any further hint of her ever having being part of Chris's home life. She moved into the bedroom, feeling strangely disconnected. She opened the wardrobe and took her few bits of clothes out, not even bothering to fold them as they joined the toiletries in the vast cotton depths. The chest of drawers was next. Out came her underwear; knickers, bras, tights. Everything. She turned back to the wardrobe and took her shoes out of the bottom — just a couple of dressy pairs that served no real purpose at Hartsford; the stilettos from the Great Cumberland Hotel night were tossed in with a pair of diamante studded sandals, some rainbow-coloured flowery flip-flops she'd bought on a whim at Camden Market and some cosy slippers that she'd purchased last winter and forgotten about.

She looked around the room, and saw the messy, unmade bed that indicated something raunchy had taken place not so long ago; seeing the hard, masculine edges to the furniture that spoke so clearly of Chris. There was a mobile phone dock on the bedside table; a phone was in it — a top of the range iPhone that so did not belong to Chris. A laptop bag tucked on the window seat; piles of paperwork strewn around; a linen pencil skirt and matching jacket, ever so tiny, lying on a chair. How had it ever come to this? At what point had it started to go wrong?

She thought the moment she made the decision to move to Hartsford had probably pushed it over the edge. She knew now, without doubt, that he had never had any

intention of moving to Suffolk with her, and if she was honest, she had always known she had no intention of ever moving back to London.

He had felt sort of safe and sort of at a distance and it worked well because she didn't — and hadn't for a long time — want him around full time.

Truthfully, it was easier to be an afterthought. It suited her to see him so infrequently. She knew she didn't want to marry him. They'd had fun, in the beginning; they'd enjoyed each other's company. But it wasn't enough. Kate knew she deserved more. And she would never get that from Chris. She didn't even want to get that from Chris.

Then, from outside: 'Babes, I got the coffees! Open up, Babes!'

Babes ? What was it with him? Did he just forget their names and go for the generic option instead?

There was a rap on the door, and, being in the front bedroom, Kate heard his voice quite clearly as he shouted at Saffy again to unlock. She wondered whether she should do it — whether she should race down and fling the door open and go 'Surprise!' and watch him wear the coffee as it upended over him in shock. But she wasn't that cruel.

And besides: he hadn't even noticed her car outside, had he? He had, instead, Saffy, hanging around inside; and soon she would be joined by coffee, making up one neat package.

Kate waited, her heart pounding, until she heard Saffy pad along the hallway. The door clicked and opened and before she could speak, Chris barrelled in. 'I was right, they did the Eggs Benedict to take away. I don't know about you, but I'm starving. Then maybe we could go for round two afterwards?' There was a throaty, sexy timbre to his voice that just irritated Kate.

‘Chris,’ Saffy interrupted in a lowered voice, ‘Kathryn’s here. She knows.’

‘Kathryn?’ There was a half-second where Chris seemed to try and place the name. ‘God, you mean Kate! Oh hell .’ He swore, loudly.

‘Oh, don’t panic. I’m just leaving!’ Kate yelled down from the top of the stairs. She didn’t bother to hide the disdain in her voice. ‘You’ve actually made this a hell of a lot easier for me. I came down here to break it off with you, and as far as I’m concerned, that’s done now. You can keep your Eggs Benedict and Saffy and everything else you hold dear. And by the way, I hate olives. And I bloody hate peanuts. And I would hate you, but I can’t be bloody bothered.’

She began to head down the stairs and dragged the duvet cover behind her like a low budget Santa Claus. She hefted it up in both hands to show them. ‘It’s all my stuff, I promise. I haven’t taken any of yours, Chris.’

‘Your stuff?’ Chris looked up at her, still holding his takeaway breakfast items. ‘Look, I can explain—’

‘Don’t bother.’ Kate cast a glance at Saffy who blanched. ‘I’ll dump it in my car and you can have the duvet straight back. Enjoy your lattes and your hedge funds and “round two” or whatever you’re doing today. Here.’ She dropped the duvet and fumbled for her keys. She tugged his set off her keyring and handed them to him.

Finally, it was done. And finally, she could move on.

* * *

It was late afternoon when Kate got back to Hartsford. She drove into the car park and, shattered as she was from the long drive, her heart skipped a beat. There was a van there — Theo’s van — and that meant Theo was here as well. Here to see her?

She couldn't take her eyes off his vehicle as she pulled the handbrake on, and ran out of the car towards the museum. It was closed today — he had to be here to see her!

Just as she reached the building, he came around the corner, white-faced. His keys were in one hand and his mobile phone in the other. He pulled up short at the sight of her.

The smile died on her face as his blank eyes fixed on her.

'Theo. What's happened?'

He shook his head. 'I have to go. It's an emergency.'

'Theo! But — I've just come back from Chiswick. I've finished it with Chris and I wanted to see you. Your van's here — why? Why are you leaving?'

'Kate.' His eyes finally focussed on her and he rested his laden hands on her shoulders. 'I'm sorry.' He leaned down and kissed her, almost apologetically. It was a very different kiss to the one last night; but it still did indescribable things to her insides that made her want to hang onto him and never let him go.

'Theo?' Kate was confused and she started panicking. Had she misread everything? It was almost as if he was kissing her goodbye.

'I should have told you earlier.' He dropped his gaze and took a deep breath, then looked at her, a world of pain in his eyes. 'I've got a daughter. She's called Poppy — she's two.' A smile flickered, then faded. 'It's complicated. But I need to get back to her and her mother, Lori. Really, I'm sorry.'

His hands dropped from her shoulders, and he paused, as if he was going to say something else. Then he turned and ran towards his van. Within seconds, it was

roaring into life and had disappeared out of the car park, leaving Kate staring after it, feeling as if her world had just disintegrated around her.

* * *

Theo had never packed up a tent so quickly or so messily in his life. When the message had come through, he felt sick; absolutely sick to his stomach. God knew how he got back to Derbyshire in one piece, but he did.

He unlocked the house and let himself in, standing in the hallway, listening to what he hoped would be silence, with no sound of a toddler anywhere near the place.

‘Sorry, Theo.’ His friend Jared said, coming up behind him. ‘I just thought you needed to know.’

Theo nodded, moving through to the lounge, his eyes scanning the tiny room. His gaze settled on the side table where the baby monitor usually was. The area was clear and he swore. He ran out of the room and took the stairs two at a time. He opened Poppy’s bedroom door, and saw the little girl sitting up in her bed, looking white and terrified, her covers pulled up around her.

‘Daddy!’ her face lit up with relief and she wrangled her arms out of the duvet-tent and held them out to him. Theo was there in a second, picking her up and holding her close; smelling her soft hair and her baby skin. He closed his eyes, and tried to control his voice.

‘Poppy, sweetie. Where’s Mummy?’

‘Out.’

He opened his eyes and saw the other half of the baby monitor on her dressing table.

‘Where is she, sweetie? Who’s she out with?’

The little girl thought for a minute, then shrugged. ‘Not know. Out. Daddy, I no like porridge.’ She shook her head sadly, as if it had just occurred to her this was a vitally important thing to tell her father in case she had the misfortune to be offered it any time soon.

‘I know, I know. Porridge is nasty. Yuk.’ He pulled a comical face and she laughed, snuggling into him and sighing.

‘Daddy. Where Mummy? I no sleep.’

Theo looked at Jared, who had come up the stairs behind him. ‘Where did you say you’d seen her? The Angler’s Arms?’

Jared nodded. ‘That’s where she was when I saw her. I don’t know where she went after that. She said you were home, and you had Poppy. Then I saw Jake later on, and he said he’d asked you to do a favour down in Newmarket. So, yeah, I guessed I’d better let you know.’

Poppy was watching the conversation sleepily. She popped her thumb in her mouth and nodded, speaking around the little pink digit. ‘I has biscuits and milk but it messy.’

‘Oh, Poppy.’ Theo saw the remains of a packet of chocolate digestives on the floor, and an upturned cup of milk. ‘Come on, let’s see where Mummy is.’

Jared glowered, apparently thinking of Lori. ‘She can’t be far, can she? I would have broken in, mate, if I’d had to. I would have got Poppy for you.’

‘I know. See, the thing is, Lori thinks it’s fine.’ Theo laughed, bitterly. ‘She reckons

if she's got the baby monitor, she can hear if there's a problem and come straight back.'

Jared raised his eyebrows and whistled through his teeth. 'D'you think she ever has?' he asked sarcastically.

'No. She doesn't seem to understand the concept of distance between the two halves of the monitor — or charging it up. Or even losing the damn thing. She swore to me this wouldn't happen again. I trusted her. But then — she told me what right did I even have, so what the hell could I do?'

'You reckon she fell off the wagon again?'

'Big time.' Theo cuddled Poppy closer. 'Perhaps she never even got on the damn wagon.' The guilt was overwhelming — and also the fact that this time she had been spotted and caught out. How many other times had it happened where she hadn't been seen? It didn't bear thinking about.

'Poppy, does Mummy go out a lot?' Theo asked, closing his eyes and dreading the answer.

'Es,' said the little girl, nodding; and her eyes fluttered closed as she dozed off on her father's shoulder.

* * *

Will was reading a letter from his friend Cameron, who had been apprenticed with him to the old smithy in Norfolk, many years ago.

Cameron had emigrated to Europe, and, by way of hard work, dedication and a natural affinity for both people and horses, he now worked with the beautiful white

Lipizzaner stallions in the Spanish Riding School, in Vienna. It always made Will smile when he read that — he had never been good at geography, but the idea of a Spanish riding school in Vienna, which even he knew was not in Spain, puzzled him.

Cameron had progressed to training and even riding the horses, and his tales always made Will yearn to see the beautiful animals for himself. Today, in his expansive, cheerful manner, Cameron was encouraging him to come to Vienna and work at the school with him.

We need a bloody blacksmith who bloody well knows what he is doing , Cameron had written, his strong, Scottish accent coming through clearly in the inky, blotched words. Bloody horseshoe fell off during bloody practice last week — impossible bloody rogue they had working that forge!

Will grinned and folded the letter carefully, tucking it in a drawer to answer later. He walked out of the house and whistled to Hector who appeared from a rabbit hole, burrs sticking to his fur, but smiling a greeting nonetheless.

‘Hector, my lad!’ Will scolded as he reached down to pick the stubborn seeds out of his fur, ‘I’d be inclined to leave you behind if I went overseas. I can’t spend my time fussing you, boy, if I need to shoe those stallions.’ He ruffled the dog’s fur and headed into the forge. He shovelled some coal onto the fire and wiped his brow as the heat blasted out at him, dampening his hair into curling tendrils.

‘Haddon! William Haddon!’ An imperious voice he didn’t recognise called from somewhere outside and a horse whinnied. Will frowned. Passing trade wasn’t unknown, but those customers rarely knew his name.

‘William Haddon, at your service!’ he called as he strode outside. He pulled up short as he saw a tall, dark-haired man astride a horse that he recognised as one of the Earl’s hunters.

‘Ah. Good man.’ The stranger smiled, but it didn’t reach his flinty grey eyes. ‘Check this beast’s shoes. I’m going for a hack with MissTredegar and I don’t trust it not to lose one on the way. God knows what state they’re in.’

The horse shied and whinnied, happy to see Will, and the stranger pulled tightly on the reins, bringing it into order again. ‘Now, please. I would be most grateful.’

Thrown a little, Will put his hand on the horse’s neck and crooned something nonsensical to it as he looked over the man’s shoulders. Behind him, the sweet palomino mare trotted slowly down from the Hall, Cat sitting on her back. Even from this distance, he could see she wasn’t exactly confident. It had been a few months since she had ridden, and personally he thought a hack into the countryside was rather much to expect from her.

As she approached, he could see her face was dark and her mouth was set unhappily. It was a look that spoke of anger, pain and helplessness.

‘Certainly, Sir,’ Will said, tonelessly. This man, then, must be Edward Mountfort. The man Charles had told him about.

And the bastard hadn’t even waited for her.

‘Will!’ Cat’s face lightened briefly as she saw him and brought Beauty up beside Mountfort. ‘How lovely to see you today. It’s a beautiful morning, is it not?’

‘Aye, MissTredegar, it is.’ Had they been alone, Will wouldn’t have hesitated to say “even more beautiful now I’ve seen you, Cat!” But of course he couldn’t say that now, could he?

‘We’re going for a hack.’ She cast a glance at Mountfort. ‘It’s the first time I’ve been on Beauty since . . .’ The words trailed off. He knew she had been about to say ‘since

you helped me onto her' and he bit his lip. 'Since the accident,' she amended and looked down; but she wasn't quick enough to hide the colour in her cheeks.

'Well, you take care, Miss,' he said, his eyes burning into her. 'I'd hate for anything untoward to happen.'

'So perhaps it's best you check her beast's shoes as well.' It was a statement, not a request and Will felt his own cheeks flush in anger.

Cat's own anger flared momentarily as she shot a faintly disgusted look at Mountfort. 'She isn't simply a beast. Her name is Beauty. And the horse you are riding, the one my uncle encouraged you to ride, to escort me today, is called Merlin.'

'Merlin. Thank you, Catriona.' The man looked over at her and smiled. 'So perhaps Haddon here can check Merlin and Beauty's shoes before we head off? And perhaps he can be quick about it? Can you, Haddon?'

'I can, Sir. I'll get to it immediately.' He wanted to punch the man, he really did. And by the look of things, Cat felt the same.

Will bent to his work, anger fuelling his actions. The memory of the letter from Cameron pierced his consciousness like a red-hot poker. He had to answer him. And, may God and Cat forgive him, but he had to answer him quickly.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

The ice-cream bicycle had up-cycled a treat. Kate had managed to ride it around the grounds of the museum and then into the barn where it had been standing at the front of the agricultural display for the last few weeks. Doing the bike up had helped her focus her energy and not go over and over the fact that she had dumped Chris — although she didn't regret that for a moment — in the hope that she could slip neatly into a relationship with Theo Kent. Well, it just went to show.

She'd also had a sign printed that told her visitors how the bicycle would be starring in the Country House Party Weekend at the Hall. Cassie had excitedly brought a whole ream of advertising leaflets over for Kate to display, so they were now in the basket of the bicycle and in the container where the ice-cream would be stashed, and there was a fanned-out pile on the reception desk as well. They were going quite quickly and Kate hoped, for Cassie's sake, that the event would be a success. Also, of course, it might drive people to the museum that weekend, which would be very good. Kate had asked — no, insisted — that Jenna be fit for work the entire weekend; because of course Kate was manning — or woman-ing — the bicycle.

In truth, Cassie had been struggling to put all her ideas into practice, but then, luckily for her, help had arrived in the shape of Aidan Edwards, a fantastic civil engineer who had the added bonus of being drop-dead gorgeous and clearly smitten with his new employer. He seemed to delight in implementing her wild schemes, and it was pretty obvious that Cassie was in lust with Aidan too. Clearly a win-win situation.

It was about two weeks before the event, and Kate was looking forward to it. Elodie had managed to produce the twins at the end of July, a couple of weeks early much to her joy, and Kate was sure tiny LadyFreya and LordAlfie would be the star attractions, despite all the work Cassie and the divine Aidan had put into the

weekend.

Kate walked back out of the barn and saw a figure walking towards her. It was a figure she recognised all too well, and she wondered if it was possible to turn around and run back into the barn; then escape through a loose panel in the back and run away, all the way to Ipswich, perhaps.

But too late — he saw her and raised his hand in an apologetic greeting. ‘Hey. Can I buy a ticket?’ he tried with a half-smile. ‘I took a wrong turning in Derbyshire and somehow found myself down here.’

Kate shook her head. ‘No. Sorry, we’re closing soon.’

‘Ah. I thought so. Just as well I don’t really want to see the museum today after all. I’d rather see you.’

‘Would you now? Theo, this isn’t a good time.’ Her heart was rattling in her chest, so much so, that she wrapped her arms around herself.

‘It’ll never be a good time for you, will it? Not after the way I left.’ He dropped his head, looking embarrassed, then looked back up, a challenge in his eyes. ‘Are you back with Chris, then?’

‘No.’ She stared at him silently for a moment, taking in the dishevelled look and the shadows beneath his eyes. ‘How’s your daughter? And her mother?’ She tasted bitterness in that word, but couldn’t help it.

Theo shrugged. It was his turn to wrap his arms around his body. ‘That’s what I came to talk to you about.’ He looked away, beyond her, somewhere she didn’t know existed. ‘I’d prefer to do it face to face. Is there anywhere we can go?’ He brought his attention back to her and her heart stuttered a little.

‘Yes.’ She was surprised to find herself agreeing after all. ‘We could go to the Dragon if you wanted. There’s a beer garden. Well. Bob calls it the beer garden. It’s three picnic tables and one umbrella between them, on a patch of grass that used to have a shed on.’

Theo’s face broke into a grin and, reluctantly, Kate found herself grinning back. ‘I’ll just lock everything up and then we can go.’

‘I’ll be waiting,’ he said softly, and despite herself, she felt thrills of desire prickling up her spine.

* * *

They had managed to get a table in the beer garden and sat now with two glasses of home-made lemon and elderflower pressé between them. Bob’s micro-brewery, Kate told Theo, had recently expanded to make what Bob called ‘botanical drinks’. The story around the village was that Bob foraged the surrounding countryside for whatever he could use in them, for free, which was why, they joked, two drinks never tasted the same.

Whatever Bob put in them, the pressé was very good. But they weren’t here to talk about drinks, Theo acknowledged, and so he stared at his glass, trying to think of the best way to tell her.

Eventually, he decided that he just had to say it. ‘Okay.’ He looked up and saw her watching him. Her expression was still guarded, but at least she was here with him. ‘So, I have a daughter called Poppy, and she’s two. But you already know that. And, obviously, Poppy has a mother. She’s called Lori. We hadn’t been together very long, when she told me she was pregnant. It was a bit of a shock, but we decided to have the baby and try to make the best of it. We’d try, we said, to be a proper family, and see where it took us. Unfortunately, it didn’t quite work out how we’d expected; and

we don't live together anymore.'

'Oh!' Kate's shoulders suddenly seemed to relax. 'Why didn't you say—'

But Theo shook his head to stop her, and saw her tense up again. 'It's not that easy. You see, I didn't realise Lori had a drinking problem until Poppy was about a year old. By then, we'd gone our separate ways, and I used to take Poppy on a weekend. I'd have taken her more often, but my work kind of negated that. A baby's not the best thing to be carrying around when you're trying to shoe a horse.' He tried to smile, but couldn't. 'And then Lori told me Poppy wasn't mine anyway.' His brow furrowed, remembering. 'It's not easy to think that you've been bringing up another man's child as your own. It turned out she'd been seeing someone else all the time she'd been with me.' He pushed his fingers through his hair.

'That's when I threw myself into anything I could to make me feel better — to stop me feeling so numb. To fill the gap.' He shook his head. 'That's when I did the dive up in Scotland with Maeve. Part of me probably wanted to be thrashed to bits on the rocks, but it never happened. Anyway. The guy she'd been seeing started to suspect Poppy wasn't his either.' He paused. 'It was after Poppy's first birthday party that one of our mutual friends told me he thought Lori had a problem. And my reaction? So what? What the fuck has it to do with me?' He looked at Kate, gauging her reaction.

She just sat in silence, staring at him.

Then she managed to ask a question. 'What had she been doing? At Poppy's party?'

'What hadn't she been doing? I was told she was so drunk, she passed out in the bathroom and had to go and get her stomach pumped.' He pulled a face. 'The guy she was seeing, who was supposed to be Poppy's father, had to look after the baby, and that cramped his style. And then it was everything to do with me, because apparently,

at the party, she started arguing with this guy and taunting him, saying Poppy was mine anyway, you could tell just by looking at her. So.’ Theo twisted the glass around. ‘I suspect that’s when he decided Poppy wasn’t anything to do with him. And just to complicate matters, Poppy was starting to look a lot more like me, and a lot less like either of those two. But by then, I’d missed out on so much. Obviously, Poppy’s first birthday; and her first proper words, that sort of thing.’

‘Shit.’ Kate looked stunned.

‘Very shit. Anyway, to cut a long story short, I went back to her after that. I felt I owed it to Poppy to try and make it work, but it was awful. Beyond awful.’

‘Did you live with her again?’ Kate’s voice was quietly horrified.

Theo nodded. ‘Yes. Until I realised she didn’t want me around for me . She wanted an unpaid babysitter while she went out partying. So I walked away and she told me I’d never see Poppy again.

‘That’s when I came here, to try and sort things out in my head. The first time I saw you, I started believing there might be a life beyond Lori — when I bumped into you in the street, that very first day.’ He smiled down into his glass, remembering it. ‘So I came down again — and you went to break up with Chris, although I didn’t know that, of course.’ He looked up at her and she blushed, not meeting his eyes. ‘I’d been looking for you all day and was just about to give up when you came back. But my friend Jared messaged me. He told me Lori was up to her old tricks and she’d been spotted in a bar. And he thought that Poppy was in the house, on her own, because Lori was down the road, in a pub, with her tongue down some bastard’s throat, telling everyone I was back again and Poppy was with me. Jared found out that wasn’t true, so he called me.’

‘Dear God!’ Kate reached out and squeezed his hand.

‘Oh, that’s not all.’ He grinned at her, so brightly it was entirely fake. ‘It was all fine, because she had the baby monitor with her, so she’d know if there was a problem. Oh. Forgive me.’ He snapped his fingers, as if he’d forgotten something. ‘That’s right. It was all fine apart from the fact that the monitor didn’t reach further than 50feet and the pub was two blocks from her house, besides which she left it in the toilets of some bar, then she’d gone home with a guy she’d only just met.’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘But she did it all the time, and Poppy was no worse off, so what difference did it make?’

‘She said that?’ Kate’s cheeks were scarlet with rage.

‘She did.’

‘Well why is Poppy still with her? It’s neglect, pure and simple.’

‘I know. But she’s calling it out again, saying Poppy’s not mine and she doesn’t know who she belongs to, but I’ve demanded DNA tests this time. It’s awful and there’s a social worker involved, and Poppy’s being looked after elsewhere until they can establish parentage, which should be pretty conclusive with the tests. Lori doesn’t have any parents, and mine obviously don’t enter the equation because Lori’s still insisting she’s not mine. But if she does belong to me, I’ll be fighting for her until I get her.’

‘And if she’s not yours?’

‘If she’s not, then God knows what will happen.’

‘It’s rather . . . messy.’ Kate said. She sat back and drained her glass, as if she wished it was something a lot stronger.

‘I’d say “messy” was an understatement. So that’s where we are. I owed it to you to

tell you why I ran off that day. But! On a positive note,' he smiled, genuinely, this time, 'I hear they're having an event at the Hall for Bank Holiday.' He reached out and captured Kate's hand in his. He traced the shape of her fingers with his thumb. 'I'm going to head over to the Hall now. I've got an appointment to see the Earl.' He flicked a gaze up at her. 'We just need to finalise a couple of things I started with Cassie, but hopefully I should be around all of that weekend. I really hope you are too.'

'But what about Poppy?'

'She's safe for now. I just have to wait and see.'

'And Lori? What if she snaps her fingers and asks you to go back? What if guilt gets the better of you? What if Poppy is yours after all?'

Theo sighed and released her hands. He drained his own lemon and elderflower, and studied something in the bottom of the glass which may or may not have been a twig. 'I know I never want to be in a relationship with Lori again — but if I had to live in the same house as her for Poppy's sake, I'd do it.'

* * *

It certainly wasn't ideal. But it was an explanation, of sorts. Kate appreciated that, at least.

'Thank you for telling me,' she said. 'I'm not quite sure how I feel about any of that.'

'Me neither.' He looked at her. 'But I owed it to you to let you know. It doesn't alter how I feel about you though.' He dropped his gaze again. 'When I came here the first time, it was all clear in my head. The part of my life that had included Lori was over, I'd brought up another man's child and I would never see Poppy again. That was the

hardest thing about it.'

'But now there's every chance she is yours. And every chance Lori will be in your life forever.'

Theo pulled a face. 'If Poppy is mine, then they're a package. Sort of. Unless I can do anything about it.' He frowned and she wondered exactly what he meant.

'It's ironic, isn't it, though?' She pushed her glass away with a sigh. 'When we first met, you were free and I wasn't. Then I broke up with Chris and now you have other things piling up. You've sort of acquired a partner and child, which I didn't know at the beginning. And I got rid of my partner, because you walked into my life.'

'I have a child, maybe. But not a partner. It's been off more than it's been on.' He reached out and took her hand. 'It's all just a bit up in the air. Can you wait a while — bear with me — until I sort it all out?'

Kate looked into his eyes and saw the pain there. She couldn't imagine what it must feel like to have that sort of a relationship with a child. She wondered, briefly, if she should have to wait for long.

Then she found herself nodding. 'I can wait. Just a little while. You need to be clear in your own mind what you want and how you want to deal with it all. I don't want to complicate things, or influence you.' Carefully, she drew her hand away. 'And you shouldn't stay in Hartsford, because that will totally influence you.'

He smiled wryly. 'I love Hartsford. It hasn't taken me long to work that one out, but my life at the moment is in Derbyshire and I can't predict the future.'

The unsaid words were, and Poppy is in Derbyshire .

She pushed the chair away from the table and stood up. 'You might have responsibilities up there in the future. I understand that. You'll be here for the Country House Party, won't you? Let's just leave things as they are for now, and I'll wait until then.'

'Can I—'

'No.' She shook her head. 'No. Don't contact me, Theo. Please. It's just too difficult. I'll see you in a couple of weeks.'

And with that, she turned and walked away before she made an even bigger fool of herself than she felt she had done already.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Country House Party Weekend — Saturday

Kate tried the outfit on and twisted this way and that in the mirror. It could have looked very wrong. It could have swamped her. She could have had an accident, tripping over the hem, she considered, lifting her leg up and plucking off a loose thread. But it didn't.

Her years of ballet had paid off, and thankfully she didn't wobble as she stood there, flamingo-like. All that practice had toned her body up and this outfit cleverly cinched her in where she needed it, to give the impression she had an hourglass figure after all. Kate allowed herself a small smile at her reflection and smoothed the blouse down over her hips. It was a glorious morning and she was looking forward to working at the Hall today.

She almost didn't recognise the person who looked back at her — she looked like Rita Hayworth, thanks to Cassie. Kate had gone to Cassie's last night, so her friend could try to force her hair into soft, bendy curlers that looked more like pipe-cleaners. A bottle of wine later, it had been the most hysterical thing ever, but dear me, what a mess she looked when she had scurried home at eleven o'clock with a headscarf on.

'Here, wash your hair and I'll put these in for you,' Cassie had told Kate. 'You can sleep in them, and you'll have lovely waves tomorrow.' She produced a can of expensive, salon-quality hairspray as well. 'This'll keep the waves in, if nothing else will. Use it lavishly.'

Kate looked at the can and pulled a face. 'Don't you care about the ozone layer?'

‘I do, darling, but I care about authenticity for my weekend more.’

Kate had to admit that Cassie had done a good job. She looked quite 1930-ish, even if she did say so herself. All she had to do was ensure Jenna turned up at the museum and then she could head over to the Hall. And hopefully, if she was right and those stars were aligning, then Theo might be there and she might see a little bit more of him. If Lori was out of the picture, it would be very nice. And if she wasn't. Well. That was just utter crap. She had done her best to exist over the last weeks without any communication from Theo; and hideous though it had been, she knew it was for the best.

Kate had flirted with the idea of asking Cassie if it was all confirmed that Theo was coming, but then shied away from it — Cassie would assume she wanted him there for all the wrong reasons. Well, they were the right reasons, but there was no need for Cassie to properly guess how she felt. And then there was Lori. She sighed, going round in circles. And if only Jenna would hurry up. She was cutting it fine.

But speak of the devil, Kate heard the door go downstairs and hurried down. Jenna was glaring around the reception area as if it had done something wrong. She must have heard Kate clattering down and transferred her glare to her.

‘Thank you, Jenna, for coming in today. And on time too! Marvellous.’

‘Yeah, well,’ the dark sultry eyes darted around. ‘I think Theo’s heading this way this morning so I wanted to catch him.’

‘Theo?’ Kate almost choked on his name. So he was definitely here then.

Jenna squeezed in beside Kate. ‘Yes. The sexy blacksmith. He’s here for the duration. He is such fun.’

‘Sexy blacksmith?’ For a fleeting moment, Kate thought of Will, all shiny and glistening with sweat, half-naked over the furnace, then blushed. Then she thought again, properly, of Theo, and felt herself blush even more hotly.

‘Yes.’ Jenna looked annoyed. ‘Theo. Remember? He came to the wine bar, last night. He’s camping again.’ Jenna grinned, her eyes flicking to Kate. ‘And I’ve never done it in a tent, so—’

‘Stop!’ Kate did not want to hear about Jenna’s sex life and she certainly didn’t want to associate her sex life with Theo Kent. ‘He’s not a blacksmith. He’s a farrier. There’s a difference. He did say he was going to come down if he could.’

Jenna leaned against the chest of drawers behind her and looked bored. ‘Well he came. And I’m here now so you can go and do your shit up at the Hall.’

Kate ignored her and moved Jenna’s mug pointedly off the counter.

Had he been at the wine bar then? Had he been here, in Hartsford last night, and she hadn’t known?

But, she asked herself, why should she care? If he’d been to the wine bar with Jenna, and if he’d got back with Lori, if it was all resolved with his daughter, then he’d been cheating on Lori — and if that was the case, at least she, Kate, wasn’t the other woman this time. But dear God, it hurt like hell if that was the case.

‘Yes. I bumped into him last night.’ Jenna smirked and continued relentlessly, almost as if she was enjoying it. ‘He was in the wine bar, like I say.’ She inspected her fingernail. ‘He didn’t have much to drink. He said he had to be at work today, but we had a good time.’

‘Hmmm.’ Kate made a non-committal noise. She didn’t want to know if Jenna was

still a tent virgin or not. She headed outside, but Jenna, damn her, followed her.

‘He said he would pop down here first thing, to see if you had everything you needed for that bicycle. I don’t know what he thinks you’d need.’

‘Tools, I guess,’ Kate replied. She couldn’t help flicking back her newly-wavy hair. ‘But he needn’t worry. I’m sorted and I don’t need to see him.’

‘No, but I do. I have to give him his watch back.’

‘His watch ?’ It was the last thing Kate expected Jenna to possess. Had he left it on her dressing table? She felt her cheeks flush in embarrassment.

‘Yep. His watch.’ Jenna eventually sauntered off, back towards the first cottage and disappeared into the building, leaving Kate alone with the ducks.

Lucifer, the biggest, angriest, duck growled and Kate nodded. ‘I agree,’ she told him.

She decided not to hang around and watch Jenna drape herself all over Theo, but instead head straight to the barn and pull the bicycle out. She’d given it a final polish before she took her curlers out, her shadow medusa-like in the early-morning sun as the curlers stuck out at all angles. She had a freezer full of ice-cream which needed to go in her basket and then she’d cycle up to the Hall.

She was wheeling the bicycle out, inwardly congratulating herself on how quiet the newly-oiled chain was, when a new shadow fell across her.

‘Nice work,’ said Theo. ‘I suppose you don’t need these, then?’ Kate turned and looked up to see him wielding a bicycle pump and a small tool box. ‘Random stuff like that breeds in my van.’ He frowned, looking down at the items in his hands. ‘I’m not exactly sure where or when I acquired the pump, but hey. It’s yours if you need it.

I wasn't sure what you had or what you might want.'

'If I had still been needing that sort of thing now, I would be quite worried and I wouldn't be heading up to the Hall today on the bicycle, would I?' Kate couldn't help it, her heart slammed into her chest at the sight of him.

'Fair point.' Theo dropped his hands. 'It was just an excuse anyway.' He shrugged. 'I wanted to see what you looked like all dressed up. The tools were incidental. You do look great, by the way. I'm definitely working at the Hall as well. I wasn't sure, right up until the last minute if I could, because of Poppy, but Alex was great and—'

'Thanks.' Kate cut him off. She didn't want to hear that Lori was back on the scene. 'I appreciate the thought about the tools. But Jenna's waiting for you in reception. Something about a watch?'

'Ah! Of course. That's where I left it. Bloody insect bites. One got me right on the wrist. I had to take my watch off. One of the curses of sleeping out in the countryside.'

'Citronella candles.' Kate straightened up the bicycle and pushed it towards the door to her flat. Theo walked alongside her. 'They help. Also, they make for romantic lighting when one is trying to impress the locals.'

'It wasn't romantic at all,' said Theo with a laugh. 'I saw Jenna and her friends walk in and I couldn't get out of there fast enough. That's why I forgot my watch. I made an excuse and told her I wanted to turn in early.' He paused. 'I gave you a knock on the door, before I went to the wine bar, but there was no answer. Sorry.' He coloured. 'Didn't quite know what my reception would be anyway. I would have preferred to go somewhere with you. Even if it was just the Dragon for some twiggy ale.' He looked down. 'And then when I thought about it afterwards, it seemed less risky to see you in broad daylight. I don't quite know what I would have done if you'd

answered.’ He looked up and their eyes locked. ‘I know what I would have liked, but I’m not sure you would have felt the same right now.’

Kate caught her breath. ‘Oh! I was at Cassie’s.’ She touched her hair. ‘Doing this.’

‘Well, you look amazing.’ He smiled and his eyes changed from burning desire to warm humour. ‘Like one of those poodle things at Crufts. As I say, I’m heading over to the Hall now, but I’ll just pop in and get the watch.’ He nodded over to the car park. His black and silver van was there. ‘I’ll have to drive over though, so I’ve got everything I need. I’d offer you a lift, but it looks like you’ve got your own transport.’

‘Unless you tied a rope on and towed me along; but yes, I can make my own way there, thanks.’

‘We’d make an interesting spectacle, I think, if I dragged you along on a rope. Cassie said something about a back road in?’

‘Yes. You’ll have to head over to the Dragon and it’s along from there. Turn left, then immediately on your right, there’s a single-track road. It runs parallel with the stream, and if you follow that around, all the way, you’ll come to the back gates. It’s quite close to the Spa — which is technically the pool area — and that’s where I’ll be stationed.’

‘Are you heading that way too?’ Theo asked. They had reached the reception building.

‘It seems more sensible to go that way.’ Kate propped the bicycle up and headed into the building. ‘I need to get my ice-cream. I’ll just see you up there, I guess—’

‘Theo!’ Jenna appeared like Morgana leFay out of the darkness and flung her arms

around him. ‘Just the person. Here — this is for you.’

Kate left them to it. She could sense the flirtatiousness creeping into Jenna’s voice and she didn’t want to hear it.

It was odd. She spoke like that to Tom and she had even spoken to Chris that way, and it had never bothered her. But with Theo — it bothered her very much. Logically speaking, it shouldn’t bother her whatsoever. She and Theo weren’t anything more than a couple of people who’d met and had a few things in common. Just — friends. Sort of. They weren’t a couple. They weren’t an ‘item’. He was practically married with a child, if you wanted to be blunt about it. But she realised, with a sense of disbelief, that she actually felt a little jealous of what Jenna might or might not be inferring with her flirtatiousness. More jealous than she felt about his on-off thing with Lori.

Perhaps it was “off”?

She could only hope.

Kate made a determined effort, and put the lid firmly back on that thought; then she walked away before she could add any fuel to Jenna’s fire. And before she could see Theo igniting with it, regardless.

* * *

Jenna was determined to hang onto him, and Theo tried to shake her gently but firmly off. She clung on like a limpet, chattering on about what he’d missed last night. She seemingly wasn’t going to let go of him anytime soon, and it took a good bit of manoeuvring to eventually disentangle himself, his temper rising exponentially. God, she’d done it in front of Kate. What if she got the wrong idea?

‘So we’ll be there tonight if you want to join us. She’s got me on lockdown though — a curfew and everything,’ Jenna was saying. She nodded towards the reception desk and rolled her eyes. ‘What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her though.’ She smiled, cat-like at the thought.

‘She’ll know,’ Theo said. ‘Trust me.’

‘Hmm.’ Jenna finally let go and dropped her arms to her sides.

Too bloody late now!

Almost immediately, one hand came back up and she started twiddling with a lock of dark hair and looking at the staircase. ‘She’s going to be away all day. I didn’t get an outfit to wear. I asked her if I could have one, and she said the best thing we could hope for here was a village wench or a horrible old dowdy servant’s uniform.’

‘I can see her point. This museum is set in a very different era to the Country House Party weekend. If you were dressed as a 1930s film star, it would just look odd.’

‘Yeah,’ she said, but Theo wasn’t quite sure she got it. ‘Oh, well. So, maybe I’ll see you later?’

‘Maybe. And thanks for this.’ Theo held the watch up before he strapped it onto his wrist. He headed back out of the room, as fast as he dared. It was bright outside and it took his eyes a little while to adjust. He stood blinking and heard the slam of the back door.

Kate scurried around the side of the building and pulled up short. ‘Oh. I thought you’d still be inside. In Jenna’s web. Once she traps a man, she rarely lets them leave alive, you know. Like a Black Widow spider.’ She had an ice-box balanced in her arms.

‘Nope, I escaped. I just needed my watch back. I’ve no desire to be eaten alive by her, thank you very much. Here, let me get that lid for you.’ Theo opened the box on the front of the bicycle and Kate hefted the ice-box inside. It fitted neatly and she stood back, surveying it.

‘That’s me sorted, and I’ve got some extra up at the Hall if I need it. I’ve got the cash box in the basket and,’ she patted her pocket, ‘my mobile. For emergencies.’ She cast a glance at the museum and Theo knew she was thinking of Jenna being in charge all day long.

‘It’ll be fine.’ He watched her climb onto the bicycle and get her balance. ‘Sure you don’t need a tow?’

‘Positive.’ She pushed off, very carefully. The trouser legs flapped a little, but thanks to a weird bow-legged pedalling movement, she wobbled away, her knees stuck out practically at right angles.

‘Oh, and I know you’ll get there first,’ she called back over her shoulder. ‘There’s no need for you to remind me.’

‘Spoilsport!’ he shouted with a laugh, and watched her disappear behind the buildings.

* * *

Despite Kate’s warning, Theo Kent trailed her along the track, his music playing loudly and his arm dangling out of the window. He also tried to sustain a nonsensical conversation, which Kate was certain was designed purely to annoy her.

She was annoyed enough as it was, because her cycling work-around was no longer working and she was getting very irritated with the fact those stupid trousers kept

getting tangled in the bloody spokes.

Eventually, Kate stopped and dismounted. 'Just drive on, will you?' she shouted at him crossly. 'I'm pushing it from here.'

He stopped the van just in front of her and opened the door. 'Swap places,' he said. 'You drive this; I'll take your bicycle in.'

Kate halted and stared at him. 'Excuse me? You want to ride my bicycle?'

'You want to drive my van?'

She lowered her eyes. 'Well I suppose yes, considering you've just suggested it.'

'Exactly. Come on — we don't want to be late.'

She hesitated another moment or two and looked at the road stretching ahead of her. A breeze blew up from the stream. It rustled the long grass and flapped her trouser legs against her calves, reminding her how impractical the suit was for pedalling.

'Okay.' Kate relinquished the bicycle. 'Only please don't be angry if I accidentally mow LadyCassandra Aldrich down whilst I'm driving. I seriously need to kill her for making me wear this outfit.'

Theo laughed. He took hold of the handlebars and mounted the bicycle. 'The keys are in the ignition.' He pushed off. 'Race you!' And he was off.

Kate climbed into the cab of the van and adjusted the seat; he was, after all, quite a bit taller than her. She could see he also had a penchant for chocolate bars, crisps and carrots. Okay, the carrots may have been for the horses, but there was definitely a massive netted bag three quarters full in the passenger foot well, with a hole ripped in

the top of it and a handful of stray, bright orange vegetables on the passenger seat. The crisp packets and chocolate, however, were most probably Theo's. Cheese and onion flavour crisps, she noted with approval, and a wide and varied selection of chocolate bars. Excellent.

She switched the engine on and crunched the vehicle into first gear. She kangaroo-hopped along the lane until she got the hang of the clutch, then she was off after him. He was a little way in front, and Kate didn't know which was the best sight — her bright and shiny ice-cream bicycle, or Theo Kent's strong, tanned legs pumping away at the pedals as he reached a small incline. Regardless, she hung back and kept the van in a low gear so she could take it all in at her leisure.

She couldn't resist it though. As soon as they got close enough to the gates of the Hall, she accelerated smoothly and overtook him. Kate looked in the wing-mirror and saw him grinning as he bumped along the final couple of ruts and followed her into the estate grounds.

Cassie was already there, hopping from foot to foot and chewing her fingernails. She looked stunning, all dressed in black and silver and looking every inch the Flapper. It was jolly good the Between the Wars era the weekend encompassed had incorporated the Roaring Twenties. Cassie had fallen in love with that style way back when she was still in the planning stages.

Cassie hurried over to the van. 'Theo, I'm going to need you to — Kate!' Her eyes widened as Kate climbed out of the van and grinned at her.

'I'm being a farrier today,' she told her. 'I changed my mind.'

It took a second or two for Cassie to process that information, then her face cleared and she grinned back, thumping Kate on the arm with her fist. It hurt. Cassie had very bony fists.

‘Ouch!’ Kate frowned as she rubbed at the patch Cassie had injured.

‘Kate!’ Cassie didn’t apologise. ‘You’re playing games with me. Where’s — oh! There he is!’ She looked over Kate’s shoulder and waved at, Kate presumed, Theo. She hadn’t heard the bicycle pull up. She was pleased with how nicely the chain was running. It clearly didn’t squeak.

‘Yes.’ She turned to face him and watched him dismount. ‘We swapped. I couldn’t cycle far in these. Now, if you tell me where you want me, I’ll set up.’

‘Just by the pool, sweetheart, like we said,’ replied Cassie. ‘And you, Theo, I need you at the stables. Hughie is very excited.’

‘Good old Hughie.’ Theo smiled.

‘We’ve got the Gypsy Caravan ready. We need to bring Hughie down and get him attached to it and—’

‘Leave it with me.’ Theo interrupted Cassie smoothly; her voice was beginning to rise. ‘I’ll head up there now, and deal with Hughie. Is the caravan in its usual spot?’

Kate looked sidelong at Theo. ‘How do you know where its usual spot is?’

‘Research,’ he said with a grin and a wink. ‘Okay. I’ll catch you both later. I might come down for an ice-cream if it gets hot.’

‘See you later!’ They stood back and watched as he drove the van past them and up towards the stable block. ‘He’s so nice,’ said Cassie. ‘Fancy letting you drive his van.’

‘Aidan let you drive his motorcycle.’

‘Exactly.’ Cassie winked. ‘It’s a good sign.’

Kate took hold of the bicycle. ‘I’m off to set up.’ And because she could and because her hair still looked like Rita Hayworth’s, she shook her head back, enjoying the feel of the curls bouncing against her shoulders, dismissing LadyCassandra Aldrich.

‘Okay darling.’ Cassie sounded amused. ‘Remember to save an ice-cream for Theo.’

And with that, she practically skipped off to her next task.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Once Kate got settled, it was almost time for opening. She really didn't expect many people to come to the Spa area before mid-morning, but she was surprised. It seemed some were early starters and wanted to get into that pool before anyone else.

Cassie's Aidan had done a cracking job of restoring it and there were a couple of lifeguards installed as well. It was only a matter of time before the place was bouncing with guests. Kate was nicely sheltered by a canopy and she did a steady trade all morning. There really was no better place than Suffolk in the sunshine. It must have been close to eighty degrees by lunchtime and there were plenty of parents slapping sunscreen on their children.

It was almost two o'clock when her tummy rumbled and she realised she'd had nothing to eat since breakfast. She drained the last of her bottled water and decided she needed feeding.

Kate radioed Cassie and she answered on a crackle. 'Hey Kate! How's it going?'

'Great. I'm having a break soon — just so you know.'

'No problem. I'll have Margaret bring the Gypsy Caravan down to the Spa so she can take over. Is it still as busy?'

She looked out at the heads in the pool and the people on the tennis courts. There was a steady stream of guests in and out of the squash courts too and Kate smiled. 'It's pretty busy. You done well, girlfriend.'

Cassie laughed down the line. 'It could have gone horribly wrong if it had rained.'

‘Yes, but it hasn’t rained. Just enjoy it.’

‘I think it’s forecast for tonight,’ replied Cassie worriedly. Kate could imagine her perfect brow creasing in a frown.

‘That’s tonight. It’ll be great if it does. It’ll clear the air and freshen everything up for tomorrow.’

‘You’re right.’ The smile was back in Cassie’s voice.

‘Okay, I’ll let you contact Margaret and when she comes here, I’ll head off.’

She was just putting the walkie-talkie away, when a young woman with a mop of glorious, curly blonde hair stopped by the ice-cream bicycle. She seemed quite distracted, looking back the way she’d come to the Faerie Bridge and searching the landscaped gardens for something, a frown on her pretty face.

Then she surprised Kate by asking her a question: ‘Can you tell me if this place is haunted?’

Kate blinked and then smiled. ‘Oh, of course! Yes, it’s got its stories. There’s a highwayman supposed to ride through the woods, and the spirit of one of the little girls from the eighteenth century passed through not so long ago. And the nurseries apparently have a few ghosts as well. The present Countess swears she’s seen them all apart from the highwayman; we think he’s more like an urban myth though.’ Elodie did indeed swear that she’d seen all the others. But then Elodie saw ghosts all the time. They all knew that.

The girl stared with round, eager eyes. ‘Seriously?’

‘Seriously.’

‘What about you? Have you seen anything?’

‘I don’t know,’ Kate said, honestly. What could she do? Tell her she’d seen the shades of Cat and Edward and Millie, all enjoying themselves at a ball, for instance? She didn’t think she’d seen ghosts, exactly. She would say, if she was really really pressed, that she had experienced an evening in their company. And that she knew rather a lot about Cat’s love life, which still made her blush, as it meant Theo was uppermost in her mind, every time she even considered it. But the people she had seen and interacted with had been as real as the visitors here today.

The girl looked around again and sighed happily. ‘I think I saw a ghost earlier, you know. She was so pretty. I’m hoping to find a picture of her in the house when I go inside.’

Kate’s stomach knotted. ‘What did she look like?’ If she had come back to Kate and said “you” she thought she might very well have freaked and run away, wide-legged trousers notwithstanding.

The girl turned back to Kate. ‘She had sort of light reddish hair.’

‘Strawberry blonde?’ she asked carefully.

‘That’s it. Lighter than yours. And she had dimples, because she smiled. And she was wearing a gorgeous dress. Like a really bright blue. She was over that side of the gardens, by that lovely bridge. She just appeared and disappeared. I thought it was one of the staff, but then she was gone so quickly, I wondered if I should ask you.’

Kate felt a little faint. ‘Hmm. It sounds like Lady Amelia,’ she said, trying to sound authoritative. But it did sound just like Millie, in her peacock blue ballgown.

‘What a lovely name! So are there any pictures of her?’

Kate couldn't answer her. She didn't know.

She shook her head. 'If there are any, Cassie might know. I'll radio through to her. She's around, she should be able to tell us, if you can hang on a minute?'

The girl nodded and Kate switched the walkie-talkie on again. 'Cassie, I've got a lady here asking a question, and I thought you might know the answer.'

Cassie sounded amused. 'I might know what?'

'If there are any pictures of Lady Amelia around?'

'Amelia?' There was a crackly sort of silence for a moment. 'Oh! Amelia. As in Millie. From the eighteen-hundreds.'

Kate's stomach did that knot again. 'That's her.' No need to check that she existed then.

'Sure,' said Cassie. 'Can the lady hear me if I speak up loud enough?'

Kate raised her eyebrows and the girl nodded.

'Yes, she can hear you.' Kate moved the walkie-talkie between them. 'Fire away.'

'Okay. If you go through to the main dining room, there's a miniature of her on the wall by the fireplace. The girl in the blue dress. You'd never see her if you weren't looking for her.'

The blonde girl looked at Kate and smiled gratefully, then leaned over and shouted into the radio. 'Thank you, thanks so much!'

‘You’re welcome!’ came Cassie’s voice.

‘Thanks Cass.’ Kate switched off the radio and smiled at the girl, her own heart racing as she wondered how soon she would be able to escape into the Hall to look for the picture herself.

‘Good luck!’ she told the girl.

‘Thank you! I’m so excited! I’ll have to eat this really fast now!’ She held the ice-cream up and grinned, then hurried away.

Kate couldn’t wait to get into the Hall and find the portrait — but unfortunately she had an event to deal with first; which might take a bit longer than simply scoffing an ice-cream.

Soon after that, Kate heard the clip-clop of hooves and saw Hughie approaching as he came around the corner. The children in the pool stopped splashing and screamed with delight — Horace, Margaret’s spaniel and the ‘official’ Hartsford estate dog, was balanced on Hughie’s back, looking for all the world as if he belonged there.

Kate couldn’t help laughing. Margaret drew the caravan up to the poolside and Kate waved at her.

‘Can I interest you in a sandwich?’ she shouted. ‘I don’t have many left, but you’re welcome to cheese, cheese or tuna.’

‘I’ll have cheese, please!’ Kate dismounted and walked over to the caravan. Margaret looked slightly flustered, and a little red in the face, but she produced a sandwich, along with a bottle of cloudy lemonade and a packet of crisps. ‘You might as well take these as well, just in case the cheese is a bit warm.’ Margaret frowned and looked up as three families headed towards her, rummaging for purses and wallets.

‘Oh dear, I hope they don’t mind cheese either!’

‘It’ll be fine,’ Kate said. ‘Have you got enough ice-lollies and choc bars in your freezer? Or do you want my ice-box until I come back?’

‘No, sweetheart, I’m fine,’ she said with a smile. ‘You get yourself off for a break.’

‘You know, I think I’ll push the bicycle into a corner on my way, instead of leaving it here. Otherwise you’ll be getting people asking for ices anyway.’

‘Good idea. Take your time. It’s quieter towards the Faerie Bridge. I suggest you go and hide behind a tree over that way.’

‘Good plan.’ Kate collected her lunch and tucked it into the basket. Her mobile was in there as well and she checked it quickly. Tom had sent a message asking how the day was going and she smiled, pleased he’d remembered. Kate texted her brother back, took hold of the handlebars and pushed the bicycle towards the Faerie Bridge, quietly hoping that if Millie had indeed been around, she might take the time to say “Hello” to Kate as well.

Kate only got stopped three times on the way for ice-creams. By the time she reached the trees near the Faerie Bridge she was actually quite relieved to push the bicycle into the shade and hide it with some well-placed branches. It was warm amongst the trees and the smell of the resin and earth was a welcome change to the sun-screen and chlorine over at the pool. Kate found a tree trunk and perched on it, unwrapping her sandwich and intending to enjoy her break.

Somewhere, across the estate, a clock chimed two. It might have been the church clock, or it might have been the bell-tower clock. But regardless of which one it was, Kate started to experience that woozy, otherworldly feeling and she braced herself for whatever might come next. Millie wasn’t going to see her in Kate’s own time, at any

rate — but it seemed she might be about to see a glimpse of Cat's life. She squashed down that little bit of panic she felt every time this happened and took a deep breath. She just had to go with it — she just had to.

* * *

She was holding her train up, making her way very slowly towards the Faerie Bridge. She'd managed to sneak away from everyone and abandoned the Bath chair somewhere just on the edge of the lawns, beneath a young sapling. She'd escaped whilst everyone was playing tennis.

She found it incredibly boring just to sit and watch and had wheeled herself off under some pretext. She let the train drop, and chanced a look at the woods on the other side of the river. There were ghost stories aplenty at Hartsford Hall, not least the idea of the phantom highwayman who rode on moonlit nights through those very woods.

That story was still, as Kate knew, alive and well even in the twenty-first century. In fact, the whole Hall had this timeless quality about it. It made you think it was watching you, along with its former inhabitants — and you would possibly end up as some stone-tape theory yourself, in some unknown future. The lives and loves of the Aldrichs and everyone who had come before them were imprinted in those old walls. Was it really surprising that on days like this, when the stars were seemingly aligned and the mood was right, people who loved the Hall would slip back and visit those old lives — and the former residents would share some of their secrets?

Kate was scaring herself now, just thinking about that. Which was ridiculous, because she was obviously part of the stories, in some way or another; and all the Hall was doing was letting her replay it, safely. Or at least she hoped it was safely. Cassie had always believed that Hartsford drew people back to it — the people it loved, anyway. But Kate was more pragmatic than Cassie. Or at least she was, generally.

She didn't feel pragmatic today. There were shadows in the woods this afternoon, something dark flitting through the trees. Kate shuddered and turned away, focussing instead on the pretty stonework of the Faerie Bridge, steep and mossy and almost a semi-circle, straddling the river from the Hall grounds to the wilder estate land beyond.

A family of swans were sailing regally along, their five cygnets sandwiched between them. Willow trees dipped into the river along its length and it was incredibly beautiful and tranquil. Unfortunately, her limp was annoying her. There was no better place to stop than here, really, so she hitched up her skirts and perched on a tree stump. She turned her face to the Hall and the windows winked at her in the summer afternoon light. She wondered exactly how long she would have to stay there before something happened. Because something was going to happen, for sure. She couldn't explain it, but there was a certain electricity in the air — a sort of buzz and a sense of hope. It was so peaceful though. She'd never been alone in these little scenarios, so she determined to relax and just enjoy the sound of the water rushing by until whatever was going to happen revealed itself.

Kate didn't have to wait too long. Sailing silently beneath the bridge, on the other side of the river, was a small, paper boat, bouncing gently on the current. She stood up, steadying herself on the tree-trunk. She moved across to the water and watched the little boat as it sailed past.

She looked up. A figure stood at the other side of the bridge. It was a man — she could tell that because of his height and his build. And what was more, the height and build looked extremely familiar. Her suspicions were confirmed when the man raised an arm in acknowledgement.

'Will!' The name came out as little more than a whisper. She raised her arm and waved back; then felt a huge smile begin to spread across her face. 'Will!' That time, she shouted his name and, hoisting up the annoying train again, hurried as best she

could to the Faerie Bridge. By the time she was at the foot of it, Will had partially crossed it and was standing at the apex waiting for her, Hector emerging from behind him, wagging his tail furiously.

‘How did you know I’d be here?’

‘I came along the path by the river and I saw your chair,’ he said with an answering smile. ‘I could hear the shouts from the tennis court, and I knew you wouldn’t be amongst that. So I guessed. Then I saw you here.’

She brought herself up short in front of him, and stared up into those dark eyes. She was longing to reach out and touch him, just to make sure he was real.

‘Cat, my love.’ Will was suddenly serious. He looked down and took her hands in his. He pulled her towards him so they were barely inches apart. ‘I was taking a shortcut to the farm, and I wanted to try and catch you.’ His voice was suddenly husky and her heart began to flip-flop. She hoped what she anticipated was going to come next. His lips looked extremely kissable. Kate focused on them to catch her breath before she fell any further into his eyes.

She parted her lips and leaned in a little, just so they were closer. But then he threw her with his next words.

‘I had a letter for you.’ His eyes searched her face and she closed her lips. This didn’t sound good. ‘But it’s better that I can tell you in person, I think.’

‘The boat. Is that the letter?’

‘It is. I thought it might get your attention.’

‘Oh.’ Over Will’s shoulder, the little boat drifted off around a corner and lost itself in

some reeds. Kate looked back at Will and their eyes met. Something shifted within her — she felt a little dizzy and a little breathless, and all she was conscious of was Will standing so very close to her, still holding her hand; and Hector, nuzzling at her ankles, shoring her up.

Eventually, Kate managed to stutter some words out. ‘What — what is it you need to tell me?’ It was unsettling being this close to Will, because in Kate’s mind, it was like being this close to Theo.

‘I want to see you in my mind for always and remember you just as you are this evening, just like this. Just like my Cat.’

Will’s fingers touched her face and he traced the outline of her cheek from top to bottom. She literally felt her knees buckle and she doubted it had much to do with the ice-skating incident. It was, more than likely, the sheer intensity of being this close to the man she’d been secretly in love with for months.

‘Kiss me, Will. I don’t know what you have to tell me, but kiss me first.’

Will didn’t need telling twice. He dropped his hand from the side of her face and cupped her chin. She caught her breath and he took hold of her around the waist and pulled her even closer to him. Kate didn’t resist. She fitted perfectly within his arms, and she relaxed against him, closing her eyes.

Eventually, they moved apart, her lips sweet and bruised.

‘Oh, my,’ she managed, slightly dazed.

He drew her closer still, and she could feel the smile on his mouth as he kissed her a second time, more slowly and more sensually than before.

‘Cat. My beloved Cat. I think I’ve always loved you. From the first moment I saw you up at the Hall. The first time I came up to tend to the horses. You were sitting outside, watching me and trying to give me advice. Do you remember?’

She nodded. She did. She’d been fascinated by his work, the way he talked to the horses, soothing them as he ran his strong, capable hands up and down their legs.

‘You were the new blacksmith. I had to make sure you would treat the horses properly,’ she whispered. The memories were flooding back, so strongly and so completely she could hardly believe she’d lived any other life; any life that he hadn’t been part of.

‘I fell for you right then,’ he told her, ‘but I knew that the way things were, I couldn’t do anything about it. I still can’t — not with me still working for the estate and you being part of the family. So I’m leaving, Cat. I’m going to find work elsewhere and then, when I’ve made enough to buy us a home and keep you like a lady, I’ll come back. I can book a passage from Felixstowe and from there I can travel through Europe. I have good friends over the sea and they promise me there is money to be made and they can help set me up in business.’ He touched his hand to her face. ‘Can you wait for me?’

‘Of course,’ she said, a little stunned. ‘I have no plans to go anywhere. You do know we aren’t important members of the family, though, don’t you?’

‘You’re important enough,’ he said with a laugh. ‘And too good for me, a mere blacksmith. Which is why I have to do this.’ He picked up her hand and kissed it briefly. ‘I’ll come back and claim you, I swear. No matter how long it takes. You’re here.’ He touched his heart. ‘And, God willing, you’ll always be mine.’ He transferred the kiss to his lips, then he touched her face and smiled. ‘I’m grateful you had the accident, you know. It gave me the chance I’d longed for. When I held you, that first time and carried you back to my cottage, I almost believed we were wed and

I was carrying you across the threshold.’ He shook his head, reddening slightly. ‘I know. I’m a dreamer, aren’t I?’

‘I like your dreams. I liked being in your cottage. Why do you think I keep searching for you and visiting you? You don’t have to do this, you know. I’d move into the cottage tomorrow.’

‘Oh, how I wish that was possible.’ He smiled. ‘But for my own self-respect, I have to go. And in answer to your question, I leave next week. It’ll be an adventure, my love.’

Kate felt a twenty-first century warning at that word — damn Cassie and her opinions. Kate didn’t feel adventurous at all.

She crushed the thought. ‘So we still have some time together,’ she said instead.

‘We do. But now, I’m afraid I have to go. I need to see to the horses on the farm before nightfall. I am glad I saw you, Cat.’

‘And I you.’

‘One more thing,’ he said with a hint of mischief in those eyes. He scooped her up in his arms and strode across the bridge. ‘After you promise to look after Hector for me, I’m going to take you back to that chair and you’re going to behave. You’re going to sit in it and let your leg heal, and then when I come back, I’m going to walk you down that aisle and you’re going to dance back up it.’

As he lifted her, Kate caught a glance of the reeds where the paper boat was trapped, and her eyes widened as the boat collapsed in on itself and sank, sodden by the water, lost for all time. For a crazy moment, she wanted Will to take her over there, so she could fish it out and dry it off. She just wanted something tangible remaining of him,

if he was leaving her like this.

‘Your boat—’

‘It was never meant to be seaworthy. Look, we’re here anyway.’ He settled her into that awful chair. ‘I’ll take you so far up the pathway,’ he said, smoothing her skirt down gently where the frills had ruffled up, ‘then leave you and your family to enjoy yourselves.’

Far in the distance, the bells in the church began to strike three. At that moment, Kate hated them. She hated the sound of them and she hated what would happen next. She wanted to stay there, crippled or not, safely in Will’s heart and loved by the Hall.

‘No,’ she whispered. She reached for his hand, desperately entwining her fingers in his. ‘Please don’t. I want to stay here, with you . . .’

* * *

It was done. It was the hardest thing Will had ever had to do in his life — walk away from her and try to make a life elsewhere, even if it was just for a little while. Just until he could come back to Hartsford and claim her. And he’d do that. He swore it to the river and to the woods and to the Hall, standing guard over it all; and he swore it to her. No matter how long it would take him, he would come back for her.

It was a promise nothing could break.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

By the time the bells had stopped, Kate was back on the fallen tree trunk, her ice-cream bicycle hidden beneath the very tree that her Bath chair had been next to. She felt bereft. She wanted to be back there, back with Will.

Kate squeezed her eyes shut, trying to magic him into the future, trying to recapture that moment. A shadow fell over her — the pinkish light behind her lids darkened and her heart skipped a beat. He was here! He was—

She opened her eyes.

And staring at her, extremely curiously, was Theo Kent.

* * *

‘Aren’t you supposed to be by the pool?’ Theo asked Kate. She was sitting on a tree trunk, a half-eaten sandwich in her hand, her blue eyes looking gloriously heavy-lidded and sleepy. ‘May I?’ He indicated the trunk and she stared at him for a moment, before obligingly bunking along.

She rested the sandwich on her knee; her hand was shaking a little bit and she looked pale, despite the sunshine. ‘I’m having a break,’ she said. ‘It’s pretty full on at the Spa.’

That explained why she looked so ghastly, then. Too busy, no food and probably overheating to boot. ‘That’s all good for Cassie.’ Theo stretched his legs out in front of him. ‘But are you okay? Where’s your bicycle?’

‘I’m fine. Just tired. My bike is under the trees. I hid it.’

He laughed. ‘I don’t blame you.’

‘Margaret’s got the Gypsy Caravan over at the Spa now. Hector’s on Hughie’s back. No — I mean Horace. Horace is on Hughie’s back.’

‘Hector, Horace. Both very good dog names. Hector’s the dog from the museum cottage, isn’t he?’

Kate nodded. ‘Horace would never forgive me if I called him Hector, I suspect.’ She tore the crust off her sandwich, shredding the bread into pieces and tossing the bits away.

‘Your vampiric ducks have you well-trained.’

‘Yes. Those bits are for any of their relatives that happen to float along the river.’

‘I’m sure they’ll appreciate it. Horace looks pretty good, though, doesn’t he?’

‘He does.’ Kate wiped the crumbs off her knees and stared out at the bridge. ‘Is everything going well for you today?’

‘Yes. I’m going to check on Hughie now. I’ve been in the carriage house and I think we could rig one of the old landaus up for him at some point.’ Theo shrugged. ‘I’ll have to run it by Alex or Cassie, but I think it might be a good idea. They could do carriage rides. They could even do carriage rides from here to your museum.’

That got her attention; she looked at him quickly, a spark of interest in her eyes. ‘I like it. Very much.’

Theo grinned down at her. 'There are a few things I've been thinking about these last couple of days,' he told her.

Kate nodded. 'Me too.' Her gaze drifted across the river again. She had gone somewhere Theo couldn't reach her; but he was intrigued enough to keep trying.

'Do you think the ice-cream bicycle will catch on?' he asked.

'If it does they'll have to get someone else to ride it. I can't be in two places at once. At least, I don't think I can. I might be able to. Who knows? Oh. What do you think of the Hall?' she asked, suddenly turning and facing him square on. 'If you had to describe it in a couple of sentences, what would you say?'

'I don't know.' Theo shrugged and looked around him. The river was lit by speckles of sunlight that dappled through the leaves, the Faerie Bridge standing squat and well-loved with one foot, it seemed, in the wilderness and one foot in the formal gardens. 'It's a very comfortable place,' he said thoughtfully. 'I feel safe here and I think it'll draw people back time and time again. I feel like I've been completely accepted by it and it's going to be an absolute horror to leave and go back to the real world after this weekend. Actually, I think that might be it. The Hall sort of exists in a different world, but it's one where I feel I could belong, if I was given the chance.' He blinked, looking around again. 'Well now. That was rather metaphysical, wasn't it?'

'Hmm. Metaphysical, as in things that are thought to exist but that cannot be seen. It's almost a perfect description of this place. Interesting.' Kate stood up and put her hands on her hips. She cast a glance at him and half-smiled. Her cheeks coloured pink for a moment, then she looked around her. 'I have to go back now. They'll be needing ice-cream.'

Theo stood up as well. 'I'm heading that way too, remember. I need to see Hughie. I

wasn't happy with his back shoe when I saw him earlier. He was throwing his hoof a little. Just need to make sure it's okay.' He produced a hammer out of his pocket. 'I could always knock the nail in a little more securely if I have to. He'll stand nicely for it, I know he will.'

'Oh, yes,' she said with that faint smile again. 'The horse whisperer strikes again.'

* * *

Kate turned and poked around in the undergrowth, freeing the bicycle. She pulled a twig off the wicker basket and dragged the bike backwards out of the little copse, propping it up against the tree trunk while she checked the contents of the basket.

Then, before she had time to close the lid, Theo had scooped her up in his arms and she was cradled there, the wide legs of her trousers trailing down as she cried out, half-laughing and half-shocked.

'Come on,' he said, with a grin. 'I'll pop you on the front and give you a lift — it looks like you need one. I'll pedal like mad to get us there! No time to waste.'

He made as if to drop her on the front, and she clung on around his neck, fully laughing now. 'Put me down! You're not supposed to manhandle the ice-cream lady!'

'But if it's the only way to get a free ice-cream, I'll do whatever it takes.'

She shook her head, the curls bobbing around, and clung more tightly. It was such a strange feeling — he was holding her as securely and as tenderly as Will had held Cat in that very same spot—

She looked at him, her lips parted, and saw the light and laughter in his eyes; was

terribly aware of the firm muscles she snuggled against — couldn't stop thinking about what it would be like to snuggle against him properly, on a bed, after they'd . . . no! What about Lori? And Poppy? And Jenna, come to think of it? On his sodding airbed. In his tent.

'Theo — put me down. Please!' She could feel her cheeks burning, and if she stayed there too much longer, she'd become even more aware of how close her face was to his, and how good he smelled — sun tan lotion and aftershave and hay-bales and sunshine.

'What if I don't want to?' His eyes were serious now, dark and blazing with something she'd never seen in Chris's eyes, and was pretty certain had never been reflected in hers. Until now. Until she was this close to Theo Kent and it would be so easy to—

'What if I want to keep you here — right here — and do this?' He lowered his voice and dipped his head towards her, drew her closer in his arms and she couldn't help it. She closed her eyes and felt his kiss burning against her lips. And there it was again — that sense of twin souls melding into one, finding each other just like before . . .

'Theo,' she murmured, after they'd eventually pulled apart. 'Oh, what's going to happen?'

'I hope,' he said, lowering her gently to the ground, 'that we will happen.' He leaned his forehead against hers and put his arms gently around her waist. Her own arms had never left his neck and she could feel the warmth of his skin, his blood pulsating around his body with every beat of his heart. 'That's what I want to happen. But I need to see my way clear with Poppy first. I just hope that somehow you can wait for me?'

'We'll just have to see,' she said. Then she broke away gently and looked back at the

bicycle. There was no question that she wanted the same thing — but here, in this magical place, it was easy to believe that reality could disappear and Lori could be wiped out of his history. And out of his present, somehow. She knew until the parenting situation was resolved, they were in limbo. But still part of her wanted to shout at him: I've waited a lifetime already — and Lori wasn't even in the last one!

* * *

It was just as noisy and popular at the Spa as it had been when she left for lunch. On the way back, she'd swung by the Hall and restocked her ice-cream — it made more sense, she had told Cassie, for some to be there and it had certainly saved time. She would only be selling the ice-cream for another couple of hours, then that eerie, late afternoon peace would descend and it would feel like a completely different place as the Hall settled down and the crowds left.

Kate's mind drifted a little as she watched the activity around her, and, in an effort to try and distract her thoughts from Theo and his kisses, she began to think more about Millie and the miniature of her, sitting unacknowledged in the dining room. Kate's mission this weekend, she determined — apart from selling a glut of ice-cream and ensuring her museum didn't crumble, of course — was to get back inside that house and see the picture. Ideally, her mission would involve sorting out things with Theo. But she had to put that thought aside, difficult as it might be.

As if on cue, her walkie-talkie crackled into life and Cassie's voice came through: 'Kate — may I prevail upon your good nature please?' Her voice was wheedling and Kate knew she wanted her to do something for her.

'What is it, Cassie? If you're hungry, I've got some strawberry left — you can have a cone, if that's what you're after. There's no clotted cream though.'

'No cream?' She sounded disappointed. 'Oh, no! Have you got some for tomorrow?'

‘I have a big tub in my fridge.’

‘Thank goodness. No, it’s not ice-cream I’m after at the minute — which may surprise you — but it’s flowers.’

‘Flowers?’ Kate stared into the handset.

‘Yes. I want a big bunch of cottage garden stuff. Someone’s knocked the jug over in the dining room, and they’ve been trampled to death. I am staring at, literally, a puddle of green slime.’

‘I assume you mean the flowers have been trampled, not the person who knocked them over?’ Kate qualified. ‘But I suspect a trampled person might also make a puddle of green slime under the correct conditions.’

‘Exactly. On both accounts. Thing is, I know your garden has the best cottage garden stuff, so I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind bringing some tomorrow morning? I know it’s a big ask, because you’ll need to be here early to deliver them — but I would be forever grateful.’

‘No, that’s absolutely fine. I’ll bring them for you.’

‘Great. The doors will be open through the gift shop, just let yourself in. I’ll tell Brian to expect you. I think he’s scheduled in there tomorrow morning. Look, thanks for today. If I don’t catch up with you before you go, I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?’

‘Okay. Oops — customer. Best go.’

Kate disconnected the walkie talkie and looked at Theo.

He had loomed up in front of her. ‘Did I hear you say you had strawberry left?’

‘You did.’

‘Excellent. I’ll take one. Hughie’s fine, his shoe’s on and I’m happy that he’s happy. I’m going to take him back to the stables now. Can I persuade you to come with me?’ His smile was warm.

Kate looked over Theo’s shoulder and saw that Hughie had been liberated from his harness and was pulling at a nearby tree, chomping mechanically at the foliage he was ripping off the branches. ‘He’s definitely fine — I agree. You’d better take him back, before he eats the estate. I have to stay here though. I want to see if I can sell the rest of this ice-cream before people go home.’ She could see the top of a carrot sticking out of his pocket and it made her smile. ‘You won’t have a problem encouraging Hughie anywhere with a collection of vegetables around your person.’

Theo laughed and his eyes softened. ‘Yeah? Well perhaps it’s not Hughie I want to encourage anywhere.’

Their eyes locked for a moment, until Kate broke the connection and scooped a perfect, pink mound of ice-cream onto a sugar cone.

‘On the house.’ She didn’t want him to linger whilst he scrabbled around for change, because she would have done anything he asked her to do at that particular moment in time. He could have encouraged her to Timbuctoo, carrot notwithstanding.

‘Are you sure?’ His dark eyes burned into hers as she gazed up at him again. She had a feeling he wasn’t discussing the price of ice-cream and remembered again that feeling of being in his arms. ‘I meant what I said up at the tree. And I can’t wish that Poppy was never born, although it would make things so much easier right now. I need to know where I stand with that situation first.’

‘I’m quite sure.’ The tremble in her voice made a liar out of her. She really had to

stop confusing this guy with Will Haddon. It was becoming dangerous. That was a good point, actually. Was it Will she wanted or Theo? It had been a very long day.

Theo Kent nodded and half-smiled, a little sadly. 'Okay,' he said. 'I wish it was easier for us, I really do'. Then he turned and walked away.

* * *

She brought the bicycle back home and tucked it up in the barn, pushing all thoughts of Theo out of her head. The ducks quacked desultorily at her, and they looked pretty plump and well-fed, so she supposed even if Jenna had forgotten them, nobody else had.

The answer to that supposition was on the reception desk, in the shape of a wicker basket stuffed full of goodies.

'Ooh.' Kate lifted the corner of the red and white gingham cloth that covered it. 'Food.'

'Delilah's food,' said Jenna disinterestedly. 'She said it was for you. She sent a smaller basket for me and the ducks.' She emerged from the shadows and sprawled against the desk.

Kate couldn't help but laugh. 'Well I hope you shared it nicely.'

'Bloody greedy beasts,' Jenna muttered.

'They look like they enjoyed it anyway. Did Delilah mention why she'd brought it over for me?'

Jenna shrugged. 'Said something about giving you a treat as she suspected you'd

been busy all day and she worried about you getting lunch. Said she'd put enough in for both of you.' Jenna frowned. 'She'd seen you and a man together earlier and she loved your outfit. It's to share with him. I did wonder if Chris had come up again.' Her interest sparked for a millisecond then died again. 'But if he did, he never came here.'

'I haven't been back all day. And no, I don't believe Chris is anywhere near Hartsford.' Kate shook her head. Chris had posted her keys back to her soon after the break-up, with no note or begging letter. There was no way he was around. 'I don't know where she's seen me. Oh, well.' She tucked the corner of the cloth back in.

'She said they would go off.' Jenna inspected her nails. 'So you have to eat them today. And if Chris isn't here, you'll just have to eat them yourself and get fat. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Kate watched Jenna sashay out of the reception area, her mouth opening and closing like a goldfish's.

'Well, thanks for that,' Kate muttered, after the girl had disappeared around the corner.

She pulled the gingham cloth off the basket and surveyed the contents. There were four scones, a pat of butter in a white enamel pot, a jar of homemade strawberry jam, a punnet of fresh strawberries, another pot full of clotted cream, two well-filled ham and cheese wraps and a thermos flask. She picked up the flask and shook it. It was weighty and sloshy with something and she suspected it was hot, sugary, milky tea — just the way she liked it. Tucked down the side of the basket was a greaseproof-paper wrapped bundle and a tweak at that wrapper revealed the corner of a lovely fruity slice of cake. It was probably cider cake. Delilah knew she loved it.

Kate's stomach gave a greedy rumble and she pressed her hand against her abdomen,

groaning softly. No way could she eat all of this — and it might not go off as such, but it certainly wouldn't taste as good tomorrow.

Kate went up into her flat and tossed the 1930's outfit onto her bed. She wriggled into some denim shorts and a black vest top, her thoughts occupied by what she could do with Delilah's picnic basket.

She sat down at her dressing table and brushed her hair out. The waves kept springing back, and she wondered if she could get away without the bendy rollers tonight. From there, she went into the bathroom and scrubbed all the make-up off until her skin tingled with a mixture of cold water and slight sunburn. The freckles were back — in force, she noted.

When she was finally satisfied that she looked like herself, she meandered downstairs and opened the basket again. She delved a little further to see if there were any treats she'd overlooked and her fingers closed on a stiff little rectangle. She pulled it out and saw a notecard with a picture of cupcakes on the front and smiled; Delilah, of course.

She opened the card and read it.

Enjoy these little gifts, Kate. Just a few of your favourites as I'm sure you deserve them tonight. I expect you to share with that lovely man who you were with earlier. He looks like he deserves a treat too. Also, you two looked like you were having fun. So good to see!

Theo. He was the only one she could mean, because she would have recognised say, Tom, of course—

Actually, that was a good point — she texted Tom.

Where are you? Fancy sharing a picnic?

The text came straight back.

Am in Kent. Hever Castle. Tudor trail totally rocks! Found some pleasant company so won't be Skyping later.

He ended that with one of those winky-faced emoticons that left Kate in no doubt as to what constituted pleasant company for Tom. She suspected he'd forget the woman's name by next week. Kate desperately wished he'd find a nice girl and settle down — it was what he needed.

So, it looked like Kate and Delilah's picnic would spend a pleasant evening together — or she would have to do what Delilah had asked and share it with Theo. It had to be Theo — there was simply no other possibility. The thought worried her slightly, after the feelings she had experienced when she was in his arms earlier. She would have to go to the campsite though — or risk Delilah's wrath, because she would find out if Kate disobeyed her.

Hartsford was that sort of village.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Theo fiddled with his watch strap, wondering whether it was worth heading into the village. The evening stretched ahead of him and much as he loved his solitude and the fact he could please himself out here, he knew there was more Hartsford could offer, if he only sought it out.

He thought about the museum and the way Kate's garden backed onto the fields by the river. He remembered the cheese on toast they'd shared and half-smiled. He didn't think he'd get much further than friendship with her at the moment. Not while things were happening with Lori and Poppy. It was obvious that Kate didn't want to complicate matters, and he respected that—

'Hello.'

He turned his head so quickly, he almost cricked his neck. Reaching up to rub it, he squinted into the late afternoon sun and saw her standing there, the rays lighting up her hair like a halo of fire. She was wearing denim shorts, a black top and a casual, zip-up jacket.

'Kate! What are you doing here?'

'Looking for you. I walked up from the village. It's a nice night and I had to bring this. I was told to do it.' She was almost defensive as she held up a wicker basket topped with a red and white checked cloth. 'Delilah said.'

'Delilah? From the café?'

'Yes. She said she'd seen us and we looked like we needed feeding.'

Theo raised his eyebrows.

‘I know,’ said Kate. ‘Once Hartsford has you on its radar, that’s it. Your business is everyone’s business and they do like to look after their own. Delilah sent this and she said I had to share it with you. So I brought it all up here. I can just leave you half of it and head back, if it feels . . . awkward. Don’t feel obliged.’

‘Obliged? For what?’

‘To actually physically share it.’ She waved the basket in a large arc around her. ‘Like here. We don’t have to sit down and eat it together, that’s what I’m trying to say. Not if you don’t want to. Not if you’ve got . . . reason . . . not to.’

Theo stood up and took the basket from Kate.

He nodded to the entrance of the tent. ‘I have no reason good enough at the minute. I don’t mind sitting down and sharing. You park yourself there and I’ll get some mugs for whatever we’ve got in the flask.’

Kate looked a little bit thrown. She also looked as if she was casting around for some sort of excuse as to why she couldn’t stay — as if she wasn’t sure it was okay for her to be there.

Theo shook his head and placed his hand on her shoulder. ‘Sit.’ He gently tried to push her down. ‘Please. If you don’t stay, I’ll be forced to spend the evening in the wine bar being entertained by the divine Jenna.’

That comment seemed to do more than any physical force could have done. Kate suddenly laughed and sat right down.

She crossed her legs and sat upright. ‘I think it’s tea in the flask.’

‘That’s fine for now. I can always boil the kettle for more later, or find a couple of bottles of beer in my ice-box.’

Kate didn’t object to the “later” statement. She nodded and shuffled along so he could sit next to her and put the basket between them.

‘We can still enjoy each other’s company,’ he said with a smile. ‘Forget about the world for a few hours. I’d like to do that with you.’

‘I know. I’d like to do that too.’ She changed position and pulled her knees up, hugging them to her. She watched him lift the cloth and smiled as he exclaimed over the contents of the basket. They were pretty impressive and Theo didn’t realise how hungry he was until he smelled the spicy fruitiness of that cake.

‘I don’t see why we shouldn’t share the picnic,’ Kate said while Theo unloaded the scones. She pushed some droopy red curls out of her face. ‘And Delilah made this for us both.’

‘I hope you weren’t considering not inviting me to your picnic.’ Theo pretended to be affronted. ‘We’re in full view of the cows anyway; so what mischief could we possibly get up to?’

Kate laughed. ‘Cows are remarkably stupid. But my ducks — they are far more astute.’

‘I wouldn’t dare offend your ducks.’

She laughed again and Theo relaxed. This was going to be a very pleasant evening.

* * *

It was quite nice, sharing the picnic with Theo. Well, more than nice, to be honest — it was lovely. That awkward moment over the strawberry ice-cream and the feelings that had risen up out of her subconscious when he'd lifted her up had melted away and the constriction in Kate's chest eased a little.

Plus, the conversation was easy and there were no awkward pauses. She found out more about where he lived, what his job entailed, what his clients were like . . . all sorts of interesting things. He didn't, she noticed, talk about Poppy at all. Perhaps he was doing that deliberately — bottling it all up, because if he talked about her and it turned out she wasn't his, it would make it more difficult and more real for him to let her go.

He discovered, in his turn, about Kate's unconventional upbringing, her brother and his quirks and possibly more about Hartsford Folk Museum than he probably, she acknowledged, wanted to know. The food helped it all flow nicely too and she was right about the flask. It contained milky tea and there was just something about milky tea from a flask in the outdoors that made it taste different and special. It was the best tea she'd had in ages.

'Are you ready for the onslaught again tomorrow?' Theo asked her. 'You've got plenty of ice-cream? That sky tells me it's going to be a hot day again.' He nodded across to the west, where the sun was just dropping behind the horizon in a big, fiery ball and the sky was streaked with red, as if reminding people it would be back tomorrow, blazing down on them again.

'I have plenty,' Kate responded, gazing at the sunset. 'And plenty of clotted cream. Cassie insisted.'

Theo laughed. He leaned forward and pulled the basket towards them, dipping into Kate's line of vision. She tore her eyes away from the sunset and studied him instead. His face was shadowed by the sun, the contours around his cheeks and jaw strong and

defined. She couldn't stop staring at him. They'd done this before, she knew they had. They'd sat under the setting sun and talked — and not just the time they had eaten cheese on toast in her garden. These fields, these woods — everything had been here, much as they were now, for centuries. It was, Kate decided, too easy to mistake the comfort of the past for the uncertainty of the present.

She dragged her gaze away from Theo and stared at her knees instead. It was, she realised now, so very dangerous, sitting here with Theo outside his tent. She recalled that veiled suggestion earlier about not encouraging Hughie anywhere. If this evening continued as it had done, Kate wouldn't be responsible for her actions and Theo wouldn't have to encourage her to do anything—

'I'd better go,' she said, too sharply. 'It's getting late and I need to prepare for tomorrow.' She dragged her fingers through her hair again. The curls had dropped quite a lot now, and it was with a vague sense of annoyance that she realised she needed to wash and set it all again in the bendy rollers.

'Why are we always saying that to one another?' he asked softly. 'Are we really so terrified about what might happen?'

'Yes.' Her answer was simple and truthful. She turned to face him. 'I'm absolutely terrified that I fall into this with you so completely that I can never climb out. It's the way it is and the way it has to stay for now.'

He reached over and touched her curls, brought his fingertips down to her lips and touched them briefly. His eyes flickered with something like desire and regret all mixed together. 'I could easily fall into things with you.'

'And that's why it's dangerous and why I need to go. It's bad enough parting as — friends. If I let myself slip too far into whatever we feel for each other, I couldn't let you go again.'

‘Again?’ He looked at her curiously, tucked a curl behind her ear and trailed his finger down her cheek, then dropped his hand.

Kate looked at the ground. Her cheeks burned but something compelled her to tell him.

She took a deep breath. ‘What I said about Hartsford looking after its own — I meant it. I think I belong here. I think I’ve always belonged here — even before I was here. It sounds crazy, I know, but it’s happened to you as well, hasn’t it? In the museum cottage? Tell me you didn’t feel you belonged there. I bet you can’t — because you can’t lie to me, can you?’

Theo stared at her and shook his head slowly. ‘No, I don’t think I can lie to you. Yes. That was a very weird experience.’ He looked away and pushed his hand through his hair. ‘It was almost as if it was my cottage and I lived there and you . . . you were there. But you weren’t you. And I wasn’t me.’ He furrowed his brows. ‘I don’t know who I was, but I belonged there and I felt like I belonged with . . . you.’ His gaze stole back to her and her cheeks burned even more fiercely, but she found she couldn’t look away. ‘It was like you were my other half and we should have made something whole. I’ve heard about that sort of thing before, but I truly didn’t think it happened in real life. It’s like I knew you before .’

‘So, if you look at it like that,’ she said, ‘we were perhaps last here about one hundred and thirty years ago, give or take a decade or two. And here we are again. And it’s no easier for me this time. We couldn’t be together because you had to leave, all those years ago, and I don’t even know if you came back to me. And I still feel the same way about you now as I did then. But now you’ve got — other things — to deal with. And I can’t be part of it. Not yet.’ She shook her head and pulled her knees closer. ‘There’s something about closure, I think. I don’t have that with the way things used to be, because I don’t know what happened then. And I don’t know what’s going to happen now. It’s all out of my control.’

Theo, surprisingly, didn't seem scared or worried at the notion that somewhere in the past their souls had met before. The magic of Hartsford was creeping all around them, wrapping them in a warm, silken embrace, drawing them together, coaxing everything back into order. Kate could almost hear those stars shifting and fizzing as they twinkled into the alignment she so firmly believed in.

'I said something to you a while ago, and I'm going to say it again. I really do wish I'd met you again three and a half years ago. Before Chris and before Lori and before my life took the direction it did. I wish I could go back and change it all. But if I did that . . . ' Theo plucked at a blade of grass. Tugged it out of the ground and flicked it away. 'Perhaps Poppy wouldn't exist and that's a concept I find hard to deal with.' He sighed. 'Come on. I'd better walk you back to the village before we do something quite reckless.'

Kate felt wretched. 'No need to do that. I'll be safe.'

'Half way then?'

'Half way.' That wasn't as dangerous. It wasn't near her flat. It wasn't within the temptation zone. It was also getting her away from Theo's tent and the big, squashy airbed she had spotted inside it.

Oh, God.

Kate briefly wondered if the connection they were clearly feeling between them was born more of her ventures into the past than anything contemporary, but somehow she doubted it. They were, and always had been, twin souls.

She still felt the same way about him now as she had done then.

* * *

They walked, almost in silence, half way back to the village.

The lights of Hartsford were just visible in the darkening twilight. Theo had intended to just leave her there, as he had promised to do, mid-way between the campsite and the Folk Museum. He was planning to simply watch her walk towards her home — perhaps wait until he heard her ducks quacking a sleepy “welcome back” before he turned back to the campsite. Sound travelled in the country and he was certain he would have heard them.

But when it came to it, they stood, facing each other, at the side of the country lane, not really knowing what to do.

He knew what he wanted to do. And so he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her in a way that left no doubt about how he felt. If that was all they had at the moment, then he was damn well going to make sure she knew that his entire heart and soul were in that kiss. And it would be forever, even if he was forced to walk away at the end of this weekend and never see her again.

* * *

Sunday

Kate dragged herself out of bed early enough to cut flowers for Cassie’s cottage garden display before the ducks had even properly woken up. It had rained overnight as Cassie had predicted, and there were diamond-clear droplets decorating the plants. Once again, thoughts of Theo had interrupted her sleep. It was becoming a habit — frustrating in the extreme, as well, because if he was going to be in her head keeping her awake, then he might as well be in the bed next to her doing it properly.

Kate snipped and snipped, working her way through the fronds of green stuff and the hollyhocks and the delphiniums and the larkspur that filled her little corner of

Suffolk, until she had an enormous bouquet of flowers that would not look amiss in the Hall.

One positive thing about getting up and ready so early, though, was that she could take the flowers to the Hall and still have plenty of time to search for Millie's portrait. Cassie had said it was in the dining room — the same place as the bouquet was destined for. It had to be Fate, it simply had to be.

Kate coaxed her hair into the stiff waves the Hall event demanded and painted a slash of red across her lips. If she could just pretend everything was normal, that she hadn't kissed Theo like that last night, she could maybe get through the day. It was going to prove tough, knowing he was working at the Hall as well.

She wrapped the flowers in some old newspaper to keep the stalks together, and stuffed the bouquet into the basket on the back of the bicycle, then filled the ice-box with Neapolitan flavours and clotted cream. She texted Jenna and told her to remember her key as she had to leave early, then pushed the bicycle all the way to the estate.

Kate knew, with a gutting little twist in her stomach, that Theo wouldn't be there to help her with transport today.

* * *

Cassie was in the gift shop when, hidden behind her bouquet, Kate pushed open the door.

'Kate? Is that you or a walking florist's shop?'

'It's me. Sorry I'm so early.'

‘No, don’t be sorry.’ Cassie peered around the bouquet, and smiled. ‘It’s nice that you’re here. You can slip straight through and put them in the dining room, if you don’t mind wandering around an empty house?’

‘It’s never bothered me. The Hall’s got a lovely feeling. Who doesn’t like it?’

‘One or two of the cleaners.’ Cassie wrinkled her nose. ‘I always tell them the ghosts don’t bother you if you don’t bother them.’

‘Some people are a bit sensitive. I’m not.’

‘Really?’ Cassie sounded surprised. ‘I always thought you would be someone who picked our ghosts up. You’ve got such an affinity with the museum and the history — I don’t know. I just thought you’d sense things other people couldn’t.’

‘I’ve never seen a ghost.’ There was no need to let Cassie know the other part — about “sensing” things — or even being a ghost of sorts herself.

‘Okay.’ Cassie shrugged and moved aside. ‘Off you go — see if the Hall whispers any secrets to you when you’re on your own in there.’ She pushed the connecting door open. ‘The vase is ready. I left it on the little table in the window earlier.’

‘Thanks Cass.’ Kate skirted around Cassie and went through the door. It shut, ever so softly behind her and she stood in that familiar servants’ passage, listening out for any secrets it might give up, today, in particular.

Kate bit her bottom lip. She could still feel his kiss on it. Damn.

Hugging the flowers, she padded through the stone-flagged corridors and somewhere, just beyond the usual pitch you can hear at, she was aware of murmurings and whisperings; of footsteps hurrying along; of people brushing past her; bells ringing;

crockery clattering in the kitchens.

Kate's heart was pounding and she stared straight ahead of her, trying not to look left or right, or to connect with any of the shadows she seemed to be sharing the corridor with this morning. She was relieved to reach the servants' staircase and practically ran up the worn, wooden steps, clutching her bouquet like a talisman. Bursting through the door, she hurried into the state rooms, winding her way through the passages until she reached the dining room.

With a little sob of relief, Kate shouldered open the door and stepped inside. The clock on the mantelpiece began, softly, to strike eight o'clock and her stomach knotted up. She knew what was happening — and she couldn't face it today, she just couldn't. There was a horrible, horrible feeling about this and she didn't want to experience it.

'But I only came in here to see Millie!' Kate said into the empty room. The Hall didn't listen; or maybe it did.

The modern world melted away, leaving her seated at the dining table, whispering with Millie. The real Millie — not the painted miniature she had come to discover. And there wasn't a thing she could do to stop it all happening.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Judging by the empty plates in front of them, they were just finishing dinner. The wind was battering rain against the windows and Millie was frowning.

‘I was hoping to go for a walk after dinner, but that looks a little unlikely now.’ She looked out of the window then turned back to Kate. ‘You could have come with me. The exercise would have done you good. This is inordinately bad weather for July.’

Charles was opposite her, with Philip by his side trying to justify why he should have the last piece of apple pie on the serving dish. Her Aunt was at one end of the table, sighing and chiding her boy to no avail, and Uncle Harry was at the other, discussing something political with Charles. It was a normal family dinner.

Kate couldn’t see the Bath chair anywhere and she was comfortably situated on one of the usual dining room chairs, Hector a heavy, snuffling weight on her foot. She had kept her promise to Will, then. Perhaps her leg had fully healed now. That, plus the fact that Millie had just mentioned the fact it was July must mean it had been a few weeks since Will left. He clearly wasn’t back yet, or Cat wouldn’t have Hector beside her.

Kate knew that, had they gone for a walk, they would have talked about Will and she would have shared her hopes and dreams with Millie. She was just about to suggest they headed out anyway, when Dawson the butler came in with a newspaper.

Dawson bowed to her uncle and murmured a few words to him. Uncle Harry glanced around the table, then leaned over and whispered something to Charles.

Charles blanched and cast a quick glance in her direction.

‘Would you please excuse us?’ Uncle Harry addressed them all. Philip looked up at him in surprise. Millie’s hand crept over and covered Kate’s. She entwined her fingers with Millie’s. Charles had turned very pale and she detected a slight tremble in his hands as he laid his napkin down beside his plate. Kate honestly thought she was going to throw up. Hector shifted his weight and sneezed before standing up and leaning against her, protecting Kate — or Cat — in his own way from whatever news Dawson had brought. Kate had an ominous feeling that news was for Cat, otherwise why was she here to experience it?

‘Certainly,’ said Aunt Violet. Millie simply nodded dumbly and they all watched her uncle and Charles head out into the hallway, Uncle Harry clutching the newspaper. Charles shut the door carefully behind him.

‘It’s not like Charles to abandon a meal,’ Philip said with an attempt at humour.

They all stared at him.

‘Stupid boy,’ said Millie, bitterly.

‘No, it’s all right,’ Kate said. ‘He’s only trying to make light of it, whatever it is.’

Philip smiled at her. ‘Thank you, Cat.’ Nobody else made any comments and they just watched the door, waiting for it to open.

Uncle Harry and Charles were gone for what seemed like an age. Kate had one eye on the clock in the corner of the room, wondering if it would chime and throw her out of this evening so she could remain in blessed ignorance. But of course it didn’t. She was here for a reason and she wouldn’t be able to leave until she’d found out what it was.

Eventually, the door swung open and Charles walked back into the room, clutching

the newspaper. He walked straight over to her and leaned down. Millie squeezed her hand even more tightly. Charles looked at her, his eyes full of something she recognised as sympathy.

‘Cat, there’s something I need to tell you. Can you be strong?’

She had to be strong ? What on earth for?

Kate felt the bile rise into her throat. ‘What is it?’ She disengaged her hand from Millie’s and grasped her brother’s in both of hers instead.

‘Cat, my dearest, beloved Cat. It’s Will.’

‘ My Will?’ Kate said sharply; then corrected herself. ‘I mean, Will the blacksmith?’

‘Oh, Cat,’ said Charles. ‘You’ve made it quite clear. None of us are blind or stupid. Our Uncle doesn’t approve at all, as you know very well — but in the spirit of a gentleman’s honour, he asked me to tell you this, in the hope it would put an end to it once and for all.’ Kate felt herself blush to the roots of her hair and cast a quick glance at Millie.

She dropped her head. ‘I never said anything, Cat, I promise,’ she said miserably.

‘I know you didn’t.’ Funnily enough, Kate did know. ‘Please, Charles. Tell me what’s going on.’

‘It’s the steamer Will had passage on. It collided out at sea with another ship. He talked about his plans with me and he must have mentioned it to Dawson as well. He recognised the name of the vessel. The SS Victoria .’

Kate felt faint. ‘What of it?’ she asked, hardly daring to breathe; although she thought

she knew what was coming and began to shake.

‘It sank, Cat. Will went down with it. There are only a handful of survivors.’

Kate stared at Charles, trying to process the information.

She shook her head. ‘No. No I don’t believe you. He’s not dead. That’s not the way it’s supposed to happen. He must be amongst the survivors. He’s coming back to me. He promised.’

‘I’m afraid not,’ said Charles quietly. ‘The survivors were mainly women and children. One or two crew members. Some elderly people. Nobody who matches Will’s description. I’m sorry, darling . . .’

Kate pulled her hands away from Charles. Without saying a word, she scraped her chair back, rose and ran out of the room, unheeding of her achy leg. Hector kept to her heel like a little shadow, whining as if he understood every word. The clock had begun to strike before she was in the hallway. As Cat’s horrific evening faded into a memory, Kate was thrown back into the present day, still clutching the flower arrangements that she had been asked to put in the dining room. For a moment, the little hazy shape of a boxy-headed mongrel glimmered next to her, then it too vanished.

* * *

There was noise and screaming all around him — chunks of the steamer were scraping and grinding together, splintering apart like a ship-in-a-bottle that had been shaken inside a tornado.

Will ducked as another explosion reverberated around him — the third one. Someone, one of the crew, perhaps, had shouted that there were four boilers — he

could only guess that three had blown up. Steam, boiler parts and the remains of bodies surrounded him and floated on the water. What was left of the ship had drifted and was sinking — even now, there were only smokestacks and a part of the deck showing. Before long, that too would have disappeared beneath the churning waves.

He reached out, trying to grab onto something, anything. Trying to gasp for breath, and scrabble for purchase on whatever he could find nearby. His fingertips clutched onto a piece of wood and slipped off. He grabbed again and lost it. He floundered, panicking, as the wreckage floated away from him.

He made one final attempt, and the last thing he saw was Cat, sitting on her horse and laughing down at him with the sunlight sparking off her hair while the final boiler exploded against the sky and the cold waves swallowed him.

* * *

A soft breeze cooled Kate's damp cheek and she realised she'd been crying. She was clutching the poor flowers so tightly that she felt she'd all but throttled them on their stalks.

'That didn't happen. I can't believe that happened.' An image of Will's smiling face, or it might have been Theo's, drifted into her mind and the tears began again. Poor Cat! She'd never had her happy ever after. She'd lost him, before they'd even begun.

Trembling and sniffing, Kate walked over to the table in the window and unwrapped the newspaper, thinking how bloody ironic it was that she'd walked in here with a newspaper and on one evening, so many years ago, a newspaper in this very room had wrecked a young girl's life. She arranged the flowers mechanically in the new vase that was ready and waiting as promised, and brutally crumpled up the paper, as if it was at fault for bringing such news to Cat.

Trying to anchor herself in reality again, Kate fluffed up the flowers to make them look less like they'd been dumped in the vase by an amateur. They were, she realised, overwhelmingly blue. The colour scheme seemed appropriate, somehow, for a room with a miniature of Millie in it. Hadn't Cassie called her the girl in the blue dress? Kate collected herself and went over to the fireplace, looking at the paintings that were dotted around the wall. There must have been about fifteen of them, from silhouettes to pencil sketches through oils and watercolours and pastels.

For a moment, she despaired. How would she know which one was—

Then she saw her. Set into a silver oval, there was a strawberry-blonde girl, dimpling a smile. She was the epitome of beautiful, confident and happy. Kate envied her a little bit on Cat's behalf. This was her cousin; rich, privileged, undoubtedly adored by everyone she met: Cat's confidante and her best friend.

'Hello Millie,' Kate whispered. She touched the frame gently, running her fingertips over the discreetly engraved silver. She was exactly as she'd seen her in the visions of Cat's life. The picture wasn't dated, so she didn't know when it had been painted or by whom. She had a feeling it wouldn't have been Cat who had done it — she seemed to be like Kate; a much more practical person with very little artistic talent. She was glad Cat had Millie in her life. Kate imagined she'd been the perfect person for Cat to be with when the news of Will came out.

'I'll see you soon,' Kate promised the picture. 'If I don't see you in person, I know you're just here. You're lovely. I do so wish I could know you properly.'

She took one last look at the miniature and her floral arrangement and headed out of the dining room. Next time she was inveigled into assisting Cassie as a room guide, she would specifically request a spot in the dining room, next to the fireplace.

But today, she thought, winding her way back through the whispering corridors,

trying to shake off the misery of Cat's bereavement, she had to sell ice-cream and avoid Theo Kent — in no particular order.

* * *

Part of him was desperate to see Kate again, and part of him wanted to hide in the stables, maybe beneath a pile of hay, just to be sure of avoiding her.

It wasn't that Theo regretted what had happened last night — far from it. But they all had real lives to get on with after this weekend and he didn't want to leave a trail of destruction behind him. Come Tuesday, he'd be back in Derbyshire picking up his other life and he didn't know if he would have to consider Poppy in his future or not. It wasn't fair on Kate and he couldn't even plan a life for himself, never mind Kate — although he was desperate to be with her, one way or another.

But Hughie still needed attention and there were plenty of tasks for Theo to be getting on with, so he couldn't second guess himself too much. He'd put himself at the Hall's disposal for the whole weekend, quite deliberately, and there was good reason for doing that. He needed, for example, to tighten the nuts on the wheels of the Gypsy Tea Caravan, because they'd been wobbling a bit towards the end of the day yesterday.

Yes; he had plenty to do — and plenty of things to keep him well away from a certain red-headed ice-cream seller. All he needed was some willpower.

* * *

The morning stretched into the afternoon and Kate was so busy that she barely had any time to think about — not to mention scan the horizon for — horses, and people who looked like they worked with horses. She tried to convince herself she didn't really want to see him at all. And tried very hard to carry that thought through the

day.

Cassie checked in at lunchtime again and offered to send Hughie and his caravan down so Kate could have a break.

‘Oh no,’ she said, ‘It’s fine. I brought my lunch today.’ It was a complete fib of course. She just didn’t want anyone turning up to check Hughie’s hooves, for example, when the horse was stationed at the Spa. She ended up eating a double-sized ice-cream with a fine dollop of clotted cream on the top for lunch, and at least it filled her up.

There was one point where she was forcibly reminded of the picnic from the previous evening though; Delilah herself came over, weaving her way through the noise and bustle, looking cheerful and relaxed and clutching a huge, plastic box.

‘Hello, my lovely!’ she said. ‘Trade doing well, is it?’

‘Not too bad, thanks,’ Kate replied with a smile. ‘And thank you for the picnic yesterday. It was very kind of you.’

Delilah shrugged. ‘Well, I know how hard you were working and I thought you might need a treat or two. I thought you’d be too busy worrying about your museum with that Jenna in charge — so I went along with the excuse of the picnic just to check things out, so I could report back if I had to, you know. And it was fine. She had the place under control and she still had her clothes on, which was a bonus.’ Jenna had once been spotted skinny-dipping in the river with a group of Danish tourists. Delilah’s opinion was that if she, Delilah, had a figure like that, she would have been happy to flaunt it bare-naked as well. Regardless, Delilah winked. ‘And then there was that lovely man with the horses. I was sure he would be busy as well, so I thought why not? You can share it all.’

‘The lovely man with the horses,’ Kate said wryly. ‘I still don’t know where you spotted us or why you thought we were having fun.’

‘I saw you chatting by the Faerie Bridge yesterday. I had a delivery to make then as well.’ She raised the empty box. ‘Any excuse to get over to the Hall and make sure the crowds are fed.’ Delilah’s cake-supply chain worked well for everyone concerned. ‘I’d seen the chap with Horace earlier and you both looked tired and hungry and hot. And as I say, it was a good excuse to visit the museum to check on things.’

‘You look after us well, Delilah.’ Delilah and Margaret seemingly looked after everyone — all of the parentless and parentless-by-proxy young adults in the village. Delilah and Margaret, and Elodie’s family, in fact, had practically brought Alex and Cassie up, as their mother abandoned them and their father had been adorable but clueless. Elodie had also benefitted from their kindness over the years, especially when she had been struggling with the pregnancy, and her parents were miles away in France. Her new-born twins had never been short of a surrogate Granny or two either. Really, the village was held together by the villagers and Kate loved it there. It was like Cassie said — Hartsford would always draw you back.

A little shiver ran up and down Kate’s shoulder blades. Not for the first time, she wondered whether that was the reason she had pitched up here; how the museum was just conveniently ready for a new manager when she was looking to start on the next rung of her career. Perhaps Cat and Kate had more in common than she thought. Perhaps Hartsford Hall had called her back for a purpose — or to finish something that she started years ago. It was an odd feeling.

It was fairly exhausting, trying to avoid Theo. Kate couldn’t relax and was on edge all day, wondering if he’d appear for a late-afternoon ice-cream like he’d done yesterday.

But after a successful day of Theo-avoidance, ironically, it was almost with a sense of disappointment that she began packing up with the last of the visitors. Part of her, she had realised by that point, really really wanted to see him.

It was no surprise, therefore, that when she'd rounded the corner towards the service road on her way home, being faced with Theo's black and silver van sent her stomach flip-flopping around her insides like a break-dancer on acid.

Kate stumbled, one foot catching the hem of her trouser leg, and the bicycle lurched to the side.

'Careful with that,' Theo said, appearing out of nowhere and somehow grabbing both Kate and the bicycle. 'We don't want any injuries.'

She had a flashback to another stumble, decades ago, on a frozen river — which hadn't ended so prettily. It certainly hadn't ended on a warm summer evening with a strong hand holding her arm, his touch hot through her sleeves.

'Thanks,' she managed, regaining her balance. He was still holding her arm. She ducked her head, her face flushing.

'I did well staying out of your way today, didn't I?' She looked up. He was half-smiling. 'Couldn't have been responsible for my actions. That's all I'm saying.'

'I sort of tried to avoid you too. But I still wondered where you were,' she replied; which was exactly the sort of thing she had not meant to say when she bumped into him.

He smiled fully then. 'Really? That's good to know. I was mainly at the stables; they had the brewery horses visiting today so I was kept busy with people asking me questions. I got some free beer for my troubles.' He nodded towards the van. 'I'm

willing to share it. I don't think it'll fit in my ice-box.'

A nice cold beer sounded perfect.

'If I agree,' she said cautiously, 'it's almost like it's becoming a habit. You know — post-event parties and such.' She was trying to make light of it, and probably sounded very silly indeed.

'Some habits are good habits. And some are so bad, they're absolutely worth it.'

Kate laughed; then became a little more serious. She needed to say something before he did.

'Last night,' she began, 'the picnic and everything was lovely. But I'm sorry if it got awkward at the end.' Her cheeks burned as she spoke.

'I didn't think it was awkward. Everything that was said, needed to be said and I'm pleased we . . . well, said it.' There was a pause while he searched her face. 'And I'm serious about the beer offer. They gave me six bottles.'

'Three each.' She hadn't meant to say that. She hadn't meant to agree at all.

'I'm glad you agree.' He removed his hand from her arm. She hadn't realised he was still holding her. 'So,' he winked, obviously trying to make a joke of it, and her heart joined in with the stomach-flipping. 'Your place or mine.'

'Neither,' she replied quickly. Either was a recipe for disaster. Especially if it meant being close to him and that micro-brewery beer was involved. Each of their places had a bed, of sorts, at least. And as much as her resolve was strong at the moment, if she let her guard down and thought about the missed chance that Cat had experienced, goodness only knew what she would be persuaded into.

Theo looked, she thought guiltily, like he could persuade her to do a whole lot of things she wouldn't normally consider. And that was why she decided they had to be somewhere neutral and somewhere in the open air.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

The first thing he remembered was a warm, cottage bedroom and crisp, clean sheets. He couldn't remember much else; barely even his name. The light that came through the little panes of glass hurt his eyes and he turned away.

A small, wooden door opened and a slender young woman came through it. She smiled, said something in a language he couldn't understand, then placed the bowl she was carrying on the bedside table, and twitched at his counterpane.

The girl had red hair, and something stirred in his memory, then was gone. It hurt to keep his eyes open, so he closed them again and slept.

Thus was the pattern of his days, as the girl, and her mother, perhaps, came in and laid cool towels on his forehead and murmured soothing words in that strange language.

One morning, the girl came in and settled herself on the bed. 'I am Felicia. You are?' Her words were in stilted English; but he appreciated her attempt.

His reply came out in a cracked way; the result of too long without speaking and a throat and lungs that had seemed on fire for too long. 'William. Will.'

'Ah!' The girl, Felicia, smiled and nodded. 'Hello William. You have an animal? A cat?'

'A cat?' Will stared at her, visions of a soft-pawed, whiskered animal not making any sense to him.

‘A cat. You have talked of it. You are on a farm. We have cats too. You will like them.’

Will couldn’t think straight. Images of a boxy-headed mongrel dog floated into his mind, and that seemed to make a lot more sense. But he said nothing, as he wasn’t very sure.

Felicia smiled. ‘So William. Do you know where you are or how you came here?’

That, he could answer. ‘No.’ He half-smiled. ‘And no. Can you tell me?’

‘Of course.’ In halting English, she explained how he had been discovered in the ocean by a fishing vessel and brought into shore. He was in Belgium, now, she told him, and her family had taken him in to look after him. Her fiancé — here she blushed prettily — had been working on the boat, and knew of no better place for the nearly-drowned gentleman to recover.

But he need not worry. He could stay as long as he liked. Until he remembered everything that had happened.

Will nodded his head against the pillow and told her thank you, and as soon as he was strong enough, he would work for them to repay them.

‘You must work hard at home,’ said the girl, appraising him. ‘You look strong. I’m sorry.’ Then she laughed again and blushed.

William closed his eyes and tried to remember what it actually was he did at home — and it was just a blank.

* * *

Kate ended up driving the van back to the museum while Theo pedalled the bicycle down from the Hall.

‘This vehicle-swapping thing is becoming a bit of a habit, never mind the beer drinking,’ Theo commented, as he swooped the bicycle to the front door of the museum. Kate was waiting for him, dangling the van-keys from her forefinger, the other hand on her hip.

‘Blame Cassie. The trousers are her fault.’ It had been nice in the van; the hot day had heated up the interior and it smelled of warm hay and soft leather and Theo’s aftershave. The obligatory carrots were rolling around the foot well looking a little dehydrated, but she was certain the horses wouldn’t mind if they were a wee bit more chewy than usual. She had also been aware of the clinking of bottles somewhere behind her, and guessed they were the brewery freebies that had inveigled her into spending the evening with Theo. Well, okay — perhaps it was Theo himself that had brought her to this point — but she wasn’t going to split hairs.

Then she saw Theo’s face change.

‘Looks like you’ve got company. Maybe we need to do a rain check for tonight.’

‘What?’ She spun around, seeing Jenna sitting on the edge of the desk, laughing up into the face of a tall man in profile. It was too dark in the foyer to make out who it was.

Her stomach lurched — if Chris had come up, if he was trying to make it up to her, to get back with her . . . no way. No way on this earth.

‘Katie!’ The man detached himself from the darkness and her heartbeat returned to slightly-faster-than normal, instead of cardiac-arrest-inducing fast. Talk about a panic.

‘Tom! I thought you were sleeping with Anne Boleyn in Hever Castle or something?’

‘She wasn’t called Anne Boleyn.’ He leaned down and kissed her. ‘I think she was called Tammy, but I can’t be sure.’ His brow furrowed. ‘Tamara? Tessa? I don’t know. She was a bridesmaid.’

‘Whatever. What are you doing here?’

‘I came to see you. And who’s this?’ He smiled at Theo and held out his hand. ‘I’m Tom. Kate’s big brother. You’re not Chris, thank God.’

Theo grinned and held his hand out to clasp Tom’s. ‘Theo Kent. No, I’m not Chris. I’m—’

‘He’s working at the Hall this weekend,’ Kate interrupted, before it got complicated. ‘He’s a farrier. And a horse-whisperer. And you might be older but you’re much more immature, so stop being so arrogant.’

‘I’m not arrogant! I speak the truth.’ Tom turned back to Theo. ‘I am older than her. Nice bicycle. That’s Kate’s workmanship, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, I can’t take any credit for it,’ Theo replied. ‘The fact is she drove my van back so I brought her bike. It’s a bit of a routine now.’

It was time to speak again, before Tom started asking any more questions. ‘Theo knows Maeve,’ Kate said. ‘They were working at the crannog together.’

‘Fantastic! I might head up there at some point myself.’ Tom grinned. ‘I’ve always got a lot of time for Maeve.’

‘Lucky Maeve,’ Kate said, wryly.

Theo laughed. 'It was good fun. Cold, wet and windy, but good fun. Well, I'll let you entertain your brother, Kate, and I'll see you tomorrow.' He plucked the van keys from her fingertips and jangled them. 'I'll find you by the Spa, I'm sure. Or maybe by the Faerie Bridge.' He smiled down at her and she thought there might just be a little shade of regret in there. She had a vision of Cat's life again; Will walking away, saying he'd see her when he came back; promising that he would return for her. And he never did. The heat must have got to her and maybe she had a touch of sunstroke as well, because she suddenly felt very weepy.

'But—' She stared up at him, helplessly. Damn Tom and his unexpected visit!

'Is it almost time to close up?' Jenna slithered out of the shadows and stretched, arching her back and yawning like a kitten; apart from the fact that kittens didn't thrust their ample boobs into their employer's brother's faces.

If they did, perhaps the employer's brother's faces wouldn't have lit up quite as lasciviously as Kate's own brother's face did. It was almost a habit with Jenna — she always did that booby-archy thing when an attractive man was nearby. It was like a mating display.

'Because if it's almost time to close up,' she said, moving over to Tom, 'I've got just the place to take you.' She walked her fingers up and down his chest and Kate's jaw slackened and dropped open. 'Have you been to the wine bar? They do cocktails on a Sunday evening and it's absolutely terribly boring when you're a woman on your own and you ask for sex on the beach, or a slow, comfortable screw.'

Kate felt her cheeks heat up. Good God, this girl was like a young, black-haired, Marilyn Monroe. Tom had totally fallen for the wily young minx as he practically drooled over her and nodded, speechlessly.

'Theo, you can come too.' Jenna quite pointedly ignored Kate as she trailed her

fingers down Tom's arm and took his hand.

She held out the other hand for Theo but he just smiled and shook his head. 'Not tonight, thanks all the same.' He looked down at Kate and his expression softened. 'I've already made plans.'

'Suit yourself,' said Jenna, shrugging nonchalantly. 'We'll be there all night if you want a little bit more — excitement.'

As a parting shot, she turned and winked at Theo, as she and Tom began to walk off across the courtyard.

Kate stared after them, her mouth still hanging open. 'Tom!' she called out, but he didn't seem to hear her. 'Unbelievable. That girl is—'

'—a genius.' Theo turned to her and dropped the keys into his pocket. 'Now, you don't have to entertain your brother until much, much later, if at all. You just need to entertain a horse whisperer — who happens to have six bottles of beer very close at hand and is longing to spend the evening with you, and not anywhere near Jenna and her wine bar. Do you have a bottle opener? If it's okay to leave the van here, I'll just walk back to the campsite tonight. It's a waste of energy driving back to the site, coming to the village, going back to the tent — that sort of thing. I'll need to be here in the morning to ride your bike up to the Hall anyway, so I'll just set off extra early and walk down.'

'Ride my bike to the Hall? You're offering?'

'Of course.'

'Thank you, that would be very kind. But right now, I need to make sure the visitors have gone, and I have to close up properly. And I need food.' Her stomach growled,

as if in agreement. ‘And my ducks need food.’

‘Okay.’ Theo smiled. ‘I’ll sort your ducks out, and you sort your visitors out, and then how about we head to the Dragon? The beer can wait until after that.’

A visit to the Dragon would definitely be the best way to soak up the promised beers and Kate nodded again. ‘The ducks have proper duck feed, just in that barn over there.’ She indicated the barn where the bicycle lived. ‘There’s a huge sack of it. If you take the bike with you, that’ll be great. I need to get changed though — I can’t go out in this suit. Oh.’ She stared at him. ‘You’ll need a shower, I guess? I’m having one.’

‘Really?’ Theo raised his eyebrows. Kate had a sudden vision of him, all soapy and glistening with droplets of water running down his chest.

There was an awkward moment as she stared at him; then she managed to break eye contact. ‘Yes. There’s a staff one, if you want to use it.’

Theo burst out laughing. ‘A staff shower? Seriously?’

‘Seriously. It’s just to the right, near the back of the entrance cottage. There was a push from the Board for all things healthy a couple of years ago, and we got a grant for a shower cubicle and they put in some waymarked paths and a heritage trail leading off from the museum to encourage walkers. Maeve used to do a five-mile run before work and she’d clean up in our shower — she loved having it. It was meant for people who wanted to be fit yet not sweaty when they got to work. You know, like if they cycled to work, or jogged. Like she did.’

‘She still does,’ said Theo. ‘She runs around the Loch every morning, or at least she did when I was there.’

‘She puts me to shame, she really does!’ Kate grinned affectionately. ‘Jenna has used our shower a few times — if she’s stayed out all night. There’ll be a spare set of her clothing bundled up in the room, mark my words. But we have towels and shower gel — so, you know, feel free. Shampoo too, I think.’

‘Thanks,’ said Theo looking amused. ‘I might just do that. I don’t think I’ve ever used a staff shower before. It’s all an adventure, isn’t it?’

Adventure. There was that word again.

Kate shivered, despite the heat.

* * *

Will realised that he felt at home outdoors. As he grew stronger and ventured outside, he found himself with an affinity to nature that he was astonished at.

He filled his days with manual work, helping Felicia’s father, Meneer Peeters, build walls and repair buildings; turn soil and tend crops. And, to his even greater surprise, he discovered a deep satisfaction whenever he cared for the livestock. His hands seemed to know their way around every lame limb, knew how to brush out a knotted coat, instinctively knew what to murmur to distressed animals to calm them and soothe them.

Deep in his mind, he was aware there must be more to these instincts than he realised.

‘Your body will heal first, and then the mind,’ Vrouw Peeters, Felicia’s mother would say after supper in the farmhouse. ‘You must stay here until then.’

‘I can’t think of anywhere I would rather be,’ he told her, smiling. But he could, although he would never, ever tell her. He would rather be somewhere that flickered

around the edges of his consciousness; somewhere that was blue and green and somewhere in England. Sometimes, he would dream of that place, and he'd wake up, just as a girl's face blurred into the edge of his mind; so close to him, although so far he couldn't even reach out and touch her.

But who was she? If only he could remember . . .

* * *

The staff shower cubicle was great. It was just big enough to squeeze into and as Kate had promised, there were shower gels, shampoo and towels in there as well.

Theo waited, of course, until Kate had herded the last of the visitors out and the ducks had been fed before using it. He was sure nobody would want to see him, half-naked, running to his van afterwards to grab a fresh t-shirt. If he had learned anything, it was to keep a few spare items of clothing in there — you never knew in this business when you'd end up covered in mud, hay or worse.

Kate came downstairs freshly scrubbed, a slick of wine-coloured lipstick on her mouth, her eyes framed by sooty, dark lashes.

'Awesome shower,' Theo said with a grin. 'You should rent it out to walkers. You could make a fortune.'

Kate wrinkled her nose. 'I'd have to invest in some manly shower gel first. You smell like Jenna.'

Theo raised his arm and sniffed his skin. 'I'm getting strawberry yogurt with a hint of cherry.'

'I wonder what my brother's getting,' Kate said, inspecting her bag for something.

‘Something with a hint of fermented grape?’

She laughed. ‘I’m not sure I really want to know! Come on. This way.’ She pointed towards the village. ‘I hope you like sticky toffee pudding. The Dragon does the best one ever. You might have to share some with me. It’s a pretty big helping.’

‘I don’t mind sharing a pudding.’

‘Excellent. Come on, then. Let’s get there and beat the rush.’

* * *

‘So what’s it like, living so close to the past?’

Theo’s question startled her, and Kate choked as she swallowed a spoonful of sticky toffee pudding. ‘The past?’

He handed her a glass of wine to wash the sponge down. ‘You know, living above the museum? It would be a bit different for me in my line of work — not like the blacksmith from the museum cottage. His forge was next to the house after all. Not far to go for a coffee break, but then you couldn’t really leave your work in the office, could you?’ He frowned, possibly contemplating it. Or just maybe, he too had been thinking about Cat and Will?

His question seemed innocent enough, but Kate dropped her spoon into the bowl and pushed it away, the pudding losing its appeal. ‘Sometimes,’ she replied cautiously, ‘the past seems pretty close to me.’

Theo nodded and dropped his spoon as well. ‘And it doesn’t freak you out, having dead peoples’ things underneath your flat?’

‘Theo!’ She saw the smile quirking at the side of his mouth. She balled up her napkin and plopped it by the side of the rejected pudding bowl. ‘Those things were special to people. Nothing freaks me out about the museum.’ Apart from the fact you knew all about the ice-skates and then there’s the randomly striking clocks, and the way that cottage on the end melts into the nineteenth century . ‘Nothing at all.’

She scraped the chair back from the table and stood up, suddenly wanting to be out of the Dragon. Wow, she felt pretty drunk. Theo shifted out of focus and she stumbled a little.

‘I know, I should have stopped at two glasses.’ She pointed to the empty bottle on the table. ‘That third one pushed it a bit.’

Theo was standing now, somehow already next to her, the smile widening and his hands in his pockets.

He leaned in towards her: ‘I stopped at two. I’m saving myself for the beer,’ he whispered.

Kate flushed and pushed her hair out of her face. ‘I don’t normally drink that much. I’ve got a few things on my mind, that’s all.’

‘Come on.’ He smiled. ‘Let’s get you some fresh air. I’ll pop back in and settle the bill once you’re safely outside.’

He took her by the elbow and steered her out of the door, propping her up beside one of the beer garden tables, then disappeared indoors again. It was a glorious evening though and Kate took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the Suffolk air. God, she loved it here. She never wanted to be anywhere else.

‘I love it here,’ she told Theo as he came back over to her. ‘It’s really my favourite

part of the world.'

'I can think of many places much worse than Hartsford. Your brother, he enjoys travelling, doesn't he?'

Kate nodded. She recalled telling him about Tom's various escapades whilst they shared their picnic in the entrance of the tent last night.

'Yes. And as you know, he's just been to Hever Castle.' She peeled herself away from the table and pointed herself towards the footpath that led to the back of the pub and around the outskirts of the village. It wound its way back towards the Folk Museum and was one of the trails they'd put in for the healthy living thing. 'And it's no surprise to me that he slept with somebody and he doesn't know her name.'

'Perhaps he's never found the right person. When he finds her, he'll know it.' He fixed Kate with a look that might have spoken volumes, and she dropped her gaze. This was entering dangerous territory.

'But what if you think she's the right one and she's not?' Kate asked.

'Some things are just meant to be. Sometimes they come at you when you least expect it.'

Kate paused under the pretext of taking her shoe off and shaking a stone out of it, but it was more so she could dip her head and he wouldn't see how red she was going. 'But what if it was meant to be years ago and wasn't?' That was worded, she thought, quite well. She could technically be talking about his own recent past — not their potentially combined past. She hadn't told Theo about Will and the steamer ship. Putting it into words made it real somehow.

'It'll happen if it's meant to happen, no matter when it happens. Are you okay there?'

Do you need a hand? You're wobbling.'

Kate stood up and shook her head. The world shook with it. 'I'm fine.' Her shoe was still dangling from her fingertips. She bent down and pulled the other one off as well. 'My feet are hot. Look — we're right next to the stepping stones anyway. If you go across there, you can head up to the Hall and through the woods and get to the fence. Whoops. I may have just admitted my secret way into the Hall grounds.'

Theo laughed. 'Do you fancy a walk in the woods then? I suggest you put your shoes back on if that's the case.'

'No. Because the highwayman might be in there.' She stared into the greenery over the river. 'And you need to get to the van which is on this side of the river. Look. This is the best way to cross the River Hartsford. I don't show everyone this, you know.'

She tossed her shoes to the ground, followed by her bag and took a run at the stepping stones. She was a toned, classically-trained ballet dancer and she could still do a perfect grand jeté .

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

‘Kate!’ Theo yelled her name as she streaked across the field and launched herself into a fairly impressive leap.

It was almost as if she did the splits in the air and for a moment she was flying, her arms outstretched, her bare toes pointed and her head gracefully tilted backwards.

It was bloody impressive, actually.

It was bloody impressive until she came down on a stepping stone, her foot slipped off it and she tumbled into the river.

It seemed as if everything happened in slow motion after that. He ran onto the stones, jumping across them and grabbed hold of her arm, tugging her inelegantly out of the water. She didn’t struggle, which was probably the most worrying thing; she was just floppy and unresponsive and his heart was pounding. ‘For God’s sake, Cat,’ he heard himself say, ‘what the hell were you doing?’ He didn’t even know where the ‘Cat’ thing came from again; it was as if someone else had shouted it.

Theo scooped her up and held her close and picked his way back across the stepping stones until they were safely on the bank. He adjusted her weight so she was snuggled into him and held her close, trying to get some warmth back into her body—

Her foot was twisted at an unnatural angle and she had a deep cut on her forehead. He prayed it wouldn’t scar — she was too beautiful to be scarred like that. She was too wild and adventurous, too perfect for this world she lived in, but she couldn’t leave the world like this — she couldn’t.

‘I’ll get you to the cottage,’ he told her, ‘I’ll look after you. Only please wake up, please wake up. I can’t bear it if—’

A bark from his feet, his dog running in mad circles in the snow.

‘I know, I know. We’ll get her warmed up. She’ll be well in no time. No time at all.’

His heart pounded and his breath came in little puffs of air as he hurried back to the cottages—

He had to believe that all would be well or else . . .

* * *

They were in Millie’s bedroom, Hector sprawled out on her bed where he knew he shouldn’t be. The leaves were turning gold and red outside and the fire was lit. They were occupied with pasting pictures and keepsakes into a scrapbook, their heads bent together as they decided what should go where.

‘This invitation should be with this pressed flower.’ Millie pointed to a faded rosebud and a gold-foiled card. ‘I kept them together entirely for that purpose.’ She picked up the card and read it. She smiled and laid it back down next to the flower.

‘It’s a special one, then,’ Kate teased.

Millie blushed, her already flushed cheeks turning redder. To be brutally honest, when Kate took a good look at her, she didn’t seem at all well.

‘You’re very pale, darling,’ she said and laid her hand across Millie’s forehead. Oddly, she seemed feverish, despite her washed out appearance; and her hands were so thin, the veins stood out in stark relief.

‘Oh, I’m all right,’ Millie dismissed Kate’s concern with a wave of her hand. ‘I just can’t get rid of this horrible old cold.’ As if to prove it, she hacked out a nasty sounding cough. She wasn’t quick enough to hide her lace-edged handkerchief. There were spots of red on it.

Oh, no. Kate knew something of these symptoms. Consumption. Tuberculosis. The White Plague. Whichever way you looked at it, this thing was a killer in 1885.

First Will, now Millie. How many other people was Cat going to lose so horribly? Kate couldn’t let Millie know she knew. She cast a glance at the clock. It had just passed six in the evening, the twilight creeping in on them.

Please don’t strike , she silently begged the clock. Please, just don’t do it. I want to stay here.

‘Oh, well, if that’s all it is,’ Kate said, far too cheerfully. ‘You’ll soon be cured.’ Impulsively, Kate hugged her friend, holding her tightly. She was so thin and frail it was heart-breaking. She had a feeling this would be the last time she saw her.

But how had she arrived here this time? She hadn’t heard any clocks striking.

‘Yes, a cold. That’s all it is,’ Millie replied comfortably. She wasn’t a very good actress, and Kate doubted even Millie knew the extent of the disease.

Kate turned her attention back to the scrapbook and cleared her throat. ‘So, you didn’t answer my question. What’s so special about this letter and rosebud, Amelia Violet Aldrich?’

‘Oh, no! Really? Is it so obvious?’ Millie’s blue eyes were wide and disbelieving.

‘Utterly obvious.’

‘That rosebud was given to me at that ball, by a very special person.’ She blushed again and dropped her eyes. ‘But I can’t tell you who. We don’t want anybody to know yet.’ She compressed her lips, as if she’d said too much. ‘Please. It’s just embarrassing now. And I can’t tell you who it is. I can’t tell you most of all.’

By implication, that meant that she desperately wanted to tell her everything about the mystery man.

‘Why not?’ Kate asked curiously.

‘Well, because of Will, mainly,’ Millie said in a low voice. ‘I don’t want to bring all those feelings back to you. Why, I think I should simply die if anything should happen to — him. And you, dearest Cat, have lived it all. It’s happened to you and I — we — feel guilty for our happiness.’ She frowned, fighting some inner conflict. She fingered the rose again. Kate felt terrible that Millie would probably be the one to die first anyway and couldn’t look at her for a moment. Millie coughed again and Kate cringed inwardly as her friend struggled to catch her breath after the fit had passed. ‘And of course, after what you told me about Edward last week — it’s adding insult to injury!’

A memory flooded in — a ball at a neighbouring estate; a muffled giggle from behind the topiary hedge as Cat wandered through the formal gardens searching for Edward. She’d had her suspicions, of course she had. And then he had made an excuse and left her alone — and he hadn’t come back for the dance he had promised her. The eager, pink frothy girl from the Hartsford Midsummer Ball — Maria — had disappeared as well — and Cat, being Cat, had gone out into the formal gardens to search for them both. She’d found them and was about to challenge them — loudly — but at the last minute her courage had failed her and she had peered at them from behind a shrub, horrified, as their hands explored each other through the layers of formal clothing. He pressed the girl back against the wall of the dovecote, and she arched her back, eager for him to do more . . .

Cat had run away, back to the ball, and immediately sought Millie out to tell her. Then Millie had feigned illness, and Cat had been “forced” to take her home. And they had discussed Edward with righteous indignation ever since. Cat felt particularly stupid and didn’t know, she’d said, how she could quite face either of them again.

But she had to. Of course she had to. Hadn’t her aunt and uncle made it quite clear? He was suitable, they said, and seemed to be doing all in their power to push them together. This was 1885, Kate reminded herself; did women have the choices then that they had in her own world? She knew, deep down, that they didn’t and it was quite depressing.

Eventually, she composed herself enough to speak; she assumed Millie would think it was memories of Will that had upset Cat the most — and she would have been right, sort of. The memories of him — Cat’s memories — were strong and overwhelming, even as they sat here in the cosiness of Millie’s bedroom.

It was slightly overdramatic, perhaps, but Kate really did feel surrounded by death and misery and bad memories here today. She missed Will. She missed going into his little cottage and having him push her around the estate or lift her up in his strong, capable arms. She missed his touches and his kisses and the way he looked at her with such a sense of wonder. She hated to think of him not being here, and the idea that he — or Theo, at least — was alive in Kate’s own time; and bloody hell, didn’t she have a chance to be with him then? But it seemed that this time, Theo needed to let go of his most recent past — and it wasn’t going to be pretty. Kate knew she was deliberately shying away from him, despite every ounce of her soul being drawn towards him.

After Chris, she didn’t want a part-time boyfriend; she didn’t want someone who she couldn’t be with fully. And to complicate matters even further, part of her wanted Poppy to be his, because she thought how awful it would be for him if she wasn’t. But, then, if Poppy wasn’t his, then that meant a clean break from Lori and a bigger

part of her wanted that . . .

‘Whatever you and your friend feel for one another,’ Kate said carefully, ‘will never change what’s happened to Will. I’ll always love him. And I can’t begrudge you that chance at happiness just because mine has gone.’ Her voice broke as she finished. Would Millie even get a chance at happiness?

Kate looked up at Millie and her lovely face was full of pain.

‘I am longing to tell you about him,’ she said quietly. ‘MayI?’

Kate nodded.

‘It’s Charles,’ Millie said, completely throwing her, ‘can you believe it?’

‘I — no. No, I can’t. Charles? My brother Charles?’

‘The very same.’ Millie blushed again and looked at the rosebud. ‘I know it’s very strange, and we are cousins, of a sort. But that doesn’t stop the way we feel about one another.’

‘And Fred?’ Kate asked, tongue-in-cheek.

Millie laughed, the awkwardness suddenly gone. ‘Fred was a passing infatuation. He cannot compare with Charles!’ Then she clamped her hand to her mouth and her eyes were wide and comical above it, overly-bright. ‘Oh, no, what if anyone hears me saying that?’

‘What of it?’ A rush of affection flooded through Kate. ‘I, for one, am entirely supportive of whatever makes you happy. You are the best friend I could ever have, the most wonderful cousin and you will be my dearest sister when the time comes,’

Kate told her sincerely. On some level, she firmly believed that would be the case. The other possibilities were just too awful to comprehend.

Millie smiled. ‘And you will be my dearest sister as well. Oh! That reminds me. I was cursed with a vile brother, and he did this — remember?’ She rearranged some bits and bobs on the table and pulled out a couple of photographs. She pushed them towards Kate and her stomach lurched.

There, before her, were two pictures. One was of Kate — or Cat, rather — scowling in her Bath chair, and the other one was Cat and Millie laughing and holding each other up on a section of frozen river. They were both balanced on identical ice-skates, one of Cat’s arms was thrown outwards to help keep her balance and Millie had both arms around Cat. They looked wobbly as hell, but seemed to be having such a good time.

The memory of that moment came back to Kate in a flash. Philip had taken the picture, practicing with his new camera, which had been, she knew, a Christmas gift. They had been unwilling to pose in the Hall gardens as they had new ice-skates and wanted to test them out. It was February and the first real ice had formed thickly on the river. Kate suddenly knew why Cat had written her name inside the skates; it was so they didn’t get mixed up with Millie’s. She felt so sad — where were Millie’s skates now? What had happened to them? Kate suspected they’d just fallen through time, or been discarded when Millie died.

But on the day of the photograph, the girls had snuck out of the house, instigated by Cat, of course, and Philip had followed them. He had threatened, good-naturedly, to blackmail them and asked for their puddings for a week to ensure he said nothing. It had been such a fun morning.

It was a couple of days later that Cat had decided to go it alone and had the accident. Millie had been nursing her bruises from their initial attempt and had preferred to sit

indoors on a soft cushion. She'd been disapproving and said Cat shouldn't do it, but she hadn't been able to stop her.

Kate held the photograph now and realised that if Elodie's archive system was working, this picture would still be in the Hall — but where, she had no idea. Unless . . .

'Millie, can we paste this in the book?' she asked. 'Then it'll be safe forever.'

'Of course we can,' Millie responded, surprised. 'I thought you might like to keep it though.'

'I do want to keep it. But I'll only lose it, so if you put it in this book,' she lifted the cover up so she could check what it was like — it was brown and had birds and flowers painted onto it in black — 'I'll know exactly where it is forever.'

Millie shrugged. 'If you insist.'

'I do. And I want you to promise that you'll never, ever take it out.'

'I won't. I promise. Will I put the other one in too?' She picked up the Bath chair one.

'If you want,' Kate said, 'but I'm really not too bothered about that one, funnily enough.'

'I might just have it framed and gifted to you,' Millie replied, playfully.

'Do what you want with it!'

'I most certainly will, then! I might even write a little message on the back for you.'

I'll have to consider what is most fitting.' Millie smiled, mischievous. 'I really will have to consider it very carefully. It has to mean something to us, so we both know the spirit in which it's intended. Anyway — look, I'll only put a dab of paste on each of the corners of this skating one. Then if you want to remove it, it'll be easy to do without spoiling anything.' It was Millie's turn to lean across and hug Kate.

'I'd like that very much,' Kate said. 'It will certainly make things a bit easier for me in the future.'

They were still hugging when a clock struck somewhere — it was the church bell, ringing for Evensong — and Kate found herself on the edge of the river they had skated on. She was shivering a little bit and dripping for some reason, but there was a warm body next to her — Will, she suspected — and she closed her eyes, trying to remember every little bit of that visit to Millie.

She wondered whether Millie had seen the leaves fall from the trees that year; whether she had seen another winter out at the Hall; or whether, when the spring buds came, she had been lying in the churchyard at peace. Kate determined to go there and find out. It was desperately painful, even now; but at least she would, she hoped, have a grave.

Which was more than her beloved blacksmith had—

* * *

'Welcome back,' said his voice. 'Any time you want to tell me why you decided to launch yourself off that riverbank, feel free.'

For a moment, she was confused. Hadn't she just been rescued from the skating incident? Was the timeline as confused as she was? Because Will had died, hadn't he? And now Millie was dying, but Will was back and he'd just rescued her again

and her ankle was hurting and—

Kate clung to him and buried her face in his chest. ‘I thought you were dead,’ she murmured, breathing in the scent of his t-shirt and his body and the strawberry and cherry shower gel and . . .

‘I’m not dead. But you might have been if I hadn’t hauled you out of the river. It’s probably not a good idea to do ballet leaps after three glasses of wine, Kate. Not onto the stepping stones, anyway.’

She pushed herself away from his chest and looked up at him. It wasn’t Will. It was Theo — although it wasn’t easy to tell the difference, to be honest. She only had the fact that this guy was wearing twenty-first century clothing to go on.

‘Ballet leaps?’ she asked faintly. She had a sudden image of herself doing a grand jeté and cursed the wine.

Theo nodded and thumbed the side of her face. He pushed the hair away from her forehead and peered closely at it, then looked down at her legs. ‘May I?’ he asked and she could only nod, dumbly, as he ran his capable hands down her legs and rolled her ankles gently.

He looked up at her, surprised. ‘You’re fine. I was expecting a sprain at the very least there — a break at worst.’

‘A spiral break?’

Theo nodded and pressed gently again. ‘It’s fine. Bloody hell.’ He shook his head in disbelief. ‘How? How can you fall like that and not get injured?’

‘I’m a dancer. I’m pretty bendy. I’ve gone over on my ankles more times than I care

to remember. I must have stretchy ligaments.’ I may also , she thought, have had my fair share, in some life, of leg injuries. So she was getting a break, excuse the pun, in this life.

He moved her hair back again. ‘Not a mark on you. I was sure you’d given yourself a head injury. I thought I saw a big gash there. And your leg looked so much worse when I picked you up.’ He frowned, and she wondered what he was thinking. ‘It was just . . .’ But he shook his head again and didn’t pursue the matter.

‘Mmm.’ Kate sort of knew where that was coming from — but she didn’t elaborate. She shifted uncomfortably on her spot of grass, the dampness from her watery adventure soaking through her shorts.

‘I suppose you want to call it a night now?’ He didn’t seem in a hurry to move away from her, so Kate didn’t force the issue. She brought her legs up in front of her and wrapped her arms around her knees. She was damp, but she wasn’t shivering any more. The sun was low in the sky and there was still some warmth in it. At least she thought it was the sun warming her. It might have been Theo’s proximity.

‘No. I think you still have beer, don’t you?’ she asked. ‘In your van?’

‘It’s back at the museum, remember? Can you walk that far? I don’t want to hurry you if your ankle’s bothering you.’

‘It’s not bothering me,’ she said truthfully. ‘I’m just sorry you had to witness that display of idiocy.’

Theo laughed and stood up. He held his hand out and hauled her to her feet. ‘You’re a bloody good jumper. I’ll give you that.’

‘You should see my pirouettes. I’ve been told they’re pretty good too.’ As if to prove

her ankle was fine, and also because she wanted to show off a little bit and rarely got the chance, she stood on tiptoe and executed a series of perfect pirouettes.

Theo clapped and shook his head in awe. 'Incredible. I never realised. You've got some hidden talents, Kate.'

'You have no idea what I get up to in my downtime,' she said wryly; and it wasn't exactly dancing that she meant. The image of Millie's sweet face, ravaged by that horrible disease, would haunt her for a long time.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

They were in the garden together when Tom wandered back from the wine bar looking smug and unravelled. Kate rolled her eyes and offered him the last beer as a bribe not to tell her what he had done with Jenna.

‘Have you had a good evening yourself?’ he asked as he settled on the wall.

Kate opened her mouth to say yes, they had, thanks, but Theo answered first.

‘I didn’t know Kate was such a good dancer,’ he said. ‘She’s shown me some ballet moves and had a little swim as well.’ He cast a glance at her, his eyes warm and teasing.

Tom laughed. ‘Come on, Theo, you should know by now that she’s not the angel she pretends to be. She’ll have been showing off again. Grand jetés and pirouettes was it? And you haven’t seen them before?’

‘Of course he hasn’t seen them before! I’ve never had the opportunity to show him.’

‘It does feel like I’ve known her ages, but really, she’s right,’ added Theo. ‘We only met a couple of times before this weekend and ballet’s never really factored into it.’ He looked down at her and she tried to read his face then gave up. She could read any amount of things in his eyes — his quite perfect eyes. It was scary what she could read in them, to be honest.

‘Then you’re lucky you’ve escaped her showing-off for this long.’ Tom raised the bottle at Kate and winked, then he smoothly moved the conversation on to horses, drawing Theo into it, quite naturally, as if they too had known each other for years.

For decades.

For more than a century?

She shivered.

Maybe they had.

* * *

Monday

Thanks to all the wine and the beer and the heat, Kate went straight to sleep and she didn't budge all night long. She couldn't recall any odd dreams the next day when she woke. Instead, she listened sleepily to the early morning creaks and groans of the old cottages, their usual greeting to each other; a bunch of old friends waking up and stretching and nodding good morning.

There was a steady snoring coming through the bedroom wall; her brother, of course. They'd both walked Theo halfway back to the campsite and subsequently fell into bed shattered. She wondered if Tom would try to beat a hasty retreat before Jenna wandered in, but she had a feeling they'd just greet each other warmly and move on. It was a skill Kate thought they both possessed. The idea of Tom with a woman brought her mind back to Millie and her love for Charles.

After that, Kate couldn't sleep any more. She needed to get to that Hall and she needed to do something. But first, she went over to her computer and pulled up the website she had found the 1885 newspaper on. She pressed a few buttons and found a 'search' facility; then typed in the name SS Victoria .

Almost immediately, the digitised image of the local newspaper came up, and she

knew without a doubt it was the one Cat's uncle had received that awful day. She read the article quickly, scanning it for a description of any survivors, hoping that Charles and Cat's uncle had simply misinterpreted it. But it was there, in faintly pixelated black and white: a passenger list from the doomed vessel, which sank, according the paper, on 5th July, 1885. And one name stood out beyond the rest: William Haddon . Her eyes filled with tears and she wiped them away quickly. It wouldn't do for Tom to see her sobbing over breakfast. She took a last look at the image and touched the screen gently with her forefinger, tracing his name, before closing the laptop down. It had happened then. It was real.

Tom trailed into the kitchen as she was boiling up the kettle for her second coffee, by which time she felt a little more human and was more in control of her emotions.

'Good night, Katie?' Her brother leaned against the bench as she grabbed another cup down from the cupboard for him.

'Not too bad. Sleep well?'

Tom nodded and yawned. 'It's all the exercise.' He winked. 'Not used to it.'

'Yes, you are.' She filled his cup up and pushed it across the bench to him.

'Jenna's a fun girl,' he said, justifying it. 'We had a laugh.'

'I bet that's not all you had — no! I don't want to hear it.' Kate cringed at the thought.

She sat down and studied him. He was a good-looking man. He had the height and the broad shoulders of their father, but the big brown eyes of their mother. It was a good combination on him.

‘Tom, why don’t you ever find a nice girl and stick with her?’

Tom slipped into the seat opposite and put his cup down. He gripped it with both hands and stared into the muddy depths. Her brother wasn’t a milky beverage type of guy; the murkier the better for him.

But he at least had the grace to look abashed. ‘I’m starting to think that ship sailed,’ he said, talking to the coffee cup. ‘Far too long ago. I doubt it’ll happen again.’

‘Oh?’ This was news to Kate. ‘Tell me more.’

Tom shook his head. ‘No. I’d rather not, thanks.’ He looked up and stared straight into her eyes. It unsettled her a bit. She wasn’t used to his direct gaze.

‘What?’ she asked, quailing beneath it.

Tom smiled a little and shrugged. ‘No. It’s not for me to tell you.’ He looked past her shoulder and stared out of the window, over the river and across to the woods beyond. ‘Just — don’t waste too much time Katie. If I had the chance again, well . . .’ He shrugged. ‘I wish I’d done it differently.’

Her stomach lurched. ‘Tom,’ she began slowly. ‘Is this a conversation we need to have in light of any particular recent events?’

‘Nope,’ he said lightly. ‘Not especially.’ He looked back at her and grinned, the moment lost; her annoying, wonderful, frustrating brother appearing again. ‘Too many cocktails, too much history in this place. Too much Hartsford air. I’ll be fine. I think I need my coffee. What’ll I do about locking up?’

He had changed the subject and it threw her. ‘Locking up? You mean the flat?’

He nodded. ‘Yep. I need to leave in a couple of hours. Just wondering what I should do for the best.’

‘Well if Jenna’s here, just pull the door closed behind you.’ Kate was still confused at the speed he had veered off track. ‘In fact, just do that anyway.’

‘Okay.’ He grinned. ‘Oh, and last night — I don’t think I told you. Your garden is amazing, little Sis. It’s like it’s all come out together. You need some more roses though. That would be nice.’

Kate’s mind drifted back to the vase of flowers she’d gathered for Cassie; to Millie’s dress in the portrait; to the rosebud in Millie’s photo album.

Oh, God. What was he really trying to tell her? ‘Tom, have you met someone? Somewhere? You’re not making much sense.’ She looked at Tom, desperate to ask him more questions.

But already he was draining his mug and getting up. ‘Mind if I do myself some toast? I’ve got a long drive ahead of me today. And no. I haven’t met anyone.’ He flashed a teasing grin at her, back to his normal self. ‘Unlike some of us, I’m still waiting to find my soulmate.’

* * *

By the time Theo arrived, smiling and bright-eyed and none the worse for their night of alcoholic excess (well, Kate’s night of alcoholic excess) she was dressed, her hair curled and her 1930’s make-up trowelled on her face.

She’d loved the weekend, and didn’t mind working the Monday at all — but good Lord, would she be happy to get her own clothes back on and have none of that greasy slap on her face for a while. Tom had shuffled off to get ready, and Kate had

other things on her mind by that point. That “other thing” was standing out the front of the museum looking just the right balance between messy and sexy. And alive! Good grief, he was alive and she was so happy to see him like that. Poor Cat. Poor Will. Horrible situation.

‘Looking good.’ Theo grinned at her. She might have told him the same, but she restrained herself. Oblivious, he threw the van keys at her. ‘Race you up there.’

‘I’ll win,’ Kate said, unlocking the van and roaring off, leaving him transporting the last of her ice-cream at a much more sedate pace.

Kate didn’t want to waste any time. Finding the newspaper had fired her into action, and there was something she was desperate to do. The morning crowds could not disperse fast enough for her, and when they did and she got the opportunity to move from the Spa, she managed to speedily wheel her bicycle into the corner and pop a sign on it.

She’d hand-painted a piece of wood with the colours she’d had left over from the very literal upcycling, and it said, in very jolly vintage lettering: Back soon! I need more ice-cream!

It was a complete lie of course, but needs must as the Devil drives. Kate hurried into the Hall, conspicuous as part of the volunteer team by grace of her wide-legged trousers and matching belted blouse; not to mention the unnaturally wavy hair. She managed to zig-zag through the crowds and headed towards the private wing of the Hall.

She was greeted at the open door with a smell of baby wipes and the sound of a squawking baby.

‘Elodie!’ she shouted. ‘Is this a good time?’

‘Come on through! We have a nappy situation but it’s contained!’

Kate followed her voice into the big, airy, comfortable lounge and found her with one of the babies already neatly buttoned into a onesie, and the other one in the process of being neatly buttoned. There were nappy bags and bottles and toys strewn everywhere.

‘Good Lord,’ Kate said. ‘This is carnage.’

‘This is motherhood. But I think we’re done. Here you are — go see Aunty Kate.’ She picked the nearest baby up — Alfie, judging by the blue and white stripes — and handed him over.

‘Oh, God. I might break him.’ Kate jiggled him a little bit. ‘Hello Alfie.’

Elodie tidied up the nappy changing gear and then picked up Freya. ‘I’m going to pop them in the pram and take them out for a walk. Everything going okay at the pool?’

Kate nodded, shifting Alfie slightly. ‘Yes, fine thanks, but there’s just one thing. I know you’re massively busy, but can you remember those ice-skates I talked to you about?’

‘Ice-skates? Oh! Yes. The broken ones, right? God, I’m sorry — I never did that digging yet, did I?’ She looked contrite and Kate felt a rush of affection for her.

‘It’s okay. I didn’t need an answer straight away, it was more of a curiosity. But I do think that one of the things relating to them is an old photograph. That should narrow the parameters for when you get a chance.’

‘Really?’ Elodie looked at Kate curiously and Kate knew she was itching to get on the case of the mysterious ice-skates. ‘How do you know that then?’ Elodie had a

certain ‘gift’ where spirits were concerned but Kate didn’t want to go there right now.

She felt her cheeks grow warm and looked down. ‘Some research I did suggested that.’ She looked up defiantly. ‘Museum research. I have my own archives.’ She didn’t think it was necessary to tell her the research and those particular archives were a direct link to Cat Tredegar’s life and memories.

‘Fair enough. And what did your research hint at?’

‘A scrapbook from around 1885. It belonged to Amelia Aldrich. The girl in the miniature in the dining room, you know?’

‘Millie? Yes, I know her. What’s the book like?’

‘It’s brown and it’s got birds and flowers on the front, all painted in black. There’s a picture in there, I think of two girls on the frozen river — and there’s another photo somewhere of a girl in a Bath chair.’

‘Ah, the Bath chair one is in the main house. And a scrapbook from 1885? Okay, that’s in the box over by the . . .’ Elodie’s voice trailed off as she thought about it. ‘. . . by the travelling trunk in the third attic. Yep. I know exactly where it is.’ She grinned. ‘In fact, I can go and get it right now — if you don’t mind looking after these two for a few minutes.’

She swung Freya towards Kate, and somehow Kate ended up having one baby on each arm. ‘That would be very kind. But don’t be too long,’ she said as Elodie hurried out of the room. ‘Please?’

* * *

By the time Elodie came back clutching the scrapbook, Kate had put both children

into the twin pram and was wheeling it back and forth to keep them happy.

‘Ta dah!’ she said, looking up as Elodie walked into the room. ‘All ready to go out.’

‘Hurrah!’ Elodie laughed. ‘Well done. Here you go.’ Kate took the scrapbook from her friend eagerly. It looked and felt so familiar that she almost sensed Millie next to her, waiting to see whether everything else had survived intact. She had to do it — she opened the book and flicked through it.

There was the rosebud, faded and powdery now, right next to the invitation. A lovely sense of warmth and belonging flowed through her and she couldn’t help but smile. She flicked through a few more pages, and something slipped out of the book a little further on. Kate caught it before it fell onto the floor and turned it over to see what it was. She wasn’t at all surprised to see that it was the ice-skating photograph. The dabs of paste Millie had popped onto the corners hadn’t held up as well as her other workmanship — her intentions had clearly come to fruition. The photograph wasn’t damaged and there were no bits of paper from the scrapbook adhering to the corners, so that meant the page mustn’t have ripped. It was perfect.

‘This is it!’ Kate was delighted. ‘This is the one I was looking for! She was right — it was never meant to stay stuck in there. That’s just so strange!’

‘Do you think so?’

Kate looked up quickly. ‘Well maybe not so much strange as . . .’ Her voice tailed off and she ended up just shrugging. ‘I don’t know,’ she said eventually. ‘I don’t think I’m meant to take the whole book away. This girl’s heart and soul went into this scrapbook and I suspect it has to stay at the Hall. Can I just borrow the picture until I can get a copy? And I can leave you the scrapbook.’

‘You can keep the photo if you like,’ replied Elodie, surprising her. ‘Display it in the

museum with the ice-skates. They work well together — I know you'll take care of it properly there. And yes, you can leave the book. You know you can always ask for it back if you want a proper look at some point. Oh! And that's what I meant to tell you — the Bath chair picture is in the stairwell. We had the chair next to it for a while, but it was too fragile to keep on display — and we found some kids climbing on it and they wrecked it, so it's packed away now.' She frowned. 'So annoying. No respect for other peoples' property. Anyway, we left the photograph there. If you can hang on another couple of minutes, I'll nip through and get it. You can have that for the museum as well.'

Without waiting for an answer, Elodie disappeared through the door Kate knew was marked 'Private' on the other side, and in a couple of minutes she was back, clutching the framed picture. Millie had kept her promise, then.

'You might be able to get it out of that frame and check the back for anything she wrote on it,' said Elodie. 'There might be something there that'll help.'

Their eyes met above the pushchair and she half-smiled. Elodie, Kate suspected, understood. She'd never mentioned messages on the back of the picture and she was willing to bet the photograph hadn't been removed from the frame in the past century or so.

'Millie's always good at leaving messages. She's a very helpful person.'

The use of the present tense didn't escape Kate; but Elodie's blue eyes were guileless and she couldn't swear to anything.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Kate hoped beyond hope that her ice-cream would sell out jolly quickly that afternoon — and her prayers were answered by about half past three in the afternoon.

She scraped the last of the vanilla out of the tub and presented it in a cone to a sullen teenage girl who obviously thought she was too cool to spend the day with her family. The teen trudged after her parents and elbowed her little sister out of the way and Kate wasn't very impressed with her. The girl should understand that she was lucky her parents actually took the time to spend the day with her. Goodness knew, Tom and Kate hadn't been used to that when they were her age.

Kate watched her walk away, then climbed onto her bicycle and pulled the walkie-talkie out of the basket. She connected to Cassie who was, she thought, somewhere near the ticket booths as Kate could hear cars driving past her.

‘Hey Cass, I’m all out of ice-cream, so I’m going to head off now — is that okay?’

Cassie’s voice came back crackling and excitable: ‘Kate! Yes, that’s fine. It all looks to be winding down now anyway. Thank you sooooo much for helping out this weekend. And thank you for listening to all my woes when I was trying to plan it. You’re a lovely friend. Really lovely.’

Kate smiled into the walkie-talkie. ‘My pleasure. I’ll take the cash box home and sort out what I owe you, yes?’

‘Perfect. I’m just wondering if the tea caravan’s nearly sold out as well. I saw Hughie pulling it before and I think they were heading back up by the Faerie Bridge to pitch it up for the night.’

‘I’ll go back to the museum that way.’ Kate looked at the last few people sunning themselves at the pool area and starting to pack their possessions away as the event drew to a close. ‘I’ll check back in with you when I find out.’

‘Thanks, you’re a peach. Catch you later!’

‘Bye for now!’ Kate ended the connection.

She pushed off on the bicycle and rang her bell, waving to the stragglers as she passed them. She cycled carefully, in that silly bow-legged manner, but she didn’t really care if her trousers got ripped now or covered in oil from the chain; because, safely stowed in the basket — inside the cash-box — were the photographs from the Hall that Elodie had lent her.

* * *

It was a nice afternoon to cycle along the neatly edged pathways of the Hall. Kate got to the fork in the gardens and headed in the direction of the bridge. From the bridge, she could take a couple of shortcuts and leave via one of the delivery routes. No clambering over fences today, not with the ice-cream bicycle to lug over after her.

She spotted the green bow-roofed gypsy caravan in its usual spot and Hughie was tugging at some grass nearby, eating his way through the estate again. His harness had been undone and he was apparently ready to go back to his stables. Horace was lying flat out next to him and they were the picture of a countryside idyll.

There was some banging and clattering going on inside the caravan and Kate dismounted, walking over to the little steps to peek in and check whoever was in there was done for the day.

‘Afternoon, Kate!’ Theo stood up, filling the caravan with his presence. ‘I’m just

reattaching some cup hooks here. They've loosened off a bit with all the travelling over the last couple of days. Are you finished too? There's been nobody over this way for a good twenty minutes or so. I'm going to lead Hughie back to the stables soon.'

'Oh!' Kate drew up short, but not without a little, unexpected shock of pleasure. Especially as Theo was shirtless, his chest smooth and tanned, his muscles rather nicely sculpted. 'I didn't expect to see you in here. I told Cassie I'd report back and let her know if things were finishing up.'

Theo looked around him and nodded. 'Yes, I suspect they are. I took over for the last hour or so. Margaret was getting motion sickness from the wobbling of the wagon. I've probably got enough milk here to spin out for a couple of cups of tea. Can I tempt you?'

Could he tempt her? Was he joking? With that body? 'I don't see why not.' She smiled, then blushed, then cleared her throat and brought her mind firmly back to the tea. 'It's a shame to just throw the milk away. I don't suppose you've got a knife in there have you? Or a screwdriver?'

'An odd request,' he replied, smiling back. 'May I ask what they would be for, before I confirm or deny the existence of those items?' He shrugged on his shirt and Kate watched the movements, her stomach squidge-ing dangerously.

'Yes, I suppose I should explain. I just want to prise a frame off an old photograph Elodie gave me for the museum.' It wasn't a lie. 'I thought I'd give it a go here.'

'In that case, I can probably find you something. Here — try this.' He handed over a sturdy, flat-ended screwdriver. It looked as if it would be ideal for the job.

'Great. I'll just tell Cassie you're closing up and then I'll have a go.'

‘Why don’t you wait up on the bridge?’ Theo suggested. ‘It’s a beautiful afternoon and there’s a bench on the rise, isn’t there? I’ll bring the tea up.’

The thought was ever so tempting. As was the fact Theo’s shirt wasn’t fully buttoned up yet and she could still see his chest. Kate tried not to stare. She squashed down Cat’s memory of hearing Will’s plans about leaving her on the bridge and nodded. ‘Sounds good to me.’ It did seem awfully appropriate that she should finally have a good look at those pictures on the Faerie Bridge.

She quickly contacted Cassie and told her the caravan was now devoid of refreshments and Hughie would return home in a little while; and then she grabbed the cash box and carried it to the apex of the Faerie Bridge, trying to stop thinking too much about touching Theo, especially about pressing closely to him again as, in her imagination, they recreated that scene she had witnessed when Will left Cat on the bridge, full of hope.

* * *

Kate was industriously digging around the edges of the photo frame with the screwdriver and Theo wondered what was so interesting that it had to be dealt with now, rather than when she got back to the museum.

‘Are you in it yet?’ he asked her as he crested the bridge with two mugs of tea.

‘Not yet, but I’m hopeful.’

Theo sat down and put the mugs on the ground between them. ‘May I have a look at the photograph?’

‘Of course.’ Kate passed the picture over, then leaned down and picked up a mug. She sat back in her seat and crossed her legs, staring out downriver.

‘Thanks.’ Theo studied the picture and saw nothing more than a girl in a Bath chair. The photograph was slightly blurry and from what he could see she was scowling into the camera. ‘Is it anyone in particular?’ He was curious now. ‘She’s got a familiar look about her.’ He cast a glance at Kate’s profile and looked back at the picture. There was a definite resemblance between them. ‘Ah! She’s a relative of yours?’

That got her attention. ‘A relative?’ Kate seemed to consider her response. ‘Perhaps. I don’t know. Maybe.’ She shrugged her shoulders. ‘That’s Catriona Tredegar. I think I’ve sort of sensed her around. Up at the museum. In the cottage. Like you did, I think.’ She looked at the ground. ‘At least I know what she looks like properly now.’

‘Cat?’ His heart thudded. No — it had all been a slip of his tongue, that’s all. Their names were similar. It was coincidence. ‘So is that why you have a fascination with her photograph?’ Theo passed it back to her. ‘Look, I think you’ve got that corner almost done.’

‘Have I?’ She took it back and inspected it. ‘So I have. I’ll concentrate on that bit then.’ She put her mug down and set to with the screwdriver again; then she paused. ‘Oh, and my fascination with her. Some of that might be explained in the other photograph as well. Look — that one.’ She passed another picture over, out of what appeared to be the cash box of the ice-cream bicycle, and Theo studied that one too.

It showed two girls, standing on a frozen river. He looked up and along the river they were straddling and recognised the sweep of the countryside around them as being the same as the topography of the photograph. The girls were wearing ice-skates and were laughing.

‘I’ve got those skates in the museum,’ Kate told him. ‘Remember? The ones you thought had been mended? I think that girl on the left is the same as the one in the Bath chair. Cat. I’m curious to know if there’s anything written on the back of the framed one, just to confirm it or something. You know?’

He nodded. He did know.

He handed the second photograph back and picked up his own mug. ‘Let me know if you need any other tools for that.’

‘I think I’ve got it now, thanks.’ The back of the frame came away with a soft pop and Kate wiped a smattering of dust off her trousers. She eased the backing card off and laid it down beside her. ‘Look! Here it is! Just like she said — a message.’

Sure enough, written in extremely neat cursive writing, was a verse:

To everything there is a season,

and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to weep, and a time to laugh

a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

This, darling Cat, is your time; a time to love.

‘Beautiful words,’ Theo said. Seeing Catriona Tredegar’s name shortened to “Cat” gave him another little chill.

Kate nodded. ‘Yes — it’s from the Bible, but I think she’s paraphrased it. It’s from a much longer piece. The first two lines there were painted onto a plough share I found at another museum. I was so intrigued I looked it up. I think the farmer was trying to motivate himself or his labourers, because the verse goes on about planting and harvesting and things. I told Tom and he said he wondered if the farmer was a

religious zealot and wanted to convert the itinerant labourers. I told him possibly not.’ She smiled, perhaps recalling the conversation.

Then she lowered her head and stared at the back of the photograph; traced the words that had been written so many years ago.

Her fingertips hovered over the last part of the verse: a time to love . ‘Do you think we always know when the time is right to take that leap of faith?’ she asked. ‘To know when the time is right to love? To know when to let someone in, no matter what might get in the way?’

He thought she was going to add to that; but she didn’t.

* * *

It was rather unsettling having Theo sitting so close to her, and she knew she wouldn’t get the answers to those questions today. It was something they both had to think about.

Instead, Kate looked down at Millie’s verse. She had chosen her words so perfectly. Kate didn’t know when she had written them though; whether it had been the day they were looking at the scrapbook or afterwards, when she knew she was dying. Whether she had framed the photograph, then prised it out herself later to write on, or—

‘ It doesn’t matter when I did it, it just matters that you read it. ’

Kate looked up quickly. The girl was so faint, she could barely make her out. Her dimples dipped in and out as she smiled. She had an armful of something that resolved itself as Hector, and even he grinned at her. Kate blinked and they were gone.

‘Did you see that?’ she asked Theo. ‘Right there? In front of us?’ She turned to him, her heart thumping.

‘See what?’

‘That!’ She flapped her hand in the direction of the dimpling ghost. ‘Her!’

‘I saw nothing. I was looking at you.’

He said it so matter of factly, that it didn’t even sound odd. She got to her feet hurriedly, shaking more than she care to admit. Little daydreams and glimpses into the past, she could, kind of, cope with. But this was a real ghost — someone who had lived years ago, yet someone she felt so close to, even now. ‘Thanks for the tea and the loan of the tools. I need to get these back to the museum. And I’m not hanging around a haunted bridge any longer than I have to.’

‘I don’t think there are any ghosts here — you’ve maybe got sunstroke? Ghosts generally don’t come out in broad daylight, or so I’ve been told.’ Theo stood up as well, collecting the mugs almost as an afterthought. He nodded towards the photographs. ‘I’ll have to come and see the photos at the museum.’

‘Yes — yes, do that. And ghosts can come out during the day.’ Hadn’t Millie already appeared to that blonde girl? Kate shivered. She could still feel Cat’s old friend around them, still smell her favourite perfume of bluebells and lilies. She jumped as something like a cold, wet nose pressed against her ankle, nudging her towards Theo. She had to get away — Millie and Hector were clearly in collusion.

He smiled, a little sadly. ‘I’ve loved spending time with you this weekend. You’re one hell of a ballet dancer. I’d kiss you goodbye, but it’s probably too dangerous. And you’ll probably tell me you have to go. I hope we meet again. I hope it is our time soon.’

He headed back down the slope of the Faerie Bridge towards the gypsy caravan as Kate stood on the bridge, seemingly unable to move despite her proclamations earlier. She understood that the whole place wanted to keep her — them — on that bridge until they'd sorted themselves out — but Theo chose that particular moment to be a gentleman, damn him, despite the electricity that was crackling in the air between them.

As Theo reached the bottom, he turned and looked back up at her. This time his smile was a little wistful. 'I meant everything I said this weekend, Kate. Don't forget that. I really don't want to leave Hartsford. I'm trying to justify some more time here, just so you know.'

Kate was usually pretty good at reading double-meaning into innocuous comments — and she definitely thought that Theo meant more in those few words than he actually said.

Hector's nose nudged her more sharply this time, and she stumbled a little. It would have been a whole lot easier if Theo had seen or felt the ghosts as well.

He might not have continued to walk away from her.

He's coming back to me. He promised.

But would he?

* * *

One day, one bright, sunny, joyful day, it finally came to him. Will lifted a mallet, and the sun glinted from the head, almost blinding him with shafts of fire.

At the same time, a horse whinnied and he heard the hooves pounding as it came

close to him — he turned quickly, and there was a girl riding it; a red-headed girl with her hair flying free. Felicia, of course, silhouetted against the sun, flames glinting through her hair.

Will dropped the mallet and sank to his knees, staring up at her, images flying through his mind, his heart pounding and his stomach churning. An intense pain shot through his head and he covered his eyes, his hands shaking . . .

He was at a forge, the smell of horses and metal around him. Sweat was dripping between his shoulder blades, and it was a hot, hot day, He had stripped to the waist, tied his hair back and was repairing some metal tools he needed to take back to the Hall. To Hartsford Hall. Then he swung the mallet over his shoulder, and strode outside. There she was — his red-headed Cat, sitting by his front door. The front door of his Suffolk cottage, with the horseshoe nailed onto the front of it.

‘Hello, Blacksmith Will.’

‘Cat!’

Conversation, laughter, as he swung her up and cradled her in his arms—

He must have called her name aloud, as he was aware of a hand touching his shoulder, and a slight figure leaning in to him, blotting out the pinky light behind his closed eyelids.

‘Will — are you unwell? What is wrong?’ A shaky laugh. ‘Did Louis scare you?’ Louis was the farm cat, a feral, tabby thing that patrolled the barns and woe betide any mouse that crossed his path.

Will uncovered his face properly and stared up at the young girl. ‘No — not Louis. It’s my Cat. My Catriona. I have to go. I know where I belong. I’m a blacksmith, and

I work for her family!’ The words tumbled out as he scrambled to his feet and towered above her. ‘But I belong with her and I have to go back.’

‘Will!’ Felicia looked astonished and then threw her arms around him. ‘Oh, you do have a cat, after all. But she is a lady. A woman. Tell me,’ she pulled away and, winking at him, teasing him out of sheer joy, ‘is she as pretty as I am?’ She did a little twirl, her cotton gown spinning out around her.

‘Ah, Felicia.’ Will picked her up around the waist and spun her around, laughing. ‘She is the most beautiful thing I ever saw. But you, you my pretty Felicia, are the second most beautiful.’ He dropped a thankful kiss on her cheek and, releasing her, turned and ran back to the farmhouse.

There was no time to waste. He had to get hold of a pen and some paper, and write to her. God knew if he would be able to find his way back to her quickly — but a letter would arrive first. A letter would tell her he was on his way home to her.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

It had been a very successful weekend, camping-wise at least. The cows hadn't bothered Theo too much on the Monday night, either; just a few mournful moos as they called to one another across the field.

But as he was lying in the tent on top of the sleeping bag, replaying the day in his mind, he thought about the sadness of parting on the bridge. He wished they'd had a little longer there; that he'd been able to forget everything else and just enjoy being with her. But he still didn't know what was happening with Poppy; and as such he was caught in a vicious circle.

He knew he wanted Poppy and Kate. That was it, really. All he'd ever wanted.

He turned over and closed his eyes; he'd decided on one more night in Suffolk after all, but he hadn't planned on spending it in the tent on his own. He was originally going to go home to Derbyshire on Monday evening — he could have covered the distance in three hours or so, and been home before ten; but instead he'd resolved that tomorrow he'd have a proper look at the Hall. He'd intended on doing that with Kate too.

The thing was, he'd been so busy over the weekend that he hadn't had time to appreciate the Hall, even though he felt a huge sense of belonging there. Theo wanted to look at the church and see the re-conditioned marble tomb they'd all been talking about. He liked anything that was hand-crafted and part of the past; and Georgiana's tomb, as he'd heard it referred to, seemed as if it would fit the bill. He'd been looking forward to hearing Kate talk about it. It was exactly the sort of thing he could imagine her getting animated about.

But it all seemed pretty hopeless now. He'd be a lucky man indeed if he got to spend any more time with Kate. He'd watched her go, then taken Hughie back to the stable — then walked all the way back to her museum and tried to see her again.

There'd been no answer at her door. He'd try again today, he determined, and failing that — perhaps he could pop a note through her letterbox?

* * *

First thing in the morning, Theo packed the camping gear up and tucked it all into the nooks and crannies of his van, then drove to the Hall — via the Folk Museum. He knocked on the door again, and there was still no answer.

Swearing under his breath, he scrabbled in the van to find something to write on. All he could come up with was a business card. It wasn't very big, and he couldn't fit everything he wanted to say on it. So, cringing inwardly at the inadequate phrase, he wrote three words on it. Call me. Please . He pushed it through the letterbox, and then he left to visit the Hall — he'd stashed a carrot in his pocket, just in case he popped in to see Hughie. Poor old fellow, he'd been unsettled as well after all that had happened.

But it seemed, once he got there, that the chap at the desk — Brian — recognised Theo.

'Ah! You're the farrier, aren't you?' Brian smiled. 'I tell you, we were so happy for you to be on site. You were such a help. I don't think old Hughie's had quite so much fun in many a year. At least he got his shoes hammered on properly.'

Despite still thinking rather too much about Kate Howard, Theo laughed. 'Hughie certainly seemed to be appreciating his fame yesterday. And that dog!' He shook his head in awe, recalling the sight of the spaniel sitting on the horse's back.

‘Horace is a character, that’s for sure! Have you come back to check Hughie out today?’

‘No, I’m just going to pass by and say well done to him. I’m visiting today as a guest. I’d like to see the Hall, properly.’

Theo opened his wallet but Brian waved the gesture away. ‘You get in for free today, my friend. As a thank you from all of us.’

‘Oh! Well thanks. If you’re sure?’

‘Very sure.’ Brian smiled and waved Theo through into the estate.

Theo thanked Brian again, and made his way to the stables. Hughie nuzzled him in a friendly fashion as he chatted to him and congratulated him on his sterling efforts over the weekend. Theo slipped Hughie the carrot and he whinnied a “thank you”, before Theo patted his nose and headed down towards the church.

It was a pleasant walk down there, and even though the festivities of the past few days had passed, there were still some visitors milling around. Theo wondered what Kate was doing today.

He wondered if he could perhaps offer a museum workshop on traditional blacksmith’s methods, which would be an excellent way to reconnect with Kate and the forge, and was working out the finer details in his head when he turned the corner into the churchyard and saw her standing in front of a stone. Theo’s heart skipped a beat and he hurried towards her. She had a bunch of wildflowers in her hand and as he approached, she dropped to one knee and placed the flowers on the grassy mound. Someone had been there before her. She paused, then trailed her fingers down the stems of the blue cottage garden flowers gently, moving her smaller posy closer towards them.

Theo hung back. It seemed as if it was a private moment and he didn't want to intrude, so he moved away and stood in the shade of a yew tree, giving her the privacy she needed.

She knelt for a couple of minutes, touched the stone gently and stood up; then she hurried into the church and disappeared into the gloom beyond the door.

He watched her go, then suddenly, his mobile buzzed in his pocket. A sickening feeling came over him; he was miles away from home and what if it was something relating to Poppy . . . ?

He frowned as he checked his phone. An email. From the social worker who was dealing with Poppy's case:

Dear MrKent, We have received the DNA test results back in relation to Poppy. The results confirm that you are indeed Poppy's biological father, and therefore, we look forward to discussing the options open to you . . .

For a moment Theo felt almost dizzy with relief and was grateful for the nearby tree trunk he could lean on. Poppy was his. No one else's. Now he could move on, sort things out. It was an indescribable feeling and a bubble of sheer joy burst through him.

He had a daughter and he'd make damn sure he was the one looking after her from now on.

* * *

'I wish Millie was here today.' Her brother was subdued. His face was all fuzzy and she realised she was looking at him through a veil. 'She wouldn't have missed this for the world. But you, dearest Cat, do look beautiful.'

Her dress was cream satin, and was more ornate than anything she had ever had before. The skirt and the train were ridiculously heavy and she carried a posy of flowers in her hands. Charles was linking her arm. They were in the entrance porch of the Hall church and she was, to all intents and purposes, getting ready to head down the aisle.

Kate could remember laying the posy on the grave — she could remember hurrying into the church; but it seemed once she had stepped over that threshold and her feet had connected with the ancient flagstones she had, quite simply, slipped into Cat's life again; as easy as that. With no warning.

Her stomach lurched. The beautiful dress was all well and good. The solid companionship of her brother was exactly what she needed. But who the hell was she marrying? She couldn't very well ask Charles. It would be as big a surprise to her when that inner door opened, as it would be to her future husband when he saw her looking like a cupcake in all this flouncy confectionery. It was bloody warm dressed up like that as well. And she assumed, as Charles was giving her away, their parents hadn't bothered to turn up either. Nothing much changes. I bet they wouldn't turn up nowadays either if one of us was getting married.

But she couldn't think about them now. The pain of loss was horribly evident on her brother's face and she owed him this much at least — she knew that he should have been the one getting married this springtime, not her. She thought again of her Tom that morning and that weirdly cryptic little conversation they'd had. Perhaps she understood some of it now, but she didn't want to think about it too deeply — not here.

'Millie is here in spirit, Charles.' It sounded stupidly trite but it was true. She could feel her, so very close to her that she half-expected her to twitch at the back of her train and straighten it out.

‘I’d like a pale blue bridesmaid’s dress,’ she’d told her. They were still pretending it wasn’t going to happen, even as she lay propped up in bed, so frail and weak that they both knew she’d never make it beyond the winter, never mind into springtime—

Charles’s voice broke into the memory — Cat’s memory. ‘It’s why she wanted to be buried close to the path,’ he said, with a faint smile. ‘She told me she didn’t want to miss anything.’

‘I’ll give her my bouquet. She’ll like that.’

‘She will. Anyway; she would want us to be happy and celebrate today. I think we’ve both had enough heartbreak to last a lifetime, don’t you? So let us rejoice over the fact you’re getting a second chance!’

Kate moved into him in an awkward hug, and he laid his cheek briefly against her hair. ‘Damn hairpin just stuck in me, Cat,’ he murmured.

It wasn’t much of a joke, but it made them both giggle.

It was odd to think that she was about to experience walking down this aisle over one hundred years before Elodie — who’d done it twice, let’s face it — yet Kate didn’t have a clue who was waiting for her.

She looked over her shoulder towards Millie’s grave. The marble was freshly carved and the letters gilded perfectly. An angel stood watch over her and the grass had begun to grow over the sad little mound. An abundance of crocuses had shown their faces over the last few days and the area around the grave was a riot of purple and lilac. She would have loved it.

At the moment, the grave was also decorated with Dog; Hector lay amongst the blooms, a blue ribbon around his neck, his tongue hanging out. He was part of today

too but Kate knew he wouldn't come inside the church. He would stay here with Millie, just to keep her company.

A shadow flitted behind the yew trees, and Kate caught the movement out of the corner of her eye. Had she been a fanciful person, she might have thought it was a ghost, but practicality told her that nobody had ever seen one in this churchyard. In the Hall itself, yes — what with the nurseries and even perhaps that beautiful, ethereal shade she'd come across on the Faerie Bridge. Her heart twisted once more at the loss of Millie.

And, of course, there was the legend of the ubiquitous highwayman in the woods, riding through it on his way somewhere. He didn't interact with anyone; he just hurtled past and disappeared.

So she turned back to the door, dismissing the shadow as a villager come for a little peek at the wedding, and took a deep breath. 'I'm ready, Charles.' This was certainly going to be interesting.

* * *

The cart rocked and bounced over every rut in the road. Will hung on, wishing the horse would go faster, wishing he could outpace it by running.

He'd managed to get a train to Ipswich, and had started to walk back to Hartsford, hitching lifts where he could from passing farm workers and carts. He had been so lucky, he thought it was Fate — he had managed to pick up a ride from the cooper, who worked in the next village to Hartsford — yes, he could certainly take Will there, it was a lovely day for it, wasn't it? He'd heard tell there was to be a wedding today, and if he was lucky, Will might be able to join in the celebrations.

Will's stomach twisted with a sense of foreboding. 'Who's getting wed?' he asked,

trying to keep his voice steady.

The cooper waved his hand in the vague direction of the Hall. ‘Someone at the big house. One of the girls. Well,’ he took his cap off briefly, ‘the girl that’s left, that would be.’

‘The girl that’s left ?’ Will clutched the side of the cart. ‘Has one of them moved away? Already been wed?’

‘No, lad.’ The cooper smiled at him sadly. ‘Not so many months since the family lost their girl.’

‘Good God. Which one?’ Will dreaded the answer.

‘LadyAmelia, God rest her soul. Consumption.’

Will felt sick. That was bad enough; that was horrendous . But it also meant—

‘So the wedding — it’s MissCatriona?’

‘Ah, yes! That would be her name.’ The cooper nodded.

‘Please.’ Will’s voice was desperate. ‘Hurry. I have to get there.’

* * *

Charles gave a nod to the curate who appeared out of nowhere and opened the door into the church. The organ began to play and she was on her way. Kate stepped into the nave and the congregation turned to catch sight of her; but there was only person she wanted to see: her groom.

A man was standing at the altar, dressed in a grey suit. He turned and their eyes met. Edward Mountfort smiled at her and she stopped dead in her tracks.

Charles clutched her arm tightly, fearing, Kate thought, that she was going to stumble or fall. ‘Are you all right?’ he asked in a low voice.

She nodded dumbly, but all she could think at that moment was this:

Thank God this isn’t my real life. I never actually wanted to get married to Chris. He would have probably had his mobile in his frock-coat pocket and have a honeymoon in Canada or somewhere that he could co-ordinate with a business meeting. His eyes would never have settled on her for very long; he’d be thinking of the next thing he had to do; quite possibly, even the next girl he could do.

And where would they have lived? Chiswick, she guessed. Being a girlfriend and living in Suffolk was one thing, but his wife? He would be under no obligation to move up here with her, she knew that, although he’d half-promised before the consultancy took off — but it would have been nice to think it had been a possibility. When they’d had children, perhaps, and wanted to do the whole ‘move to the country’ thing. But she hadn’t wanted to have children with Chris. Ever.

She felt quite sick.

‘It’s just a big commitment,’ she managed to whisper, ‘in the eyes of God and all that.’ It seemed a more appropriate comment.

Charles said nothing, he just squeezed her arm and she pasted a smile on her face.

She had to remember — this wasn’t her life. This was Cat’s life. Will was dead. Edward had apparently asked her to marry him. And she’d said yes.

However, she paused briefly; resisted the gentle tug of her brother.

Then she looked up at him: ‘D’you know, Charles, I don’t think I can do it.’

‘What?’ Charles’ eyes widened. He stopped and looked down at her, horrified. ‘Cat! What do you mean?’

‘He was . . . being . . . unfaithful.’ She blushed, trying to think of a suitable way of describing it. ‘He was in amorous congress with Maria’, was probably something he’d understand better — but it sounded a bit weird to her twenty-first century ears, and she didn’t think she could say it without giggling inappropriately anyway.

‘Unfaithful? Cat!’

‘Yes. He was — kissing — Maria.’ Oh, he was doing more than kissing her, but she couldn’t really tell Charles that.

‘Kissing Maria ? Good Lord—’

‘Shhh! You can’t say that in a church! It’s like blasphemy or something.’

‘Well, really, Cat. Is that all they were doing?’

‘Actually no.’ She blushed. ‘There was . . . more than, uhm . . . kissing.’ Good grief! ‘They were in . . . convivial society.’

‘Cat!’

They were still just inside, quite close to the entrance porch and the congregation were becoming restless.

‘Is the bride quite well?’ Someone materialised at the side and Kate looked at them, without really seeing them.

‘Yes. Thank you. I’m just very nervous.’

‘Cat—’

Kate had to squash down the feeling of impending doom as she looked again at Edward. But this wasn’t her life. It was Cat’s life, and whatever she felt in the modern-day world had nothing to do with how Cat had felt — surely. She felt the sweat begin to prickle across her forehead and wondered if she could fall down in a supposed faint and play the terrified virgin bride to put it off a little longer.

She took a deep breath and steadied herself. ‘Charles — what should I do?’

‘If you don’t want to do it, then don’t do it!’

‘But I’d be letting everyone down!’

‘Sod everyone.’

‘Charles!’ Kate looked around helplessly. The vicar was looking perplexed and she really didn’t like the pressure. Why on earth had Cat allowed it to get to this point? She must have wanted to marry him — rebound, loneliness, forgiveness — whatever had been in Cat’s head, she had made the decision to marry Edward and Kate had to abide by it.

‘I’ll do it. I’ll do it. It’s what she would have wanted,’ she heard herself say. Charles started, and she realised he would assume she meant Millie. She pressed her lips together and nodded. ‘Yes. I’ll do it. Come on.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’ No, not at all.

‘Very well.’ His fuzzy face didn’t look convinced but she took a determined step forwards, forcing him to walk alongside her, and they started to make their way slowly and elegantly down the aisle of Hartsford church.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

Kate tried to maintain some sort of distance as she walked with Charles. Psychologically, she knew it wasn't her and the words she would say meant nothing to Kate Howard of contemporary Hartsford. She was also aware they would clearly mean a lot to Catriona Aphrodite Tredegar (who would cringe when her full name was read out during the ceremony), but still, part of Kate railed at the process by which Cat was tying herself to Edward for the rest of her life. It had been an unpleasant shock seeing Chris again, even in the guise of Edward, and she really didn't like it.

When she was finally next to her bridegroom, the vicar cleared his throat and began his little speech. The words washed over Kate as she tried to concentrate on the fact that this was Cat's wedding and Cat's decision.

'Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this Congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy Matrimony . . . honourable estate . . . mystical union . . . ordained for the procreation of children . . . Therefore, if any man can show any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace—'

Oh, Will.

* * *

The cooper had barely pulled up outside the lychgate, when Will leapt off and hurtled up the path to the church door. The first thing he was aware of was Hector, lying by a gravestone, his chin on his paws and a blue ribbon around his neck.

The dog looked up as Will approached and leapt to his feet, barking joyfully. He bounded off the patch of flattened grass he'd been guarding, ran towards Will, then streaked ahead of him to the door.

Will was just about to shoulder it open, when he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye; a bright blue flicker, the colour of the heavens. He couldn't help but look, and he saw her.

The dimpled smile was unmistakeable and she directed that smile right at him. 'Do hurry up!' was all she said. And then she was gone.

'I'm doing my best, Millie,' he whispered. Then the door gave under his weight.

* * *

The thought of Will rushed in from nowhere, tearing Kate up inside, as if it had been her own subconscious saying it, and a fleeting image of Theo came into her head. She didn't have time to process it much further though; there was a sound of the door slamming open, a frenzied barking and running footsteps coming into the church, skittering claws echoing around them.

'I shall speak!'

The voice was loud, confident and not an ounce of deference was shown to anybody in that congregation.

The skittering stopped, and Kate spun around. Will Haddon was standing there, Hector at his heels, staring at her. His dark eyes were drilling into hers, full of pain and anguish and love. 'I shall speak,' he continued and took two steps forward. 'They cannot marry.'

‘What the hell ?’ That was Edward, and the vicar sucked in his breath in horror.

‘Oh, my word,’ muttered Charles, hiding his face in his palms and shaking his head.

‘What a bloody time to turn up. What timing!’

‘Will!’ Kate stared at him, and, hitching her skirts up, ran towards him, forgetting Cat was supposed to be marrying the man in the suit at the altar who had tried to grab at her to stop her running off. She tossed her veil over her head so she could see clearly and continued up the aisle — and not in the direction she was supposed to be heading on her wedding day.

‘Cat. My love — my only love.’ Will took a few more steps forward and they met in the middle. He held his hands out.

Kate dropped her bouquet on the floor and clasped them, her heart pounding so much she felt faint. ‘You’re alive!’ She searched his face. It was a little thinner, his eyes darker and more haunted, his hair longer than it had been. He was tanned and looked as if he had been working out of doors. ‘Where on earth were you? All this time?’ His hands were calloused, rough against hers, but so warm and so real, she never wanted to let them go again.

He lowered his voice and spoke only to her, his eyes burning into hers. ‘You probably know the steamer I was on sank, but I managed to cling onto some wreckage and got picked up by a fishing boat off the coast of Belgium. It took me ashore, but I had no clue where I was and I took a fever and when I woke up I didn’t remember a thing. I had nothing, no identification, no money — nothing. A family took me in and I stayed with them for a while. I worked my debt off to them on their farm, and then managed to pick up some work here and there on my way to France, and eventually, I reached Calais. I had just enough by then for passage back. And then I worked my way up the country to you. I’m sorry. I had no way of contacting you for so long — and then when I could, God alone knows whether the letters

reached you.'

Kate shook her head — she didn't know if Cat had received anything or not but seriously doubted it, otherwise why would she have agreed to marry Edward? Unless . . .

She became aware of an uncontrollable sobbing, and looked over at her aunt, who was a sickly, pale colour and pressing her handkerchief to her mouth. 'Oh, why did you do it? Why ?' she was repeating hysterically.

'Damn you woman!' That was her uncle, on his feet and almost apoplectic with rage. 'Can't you keep your mouth shut?' He gestured wildly to Cat. 'To stop something like this damnable aberration occurring! If she'd had the letter, then she would have been off, and how the hell would we have explained that to her damn parents? Damn and blast it!' He stared across at Cat, then pointed. 'Don't think it's going to happen. I'll see him laid out before it does—'

'Please! This is a church!' the vicar had clearly had enough of people blaspheming in there today.

Kate just shook her head, her gaze returning to Will. She knew it was all an empty threat. Her uncle could bluster all he liked, but Will was here. Will was with her. And he hadn't travelled all the way back to be told they couldn't be together. May the vicar forgive her, but she didn't give a damn about being party to such an aberration. In fact, she looked forward to it. she realised with a wicked little shiver of anticipation.

Oh, Will!

'Were you outside? Just before the ceremony?' She was breathless, her voice trembling with excitement and delight. He was back, and he was standing in the

church, holding her hands. Will was back !

Will looked a little perplexed, a frown creasing his dear, dear face. ‘No, my love — I just arrived a few moments ago. I was dropped off by the cooper’s cart outside and raced straight in. He told me what was happening. I’m sorry I look so dishevelled. I—’ His expression changed and he suddenly looked horrified and embarrassed, all at the same time. ‘Oh, no — tell me I’m not too late. Or please, God, tell me you won’t do it now? You won’t marry him. Or have I just made the world’s biggest fool of myself? Do you still love me, in fact? Have I still got a chance? If not, I’ll walk out of here and walk out of your life. I’ll—’

‘Shhh. No. Stop it.’ Kate stood on tiptoe and kissed him, to a chorus of astonished gasps from the congregation. He responded hungrily, the outpouring of so many months of sadness and longing crystallising in that kiss.

He drew her closer and laid his forehead against hers, closing his eyes. She could feel he was shaking, but he was real and warm and solid — and alive! Cat was the luckiest woman on the planet, she really was. ‘Oh, Cat. How I’ve missed you.’

‘I thought you were dead! I don’t know how I’ve made it this far without you,’ Kate murmured, her own voice breaking. It seemed as if she wasn’t even speaking the words; they were coming straight from Cat’s consciousness, straight from her heart.

‘Catriona!’ Edward’s voice was sharp. ‘This is ridiculous.’

His hand came down on her shoulder and she stiffened.

‘No, Edward,’ she replied. This time it was all Kate — and maybe she was superimposing her experiences of Chris onto this nineteenth century rake, but whatever it was, she said her piece. ‘What is ridiculous is you being unfaithful before we’re even married. It’s ridiculous that you think I could ever trust you in marriage or

in anything else. You charmed your way back into my life and my affections, and all the time you were secretly seeing another woman. Oh, don't look so surprised — I saw you, Edward. I saw you by the dovecote and I saw everything. I'm really not willing to tie myself to someone like you for life. I need a man I can trust and who will — look after me.' Okay, maybe that bit was for Cat's benefit. It sounded kind of appropriate for a Victorian girl to say.

'Cat!' Edward was scarlet, apparently holding his temper in, but not very happy to have been called out like that on his wedding day.

'I don't love you. I thought I did, but you were second best. It's Will I want to marry.' There was a rumble of disbelief from the congregation. It was, quite clearly, out of character for a girl in 1886 to specify such things. But in for a penny, in for a pound. Kate cast a quick glance at Charles. He was sitting on the edge of a pew bent double now. His shoulders were shaking, and she knew on some level he was laughing silently at her. It was probably a laughter born of embarrassment, but she had never been particularly compliant anyway. And neither, it seemed had Cat. Wild and adventurous? Well, what she had done was quite wild and adventurous for a Victorian girl anyway. It was a start; and incredibly liberating, actually.

'Can we go, Will? Would you take me out of here?'

'Certainly, my love.' He kissed her again. She leaned down and picked her bouquet up. There was something very special she needed to do with it, before she left this little scenario behind. Will lifted her hand to his and kissed it, and their eyes met. Yet his eyes were so familiar and so very — Theo — that Kate's heart skipped a little beat.

Surprisingly, as they turned their backs on an astonished vicar and a scarlet-faced, shouting bridegroom, a cheer broke out from Cat's cousin and his friends, and Kate couldn't help but dip her head and smile as she walked out of the church on Will's

arm. It was probably the best entertainment the young men had had in ages.

Kate looked up at where she had seen the shadow in amongst the yew trees. It flitted into view again as it passed behind a cluster of shrubbery.

For a moment, the shape wavered into focus and she saw Theo — the real Theo of this last weekend, sunburned, dressed in his shorts and an open shirt with a white top beneath it. She blinked and they stared at each other. Her stomach somersaulted as she held onto Will's arm and the church bells began to chime midday.

'I should probably tell you that I saw Millie,' she heard Will say. 'She was out here, waiting. She told me to hurry. I'm so sorry.'

Kate had no words. She bit her lip and nodded, and just had time to place her bouquet on Millie's grave, and whisper some private words to her before she pitched back up in her own world, on the path outside the church.

She was alone — no congregation hurrying out after her, no jilted bridegroom. No Will. No wedding bouquet on Millie's grave, which was now weathered and, although still well-tended, very obviously old. The posy of wildflowers she'd left on it seemingly moments ago was nothing but a bright memory of the girl she had once known. The blue flowers next to Kate's posy shone out from the grass. Kate needed nobody to tell her that Tom had left those — but how or why he knew about his connection to Millie was probably not something he would elaborate on any time soon. It was enough for her to know he had grasped it. Hartsford looked after its own; the Hall made sure everyone who mattered understood their place in its history.

Instinctively, Kate looked up at the group of yew trees. Theo Kent was still there, hands in his pocket, dressed exactly the same as she'd seen him just before. Perhaps the ever-present veil had dropped a little in Cat's world for them both; because Theo was looking at her very curiously indeed.

* * *

Kate and Theo were staring at each other as if, Theo thought, they'd each of them seen a ghost. He wasn't sure what he had seen to be honest. It was Kate, but for a moment as she'd stepped out of the shadows of the porch, she'd looked different. Her clothes were different, and she seemed to have been suffused with some sort of light. It made her long, white dress glow and then it just faded into nothingness; and there she was in her denim skirt, her black top, her black leggings and her ankle boots. Her cheeks were still tinged pink from yesterday's sun and her freckles stood out.

'It's you!' she exclaimed. She took a couple of steps towards him, then pulled herself up short. 'I mean, I wasn't expecting to see you here.' She dropped her head and mumbled, 'I thought you'd gone back.'

'I stayed an extra night. I'm here. I spotted you over there, but I didn't want to disturb you. Listen, Kate—'

'No! Please Theo. No.'

'Kate—'

'No! Look — talk about something else. Talk about the Hall — don't talk about yesterday! Please.'

'Okay.' He cast around for something, anything to focus on. 'Something else.' Anything to keep her here, anything to maintain that closeness to her. He nodded towards the grave she'd been standing at. 'Is it a special one? It looks really old.'

'She's the one who wrote the verse on the back of that photograph. She died in 1886 — she was only in her early twenties. It's sad really.' Kate looked relieved that he'd changed the subject. 'She was called Millie. But it says Amelia here. Amelia Violet. I

suspect she loved all the different shades of blue and purple. She's the one I think I saw on the bridge. Silly, huh? There'll be crocuses here in the spring, you know. It'll be a pretty spot.'

Theo nodded in agreement, seeing the long leaves that were evidence of those spring flowers. 'People often didn't last long in those days. It could have been a fever or anything.'

'A fever.' Kate blushed and for a moment she seemed to be miles away; then she looked back at him, almost searchingly. 'It was consumption. Poor thing. It can't have been pleasant.'

'I suspect not.' Theo folded his arms. 'This chap here, just where I am,' he pointed with his foot to a half-hidden stone, 'I don't know what finished him off. There's a horseshoe on the top and anchor on the bottom. So it was a horse or a boat — I'm not too sure.'

'Seriously?' Kate wove her way through some graves and came over to where he was standing. Theo moved to one side so she could see the stone clearly.

'It's a memorial stone,' she said after a moment. 'I don't think there's anybody buried here.' She hunkered down and moved some grass and old leaves off the stone, which lay flat in the ground. The words engraved on the top were barely legible, but she leaned in and traced the carvings out with her fingertips, trying to interpret the name.

'Wm. Haddon,' she said after a moment. 'B.15thApril 1860, D.5thJuly 1885, victim of the SS Victoria Disaster. Always loved, never forgotten. Heri fuit nostri.'

'Heri what?'

'I think it means "yesterday was our time".' She looked up at Theo, and surprisingly

she smiled. 'It's for William, the blacksmith on the estate. They thought he'd died, but he didn't. He came back. You saw his house, remember?'

'Ah! Yes. I remember it very well.' Theo kneeled down next to her to get a better look at the stone. 'And I guess if he was supposed to go down in a shipping disaster, that's what the anchor symbolises.'

'I guess.' She picked at a bit of moss with her nail, then gave up. 'I need to get permission to tidy this up. It's not right that he should be hidden away here and neglected. I think he's got just as much right to a tidy memorial as anyone — even though his body is probably miles away. I think he wanted to travel and work abroad. Maybe he succeeded, maybe he didn't. But they thought he'd died and it's all part of Hartsford's history anyway. He was in love with Cat, the girl who owned the ice-skates, and he never stopped loving her; and he came back for her, just like he promised. I think he probably deserves something in my museum, you know. Something to go with the story of Cat's ice-skates.'

'Yes. Of course.' He shivered a little, remembering his experiences there. This was as good a time as any to float one of his crazy suggestions past her, especially if she was considering doing something relating to the blacksmith anyway. 'I don't suppose anyone has ever considered really rebuilding the furnace, have they? It could help you with the interpretation of the site. Help to tell Will's story. You could have demonstrations.'

'It's basically a pile of rubble. I don't know who we'd get in with the experience to do it.'

'What about that Aidan guy from the Hall weekend? The one with the motorbike? I'm sure he would do it, and if not, he would probably know someone who could.'

Kate looked at him, a spark of interest in her eyes. 'The Aidan who Cassie's falling

over herself to spend time with — that Aidan?’

‘Yeah.’ Theo shrugged his shoulders. ‘It’s a thought anyway. I’d be happy to be a consultant if he needed it.’ He stood up and held his hand out to help her up. She hesitated for a moment then took it.

He pulled Kate to her feet and she stumbled. He grabbed her other hand to steady her, and for one bright moment, they caught each other’s eyes and the world stopped turning. Theo didn’t know whether to drop her hands and step back; or to lean down and kiss her.

He chose the latter.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:19 am

When he leaned down to her, Kate ducked out of his way and stepped aside. ‘No. No, Theo. I’m sorry. I can’t. Not here, not now.’

The memory of Cat standing on the Faerie Bridge, dressed in her beautiful gown, and Will telling her he was leaving suddenly burst into her mind and blotted out everything else. Then she remembered how Will had come back for Cat. What Cat had felt, seeing him there when she thought everything was lost to her. *Heri fuit nostri*. Yesterday was our time. And how she had grabbed a future with the man she loved, out of the wreckage of her past. Lucky, lucky Cat.

But —

She took a deep, shaky breath. ‘None of us can live in the past, Theo. It doesn’t work out like it did for Cat and Will for everyone—’ She shook her head, unable to finish the sentence, desperate to just give herself up to him right there and then, but still raw from the day before. If ever she had felt lost, she felt it now. But he had to sort his life out before she could commit to him wholeheartedly.

If Theo thought it was a weird thing to say, he didn’t comment. Instead, he stood in front of her, hopelessly, almost, his arms by his side.

Then he wrapped them around his body, a mixture of pain and honesty in his eyes. ‘You’re right. And Kate, my love, I have to tell you something. What I’m going to say doesn’t for one moment change how I feel about you, but I have to be honest. Poppy’s my daughter. They’ve just confirmed it. I’m going to fight for her. I want her with me.’

Kate just stared up at him, her eyes wide. ‘Yours? She’s yours?’

Theo nodded. ‘She’s mine.’

Kate couldn’t even speak for a few moments. Things were shifting and changing in ways she had never anticipated. He had a daughter. He really had a daughter. And that daughter had a mother.

‘So, do we need to talk about what happens next?’ Theo’s voice was quiet, trying she knew, to keep his emotions in check.

‘Whatever that will be, is up to you.’ Kate looked up at Theo, her voice equally unsteady. She turned her attention back to the stone beneath her feet. ‘He really did love Cat, you know. And she,’ she looked up at him again, ‘loved him. She still does. I think.’

More silence. Then he apparently lost his resolve. He reached out, and drew her towards him. This time, she didn’t resist as he pulled her closer and leaned his forehead on hers.

‘I guess,’ he said quietly, ‘it’s a start?’

‘I can’t promise you anything. Like I said, it’s up to you. Someone once told me they didn’t like sharing. I can share some things. I can share a little girl’s life, but I can’t share the man I think I love with her mother. You have to decide what you really want, Theo. It’s more important than ever, because now you do have a daughter. It’s got to be me and Poppy. Or Lori and Poppy.’

Then she bit her lip, and broke away.

* * *

He watched her walk out of the churchyard. He knew that time was running out and he had to go back to Derbyshire; his van was packed and he had a life up there which didn't involve Hartsford.

He had Poppy to think about and Lori — what the hell was he supposed to do about Lori? He had a feeling this new development would send her hurtling back to him in some way, begging forgiveness and wanting to try again and promising the earth. But he didn't want her. Not at all.

Kate's face came back into his mind; her warm touches, her soft kisses, her laughter. The way he knew exactly where he was with her; the fact that he wasn't on edge when he was with her. With Lori, there was only incessant worry. The constant thought that she'd do something crazy; that if he left Poppy with her, Poppy would be dragged into it all. Poppy deserved so much more. She was only two.

He stared around the churchyard and looked down at the memorial stone. There was a feeling like something was starting up again; as if the gears in some giant clock were creaking back into use.

He shivered and pushed the thought away. He cast a glance at the church door where he'd seen her coming out in a white dress and catching his eye.

He wasn't sure if he'd seen the past, the present or the future. But he very much hoped it was the latter.

* * *

Kate hurried back to the Folk Museum, the back way, of course, trying not to catch sight of Cassie or Elodie or anyone she knew — she didn't want to go into why she was a snotty, soggy mess. Which made it worse when she actually did get to the museum and Jenna was there, in reception, looking guilty as hell.

‘Oh!’ Kate pulled up short and Jenna stared at her.

Jenna tossed something in the bin, then folded her arms defensively. ‘Junk mail. My last duty in this shit-hole. You’re welcome.’ She nodded her head briefly.

‘Last duty? Please — tell me that’s the truth?’ Kate didn’t care how awful that sounded. She really was in no mood to cross swords with Jenna today. In fact — ‘What the hell are you doing here anyway? We’re closed.’

‘Yes. I’m returning the key.’ She tossed it onto the bench where it landed with a metallic clatter. ‘And handing this in. My resignation. You’re welcome ,’ she repeated.

‘Well, thank the Lord for small mercies.’ Kate snatched it from her and scanned it. She looked up at her. ‘This says the date you’re leaving is today?’

‘Yes.’ Jenna inspected her fingernails. ‘You probably owe me holiday.’

‘I do not.’

‘Then I’m exercising my right not to work my notice.’

Kate wasn’t exactly sure if there was a right for that or not. She left all the HR stuff to, well, the HR people and the Board. Whatever.

Instead, she nodded briefly. ‘Resignation accepted.’

‘Good. Because you haven’t got a say in it really. Daddy says I’ve done enough. I’ve paid him back for that stupid holiday, which I couldn’t go on anyway, because I was in this fucking pit.’

Kate was in no mood to entertain the girl's petty whines either. And because this was possibly going to be her last chance to find out a few things, she had to ask. 'Jenna, did you ever sleep with my brother.'

'God, yes, of course .' An eye-roll, implying that Kate really was as stupid as she looked.

'And Chris?' Kate thought she knew that answer, but she needed to hear it. She remembered again all the times he'd disappeared early and Jenna had come in late . . . now it made sense.

'Yes. Sorry.' A smirk. She wasn't sorry, of course she wasn't. 'Once or twice. Maybe three times.' A shrug. 'Four? Who's counting.'

'And,' the words would choke her, she knew, but she had to say them, 'with Theo Kent?'

Jenna's ruby-red lips twitched up at the corners. 'See you around, Kate.' She turned on her heel and stalked out of the museum.

Kate watched her leave, speechless. Knowing Jenna, that could have meant anything. She was more annoyed at the fact that Jenna might have moved in on Theo than she was with the fact that she had definitely been with Chris. And she found she couldn't leave it like that with Theo; not at all.

She was one hundred percent not going to share him with Lori, she knew that — but she wanted a chance to talk to him again, sensibly, without the shadows of Will and Cat lurking around. Perhaps they could sort things out properly. Perhaps she could give them a second chance again today.

It only took a moment for her to grab her car keys and run outside again. She put the

car in gear and drove off, towards the campsite, her heart pounding as she imagined all the things she'd say to him. This was when, hopefully, everything slotted into place and the stars aligned and they finally had their time together.

It was the biggest gut-wrench of her life when she drove into that campsite and pulled up at the spot where his tent had been.

Because Theo Kent had packed up and left, without so much as a half-chewed carrot on the ground to say he'd ever been there.

* * *

Theo was all Kate had thought about, the whole of that Tuesday night as she tossed and turned in bed and knotted herself up in the sheets so thoroughly that she struggled out of them at two thirty in the morning and kicked them off.

She knew what she was going to do. She padded across the bedroom floor and headed down the staircase that led into the museum, relishing the cool stonework on the soles of her feet. She walked all the way through the museum until she came to Will's cottage and she stood in the middle of his room, looking around as the shapes and shadows resolved themselves out of the darkness.

It was only the museum cottage, though. It wasn't really Will's cottage. Kate might have heard a snuffling, and she might have felt a cold, wet nose brush against her ankle. It might have been Hector coming to see her, but it could just as easily have been her imagination. She supposed in Cat's timeline, Will had left the place; at the very least, he'd moved out of the cottage when he left to travel and someone else had moved in. She didn't know where they had gone after the wedding-that-wasn't-a-wedding. Perhaps Cat would have had no reason ever to come back here? The thought was sobering. Kate wondered if that meant it was over — her visits to the past had ended. Her life and Cat Tredegar's life had finally diversified. They were no

longer travelling the same path.

She had lost Theo, just as much as Cat had seemingly lost Will.

Second chances sucked, they really did, if everyone involved felt differently.

‘I guess this is really goodbye, then,’ said Kate. She listened, very carefully, but nobody answered her.

* * *

The drive back to Derbyshire was never-ending. Theo got stuck in some sort of tailback on the M1 and he was having a hard time concentrating on his driving as it was. Thoughts of Poppy and Kate were tumbling through his mind; and the spectre of Lori was there too, creeping into the corners of it.

‘Oh, for God’s sake!’ he said out loud, and swung his car away from the direction of his rented stone-built cottage near Matlock, and headed instead towards a newer estate of characterless, two-dimensional-looking brick houses. This was where Lori and Poppy lived. Well — currently just Lori on her own, thank goodness. Poppy was still safe, and he had already rung the solicitors and the social workers and had an idea in his head of how to progress on that one. But there were things he needed to say to Lori.

He too had lived on this estate, when they’d been ‘on’ — and he knew it was never an estate he’d fitted into. The neighbours he’d met clearly thought he was the one at fault. All they saw was a young woman with a baby, and a man coming and going. Lori had quite a creative mind, to put it politely, and he knew the stories would not be very complementary to him at all.

Sure enough, he saw some of the curtains twitch as he pulled onto the shared

driveway and debated whether to wave at them or just ignore them and walk straight up to the door. He decided on the latter, and briefly wondered what Kate would have done. The thought made a bittersweet smile twitch at the corners of his mouth. But he pushed the image of her smile away, took a deep breath and rapped on the door.

He stood a few minutes, then tried again. Eventually, there was a movement from behind the door and it cracked open.

Lori peered out, looking dishevelled and her eyes widened as she saw him. ‘Theo!’ Her voice was slurred and Theo’s heart sank. Lori drunk was ten times worse than Lori sober.

‘Hello Lori. May I come in?’

‘It’s a bit awkward,’ she said, flicking a glance over her shoulder. ‘Poppy’s asleep and you can’t be waking her up.’

His heart pounded. ‘Poppy’s here? Then I’ve got to come in. I need to see her.’ I need to take my daughter and get her away from you! Why the hell had nobody told him she’d been returned when he’d been speaking to people earlier about it?

Lori just shook her head and made to shut the door. Theo put his hand on the door and pushed against it. He leaned in as close as he dared, and Lori’s breath reeked of alcohol and something he really hoped wasn’t marijuana.

‘Lori, Poppy’s my daughter. I’m coming in. You’re in no fit state to look after her today.’

‘I know she’s your daughter. And if you come back tomorrow you can see her and we can decide what to do.’ Lori smiled, lopsidedly and made her eyes wide and innocent. Theo saw her pupils were like little pinpricks and he didn’t like it much. ‘I think she

needs two parents, and it's something we can talk about tomorrow.' Then, quite frighteningly, her face crumpled and she squeezed a tear out. 'I'm too upset today to deal with it. It's a big thing.' She raised her voice, so the neighbours would hear her if they so desired. 'I mean, you abandoned us, and all she asks is "where's Daddy, where's Daddy"'. And I had to get all those paternity tests before you'd accept your responsibilities!'

'Lori! That's a lie and you know it! And what the hell have you been taking?'

She didn't answer; but her gaze raked over him and suddenly she gave one of her little smiles. It reminded Theo of Jenna, back at the Folk Museum. It was predatory; there was no other word to describe it. And Lori was pretty much pickled. She only ever smiled like that when she was two drinks away from passing out. A prickle of unease ran up his spine. He knew, now, he had parental rights — but did that give him the right to walk in there and get his daughter? He didn't know.

Then he realised he didn't care. 'Look — don't even answer that. I'm coming in now.'

Lori went to slam the door, but he was too quick for her. She yelled out in anger as he barged through and ran straight upstairs. He flung the door to Poppy's room open and stopped in his tracks. The room was untouched. The biscuit wrappers, and the mug with its residue of curdled milk were still on the floor from when he'd last been there. The room smelled stale and there was no sign of the little girl.

He spun around and saw Lori staggering up the stairs, hanging onto the handrail as if she had the world's worst case of room-spin. 'She's in my room. That's where she is. And you can't go in there — Theo!'

Theo pushed past her and flung that door open. A man lay in the bed, looking as spaced out as Lori. There were bottles and cigarette stubs piled on the floor and the

man blinked at him, then smiled as if he was welcoming him to the party: 'Hey — how're you doing?'

Theo thought he'd fallen into a nightmare. It was so different from this last weekend in Suffolk. He wished with all his heart he was still there.

'I'm doing great, thanks,' he said to the man. 'Can you tell me where my daughter is?'

'Daughter?' The man looked vague for a second, then shook his head. 'Haven't seen any kids around here. Sorry mate. Try next door.' He waved in the direction of the wall.

'Sorry to bother you, then,' Theo said and backed out, shutting the door behind him.

Lori was standing on the landing swaying, her arms wrapped around herself. 'A girl needs company,' she said in a whiny, childish voice. She jabbed her forefinger at him and he ducked out of the way as it came a bit too close to his eye. 'And you're never around. So I have to take it where I can.'

'I'm never around because you never seemed to know who Poppy's father was!' He was trying hard to control his temper.

'Well then, there you go, it's you . We know now!' Lori smiled again. The mood swings were terrifying. 'So you can come back and live here with us!'

'No.' Theo just stared at her and shook his head. 'No. I'm going to fight for custody. You can't even look after yourself, never mind her.'

'Theo! It's because I'm sad. And I'm lonely.' Here were the tears again. 'I miss you. Poppy misses you.'

Theo stood his ground. 'No. D'you know what? I'm delighted Poppy's not here. I really am. Because she's not seeing you like this. You're on a downward spiral, and you have to get yourself sorted out. You owe it to yourself and, if you can't do it for you, do it for her .' He looked at her for a moment more, relieved beyond belief that Poppy wasn't with her. She could do what she liked with her friends and her body, so long as Poppy wasn't there to witness it all. 'Lori. I'm sorry, but I'll see you in court. And I'll damn well win.'

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Kate sat at the reception desk the next day, her heart and mind not on work at all. It would be tough for a few weeks, without an assistant, at least until the Board appointed someone new; but then Cassie turned up, a smile splitting her pretty face.

‘I’m going to help out, don’t you worry,’ she told Kate. ‘It’s the least I can do! Your ice-cream bicycle was the best . I just need the Board to sign off on a couple of things. Honestly, it’ll be a pleasure!’

‘Cassie!’ She had come around to the front of the desk and hugged her. ‘I hope they hurry up with the paperwork. Thank you!’

‘You’re more than welcome,’ Cassie replied, returning the hug warmly. ‘Oh, and Elodie said to give you these. She says you needn’t ask how she found them, but just to tell you she had a little help because they were well hidden away.’ She handed over a lumpy tissue-wrapped package. ‘She told me a little about Cat and how you’ve got her things. She thought these would go nicely with them.’

Kate suspected what was in the package before she’d even begun to unwrap it; and she wasn’t disappointed. Another pair of beautiful Victorian ice-skates, identical to the ones she already had — except these ones were intact, as far as the blades and the boots went. Barely used, for the most tragic of reasons.

Inside the boots, written very neatly on the soft leather, were the letters AVA. Amelia Violet Aldrich .

Elodie was right — Kate didn’t need to ask who had helped her find them.

‘They’ll go straight in the cabinet, next to Cat’s skates and the photographs Elodie already gave me.’ There was no need to tell Cassie she had taken the photographs out to look at as she sat behind the desk this morning. She had needed to remember how happy and carefree those two girls had been, on that particular day, captured forever, laughing together.

Cassie looked at the skates. ‘AVA?’

Kate nodded. ‘Yes. They’re Millie’s initials. She was Cat’s best friend, you know. It’s right they should be able to prepare for some fun together again.’ She smiled at the skates and then transferred her smile to Cassie. ‘Thanks for letting me know where Millie’s picture was. Elodie found her scrapbook for me too.’

‘No problem. Alex has loads of family history notes, you know. Things Dad left which he’s just started looking at again. Well — he was looking at them, before the babies arrived.’ She smiled again. ‘How can things so small take up so much time?’

‘Easily, I suppose.’ Her mind went unwillingly to Theo’s little girl. How come every single topic of conversation led her mind back to him? ‘I might ask to have a look at the notes someday, if he’d let me. Cat and Millie fascinate me.’

‘I’m not surprised. I’ve got a million and one fascinating relatives if you want to know about any more of them.’

‘Cat and Millie are enough for now, thank you.’

‘No problem. Look, I need to get back and sort the fall-out from the weekend. But I’ll be working with you just as soon as humanly possible, I promise.’ Cassie blew her a kiss and hurried away.

Kate watched her leave, and then squeezed back behind the desk. She looked again at

the photographs and realised she hadn't actually told Elodie how everything had fitted together. She supposed that she should be grateful for small mercies — or small babies anyway. With Elodie having the twins to look after, Kate suspected that her giving Elodie an update on those photographs and Cat's skates would have been the very last thing on her friend's mind. But still. It was probably just confirming what Elodie knew anyway from certain quarters. But Kate needed to do it personally, in a corporeal fashion, and thank her for the new set of skates as well.

She picked up her mobile, and held it aloft. No signal. Typical. She'd nip out the back and text her something appropriate from there. Kate didn't really like the Bath chair photograph, probably because she knew Cat would have hated it too, although she could see the humour in it and she did appreciate it, especially the little message on the back. Kate was willing to bet that Cat had wanted to kill Philip for taking it. But Kate did love the skating picture.

It was still odd seeing herself — or a very blurry version of herself anyway — dressed in skating clothes and hanging onto Millie. Poor Charles — she wondered if he'd ever found anyone else after Millie died? One of these days she'd do some research online to find out, but not today. She put the photographs back under the desk, thoughtfully.

Kate hoped Cat and Will had found their happy ending. She had loved the feeling of joy when he turned up and she walked out of the church on his arm — and they were not married, but who cared? She knew what she would have done in Cat's place, but that was overlaying a modern-day attitude on a Victorian girl. It wouldn't have been the done thing to fall into bed with him, but God — given the chance again . . .

The thing was, Cat lived then and Kate lived now. She had more choices, more opportunities and was more in control of her own destiny; but Cat would have fought hard for what she wanted, undoubtedly.

She headed towards the back door, and quickly looked up at the Hartsford clock. The hands were stuck as they had always been at 3.27 — some forgotten hour in some forgotten year. *Hodie est tempus nostrum* . Today is our time. It certainly didn't make her feel any better about the Theo situation.

Kate sighed and walked outside, typed her message and sent it to Elodie, then paused. It would be so lovely to complete the circle — Cat's circle and her circle were almost the same, but hers wasn't quite complete yet. God knew where Theo was now, and what he was doing with Lori and Poppy. Her heart twisted at the thought.

'Hello, Kate.'

Kate started and looked up. She knew that voice. She'd dreamed about that voice. But she never thought she'd hear it again.

'I was just thinking of you,' she said, stupidly. Her phone and the text to Elodie was forgotten. 'Just this minute.'

He stood there, the sun glinting off his unruly, light brown hair. His dark eyes were warm and friendly and there was a smile playing about his lips.

'I've been thinking about you as well. More than is probably healthy, anyway.' He shrugged. 'You can tell me to leave if you want.'

'No,' she interrupted, far too quickly. 'I don't want to do that.'

'Really?' Theo Kent moved towards her. 'So why didn't you call me?' He looked genuinely flummoxed. 'I left my number for you. On the business card? Just before I saw you at the church. Yesterday? I wondered at the time if I should just give up and forget about you. But there was no way I could do it. So there it is.' He shrugged. 'I mean, I can go now, if it's going to be a problem—'

‘No!’ Kate cut him off. ‘It’s not a problem. Not at all. I went to the campsite, yesterday as well, after the church. And you’d gone.’

‘Yeah, I’d gone. I was all packed when I met you. But if I’d known you were coming back, I would have stayed until I saw you. Pitched my tent up again and waited another lifetime. But instead, I just had to hope that you’d get the message and call me. But you didn’t.’ He smiled, ruefully. ‘That estate cottage is a strange place. I knew in my heart what I had to do — but there were some things to sort out first, and then it was easier to come here and tell you face to face afterwards.’ She noticed he looked tired, as if he’d been up all hours, perhaps being part of a difficult conversation and refusing to give in.

‘It was easier to drive all the way from Derbyshire, than to find my number and call me ?’ she asked in a shaky little voice, thinking of Chris and the way he’d done everything he could, to avoid even her phone calls.

‘Not easier. But better. I had to let you know I’d be there for you when you made your mind up, if you felt anything like I did. You need to know that I’ll be fighting for sole custody of Poppy and cutting Lori out of it all. I’ll be going as far through the courts as it takes — Poppy isn’t safe with her and I have plenty of people who’ll back me up.’ He frowned, then his face darkened. ‘I couldn’t really have written all of that on a business card anyway, but never mind.’

Kate suddenly realised. Yesterday was the day Jenna had handed her resignation in. That was the day she’d been in the museum, on her own, and supposedly tossing junk mail in the bin when Kate caught her . . .

‘Oh no! Theo — I’m so sorry. Jenna must have done something with it. I swear, I never saw it. If I had . . .’ Her heart was racing and she thought she might pass out. Was it happening? Was it really happening? She felt that cold, wet nose against her ankle again and she knew this time it was definitely Hector, coming to greet them

both. But she had to ask that question again; she had to know. ‘Theo, I asked Jenna something and she didn’t give me an answer. I need to know it from you.’

Theo smiled again and she was mesmerised.

‘Fire away. I can take it.’

‘Did you sleep with her? At all?’

‘Good God, no way!’ He was genuinely horrified and she felt light-headed with relief. ‘She tried, I’ll grant her that. But I think I put her off, because all I did was — well. No. I can’t tell you.’ He ducked his head, suddenly sweetly embarrassed.

‘No, tell me. Please. It’s important.’ Her heart was cantering like Hughie probably did in his wildest dreams.

‘Important?’ He looked up and his dark-chocolate eyes met hers. ‘Well, okay. All I did was talk about you. Ask her a million and one questions about you every time I saw her. I had a much more Kate-focussed agenda, I have to admit.’ He grinned. ‘Sorry to tell you that, but I did. And I still do.’

‘I truly didn’t get the message to call you,’ she whispered, but it didn’t seem to matter now. His lips looked extremely kissable. They’d done this before — and not just a couple of times. They’d done it so very many times. She knew exactly how his lips would feel, how he would taste, how warm and solid his body would be when he took her in his arms. She knew she would fit perfectly within those arms and if she closed her eyes, they would be back on the Faerie Bridge. He would be holding her. But they would have all the time in the world left to them. He wouldn’t be saying goodbye.

He moved even closer. He drew her to him slowly. He looked down so his eyes were inches from hers and tilted his head to the right. He nuzzled into her neck and it was

all she could do to keep standing upright.

‘Is it all right to do this then?’ he asked.

‘It’s more than all right,’ she said on a gasp, ‘but you have to understand I might get a visitor in the museum. It might get busy.’ Her protests were useless and they both knew that.

‘That’s good. It’s good to be busy. You’ll possibly have a very busy evening as well.’

Dear Lord. She could not actually respond to that.

Theo laughed gently and pulled away. ‘Sorry. I’m assuming too much. Tell me to get lost. I can take it.’

‘No! No. You’re not going anywhere.’

‘Really?’

‘You have no idea. No idea at all.’

‘That’s so good to hear.’ He smiled into her eyes. ‘I should let you know, though, that amongst all of that thinking I’ve been doing, I’ve decided to expand my business — so I’m also going to be very busy in the future. It involves lots of travelling for a while, though. I hope that’s okay with you?’

It was almost as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water over her. Kate stared at him, the words not formulating. She didn’t want this to be a fling as he killed time between jobs. She’d never wanted it to be a fling. She wasn’t entirely sure if she’d ever made that clear to him.

‘I don’t want that sort of relationship,’ she said. ‘Not again, not like it was with Chris. I’m sorry, but I can’t—’

He stopped the words with another kiss, hard and urgent this time. ‘Me neither. Believe me. Oh, Kate, don’t worry about it. I should be more specific, shouldn’t I?’

He’d better be more bloody specific, because if not, this was rubbish. Absolute rubbish.

‘The thing is, I’ve decided to expand into Suffolk. I’ve got more than enough work on in Derbyshire, and I’ve worked it out. I can afford an assistant. They’ll cover that area, and I’ll relocate down here. Poppy and me, that is; if I get her, and God willing I will. I put out some feelers over the weekend, and Alex pointed me in the right direction to build my network. I really think it’ll be worthwhile. Is that okay with you?’ He put his fingertips under her chin and lifted her face to his. There was uncertainty in his face, almost a sense of if he’d done the right thing or said too much or too little. ‘I needed to see how you felt about things before I decided to go for it properly though. Because, my love, I couldn’t bear being down here and not being with you. So I guess I need to know how we’ll be, first.’

Kate stared at him, seeing again all the beautiful, wonderful things she’d seen in him — from the time he rescued her from the ice-skating incident, to the time they’d talked ice-cream bicycles, to the moments — in both lifetimes — they’d been on the Faerie Bridge together. He was the same person; completely and absolutely and she’d never been more certain of anything in her entire life.

‘We’ll be fine,’ she said. ‘Trust me.’

And as he took her face in both his hands and leaned in to kiss her again, a clock chimed in the museum.

Kate smiled against his lips. It was the grandfather clock. It was reminding them that, finally, it was their time.

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Kate only ever had one more vision of Cat's life after that. It happened when she was walking along the riverbank towards the Folk Museum, on her way back from the Hall.

She sat down on a bench overlooking the gardens of the cottages, and smiled as she saw Theo, surrounded by a group of school children, demonstrating how to hammer a horseshoe into shape. Poppy, living with them full-time now, was sitting on a low wall, and Kate knew she would be babbling to anyone who listened that her Daddy was the man with the horses. He had his sleeves rolled up and the sheen of sweat on his forearms glistened in the sun, even from this distance. The re-built furnace was going and the firelight threw gold and red shadows onto him as he bent to his work. Hughie stood patiently by his side, adoring the extra attention he now received by giving carriage rides to people between the two sites.

It was so warm and relaxing, she tilted her head back and closed her eyes, meaning only to rest for a moment before she continued her walk. But the buzzing of a nearby bee turned into the rhythmic chomping of a horse eating hay, and the scent of wild garlic and woodlands turned into the smell of leather and burning coal . . .

* * *

She was in a garden. Not her cottage garden, but the flagged terrace of a little, walled garden, overlooking a stone building imprinted on a backdrop of mountains and green fields. She was lying on a reclining chair, her hands comfortably over her very rounded tummy, a parasol shading her from the unusually hot sunshine. A snuffle nearby reminded her that Hector himself was enjoying the day, lying guard beneath her chair.

‘Mama, Mama!’ A sturdy little boy toddled over to her, holding a piece of twisted metal, in a semblance of a horseshoe-shape. ‘Papa says I may keep this and he will help me hammer a nail in, and we shall have it on our door.’

She laughed and took the horseshoe from him, shifting position awkwardly as the baby inside her squirmed in protest at being disturbed.

‘Darling William! You might need several nails and perhaps a little more practice for the future.’

‘That’s not a problem,’ replied Will, following the boy. ‘He has plenty to practice on.’ He waved his hand across the vista of Welsh mountains, taking in the little row of pit ponies waiting their turn at the forge beside a splendid gelding and a prancing filly; and Kate saw in that gesture a man who had pride in his work and a love of what he did — but also a man who loved his family very much indeed. Will had set up his own forge, and it was testament to his skill and passion in his field that it was an extremely successful venture.

Will Haddon leaned over and kissed her, and Kate started awake, suddenly dropping back into her own world . . .

* * *

Cat had been happy then. Kate was inordinately pleased things had worked out for her.

She sat for another moment or two looking at her own beloved blacksmith working at his furnace and smiled. She hauled herself to her feet, her own baby squirming inside her, protesting just as Cat’s had done. Hector the Second scrabbled to his feet as well, his tail wagging, his boxy head nudging her to get a move on.

Then she turned to face the sunshine and began to walk home.

THE END