



AnneMarie Brear

*Where Dragonflies  
Hover*



*Where Dragonflies Hover*

By

AnneMarie Brear

*Extract - First three chapters*

Copyright © 2016 AnneMarie Brear  
Published 2016 by Choc Lit Limited  
Penrose House, Crawley Drive, Camberley, Surrey, GU15 2AB, UK  
[www.choc-lit.com](http://www.choc-lit.com)

The right of AnneMarie Brear to be identified as the Author of this Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

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

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying. In the UK such licences are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London, W1P 9HE

MOBI ISBN: 978-1-78189-284-8

EPUB ISBN: 978-1-78189-283-1

*To my wonderful husband, Mark Doust.  
I didn't know true love until I met you.*

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Tasting Panel readers who said “yes” to *Where Dragonflies Hover* and made this book a possibility: Karen M., Jenny M., Debbie J, Lizzy D., Alma, Linda W., Jenny K., Jane H., Claire W and Sarah C.

## Chapter One

Wakefield, West Yorkshire

1945

Alexandria Jamieson rested the book and pen on her lap and watched the shadows from nearby trees pass over the garden until the dull pain in her side receded. The sun was setting, but the surprising early warmth of the spring day remained, comforting her as she sat on the timber bench. March was usually still cold in the north, but today had been an exception and she'd left her room eagerly to feel the sun on her face.

Slowly, she shifted her position to catch the last of the sunrays and waited for the pain to return, but only a slight niggle in her stomach lingered. It amazed her that for over sixty years she'd been as healthy as a horse, and now, within a space of mere months, her body had turned on her. Well, there was nothing she could do about that, but to wait for the end, and while she did she would write.

Gently fiddling with the yellow flower brooch she wore, Allie gazed over to the small lake, separated from her by a lush lawn edged with flowerbeds that were once filled with nodding daffodils, jonquils and snowdrops, but now were replaced with vegetables. Oh, she could well imagine the parties that had been held on the lawn – the laughter, the gaiety. All gone now and replaced with the human debris of a Second World War.

A few men lingered near the water, happy to be doing nothing but watching dragonflies hover. A young soldier in a wheelchair fed the ducks while Major Donaldson lay on the grass reading a book, one of Dickens' it was, plucked from the house's abundant library. He'd be gone soon, his broken arm mended and fit for war again. Though she doubted his mind would ever be.

She heard his screams at night. Further away, near the outbuildings, old soldiers from the Great War and wounded young soldiers from this current war dug in the soil together, planting seeds and weeding the rows. Birds twittered in the trees and Allie closed her eyes for a moment.

Such a peaceful setting – quiet and beautiful. No one would guess that hundreds of miles from here men were killing each other – again.

How had it happened? Another world war? Hadn't the first one taken enough lives? Didn't the men in politics, those with power, learn anything from the war fought only twenty-odd years ago? Who would have believed the colossal carnage and suffering could blight the world once more. Was everyone mad?

Soft music from the conservatory floated out from the house behind her. She smiled. Captain Flannery had obviously begged access to the piano. She didn't understand why Matron wouldn't let him play more often. His music comforted the men. But then she knew first-hand how matrons behaved. When she had been in the nursing service she'd known when to bend the rules. Chuckling, she sat up straighter and stroked the book's leather cover. How many rules had she bent until they broke?

For a moment her mind stilled, grew foggy. She frowned, gathering her strength to deal with the unknown. Her hand on the diary shook. The pen she held slipped, but she gripped harder, refusing to let it go. This, her memories in a diary, was all she had - all that was left to her. The years rolled away. Death, slaughter, struggle and hardship threatened to overwhelm her. Danny was calling for her in his sleep. Or was he? She shook her head, puzzled, dazed.

Damn medication! She'd have to stop taking it if she wanted to finish her writing. It was not as if the pills would allow her to live longer, no pills stopped cancer. Besides, she was tired, tired of being alone. Danny was waiting ...

Taking a slow, deep breath, she relaxed and forced herself to concentrate on writing once more and letting the memories flow onto the page. Within moments she was lost again; lost to a world that, although once familiar, seemed foreign now. Her pen scrawled across the paper becoming faster and faster. She had to hurry. There wasn't much time left. With every second it became harder to know for sure she was doing the right thing. Would anyone care or even want to read it? She was nothing special after all - only an old Australian nurse who never went home.

'Miss Jamieson?'

Startled, Allie looked up at the approaching nurse. 'Yes?'

'It's time to go in now. Tea is being served.'

'But I'm not finished.' She shivered. A cool breeze had sprung up without her knowing. The sun had set lower down behind the house and threw long shadows. 'I'll go inside soon. I have so much more to write.'

'There is always tomorrow.'

'No, there isn't.' Allie stared at the nurse, remembering when she had been that young, that starched, that fresh. It seemed a thousand years ago. 'You're new here, aren't you? Jones, isn't it?'

The nurse, tweaking her skirt, sat stiffly on the bench next to her. She hardly looked old enough to wear the uniform. 'Yes, I'm Nurse Jones and I've only been here a week.'

'You'll do fine if you listen to your instincts and use good common sense. I remember my first posting, though it was to a large hospital in Sydney, not a—'

'Sydney?'

'Australia. I was born there. I actually came from a small country town, all dust and flies it was, but I went to Sydney to train as a nurse. My mother always said that to do something you

must try and do it the best you can. I couldn't be a nurse in my little town, which was nothing more than a main street and a few pubs. So I went to Sydney. Scared to death I was, I can tell you.'

'Was it difficult? The training, I mean.' Jones frowned, a worried look stealing across her face. 'Some days I just can't seem to do anything right. Everything I learn one day is gone from my head the next day.'

'You're completely normal, my dear. It happened to us all.'

Relief shone in Jones's eyes briefly. 'I'm pleased to hear it. Matron calls me a dolt and gives me cleaning duties. How can I learn anything if all I'm doing is washing floors?'

Allie smiled at her. 'You'll work your way up, believe me. At the hospital in Sydney I lost count of how much scrubbing I did, and in summer ... heavens, we'd be wet through with sweat and have to change our uniforms twice a day.'

'How did you end up here in England?'

'I left when the war started, the First World War that is. I nursed on a troop ship in the waters off Egypt, before heading to France.'

'Why aren't you in Australia now? Didn't you want to go back?'

'When I sailed, my parents were already dead. I had nothing to go back to.'

'I see.' Jones fiddled with her stiff uniform collar. 'I was told you sit out here most days and that you've been writing your memoirs for some time now.'

'Indeed. I have a lot to tell. I promised Danny I'd record our life together.' Allie leant back and raised her face up to the coral-streaked sky. High in the clouds three fighter planes flew in an arrow formation and she wondered if they were heading across the Channel.

'Danny was your husband?'

Tossing her head, Allie gave a brief smile. 'No, he never was that, sadly.' She cradled the book to her chest, its leather cover reassuring.

'He was your fiancé?'

'No, he wasn't that either. He was simply my lover.'

Nurse Jones gasped and a blush crept up her neck above the stiff white collar. 'You had a lover?' she whispered, guiltily looking around as though they spoke of government secrets.

'We felt married.' Danny's image rose before her, resplendent in his service uniform. 'He was the man of my dreams, with movie star looks and the charm of a gallant knight.' She peeped at the disbelieving face of Nurse Jones. 'Do you think a man who owned all this grand estate could be ugly? Heroes are always good looking, and he was a hero, a marvellous man.'

Jones chuckled and shook her head, then quickly sobered, a frown creasing her pale skin. 'This estate? Do you mean ...'

'Daniel Hollingsworth.'

'Nay, I don't believe you.' Jones sat straighter, suddenly businesslike and efficient, but her stiff shoulders softened a little. 'Are you telling me you *knew* Mr Hollingsworth well?'

'Danny loved me.'

'I've seen his portrait in the hall. He was a looker all right.'

'I remember when that was painted. He sat for his portrait in London. I used to go and watch sometimes, but I made him laugh and the artist was most put out.'

Nurse Jones scowled and looked at her strangely, her attitude slightly patronising. 'I read about the family's history in the staff room. The Daniel Hollingsworth who owned this place was married to Irene Rowlings. But *you* were his mistress?'

Allie blinked rapidly, rejecting the sliver of pain that always came when Irene's name was mentioned. Even now, so many years later. 'Don't you know I'm the scarlet woman of Hollingsworth House?'

Shocked, Nurse Jones bristled and lifted her chin higher. 'We'll have none of that talk, thank you very much. Matron will be most unhappy.' She stood and took Allie's elbow. 'Let us be going inside now.'

Allie raised her eyebrows. She knew people thought it was a story she made up. 'You don't believe me?' She shrugged. 'I don't mind, not many people do. They take one look at me and see an old woman, but once, once I was young and beautiful and in love. That's why I have to write it down.'

'Mr Hollingsworth was a military hero in the Great War. He won medals. Afterwards he became a Member of Parliament!'

'Yet, despite this, he loved me, Alexandria Jamieson, an Australian nurse with no family. A nobody.'

'Nonsense, I don't believe it. Your mind is playing tricks on you.'

Allie jerked her elbow out of the nurse's grip. 'I may be old, my body is past its best and I have one foot in the grave, and, yes, my mind does fail me at times, but let me assure you of one thing, Nurse Jones, Daniel Hollingsworth and I were lovers.'

At Jones's astonished gasp, Allie raised an arrogant eyebrow. 'Men are human, Jones, even heroes.'

'I don't believe a word of it. What awful tales. I shall find Sister, she will know what to do with you.' Nurse Jones sniffed in disapproval, an embarrassed blush creeping up her throat again.

‘Oh, sit down, Jones, and stop your twaddle.’ Allie patted the bench. ‘Let me shock you some more.’

‘I certainly will not!’

Allie laughed. ‘Go on, you’re dying to know how bad I really was in my time.’

Slowly, Jones perched herself at the edge of the bench. Her back was ramrod straight but the curiosity in her eyes could not be hidden behind her stiff affronted exterior.

Settling back more comfortably, Allie let her mind recall the happier times. ‘We met in France. I was a nursing sister, serving at a hospital unit near the front line. I was never really bothered with the men in a romantic way. I didn’t want a sweetheart. I was a spinster and no longer a young girl, an old maid, so they said, at thirty years of age. I accepted that nursing was my life and I certainly didn’t want to fall in love with any of the men in active service that came through the hospital. They were in and out so fast that to become attached to them meant suffering a broken heart over and over again. I’d seen it happen to the other nurses, plus I was a nursing sister and romantic attachments could lead to dismissal, and I couldn’t bear such a thing to happen. So, I had to be strict, even with my own heart.’

Jones nodded and leant slightly closer. ‘I understand ... but you still fell in love?’

Allie smiled, recognising a romantic streak in Jones. ‘Have you ever been in love?’

‘No.’ Jones’s lashes lowered, covering the sadness in her eyes. ‘I begged my parents to become a nurse and serve our nation, after all my struggles to get my parents’ permission, well, to fall in love would make it seem worthless as nurses aren’t allowed to work once they are married and I’m only eighteen ...’

‘When you fall in love you aren’t in control. Love controls you.’ Allie nodded to herself, remembering. ‘You’ll understand when it happens to you. You can’t help it or stop it, and you don’t want to.’

‘So you met Mr Hollingsworth in France?’ Jones probed.

‘He was brought in one day, during the battle of the Somme, badly injured. Even though he was in acute pain, he winked at me and said he was fine, all the while he gripped my hand so hard I thought he would crush the bones.’ Alexandria caressed the cover of her journal.

‘Somehow I managed to keep him at the casualty clearing station and he wasn’t sent down to the hospital ships. For weeks I tended to him, saw to his injuries, read the letters from home to him. As soon as he was well enough to be loaded onto the train, I took leave and went with him. We laughed and loved in a tiny hotel on the coast of France, and later we met as often as our schedules and the war allowed.’

‘Such shameful behaviour!’ Jones bristled, but Alexandria could tell it was all a performance.

‘Yes, most would agree with you, but we were in love.’

‘Was he married then?’

Allie nodded and sighed sadly. ‘We never discussed the future. We didn’t have a future; no one did then, with a war raging. Everyone lived each day as their last. I believe there are men and women doing the same right now, like we did in the last war. It can’t be helped.’

‘My father says that doesn’t excuse such behaviour.’

‘Perhaps not. Did your father serve in the last war?’

Jones straightened her shoulders even more. ‘He was a cook in one of the training camps ... he never left England.’

‘A worthy occupation, but your father wouldn’t understand then. He wasn’t living our lives, being the ones in danger. We did what we did without guilt. There was no room for guilt when the next day we could be dead.’ The constant nagging pain in her side, which had been her companion for these past few months, gave her a sharp jab as a reminder that her time here was limited.

‘Well, what happened?’

‘I’m cold. I need to go inside.’

‘Yes, of course, let me help you.’ Jones rubbed her arms as the temperature had now dropped sharply. ‘Why do you write a diary about it now, after all these years?’

Allie gazed over to the lake, her mind’s eye picturing Danny rowing on it. Back home in Australia it would have been called a dam. ‘Why write it? Well, because it happened, that’s why. Our love was so strong it has lasted beyond life itself. I have to leave behind the knowledge that true love, lasting love, exists in this world gone mad.’

‘Who will read it though?’

Allie smiled softly. ‘Anyone who needs to find it will read it.’

## Chapter Two

Leeds, West Yorkshire

2010

Lexi O'Connor wanted to be home early this evening. It was Dylan's thirty-third birthday and she planned to cook him something special. If she had time she even wanted to bake a cake. That alone would hopefully give them something to laugh about as they'd not laughed together in a long while.

Baking wasn't an art form she had mastered.

Tapping her pen with one hand, Lexi hid a yawn behind the other. The meeting was dragging on and a quick glance at her watch showed it was past three o'clock.

She squirmed in her seat, her bum becoming numb. She eyed Emily, another partner in the firm of Johnson, Toole, O'Connor & McDonald. Emily smiled back and stopped jotting on her notepad. They were all meant to be listening to Cara, the senior partner, about their latest client, a new important construction company, but since Cara and maybe Fiona were the only two to deal with them, Lexi was growing bored and tired.

'So, that should be enough information for now.' Cara tidied up her papers at one end of the polished table. 'If you have any concerns, I'm all ears at any time. We need this to be successful. Dealing with WhiteHold Constructions could lead to working with more influential clients.'

'Enough to share around?' Emily laughed, though the tone was forced, as she collected her clients' portfolios together.

Lexi looked at her, knowing Emily's aversion to Cara's high reaching goals and driven work schedule. Cara was an achiever, who wanted success at all costs. Lexi turned her gaze on Cara and for the first time saw the shadows under her friend's eyes, which were at odds with her immaculate dress standards. Cara worked too hard, expected too much from herself and everyone around her, but where had it got her? Yes, she had a successful business. Yes, she was comfortably well off financially. However, despite all that, she didn't seem happy.

Nor did Fiona, for that matter, with her boyfriend issues. And Emily struggled to keep going, looking after her five-year-old son and her invalid mother.

Lexi frowned, these three women were her closest friends, and not one of them was truly happy. How had that happened? Two years ago when they formed the partnership they'd had such hopes and dreams of brilliant futures. They were driven, energetic, and hungry for success – Cara still was, but the others, herself included, had lost the passion somewhere and this frightened Lexi.

'Shall we all have a drink tonight, girls?' Cara smiled, avoiding Emily's question. 'There's a new bar opened near the high street. It has some outlandish name and I suppose it'll be hideously expensive, but we could try it.'

'Sure.' Fiona drank from her water bottle. 'Richard has gone to his mother's house for the weekend as normal. She says the boiler isn't working. I say call a frigging plumber!' Fiona took another swig of water. 'Don't know why I'm still seeing him, waste of time really. He spends more time with his mother than me. I always pick the jerks.'

Emily shook her head. 'No, thanks. I'm off to the pictures with my darling son to see some movie. Though for once I'd like to go watch a movie that's not rated PG or animated.'

'Not me either, I'm afraid,' said Lexi. 'It's Dylan's birthday.'

She followed the women out of the meeting room and each sent their love to Dylan for his birthday as they went back into their own tiny offices.

After throwing her paperwork on her desk, Lexi went to stand by the window, which overlooked a concrete city. The work waiting for her in the in-tray was ignored. For some reason she couldn't summon up the interest for it today and, if she was truthful, she'd been feeling like that for weeks. A nagging ache of unrest was lodged at the back of her mind, keeping her awake at night. It was more than just being uninterested in her work, and that was bad enough, but she couldn't put her finger on the problem.

She gave herself a mental shake, in an attempt to snap out of her current mood. On impulse, she grabbed her suit jacket from the back of the chair, her bag from under the desk and her laptop. She closed the office door and walked down the short hall, waving goodbye to each woman at their desks as she went and wishing them a happy weekend.

She paused by reception. 'Lindsay, divert any important calls to my mobile, please. The rest can wait until Monday. I'm going home.'

'Sure thing. Have a good weekend.' Lindsay, the young trendy receptionist looked up from her files. Today her hair was a two-toned colour, black and white blonde. Her fingernails were professionally painted with little flowers on the tips. Lexi was fascinated by the different looks Lindsay frequently displayed.

'I'll try.'

'I'm off to Manchester with some friends for two days. We're going on a pub crawl and seeing who can pick up the most guys.' Lindsay bent under the desk and brought out a bright pink shopping bag. 'Have a look at this dress.' She withdrew a shocking blue dress that appeared to be missing its skirt.

‘It looks like a T-shirt.’ Lexi blinked, alarmed that someone would actually wear that without jeans underneath. ‘You’ll not be bending over in that,’ she added, heading for the main door.

‘Well, I might for the right fella.’ Lindsay’s peal of laughter followed Lexi down the back stairs.

Once out in the car park, Lexi searched her bag for her keys and pondered Lindsay’s outrageousness. The dress was indecent, but young women wore them these days, just like girls wore minis in the sixties.

God, she sounded old, even to her own ears. She was thirty-two not sixty-two.

When was the last time she’d worn something so short? Years!

Unlocking and climbing into her blue Mini Cooper, she wondered why she had stopped wearing slinky dresses. Now, when she went out to dinner or to a party, she wore tailored slacks or a long skirt. Why? She had a good figure, nice legs. When did she begin dressing so conservatively? The answer was simple. Two years ago when she became Cara’s business partner. She’d also hit thirty and started behaving like someone over fifty.

Lexi stared out of the windscreen. Her mother was more fashion conscious than she was. Her sister-in-law – a woman with two small children, two dogs, a cat, three fish, a husband, and who attended women’s meetings, was president of the local community neighbourhood watch and hosted Sunday family lunches – still had time to look young and attractive. Lexi did none of this and felt old and worn and ... empty.

Sudden tears blinded her. Oh shit, she was falling apart. She started the engine and wiped her face. She hated to think she was depressed, but something was definitely not right with her. Was she menopausal? Was she going through the change of life early? Women did, all the time. Some

turned thirty and that was it, they were on hormone drugs for the next forty years. The thought made her chest tighten. Perhaps she should see a doctor.

Backing out of the car parking space, Lexi sniffed away the ridiculous emotions. She had to pull herself together. What was wrong with her? She had a gorgeous husband, even if she rarely saw him, a great career, even if it bored her at times. She had her family, who loved her, and her health. So why was she crying while driving down the M1?

At Junction 39, she turned off and headed for the southern part of Wakefield and the flat she shared with Dylan. In the rear-view mirror she scowled at her hair. It needed washing and another cut. The original chin-length bob was no longer chin-length, but actually touching her collar. One-handed, she pulled the sides up. Dylan liked her hair up in clips. She should book into the hairdressers for a cut and a colour, too. Something fresh to lighten the dark brown, maybe toffee highlights.

Waiting at traffic lights, she spied the signpost for Walton. Her fingers itched on the indicator and abruptly she had turned it on and was inching out of the traffic for the turning. She could get to her flat going this way, but it was a longer route. She assumed Dylan would be home late from the hospital, birthday or no birthday, so she had time.

Slowing down, she pulled onto the side of the road and rang Dylan's mobile. Despite telling him yesterday she was cooking him a birthday meal, he'd still likely forget.

As usual his mobile rang directly to his voicemail. She waited for the beep to leave her message. 'Hi, babe, it's me. Don't forget I'm cooking dinner tonight. I've left work early. See if you can too. Hope your day was good and not too exhausting. Bye, love you.' She hung up and tossed the phone onto the passenger seat. On the road again, she drove the old way home and

wasn't surprised when she came to the place she frequently drove past even when there was no need to come this way.

Lexi slowly applied the brakes. Peering through the trees, she frowned with impatience at not being able to see the old house clearly. A large 'For Sale' sign heralded the driveway entrance.

'Not sold yet,' she whispered, relieved. She bit her lip, trying hard not to feel guilty at the pleasure that no one had bought it yet. Every time she passed by the rusted gates of this old house she experienced something emotional, and today, being strangely overly sensitive, was no different.

As if directed by an invisible force, she turned off the road and into the tree-lined drive. It was wrong to trespass, but she couldn't help herself. She had to take a closer look. Her heart swelled and daydreams filled her mind as the drive swept in an arc until Hollingsworth House loomed before her in all its old world splendour – a two-storey Georgian example of a bygone era. Tall, newly-leafed silver birch trees stood proud in a large overgrown lawn broken by garden beds equally neglected. Still, none of it diminished the aura of grandeur.

Lexi switched the engine off and sat admiring the front entrance. Yes, it was looking sad, in need of work, but it exuded style and, with tender care, she knew that one day it would shine once more.

After leaving the car, she ambled through the ruined garden. Daffodils valiantly struggled through the weeds. In her mind's eyes she could see it as it once was. Alive with activity, clipped hedges, glorious landscaped lawns, flowers bursting with colour and fragrance.

At each window, she stopped and peeked in at rooms laid bare: fireplaces stood empty, cold. However, she could envision the house full of antique furniture and the smell of beeswax polish. The front door needed sanding and repainting, and she guessed all the woodwork inside would

be in a similar state. So much work, so much money, but she felt peaceful whenever she was here. The house spoke to her like nothing had done before. Instinct whispered that this place was right for her.

If only Dylan would agree.

She turned and walked back towards the drive. She was mad to think she could actually buy this place. It would cost a small fortune to make it habitable again. Dylan would have a fit, but then lately he argued with her about everything. They both worked long hours in stressful jobs and whenever they saw each other squabbles erupted over things not being done, like the clothes not being collected from the drycleaners or the bills unpaid.

When had she and Dylan stopped laughing? When had they ceased taking picnics or making love in the shower? Where had their youth gone?

She'd spent all her adult years studying and then working as a solicitor and he had done the same to become a specialist oncologist. But what did they have to show for it? Stress. Holidays spent apart. No children. Sometimes they went for weeks without sleeping together.

Basically, a stale marriage!. There, she'd admitted it. Her marriage wasn't in great shape. The truth gave her a dull ache in her chest.

Why then, when her life had gone down the toilet, did she insist on looking at this house? What would buying this old place do for her?

Miserable and frustrated, she shook her head. She was the biggest fool.

Back at her car, she paused and looked up at the grand house. Its mullioned windows seemed to beckon her, but she resisted the urge to peep through them again. She'd been here for over an hour already.

Lexi jumped guiltily at the sound of a car coming up the driveway. She blushed furiously at being caught out, she had thought the place abandoned. Amazement was mixed with relief when she recognised Dylan's car as it swept round the bend in the drive.

Hiding her surprise, she went to meet him as he slowed his car. 'Hello. What are you doing here?'

He leant out the window. 'I came this way because of road works. Good thing I did too. I saw your car from the road. What are you doing here? Have you broken down?' His puzzled expression went from her to the car and back again as he got out of his car.

She hesitated. 'No.'

His hazel eyes narrowed. 'What are you doing then?'

'I just came to have a look.'

'Again?' A scowl altered his handsome face. 'Why, for God's sake?'

'It's a nice old place.'

'It's a money pit. We've talked about this numerous times, Lexi. Why can't you let it go? We can't afford it and we don't need a house this size.' His mobile phone rang and he turned it off and threw it through the open window into the car. 'Won't they ever leave me alone? Christ, I just left the place.'

'A tough day?'

'The worst.' He ran a hand over his head, sighing, and she noticed his dark brown hair had a few grey ones. When did they appear?

'Well, the day is over now.'

'I wish it was. I've just been home and packed for the conference. I thought you were still at work, so I left you a note.'

She stifled a moan. The conference had slipped her mind. ‘But it’s your birthday. I was going to cook us a meal. I left you a message.’

‘My birthday is no big deal, I have one every year.’

‘You could have reminded me about the conference. You knew I was cooking tonight. Can’t you leave in the morning?’

‘No, it’s a pain in the arse driving through morning traffic, hoping I don’t get held up. Birmingham is a nightmare for traffic. My presentation is at ten o’clock. I booked the hotel room for tonight so I can go over my notes and then get a good sleep.’

She nodded and stepped back, heartsick at the thought of another lonely night. ‘So, you’re going right now? You can’t wait until later?’

‘Sorry, Lex. We’ll do something on Sunday night.’

‘What about tomorrow?’

‘I’ll be knackered after the conference and there’s a dinner on afterwards so I’ll stay the night so I can have a drink, relax a little.’

Blinking back more stupid tears, she forced a smile. ‘Of course. I hope it all goes well for you.’

‘Thanks. I’ll ring you tomorrow, okay? I’d better go.’ He kissed her quickly and climbed back into his car. ‘Don’t get caught for trespassing. That’s all I need.’

Lexi lowered her gaze. Was she only a hindrance to him now in his busy life? She watched him reverse the car and turn around. The low purr of the Jaguar’s engine disappeared behind the trees hugging the drive.

Letting out a deep breath, Lexi tried not to feel lonely. Dylan’s job was stressful, she knew that. It wasn’t his fault he didn’t have time to ask about her day or give her a proper kiss hello or

goodbye. She swallowed the tears that clogged her throat. God, she never cried usually, but it's all she did now. What was the matter with her lately?

The late sunshine enveloped the house in a golden glow. Again, it seemed to call to her, begging for attention. A path on the left of the drive looked inviting as it meandered through a small strand of poplars. Lexi grabbed her keys, locked the car and took off to explore again. She had nothing to rush home to now, and if she got caught for trespassing, then so be it.

The overgrown pathway brought her out on the far side of the grounds near the end of a small lake. She gazed over the water towards the back of the house and noticed a paved terrace area. From there the lawn then sloped down to the water. She'd not been around the back before and fell even more in love with the property. She could imagine the serenity of sipping a cool drink on a hot summer's day and looking out over the lake.

Lexi stepped out along the bank. A lone duck swam by, its movement serene on the glassy, dark surface. This side of the lake was in shadow from large pine trees, and she stumbled on fallen pinecones hidden in the long grass. On the opposite side of the water were some small buildings, a garage, fruit trees in early blossom, and an overgrown vegetable patch, complete with a broken, rejected-looking scarecrow.

She wandered over to a narrow shed on her left and peered through its sole, dirty window. Unable to make out much in the dimness, she walked around to the front and was surprised when she was able to pull the bolt back on the door. Why didn't people lock things?

A covered rowboat took up most of the space inside. She smiled, seeing herself rowing it on the lake. Growing more excited, Lexi edged around it to peer at the workbenches and the odd assortment of tools and useless things one found in abandoned sheds. It was like treasure hunting in an antique shop. She used to love doing that with her grandfather.

She glanced about and spied a dusty painting leaning against the wall. The scene was of a child and a brown dog. Behind the canvas were more paintings, some framed, some not. Lexi flicked through them. The ones that caught her attention she took out and set aside.

She looked for somewhere to sit and study the paintings. A small tin trunk wedged under a workbench seemed the only offering. Thinking it empty, she went to tug it out, but it remained fast.

Using both hands, she heaved it out and was showered in a puff of dust. Squatting down, she inspected the latch that was held tight with a small lock. ‘Why are you locked?’ she murmured. The shed was open to anyone passing by, yet this ugly little chest had a lock on it. The trunk was nothing special, plain and in parts rusted. No ornament or writing hinted at its use.

Intrigued, she grabbed a hammer from the workbench, but then hesitated. She had no right to open someone else’s property. Lexi closed her eyes momentarily. *What was she thinking of breaking into the trunk? What am I doing?* Never had she broken the law and here she was guilty of trespassing and breaking and entering! She looked around the rowboat as though expecting someone to jump out and arrest her.

Something inside urged her on. She knew she couldn’t stop now. Sucking in a deep breath, she bent and hit the lock hard. The ringing sound was loud in the quiet serenity of the garden. The metal dented and with another few solid whacks the lock gave.

Shivers of excitement tingled along her skin. Gently, she eased up the lid. A wave of staleness hit her, but she quickly forgot it as she examined the inside. A small tray filled the top space containing balls of twine, screwdrivers and a small trowel. A flicker of disappointment filled her. A toolbox. All that for a toolbox?

The top tray didn't fit well and Lexi slipped her fingertips underneath it to lift it up. After placing it on the floor she stopped and stared. A piece of canvas covered the bottom and on lifting it up, a book was revealed. Delicately, worried it would disintegrate at her touch, Lexi carefully withdrew the book and blew the dust from the plain brown leather cover with no markings. She frowned and turned the book to read the spine: it too was bare.

She opened it to the first page and read:

*So, you found it. I knew you would.*

*What you are about to read is a record of true events that happened to me.*

*Read with your heart. ~*

*Alexandria Jamieson, July 1st, 1945.*

*Hollingsworth House.*

Goodness! This journal was written here at this house.

Amazed, Lexi sat on her bottom and crossed her legs, careless of spoiling her business suit. A spear of sunlight angled in through the shed's small window and illuminated the page. She ran her fingers over the words, absorbing them, letting them enter her heart. Alexandria Jamieson – the writer had the same first name as her. The journal was written here at the house during the Second World War.

A shiver of excitement ran down her back. Swallowing, she turned to the next page and read:

*From the first moment ours eyes met, and he winked at me despite his pain, I was lost. I didn't know it then, but the man who lay on the stretcher covered in blood, mud and the sorrows of war*

*would be the only man I would ever love. The one man who would come to mean everything to me, in this life and beyond.*

*But I get ahead of myself.*

*I must start at the beginning.*

Lexi gasped, having forgotten to breathe while reading. She cupped her hand to her mouth, speechless, aware of the enormity of the treasure that she had uncovered - a personal diary. In her hands she held the emotions, the fears and the very spirit of another woman from an era long gone. As someone who loved history, antiques and the mystique of the past, Lexi knew that such a diary was valuable, if not monetarily then at least for its archival value for historians.

A dog barked close by. Lexi jumped and listened as a man's voice answered. Footsteps. Hurriedly, she placed the diary back in the trunk. Crouching, feeling like a criminal, she peered out of the window. A man threw a stick for a big black Labrador. They were walking away from the shed, heading towards the far end of the lake. Was he the owner of this wonderful house?

She waited until he was near the far boundary and the gap in the hedge and, as quickly as she could, she slipped from the shed, gently closed the door and shot the bolt home. She checked that the man hadn't doubled back and noticed her, then she ran along the bank through a strand of birch trees and onto the path at the side of the house.

Back at her car, she fumbled with her keys until at last she turned the ignition and started the engine. Puffing, she didn't look back as she drove away.

Her hands were still shaking as she let herself into her flat ten minutes later. Disgusted with her behaviour, she flung her laptop case and her bag none too gently onto the kitchen bench. Switching on the kettle, she leaned against the sink. What had she done? She'd nearly been

caught breaking the law. And she was a solicitor! Hugging herself, she tried to calm down. It was all right, she'd not been seen.

The kettle boiled and switched itself off, but she ignored it. The diary's contents plagued her. That short glimpse fuelled her imagination and sparked her curiosity. She had to return to the house. She must know more about the woman, Alexandria Jamieson, whose simple words "*The one man who would come to mean everything to me, in this life and beyond.*" burned into her soul.

Those rich words carried a haunting feel to them. Perhaps she should have brought the diary with her, but that would have been stealing ...

Lexi jumped when the phone rang. Lord, she had to get a grip. Rubbing her forehead, she picked up the phone. 'Hello?'

'Lexi, it's Jilly. How are you?'

Smiling in response to her sister-in-law's pleasant voice, Lexi sat on the new cream sofa she'd bought a few weeks ago, then stood immediately remembering her dusty bottom. 'Hi, Jill. I'm fine. How are you and everyone?'

'The same as always.' Jilly laughed. 'I'm ringing to wish the birthday boy a happy birthday.'

Lexi's smile faded at the thought of Dylan being away again. 'He's not here. Gone to a conference in Birmingham.'

'Well, that's a pain. I thought you were cooking him a fancy dinner?'

'So did I, but I forgot about the damned conference.' Looking down at the dust on her skirt, Lexi checked the sofa for marks.

'So you are all by yourself tonight then?'

‘Yes, tonight and tomorrow, too. There’s a dinner after the conference, so he’ll stay instead of driving.’

‘That’s crap. Come over to ours for the weekend. Leave now and we’ll have some drinks and watch a DVD or something. The girls miss you.’

‘I don’t know ...’ the thought was tempting, but did she have the energy?

‘Oh, go on. It’s been ages since we’ve seen you. It’ll only take half an hour to get here. The girls will be so excited, and so will your brother. Gary was saying only yesterday that you’ve been a stranger for the last few months. In fact, we haven’t seen you since Christmas.’

‘I speak to you every week on the phone.’

‘I know, but it’s not the same. You and Dylan work too hard.’

Lexi glanced at the clock on the DVD player. Quarter to six. Suddenly the flat was too small, too quiet. ‘Okay. I’ll come over for the weekend. I’ll be there in an hour.’

‘Fantastic!’ Jilly squealed like one of her daughters. ‘Just bring clothes, nothing else. Don’t stop and buy food or anything like you usually do, and no sweets for the girls, they’re wound up enough without extra sugar.’

‘Then I won’t come.’

‘Oh, Lex—’

‘I’ll just get them something small. Smarties, or something.’

‘Keep it to something small.’

‘What’s for dinner?’

‘We are having takeaway, Indian or something. I’ll tell Gary to get extra. Drive carefully.’

‘See you in an hour. Bye.’ Lexi hung up and stared around the quiet sitting room. No, she didn’t want to spend the weekend here by herself, though she should. She’d spent plenty of

money and time in creating a beautiful room. The furnishings were neutral colours of cream, beige and white, with splashes of brown and caramel. Dylan liked the sleek look of modern lines, something she didn't always agree with or want, but it was his home too and so she'd decorated with his tastes in mind. Yet, funnily enough, she was the one who spent most of the time here. Dylan lived a large part of his life at the hospital.

She went into the bedroom they shared, a large room, dominated by the king size bed. Why did they have such a large bed? She shook her head. When they had bought it five years ago, not long after they were married, they'd laughed and rolled about on it like a couple of teenagers. Now, they were rarely in it together.

Lexi dismissed the depressing thoughts. She was going away for the weekend and refused to be down in the dumps. Two days of playing with her nieces, joking with her lovable brother and eating Jilly's wonderful food would put her to rights again.

As she showered and changed, then packed her overnight bag, she made a mental list of things she'd need, and if at times her thoughts strayed to a certain diary in a boatshed, she did her best to ignore them.

## Chapter Three

At lunchtime on Monday Lexi left work early, pleading a migraine, which wasn't far from the truth. After a lovely weekend with her brother and his family, she'd returned home on Sunday to find Dylan tired and deep in paperwork. Undeterred, she'd made them a stir-fry meal and even managed to get his attention away from work long enough to encourage him into the bedroom. Only Dylan's love making was unimaginative and habitual. In an act of defiance, she didn't take the pill and, her temper getting the better of her, threw the entire packet in the bin.

She didn't sleep much that night, worrying about not only what she'd done, but why her husband had lost his spark. The argument they'd had this morning hadn't helped the situation either. Frustrated at his constant detachment, she'd suggested they go away for the weekend. It didn't matter where, just as long as they were together. His reply that he couldn't possibly go, and that he had too much to do, sent her into a wild rage built on disappointment and neglect. She screamed that they were growing apart and heading for a divorce. Her hysterics didn't make an ounce of difference to him. Dylan stormed off saying she was unreasonable and she cried all the way to work, ruining her make-up.

Of course they had argued before, but this time it felt different. The crack in their marriage was widening. It scared her that she could no longer fix it, or that she even wanted to. How many times could she keep trying to get his attention for more than five minutes? Just for once she'd like him to ignore his work and do something spontaneous. Why must it always be her who suggested going out for dinner or go watch a movie at the cinema? And each time she suggested something he always had an excuse not to go. Was it any wonder she had stopped asking him? Rejection could only be taken for so long before your confidence wavered.

Had Dylan stopped enjoying her company? Did he prefer to work rather than spend time with her? All the signs pointed to that answer. How long could she go on with him putting her second?

After a difficult morning with quarrelsome clients, it was no surprise to find herself parked in front of Hollingsworth House once again. She sat in the car, gazing up at the mullioned windows, and remembered Gary and Jilly's reaction to her plan to buy the property. Both had been shocked at first, then Gary laughed and finally he grew serious and troubled.

'You're joking, aren't you, Lex?' Gary stared at her, his cup of tea halfway to his mouth.

Jilly paused, knife in the air, and turned on him. 'Why should she be? Why can't she buy a house?'

'Because the bloody house she wants is probably nearly a million pounds worth, that's why.'

'So?' Jilly cut generous slices of the cake she'd baked a few hours earlier. 'They both earn good money.'

'They'd need it for that rambling place. It's a ruin.'

Lexi frowned and accepted her piece of vanilla cake. 'Not a ruin, Gary, or worth that much money, so don't exaggerate.' Her large burly brother had a habit of over-dramatising things.

'Have you had a surveyor or building inspector out? I bet it's riddled with damp. The wiring will be ancient, the plumbing—'

'Yes, Gary.' Jilly shot him a warning look. 'Lexi and Dylan aren't stupid. They know what goes into buying a house.' She smiled and winked at Lexi. 'I think it's exciting. You both need a proper home, and a garden.'

'Dylan's not too keen,' Lexi lied. She was delusional. Not too keen? That had to be the understatement of the year.

‘The man has sense then,’ Gary argued, sipping his tea and ploughing through his cake.

‘I want the house, Gary, and I will get it. I work hard, why should I deny myself something I want, something that will make me happy?’ The vehemence in her reply surprised even her.

She wanted Hollingsworth House.

Now, at twenty to two on this Monday afternoon, and, as naturally as breathing, she left the car and strolled around the outside of the house, *her* house.

The house she would make into a home.

Impulsively, she ran back to the car and searched her bag for her mobile. Within moments she was dialling the estate agent listed on the ‘For Sale’ sign. The brief conversation had her smiling. The agent could come out in the next half hour and show her inside the property.

Sticking her phone in her jacket pocket, Lexi walked to the boatshed and slid back the bolt. The diary beckoned. If she was fanciful, which she usually wasn’t, she’d like to imagine it had been put there for her alone to find. Was she losing her mind? Lately, she didn’t know herself. With a toss of her head she pushed away her thoughts. Nonsense. She was sane. Sane people found unusual things all the time.

Lexi stood in the dim boatshed, staring at the trunk which hid the diary. She enjoyed reading, loved books. She liked nothing more than wandering around second-hand bookshops with their distinctive old world smell. The diary was going to be a good book, that’s all. Just like the ones she bought in the shops. There was no reason to get sentimental or weird about it ...

Yet, as she bent and pulled the trunk out, she knew it was more than that. She desperately wanted to lose herself in the past. She felt an instant connection with the diarist who had lived at this house. How did Alexandria cope with love and life fifty years ago? Was it as hard then as it was now?

Settling herself on the dusty cold floor, Lexi retrieved the diary and turned to a random entry. She read a few pages, which detailed journeys the diarist and her lover took – their snatches of togetherness from the cruelty of war.

*Oh how we laughed!*

*A simple day by the seaside, eating cheese sandwiches and running along the sand. I knew not where we were – a particular bay somewhere on the French coast. Allies on patrol whistled at us until they saw Danny's rank and then quickly saluted. I laughed and blew them kisses to send them on their way. What gay abandonment we had, Danny and I. If only for a little while ...*

Flipping through towards the end of the journal, she read another page where the writing was harder to read and the entries were much shorter.

*London, July, 1932.*

*After three weeks apart, Danny is back in my arms. How I have missed him. But I mustn't grumble for we both know that nothing can change it except death for either of us or for Irene. Danny looks tired and I know he's been having a difficult time of it lately. Politics are an exhausting duty, especially in these uncertain times. The rebellious energy of the Twenties has long gone and instead it seems the world is falling apart once more, this time it's not due to war but about the lack of money caused by the war. The north of the country, where Danny's interests lie, has been the hardest hit and unemployment is high.*

*It has been dreadfully hot and I want to escape the London heat and go somewhere cool. Danny is arranging for us to go to Cornwall and I'm glad of it, for he needs a rest as much as I*

*do. He knows of a cottage we can have for a week. I am beside myself with excitement like a child on her birthday. I will have Danny to myself for seven whole days and nights. We'll swim in the ocean, walk along the sand, eat ice cream and sleep in late. There will be no patients for me to worry over, or staff rosters to contend with, and Danny will be spared the bother of family and office duties. We will be totally selfish and think only of ourselves and each other. Bliss.*

Lexi rested her back against the workbench and closed her eyes, jealous of the love Alexandria and Danny had shared. A love that war couldn't intrude upon and couldn't smother. It wasn't like that for her and Dylan. Their love had surrendered to the pressures of modern day life. They had every gadget man could make to ease their needs. Everything was instant, clean, fast and efficient. At the touch of a button they washed clothes, phoned the other side of the world, cooked a meal and heated their house. Their lives were so easy. No war, no threat of death and destruction hindered her and Dylan's life, or their love. But, despite this, or because of it, the bond, the strength of their affection, had waned.

Died.

Buried beneath careers and possessions.

Two hot tears fell from her lashes and scalded her cheeks as they streaked down to her chin, and there they hung, suspended, then dropped silently, soaking onto her shirt. Crying. She was crying again!

Lexi wiped her face with her sleeve. 'It ... it doesn't matter. It's good to cry.' She sniffed and her chin wobbled as new tears formed and spilt. 'And now I'm talking to myself in an empty boatshed.' She wanted to laugh, but a sob escaped instead.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to ignore the hurt breaking her heart. She had to think positively. Perhaps with hard work and a determined effort they could save their marriage? Maybe go to counselling? Take a holiday? They should go to Cornwall as Alexandria and Danny had.

Grasping this slim hope, Lexi lovingly stroked the leather bound diary and then tucked the book under her arm and stood. She gazed down at the opened trunk, the diary's resting place. She should put it back, but the journal felt right being with her. She had to read it. She bent and gently closed the trunk and pushed it back under the workbench. Forcing the guilt away, she bolted the shed and walked around to the front of the house just as the estate agent's car pulled up alongside hers.

Lexi placed the diary on the passenger seat of her car and smiled at the slim elegant woman who came towards her carrying a black folder. 'Thank you for coming out on such short notice.'

'My pleasure. I'm Phoebe Campbell.' The agent held out her hand and Lexi shook it. 'Please call me Phoebe.'

'Lexi O'Connor.'

'And so you're interested in this fine house?'

'Yes.'

'It must be a special week as another client has been inquiring about it too, after months of silence.' She shrugged as if to say the property market was all beyond her comprehension.

'Oh?' Lexi's heart plummeted as they walked towards the front door. 'I couldn't enter into a price war.'

'Well, nothing has been offered yet, so don't worry. The other client is still acquiring the costs of turning this place into flats.'

Lexi jerked and stared at the woman. 'Flats?'

Phoebe jingled the keys to find the right one. 'It's common. Flats provide good returns on the original investment.'

'But isn't this house a listed building?'

'Yes, Grade II, which is why our other client has to investigate things further.' Phoebe opened the door and walked into the entrance hall. 'The house was built in about 1800 and is set on two acres, though of course the original estate was much larger. A lot of it was sold off after the First World War. During both world wars it was a convalescent home for soldiers. Apparently every room housed beds, even the reception rooms. The Hollingsworth family had inheritance debts, which affected the estate's survival. I should warn you it hasn't been redecorated since the sixties and is in desperate need of work. Any major renovations will have to go through the correct officers in the local council and Building Control Department.'

Lexi hesitated on the threshold, ignoring the stale damp air that hit her. Inside her chest a budding spark of joy and well being began to envelop her. Black and white marble tiles flowed from the entrance hall to the wide staircase on the right and then drew the eye down a hallway. She stepped inside, hardly daring to breathe. She felt such a sense of belonging it frightened her.

The agent's phone rang in her pocket. 'Oh, I'm sorry. Please have a look round. I'll come and find you in a moment.' She darted outside to answer the call.

Turning into the first room on the left, Lexi gazed around at what she thought must have been a sitting room. It held an ornate fireplace on the far wall and had two long sash windows overlooking the front gardens. Faded green wallpaper covered the walls and a threadbare carpet in hues of green and brown covered the floorboards.

Suddenly impatient to see the entire house, Lexi hurried across the entrance hall to the room opposite. This room was a mirror image in size of the one she'd just left, only decorated in shades of pale blue. Next, she walked down the hallway past the staircase to the rooms beyond. What she assumed was a small study was on the left and, opposite it, a dining room. All the rooms had ceiling roses and moulded cornices. Further down the corridor and turning right she found small storage rooms and then a good-sized kitchen.

The kitchen seemed to be lost in a time warp. A large old-fashioned cooking range filled the length of the far wall. An enormous wooden table dominated the centre of the room and high in the lofty ceiling were timber racks on pulleys. Red stone tiles gave the room a hint of warmth, but the whitewashed walls were patchy with spots of damp and mould. Under the window overlooking the back garden was a white stone sink with an ancient tap, and in another corner stood a decrepit old washing machine. A heavy door led outside but she resisted going into the garden and instead returned the way she'd come and went upstairs.

The landing at the top was square and wide with a good size linen closet, which also held the hot water boiler. Six bedrooms led off the narrow hallway, each room was empty and badly in need of redecorating. The carpet throughout this floor was a revolting mix of red and brown swirls that made the rooms and hallway appear dark and small.

At the end of the hallway, stood a large bathroom. Like the agent said, it seemed some attempt in the sixties had been made to modernise it. There was a flushing toilet and a bath with a sink, all in a hideous pea-green colour. A shower would have to be installed and the entire bathroom taken out and restyled.

As the list of work lengthened, Lexi expected her enthusiasm to wear off. Yet, strangely, she felt more determined than ever to restore love and care back into the house. It had been unloved for too long. This house needed her. And she needed it.

The agent called from below and Lexi ran lightly down the staircase, filled with excitement.

‘I apologise, Mrs O’Connor.’ Phoebe fussed with her folder, her expression one of apology. ‘Sometimes mobiles can be a curse.’

‘I understand.’ Lexi gazed around the entrance hall again. ‘I’d like to make an offer. Can I ring you later after I’ve spoken to my bank?’

‘Absolutely. Here’s my card.’

Lexi took the card and studied it, though her mind was not on the black printed words, but on Dylan and money.

‘If you’ve seen enough at this viewing, I’ll lock up.’ Phoebe smiled, pulling the door closed. ‘I have another appointment.’

‘Thank you again for coming out at short notice.’

‘No problem at all. I hope you get the house. I’d hate to see it turned into flats.’

‘Me, too.’ Lexi watched her lock the door and then they walked back to their cars. ‘What’s the asking price for flats in Wakefield now?’ She told Phoebe what area she lived in and details about the apartment.

Phoebe flipped through her folder. ‘We have a few properties like that listed. You’d probably be able to ask over one hundred and twenty thousand pounds.’ She gave Lexi a few brochures, one of which was about Hollingsworth House.

‘Yes, they are similar to my flat.’ Lexi glanced through them and then back to the house.

‘Thanks. I’ll be in touch soon.’

‘Good luck.’ The agent’s phone rang again and she answered it as she climbed into her car.

Lexi looked back at the house. She had to have it. All she had to do was convince Dylan he needed it, too.

She sat in the car and started the engine, her mind whirling with ideas and plans. When her phone rang she hoped it would be Dylan, but it was her mother. ‘Hi, Mum.’

‘Hello, love. Are you busy?’

‘No. I’m on my way home. I left work early because of a headache.’ Funnily enough it had disappeared the minute she walked into the house.

‘That’s a shame. Go home and lie down for a while. Do you want me to do anything for you? Get some groceries, or something? You never have food in your flat.’

‘No, thanks. I’m fine. Besides, we eat out a lot. Dylan gets his meals at the hospital most days.’

‘Oh.’ There was a slight pause. ‘I’ve just been talking to Gary.’

‘And?’ Once the agent had driven away, Lexi switched the engine off again.

‘Lexi, he says you want to buy a ruined mansion or castle or some such nonsense.’

‘Lord, he’s such a drama queen.’ She rested her elbow on the door and shook her head at her brother’s dramatics. He’d never change. ‘It’s not a ruin, Mum. It’s just a house. Hollingsworth House, you know it.’

‘Oh, that house. I was imagining some castle ruin on the moors or something. Silly Gary, getting me all worked up over nothing.’

‘Yes, well, he thinks I’m an idiot.’

‘Is it a lot of money?’

‘Yes, but I’ll try to bargain the price down, of course.’

‘And what is Dylan’s opinion? Can you both afford it? Gary says it’s a million pounds. Surely he has that wrong.’

‘It’s just over half that amount. Five hundred and fifty thousand. It would be a lot more if it wasn’t surrounded by housing estates and in need of work. I will be offering a lower price, obviously.’

‘Oh, Lexi, such a lot of money.’

‘I know, but I want this house, Mum. I can’t explain why I do, I just do. It seems so right.’

‘But what you’d get for your flat won’t come near to the price. Can you raise the money?’

‘It’ll be tough. I need to speak to the bank and stuff.’

‘Why don’t you call in and see us when you have a chance. Speak to your dad.’

‘I will, maybe tomorrow.’

‘Come to dinner, you and Dylan.’

‘Okay.’

‘Good. See you then, love. Bye.’

‘Bye, Mum.’ Lexi threw her phone into her bag and started the engine. She had to get home and make some phone calls. Her recently retired father had been a banker and his wise investments had secured the family’s wealth, which, although not enormous, was enough for her parents to live comfortably. Both she and Gary had been given trust funds, along with a substantial inheritance from their grandparents, which had matured when they reached twenty-five. Gary bought his house and she had bought her flat. She’d also used her money for university. When she met Dylan he’d been a struggling medical student and her money had helped him, too. He lived in her flat and she helped him pay for his university fees once they were married.

Once she was home, Lexi made herself a cup of tea and phoned her bank manager. Then she rang a couple of estate agents, asking them to come and give her a valuation on her flat. On the table, beside her notebook, lay the old leather diary, like an old friend. She smiled at it and although tempted to read a few pages, she resisted. Reading the journal would be her reward once she'd finished with facts and figures. She rang the council next and managed to talk to someone in Building Control for listed buildings. He was happy to come out and view the house and give her information. She rang the next person on her list.

Dylan rubbed the tension from the back of his neck as he let himself into the flat. Lexi looked busy with papers strewn out in front of her. 'Hello.'

'Hi.' She put down her pen and smiled warily. Like him, she was probably hoping they could forget this morning's argument. 'How was your day?'

'Long.' The demands at the hospital were never ending and a young patient of his had died during the day just when he thought they'd turned the corner. Damn cancer. He was fed up and exhausted. He worked loose his tie and opened the fridge door. It was nearly empty. Didn't Lexi ever shop for food? 'Why don't we ever have beer in this place?'

'Because we never buy beer unless we have guests over.' She frowned. 'I'll open a bottle of wine.'

'I don't want wine.' Frustrated, he slammed the fridge door and walked through to slump on the sofa. His head pounded. There was a mountain of notes to write up, but he couldn't face them. All he wanted to do was have a can of beer, sit down and close his eyes and not think about anything.

‘I’ll cook us something.’ She left the table and stepped into the kitchen area. He watched her, frowning. Something was up with her. She seemed a little tightly strung. As much as he wanted to, he couldn’t deal with conversation right now. He did nothing but talk at the hospital and he just wanted some peace and quiet to relax. He felt so useless sometimes. He knew she was unhappy, but he didn’t know how to change that. His work took all of his energy. He tried to be a good husband but he was exhausted most of the time. Lexi had vitality and ideas, always wanting to do this and that whereas he much preferred to spend his spare time relaxing and switching off. Why didn’t she understand that? He loved her, but somewhere deep in his heart he knew things were not great between them. At times he felt that his wife was disappointed in him. That nothing he did was good enough for her.

Dylan sighed, turned on the television and skipped through the channels. He never watched the television. He didn’t really want to watch it now, but he couldn’t face paperwork or conversation. Most evenings he worked in the spare bedroom, which they’d turned into an office, but this evening he was in need of something light and funny to distract him, something that didn’t require his intense concentration.

While Lexi filled a saucepan with water, he glanced over at the paperwork piled on the table. A brochure caught his eye and he reached over to pick it up. ‘What’s all this?’

Lexi turned from the sink and her face lost some of its colour. ‘Oh, well ...’

Reading her jottings on the notepad, his interest changed from boredom to puzzlement, then anger. No, she couldn’t be serious. He stared at her and saw the guilt in her eyes. She was serious. A fireball of frustration burst inside him. ‘That bloody house!’

She came towards him, hesitant and with appeal in her eyes. ‘Can we at least talk about it, please?’

‘No! I’m not buying that house, Lexi, I mean it.’ Christ would she ever listen to him? Did she always have to have her own way? ‘I have told you before that I don’t want to saddle myself with such debt right now.’

‘Dylan, for God’s sake calm down and let me explain what—’

‘I don’t care. I don’t want you to explain. I’m not having it.’ He picked up the notepad and laughed without humour at the figures. ‘Bloody hell, just look at the repayments! Are you insane? I can’t afford this.’ His heart flipped at the thought of that amount of money. He hated debt with a passion.

‘It’s not just you who will have to repay it. I’ll be doing my share. I’m sure we can get the price down substantially and then with the sale of this flat, which is all profit. Plus—’

‘Oh yes, don’t let us forget this is *your* flat paid for with *your* money.’ He’d never said that to her before. He’d always tried to make her feel that money wasn’t an issue between them or, more importantly, her money wasn’t. But, her words had touched a raw nerve. The delicate topic of her wealth always made him ashamed that he had none when they met, and he was still playing catch up.

Hands on hips, she glared at him. ‘What the *hell* is that supposed to mean?’

Why did they have to argue? They barely saw each other, but lately when they did spend time together a fight soon followed. Nothing he said or did pleased her any more. Where had the funny, sexy Lexi gone? She’d been replaced by a woman he hardly recognised – one that wanted a big house and babies and no longer cared about her career. He couldn’t be more shocked at the change than if she’d said she wanted to dye her hair blue and live in Outer Mongolia!

Suddenly it was all too difficult, too demanding. He’d had enough of everything.

‘I’m not doing this.’ Dylan dropped the notepad as if it burnt him and flung away from the table. He needed air, he needed a beer, several, and he needed to get away from her accusing eyes. He grabbed his car keys from the kitchen bench top and stormed out, slamming the door hard.

Lexi jerked, stunned. She felt like she’d just been slapped. What had just happened? What *was* happening to them?

In a daze she walked into the sitting room area and stared at the brochure for Hollingsworth House. Fighting with Dylan made her ill. This wasn’t like him. Before he always talked to her and never reacted with tantrums and shouting. When had it all started to go wrong?

She was glad he was gone. The violence in his expression, the confusion, the anger he showed in his eyes was not the man she knew. Why couldn’t he just let her explain and discuss what they each wanted? Her heart ached. Deep down she knew they were getting to a stage where there would be no going back.

Her hands shook as she reached out and picked up the diary. She hugged it to her.

Slowly, as though she was frail and weak, she inched onto the sofa and curled her feet up under her. Gently, she opened the diary to the first date and began to read.

## Chapter Four

*When the moans and cries of wounded men became too loud, or the smell of blood and putrefying flesh was thick in my nose, I'd turn my mind to something else, somewhere else. It was a habit, a safety tactic I had developed an extreme talent for. Within minutes the hard wooden duckboards beneath my feet, the billowing canvas, the stench of disinfectant would all disappear as I trained my mind to be elsewhere while I went about my duties.*

*As I tended to the wounded, instructed junior nurses, listened to doctors, and spoke to orderlies, I could also be on the other side of the world – in my memories. I'd think of my parents, of how happy they were just before they died, knowing I had a career, money to live on and rooms in Sydney. I'd think of home, of Australia, the sunshine, the blueness of the vast sky, the sound of a kookaburra's laugh. I'd recall the small country town where I grew up, its dusty dry roads, the corrugated iron water tanks, the wide brown land. I would remember the years of training and studying I did to become first a nurse and then a promotion to Sister in a world where women rarely left their own hearths and went from the protection of their father to a husband without pause.*

*By using this method I could block out the young men's faces, their agony, their tears and curses, or worse, their dead staring eyes. I could pretend that bombs weren't exploding into the earth, that my uniform wasn't soaked in blood or that my ankles were not swollen and my feet didn't ache because I'd been on duty for two days straight. I could forget that I hadn't slept properly in months. Thinking about Australia allowed me, for a little while, to pretend I was anywhere else than where I actually was ...*

Number 10 British Casualty Clearing Station, 6 miles from the Allies frontline, Albert, France.

June 23rd, 1916.

‘Sister Jamieson, if you please?’ Doctor Ackroyd lifted the sheet over the dead soldier’s face.

Another gone to Heaven. Another young man cut down too soon.

‘I’ll see to it, Doctor.’ I wrote on a cardboard tag and attached it to the soldier’s shirt button. I clicked my fingers at Bosworth, the orderly, coming into the tent, and although he was over forty years old, he ran to do my bidding.

With the efficiency that had got me noticed and advanced in my nursing career back home, I sped to intercept the doctor’s needs as he went to inspect the soldier on the next stretcher. The patient’s medical card indicated a slight chest wound.

‘Chest ward,’ Ackroyd barked, then moved to examine the next soldier as I followed him. ‘Operation ward. Paynter is still in theatre.’ Then on to the next man. ‘Stretcher case. Dressing room.’

On and on it went, man after man, the wounded, the dying, the dead. Another battle had spewed out its leftovers. I had orderlies and nurses running to and fro obeying my orders and instructions.

At the end of the row Doctor Ackroyd, a good surgeon and chief medical officer at this station, and, sadly, also a little dull, wiped his lined forehead. ‘I noticed the new VAD, Featherstone, is an excellent addition to our group. She handles the patients very well.’

I nodded, thinking of the young woman who had joined us two days ago. Valerie Featherstone was a Voluntary Aid Detachment, shortened to VAD. A woman who didn’t get paid for her services, but who had to work the hardest at all the mundane and basic chores everyone hated

doing. 'I agree. But then she has had practice. She was working in a hospital near Loos when that battle raged last September. She told me it was a baptism of fire for her and the other VADs fresh from England. At the time she wished she had never defied her father and come over here, but she told me that she soon sorted herself out. Featherstone is very dedicated. Her brother was killed at Mons.'

Ackroyd adjusted and checked a soldier's irrigation tube snaking out of his leg stump. 'We simply couldn't be without the VADs and I don't care what anyone says to the contrary.' Giving the soldier a manly pat on the shoulder, he moved on. 'I've been advised of another offensive starting next week, Sister Jamieson. We need to be prepared. We need to be empty for the fresh influx of wounded.'

'Yes, Doctor.'

'I've alerted Matron, but she isn't well enough yet to leave her bed.'

I nodded and straightened a blanket at the end of the cot. 'I checked on her today and she is still weak. Of course she refuses to admit it. She'd been in here in a flash if I hadn't hidden her shoes.' I looked up suddenly. 'Please don't tell her it was me.'

A quiver of a smile showed before he turned away. 'Tell her what?'

'Thank you.'

'Naturally, this all means you are still in charge of the nurses for the foreseeable future.'

'Understood.' Rubbing my eyes, I moved with him to the next bed.

Matron Reeves, a stickler for obedience, routine, hygiene and rules, had been laid low with dysentery for two days. I doubted she'd be out of bed and back on duty for another week yet, despite her determination to get up.

‘An important offensive, this one.’ Ackroyd consulted the card for another patient. ‘The official word is that casualties are expected to be low this time, but well, we’ve seen the true side of that statement, haven’t we, Sister?’ He sighed deeply. ‘No doubt casualties will be high as they always are.’

‘And yet such offenses still continue. Men still die.’ I shrugged, longing to stretch my tight neck muscles and ease away the starched collar of my uniform.

‘You are right, of course. Just one man being injured is too much, but that is not for me to comment on.’ He rubbed his nose and looked about the crowded marquee. ‘When does the next train arrive?’

‘In three hours.’

‘And all is ready?’

‘Absolutely. There are fifteen walking cases and thirty-four stretcher cases waiting in the evacuation tent.’

‘Right ...’ He scratched his chin, a frown creasing his forehead. ‘Is it possible to send another dozen or two?’

‘A dozen or two?’ I blinked, my mind working furiously. ‘Well, perhaps eight or ten more. I was being cautious and kept some behind that might be able to go. Being a new hospital we’ve been quiet up until today.’

‘Try to make it as many as you can. I’d feel better knowing these men were going to the base hospital or England as soon as possible. I don’t believe we’ll have time to care for all the critical cases before too long. I’ve a bad feeling about sending men on their way with hardly a bandage on, but our orders are to get them to the base hospitals as soon as possible.’

‘I don’t like sending them on when we can see to them here, especially while we’ve got the beds. If we could spend a little more time on each man here, we might save more men.’

He placed his hand on my shoulder. ‘We are here to do the best we can and work with what orders we’ve been given. Don’t waste your time fighting it, Sister. We’re not in England at some clean hospital. We’re in the middle of a war and far from decent medical facilities. We do what we can and send them on.’

I sucked in a deep breath and held back any further comments. ‘Understood, Doctor.’

‘Good, and remember, we don’t know what’s ahead, Sister. We’ve been too quiet, as you say.’

‘Well, perhaps the army don’t know we’re here yet.’ I tried to joke, but my voice was strained.

‘They know. And we’ll get our fair share of the casualties, don’t you worry.’ He glanced at the wounded surrounding them. ‘Enough to make this lot look like a tea party.’ He checked his watch. ‘Do try to move on as many as you can. Fill the train when it arrives. Get them away from here.’

‘Yes, sir.’ I would, of course, find a dozen, and more, men to send down the line to the base hospital. If a major offensive were to begin, then we’d need every bed.

He nodded. ‘Good. I’ll be in the chest ward if you need me.’ His lips thinned into a semblance of a smile. ‘Go have a cup of tea, Jamieson. The night is long.’

‘Thank you, Doctor.’ I fought back a yawn and turned away. I had two more hours left of my shift. Would this night ever end?

Outside the tent stars twinkled in the black sky. The day had been hot. France had baked under a burning summer sun. In the distance a flare went up over the trenches, a fluttering tiny

spark lighting up the land for a brief moment before darkness returned. There was the odd explosion, but it had been relatively calm for the last day or so, if the constant stream of wounded was what could be called calm, but at least they'd been spared major conflicts so far.

I yawned again, wishing for my bed, or even better a long hot bath. I couldn't remember when I last enjoyed one of those. I stumbled like someone drunk over to the mess tent. All was silent inside, everyone asleep in their tents. The cook, McKinley, a kindly Scottish man, kept flasks of black tea hot by wrapping them in towels and placing them in the still-warm ovens. I eagerly made myself a mug of sugarless tea and found a plate of the cook's own flat oatcakes.

As I sipped the comforting brew, the low rumble came of bombs landing, and consequently, the answering ack-ack of the guns. It no longer had the power to fill me with horror, not like when I served on the hospital ships off Egypt last year, but it was still all so very endless. Yawning again, I slipped my head down onto my folded arms and closed my eyes. I'd just have a minute's rest then go back ...

'Sister. Sister Jamieson!'

I woke up with a start. Bosworth was shaking my shoulders as if he wanted to wrench my body apart. 'Stop it, man.'

'You must come, hurry up. The doctor needs you. We've wounded.' Bosworth pulled me from the bench.

I staggered after him, peering at my watch, had I slept long? I had no idea. Shame washed over me. No matter how tired I was there was no excuse to sleep while on duty. How could I have slept through the noise of the wounded arriving?

'How many are there?' I shouted, weaving through the tents in the darkness. This particular clearing station had only been open for a week and as such had been spared a large influx of

wounded until enough supplies were brought in. However, the war waited for no one and it seemed our time for receiving small amounts of casualties was over.

‘Twelve so far, but some of the ambulances have returned to the Dressing Station for more. There was a trench raid again.’ He paused, his expression kind. ‘You only had your head down for a few minutes, so don’t look so stricken. I knew what time you went for your tea.’

‘Thank you. If Matron had found me ...’

‘Not in her condition, and you know I’ll watch out for you.’ He turned and hurried along the duckboards.

The sky lit up orange and red as bombs exploded closer than those before. I could now feel the vibration beneath my feet. I ran after Bosworth, skirting the smaller tents and into the main drop-off area. Nurses and orderlies were hauling patients out of the last ambulance.

Once more I entered the distribution ward. Again, I faced the chaos. Like a disturbed ants’ nest the place swarmed with activity. Noise bludgeoned my ears. I winced, then a second later I was in the thick of it. Already blood soaked the floor and I called for sand or sawdust to cover it as I hurried down the rows of squirming, wounded men.

Years of training came to the fore while I did numerous jobs at once. The orderlies, like Bosworth, were brilliant. I relied heavily on them and my two nurses. I nodded to Nurse Vincent, who was efficiently organising the wounded by the scale of their injuries. The critical ones were prepared for surgery, and the others divided into smaller marquees housing different levels of injuries.

The staring eyes of the dead men were hastily covered with a blanket and taken out to be replaced by another broken man. I stopped by one soldier’s bed and gave him a comforting smile. ‘There, we’ll soon have you right again.’

‘Thank you, Sister.’ He squirmed, clearly in pain, as I assessed his injuries but he didn’t complain, they never did. ‘May I have some water, Sister, when you have a minute free?’

I changed his bandage over what remained of his left foot. ‘Certainly you can.’ I gave him a morphine injection and wrote on his card, knowing he’d need to be amputated to the knee. ‘We’ll just get you ready for surgery and then you’ll have a drink.’

‘Surgery?’ His eyes widened.

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘I’ll get to go home, Sister?’

I patted his arm. ‘First to England, then home. Your war is over.’

A wide smile spread across his face. ‘Home. Thank God!’

For an hour I worked, before finally the stream of wounded stopped arriving. I changed my apron and sipped some water, my throat parched as a dry creek bed.

‘Do you need me here any more?’ I asked Nurse Vincent as she came alongside me, an enamel bowl full of bloodied bandages.

‘No, Sister, but Doctor Ackroyd wants you in theatre.’

I rushed outside and along the duckboards into the long hospital marquee. It was quieter in here, the patients critical. Morphine had reduced their awareness in readiness for surgery.

‘Is that you, Sister? I need you in here now,’ Doctor Ackroyd called from behind a partition where he did the operating, along with Doctor Paynter.

Flipping back the canvas screen, I assessed the situation in a glance. A pile of sawn limbs filled one corner, an orderly was hurriedly taking them out to be burnt. Doctor Ackroyd had his hands inside a soldier’s stomach, the patient’s intestines spilling out like a coil of butcher’s

sausages. Nurse Appleby, her young face bleached white from exhaustion and revulsion, was trying desperately to assist the doctor, but I knew she needed air.

I washed my hands in the disinfectant solution and plunged in to help. 'Thank you, Nurse.' I dismissed her with a nod of my head. 'Go out and help Nurse Vincent, please.'

'Yes, Sister.' She fled without washing her hands and I sighed.

'Be good enough to push my glasses up, will you, Sister.' Doctor Ackroyd grimaced. 'Then we need to shove this lot back in.'

'They're swollen, Doctor.' The red and pink guts pulsed in my hands. The metallic smell of blood and mud and death clung to me and everything around me. 'They'll never fit,' I feared.

'Then we'll bind him up as best we can.' He was pragmatic as always.

I nodded, steeling myself to do the task needed of me and to not look in the young man's face because he would die of his wounds like so many others. Sometimes, no matter how hard we tried, it was never good enough.

As soon as we had done the best we could for the soldier, I washed my hands and changed my bloodied apron for a cleaner one. Taking a deep breath, I turned to the next stretcher, a chest case, and we started again. My body felt bludgeoned with tiredness and my senses seemed dazed. I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. 'I didn't expect wounded tonight. Aren't we usually notified?'

'I spoke to a lieutenant just before he died. They had done a trench raid that went badly wrong. Another stupid waste.'

I looked around for Doctor Paynter. 'Should I send for Doctor Paynter before we start again?'

Ackroyd shook his head. 'He's dead on his feet. He's operated for fifteen hours straight. I've sent him to bed. Let him sleep. We'll cope.' He glanced at the opening. 'Where is Stevenson? This fellow needs to be put under.'

I left the table and found the anaesthetist, Stevenson, administering to another patient and told him he was needed in theatre.

'Two more just arrived, Sister, only slightly wounded,' Bosworth said, appearing silently at my shoulder, his blue eyes behind round rimmed glasses were focused and intent. 'They are the last of them for now apparently.'

'Right, I'm coming.' What would I do without him, this brave hardworking man? I sent another grateful plea to the heavens that Bosworth's poor eyesight had got him out of combat and posted at my side.

I sent Nurse Vincent in to help Doctor Ackroyd and then marched up between the rows of cots, automatically checking each man with a glance as I went by.

In the distribution tent I sought the whereabouts of my nurses, those who'd just come on duty as dawn broke. Cheetham was changing a dressing, Appleby was writing on a card attached to a man's jacket and Nurse Pritchard was busy at the medicine cabinet in the corner.

'Where is Nurse Doyle?'

'Ill, Sister,' Bosworth murmured, 'like Matron. She nearly fainted outside. So I helped her to her bed. I hope I did right?'

'Yes, thank you, Bosworth.' Dysentery frightened us more than anything else. It had the power to wipe out the staff and patients within hours.

The noise, although still loud, wasn't the fevered pitch it was hours earlier. Some order had been obtained. The cries of the men in agony had been reduced by morphine, exhaustion or

unconsciousness. The ambulances' engines were turned off as the drivers restocked their equipment from our supplies. People walked, no longer ran. The emergency had calmed and the silence of pre-dawn returned.

I took a deep breath, left the marquee and did a round of the other tents holding wounded: the chest ward, the stretcher case dressing room, the observation room, the resuscitation ward and, lastly, the walking case dressing ward.

By the time I had finished my rounds, wrote up my notes and assisted once again in theatre it was four hours past the end of my shift. The sun had risen once more and for a moment a peaceful summer's day descended on the countryside. Although I had more hours of paperwork ahead, I wanted to wash and change and maybe catch an hour's sleep.

'Sister Jamieson?'

I turned from watching a small brown bird pecking around the bottom of the rubbish bins behind the kitchen. Birds were rare in this open country now, with so many trees blown up. 'Yes, Nurse Baintree?'

'I wondered if Matron could see me?'

'Oh? Is it important? She is still ill.' Together we strolled companionably to one of the large white canvas tents which housed the nurses' quarters, inadequate, but better than the smaller bell tents we usually occupied.

'I'd like some leave, if possible. My fiancé is able to meet with me for two days if we can arrange it.' Her grey eyes, usually so serious, were lit up with some inner light. Her pale face took on a rosy bloom, transforming her into an attractive young woman again. Like me, she was an Australian. There were several of us at this hospital and in our limited spare time we'd swap

stories of home and relish any letters or cards reminding us of loved ones so far away. Sadly, all I had was an elderly aunt now, but I cherished everything she sent.

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

‘I haven’t had any proper leave for three months.’

Patting her shoulder, I smiled. ‘I know that. I’ll try my best for you.’

‘Oh, thank you, Sister.’ Baintree, much lighter of spirit, hurried up the duckboards and into her tent.

I stared after her, wishing I knew what it was to be in love, and to be loved back. What was it like to be held, caressed and kissed by a man who thought only of you? Would I ever get the chance to experience it? But then, did I really want it? Baintree’s fiancé was a corporal and often in the front line, a man who faced death every day. Did I want to fall in love with a man only to perhaps lose him? How many nurses had I seen crying from the loss of a beloved? Did I want that pain? Could I handle any more stress and heartache than I’d already had in my life?

A train whistle blew half-heartedly. I swung to watch the hospital transport train, hours late, pull into the loading station, hissing and spitting and disturbing the morning peace. I’d learnt back in 1914, while serving in Egypt, that timetables and time itself had a different meaning in war.

Despite the gritty tiredness behind my eyes, I made my way over to help load the men as requested. The thoughts of love pushed to the back of my mind.

*We just know you’ll want to continue reading, download from:*

