

FROM AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

JANE LOVERING

*I don't
want
to talk
about
it*



I Don't Want to Talk About It

Extract- First Two Chapters

Jane Lovering

Book 5 in the Yorkshire Romances



Where heroes are like chocolate – irresistible!

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*To Prince, Saddle, Perry and other sock-headed, broomhandle-bodied,
woolly-maned facilitators of imaginary gymkhanas - and the grown up little girls who
loved them.*

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Thanks also to the Tasting Panel members who passed *I Don't Want To Talk About It*: Megan, Betty, Heidi, Janice, Sarah, Linda.Sp, Saada and Janyce.

Facebook

Alex Hill

My mother's let her holiday cottage to someone writing a book about graves! I bet she's all black lipstick and dodgy footwear. Who writes books about graves, anyway?

Matt Simons likes this

Comment: Matt Simons Your mother is all black lipstick? Introduce me ...

Comment: Alex Hill This woman writing about graves, dickbrain.

Comment: Matt Simons Aye aye, you could be in there, man! She'll be someone who doesn't get out much ...

CHAPTER ONE

‘Northern stone, being harder – like the locals, some would say – lends itself less readily to the flourishes and overblown decorations found further south. Nevertheless, the Churchill family somehow managed to find a stonemason capable of producing something more appropriate to the pages of an illustrated manuscript for their daughter Beatrice. Deceased at the age of 29, there is a local rumour that she died giving birth to an illegitimate child, and that the somewhat over-decorative nature of her stone was her father’s attempt to distract attention from this unpalatable fact. Whatever the circumstances of her death, familial affection is obvious in every deep-cut line.’ – Book of the Dead 2

It’s not every epitaph that can carry off the ‘explosion in an eyebrow factory’ look, but, as I moved the ivy which made the age-angled gravestone look like a drunk in a bad toupee, a host of earwigs scuttled across the surface and, when I looked through the camera viewfinder, Beatrice Churchill (1747-1776) was giving infestation her best shot.

‘What are you doing?’

I jumped and turned around. There’s not usually much of an audience in a graveyard, or, if there is, I don’t want to think about it, but, standing behind me and half-hidden by more ivy, was a little girl.

‘I’m taking photographs of this grave,’ I said, slightly unnecessarily I felt, given that I’d been crouched in front of the stone with a camera and there were a limited number of other things I could have been up to in the circumstances and in broad daylight.

The girl came a little further into the sun. She looked, to my inexperienced eye, to be about eight, blonde messy hair with a cycle helmet crushed down onto it, the splash of freckles that said she probably spent a lot of time out of doors, and one hand holding a hobby horse with a red corduroy head and an expression of good-natured stupidity stitched onto his face. ‘Why?’

I turned away and took another shot, now that the earwigs had reconvened somewhere other than all across the sandstone. ‘I’m writing a book. I write books about graves. Haven’t you been told not to talk to strange people?’

The little girl came further out from under the ivy. I could see now that, along with the cycle helmet, she was wearing a striped jumper, leggings and a pair of wellington boots. The hobby horse continued to wear his inane grin.

‘You aren’t strange. You’re called Miss Winter Gregory and you’re renting Grandma’s little cottage in the High Street.’ She dramatically threw one knee in the air as though she was having some kind of fit, dragged the stick horse to a bush and pushed his plastic reins over it, and I realised that she’d been dismounting from an imaginary, and quite large, pony. ‘I’m Scarlet, and this is Light Bulb. He’s part thoroughbred.’

I stared at the broom handle, fabric and vacant embroidered smile. ‘Light Bulb is an unusual name,’ was all I could think of to say, doing that peculiar half-crouch that people who aren’t used to children do when trying to make up their minds whether to bend down to talk to them or not. Children had never really featured much in my life and, at thirty, I hadn’t quite made up my mind how I felt about them.

‘So is Winter,’ Scarlet replied, sensibly enough, I suppose.

I went back to trying to get an un-entomological shot of Beatrice’s stone and hoped that Scarlet would take the hint and go away. Like I said, I didn’t know much about children,

otherwise I would have realised that, in the land of the village-bound child, a newcomer is conversational gold.

‘I like your scrunchie. And ...’ a pause, as though she was giving my usual outfit of jeans and T-shirt a once over, in search of something at least vaguely complimentary to say, ‘your boots.’

I glanced down at my strictly practical Converse trainers. ‘Are you supposed to be here on your own? Isn’t someone ...’ I glanced around, and saw a resounding lack of responsible adults, ‘looking after you?’

‘Only Alex,’ the little girl said, with an insouciance that seemed to say that ‘Alex’ was so regularly neglectful of her that she’d already learned to cook, pay the bills and do basic DIY. ‘It’s all right. He’s working on the Old Mill across the road over there,’ a toss of blonde fringe towards the building site beside the river. ‘And he knows that Light Bulb sometimes runs away with me.’ This time the head-toss went in the direction of the hobby horse, propped blamelessly against the overgrown yew. ‘Alex is my uncle and he helps look after Light Bulb and I live with him. Alex, I mean, but I live with Light Bulb too, but I’m not allowed to sleep in his stable because Alex says it’s unhygienous.’

Oh boy. It’s like Sesame Street meets This Is Your Life. ‘Uh-huh,’ I tried to grunt in a conversation-stopping way, swivelling around to get Beatrice Churchill and her interesting engraving in a shot to show this corner of the churchyard, triangulated by a wall slumped around it like bored shoulders and overgrown with feathers of grass and cow parsley. Some unkempt trees shaded it and hung their lowest branches over the grave markers.

‘You’ve got wiggly hair,’ observed the child, and I finally laid down the camera.

‘Look, Scarlet. I’m trying to get this picture done so that I can go back and struggle with the next bit of my book. Please, can you just let me get on?’ I hadn’t meant to sound so

abrupt; the words came out cropped by annoyance and snipped into sharp edges by my desire for solitude. There was silence from behind me, and when I turned around to check that she'd got the message, she was standing very still with one thumb in her mouth and the other hand twisting a piece of hair that stuck out from under the bike helmet. She looked small and hurt and I felt like the biggest pile of pooh on the planet. 'Sorry, sorry, I'm just ... Look, why don't you come and hold this ivy back for me so I can take a proper picture?'

The thumb came out with an audible 'pop', and her mouth stretched into a grin as she ran over and dragged the leaves away from the stone with an enthusiasm that would have any botanist gritting his teeth. 'Like this?'

'Fabulous.' For the look of the thing I took some more pictures. I'd already really got more than enough of Beatrice, whose lettering wasn't *that* interesting, but I wanted to give Scarlet something to take that 'lost' look from her eyes.

After that, she ran from stone to stone, yanking at undergrowth and overhanging branches with shouts of 'do this one now!', leaping the snagged upthrusts of broken grave-kerbs with an almost elemental enthusiasm. She hugged marble angels and whirled around a granite obelisk as though engaged in some kind of morbid country dance, finally flinging herself down alongside a new-looking pale stone which hadn't had the chance to grow more than a border of ivy and a slight lichen-tan. 'You have to do this one too!'

I looked sideways at the marker, its clean white lines sharp against the green backdrop, like a lost tooth embedded in an apple. 'No. I'm writing about pre-nineteenth century headstones, this one is far too recent.' My glance slid away from where she sprawled and found the comforting endurance of Beatrice again. 'It's not interesting enough.'

The silence came over the little girl again but this time the thumb stayed away from her mouth; instead her fingers bunched and grasped at the fabric of her leggings. Her easy

slouch pulled tight into a curved defence. ‘This is Mummy,’ she said, ‘and she’s very, *very* interesting and you are horrible.’

Ah. The bitter smell of torn ivy was suddenly very pungent in the still air.

Nothing in my previous experience had given me any hints as to how to manage this situation, so I was more delighted than I should have been when a large man came crashing out of the yew-and-conifer undergrowth. The fact he had no shirt on, a light shading of brick dust being all that covered his well-muscled upper torso, didn’t hurt either. He had dark hair lightened by powdered stone, and an expression of dusty annoyance. On seeing me he froze into immobility, as though being seen by a human turned him to stone, like a troll.

‘Alex!’ Scarlet scrambled to her feet. ‘This is Winter who’s in Grandma’s cottage, but she won’t take a picture of Mummy!’

Welcome to Precis-land. ‘Scarlet was just helping me,’ I began, although why I felt I needed to justify anything to a man who’d left a child in his care to roam willy-nilly across a main road, I wasn’t sure. The man opened his mouth but didn’t say anything, closed it again, and held out a hand to the little girl, who gave him a weary look and fetched the hobby horse from his tethering post on the bush.

‘All right.’ She mounted, with the same exaggerated gesture as she’d got off. ‘We’re coming.’ Then, adopting a high-kneed trot, she hurtled off, followed by her silent guardian, and I heard her shout out to me as she disappeared through the overgrown graveyard. ‘He’s not weird, you know!’

Well, you could have fooled me. But then, I was taking pictures of graves, so, you know, maybe it takes one to know one.

Daniel Bekener @EditorDanB

RT @TheBookseller: Next yrs list from publishers of 2014's surprise hit Book of the Dead

@ShyOwlPublishing. Can they do it again?

CHAPTER TWO

'These remote churchyards are less subject to vandalism than those in conurbations, but their isolated locations can mean less in the way of conservation and protection of the stones. One very interesting example of Primitive carving with triangular terminations has become so overgrown that it took some effort to determine that it had been erected to the memories of children in one farming family, who had all died before their third birthdays. There were seventeen of them. One can only imagine ...' Book of the Dead 2

Facebook

Winter Gregory Author Page

Does anyone know whether J.R.R. Tolkien ever visited a North Yorkshire churchyard? Because some of the spiders I'm seeing look like Shelob's descendants. Honestly, this research should come with an award for 'Bravery in the face of Numerous Legs'.

I flipped the computer shut and sat down on one of the very 'holiday cottage' chairs in the tiny living room; old-fashioned wooden backs and seats padded with home-made cushions in 1940's tea dress fabric. The room was so small that there was no space for anything more upholstered and the rest of the furnishings looked like dolls house seconds.

I'd got the fidgets. The ideas were there but somehow the writing-down of them had got clogged, and the build up of words was making me restless. This little market town, with

its cobbled streets, jagged roofline and notable lack of tourist attractions, was providing me with lots of lovely material for the book, but not a lot of recreational activities, unless I wanted to join the Bowls Club (I didn't). Pacing around the room wasn't much help either, not enough floor space and too much furniture, and the bookshelves were filled with local guidebooks, maps and the odd Jeffrey Archer, Scrabble and puzzles. Nothing that would occupy my mind. Nothing that would provide focus for thoughts which, left to themselves, would circle and snap at me from the shadows like hungry wolves.

I'll talk to Daisy. I felt a bit guilty at having the idea now. As though speaking to my twin was only something I did when there was nothing else, when I'd run out of books and there was nothing on TV, rather than it being something that was second nature.

'Hi, Daze!'

A small pause before she answered. 'Hey, Winnie.' Sounded normal, sounded as she always did, apart from maybe that little gap before her reply being longer than usual. 'Are you bored again? You only want to talk to me when you're bored these days.'

'That's rubbish.' My eyes wandered over to the picture on the mantelpiece, me and Daisy aged about five. My favourite picture of us, wearing identical pink dresses and identical ice cream-smearred grins. I'd rebelled shortly afterwards at our mother's liking for dressing us the same and had immediately gravitated towards jeans and T-shirts, while Daisy had continued with the pretty florals and floaty fabrics. She said I looked like a boy, and I countered with the fact that she looked like curtains. 'It's just, you know, after what happened with Dan ... I never wanted us to fall out about it. It was nothing to do with you.'

She laughed now, and her laugh was unhesitating and unconsidered, unlike her speech. 'How could I fall out with you, Winnie? You're so totes adorbs in every way.'

I snorted. 'Don't overdo it. How's things for you, anyway? Are you okay?'

‘Busy, busy, busy, you know how things go. How’s the book coming along?’

Daisy, predictably enough, had gone into fashion design. Having spent our teenage years wearing stuff she created herself and embarrassing me half to death by draping herself in rugs, our dad’s cast-off shirts and random bits of knitting, she’d found herself a dream job working for an up-and-coming ‘name’ in designer fashion. It was dramatic, creative and wildly exciting but also had moments of sheer drudgery, all of which my sister accepted calmly and worked through methodically. The only real drawback was that it was in Melbourne, Australia, but it was so ‘Daisy’ that it had been an unmissable opportunity, with the chance to create her own clothing lines and work with so many talented people. It was my idea of hell, but then I worked on my own and, apart from the obligatory book tours and radio and TV slots, rarely spoke to people who weren’t dead, buried and immortalised by an interesting gravestone.

‘The book’s going okay. I travelled around a bit looking for the perfect place to write and now I’m in a village called Great Leys. It’s not that great, and I don’t know what leys are, but the material is good.’ There was a knock at the front door, which opened directly into the living room, and behind the glass lights I could see a female head. ‘Got to go, Daze. I think my landlady is paying a visit.’

‘Laters, Win,’ and, uncomplaining as ever, Daisy went back to doing whatever it was she did. It was one of the few advantages I’d ever come across with being a twin, we could talk or not talk, agree or not, and yet when we did communicate, everything felt as though it was part of an ongoing conversation, something we could dip in and out of and always have that feeling of connection.

I opened the door to see Mrs 'Call me Margaret' Hill and, much lower down, Scarlet. She was being held by the hand very firmly and there was no sign of Light Bulb, so I assumed that the news of her earlier adventure had travelled.

'Hello. I was just taking Scarlet home and I thought I'd pop by and make sure everything was all right for you in here. Have you found the bin liners? Only the bins have to go out every Monday, like it says on the notice, and it's Sunday today and so I wanted to remind you, and I wondered ...'

Margaret had the tightly managed hairstyle and slightly random clothes of a woman whose life consisted of more wayward arms than a spiral galaxy and the little worry-crease between the eyes of someone who isn't sure they're doing a very good job of holding it all together.

Scarlet made a face at me. I returned it. Margaret was still talking.

'... and if the bin lid isn't down they won't take it away. We've complained to the council but there's not much they can do now it's all contracted out. Oh, bother, and I forgot, I've got to call in at the library while they're still open and take those books back and put up that notice about craft shops for Alex, only they close at twelve on a Sunday.'

'I'll stay here then, Granny, with Winter. I can help her find the bin liners while you go to the library.' The little girl slipped out of her grandmother's grasp and into the living room, where she plonked herself down on a chair and looked around with evident curiosity. 'I know where everything is,' she said, despite the wide-eyed taking in of the scene that gave the lie to her words.

'Oh, no, I can't leave you with Miss Gregory, that wouldn't be ...' Margaret trailed off, the worry-crease deepening into a veritable gulley.

‘I helped you in the graveyard, didn’t I?’ Scarlet appealed to me, turning surprisingly adult-looking grey eyes to mine. ‘I’m useful, Granny. And I really *hate* the library. Mrs Cookson said I drew in the pony books.’

‘She can stay with me,’ I said, hoping that my expression implied that I had things to be doing and it had better not be an extended stay. ‘It’s fine.’

‘But your work ...’ Of which, I knew, there was no conspicuous sign. My laptop was closed, the pictures were still in the camera and there wasn’t so much as a notebook to hint that I was actually doing any. In fact, apart from a couple of photographs and my pyjamas neatly folded on the end of the Spartan bed upstairs, I might not even be here. I gave an inward wince and made a mental note to tell Daisy that I was travelling so light these days that I seemed to have more mental baggage than physical.

‘Hurry *up*, Granny. I need to turn Light Bulb out soon!’ Scarlet had got up again and was looking at the framed pictures I’d propped up on the shelf above the gas fire. She stopped short of picking them up and squinting at them but I knew she wanted to. People always did, as though identical twins were an optical illusion.

‘Are you sure? She can be a bit of a handful.’ Margaret was backing out of the door, but slowly and dubiously. ‘I’ll only be a few minutes, the library is just over there, next to the little bistro, and I really ought to put these posters up for Alex, he’s hoping that the Old Mill can be turned into craft shops when he’s finished.’

‘We’ll be fine. Scarlet’s right, she’s been very useful.’ And I felt a bit sorry for her being described as ‘a handful’ in front of me. Surely parents, grandparents, should keep their opinions of their children to themselves? I knew mine always thought of me as the strong, capable, practical one while Daisy was the artistic one, but they never said as much to either of us, although my mother had said that we’d fallen into our chosen professions because of

the sort of people we were, and that was the nearest she ever came to acknowledging our differences. But then, she'd been the one who'd tried to dress us alike until the incredible temper tantrum I'd thrown, now notorious in our family as 'Frockgate'.

The door closed and Scarlet grinned at me. 'Granny fusses,' she said. 'Why are there two of you?'

I jumped. The skin around my shoulders prickled as though I was being hugged by a frost. 'What?'

She pointed at the picture. 'Here. It's you when you were little.'

Relief. Stupid relief, from a feeling that was just as stupid. I'd thought she'd meant that there was someone standing behind me. 'It's me and my sister Daisy. We're twins.'

Scarlet picked up the other picture. 'And this is you when you're grown up.'

I took it from her. 'No, that's Daisy.' Long wildly curly hair tied back, boyishly slender figure lightly tanned in a bikini. Blue-green eyes and wide mouth laughing at the camera.

'Are you sure?' Scarlet narrowed her eyes at me and I laughed.

'Yes, I'm sure. It's Daisy. She lives in Australia and she emailed me that picture last Christmas, to make me jealous. It was freezing here and she was having Christmas dinner on the beach.'

'Looks exactly like you though.' She lost interest and wandered into the tiny kitchen. 'The bin liners must be in here. Granny keeps hers in the cupboard under the sink.'

‘That’s how identical twins work,’ I couldn’t let it go. ‘We are the same. Everything. Well, Daisy’s hair is a bit longer than mine, and she’s thinner than me, prettier ...’ I tailed off. Cleared my throat. ‘But we’re very alike.’

‘Is she coming to see you?’ She had her head in the cupboard now, her voice muffled and the room full of the smell of drain-cleaner – my knowledge of childcare was limited, but just about everything I bought said ‘keep out of the reach of children’.

‘I’ll find them, don’t worry,’ I said, hastily. ‘Would you like a drink of ...?’ What did I have that I could offer to a child? Did I have *anything* that could be drunk by anyone under voting age? ‘Milk?’

‘Yes, please.’ Scarlet hitched herself up onto the square foot of work surface. This cottage was *tiny*, no wonder it was advertised as only suitable for one person. If that person had had a dog, even a small one, someone would have had to eat outside. ‘And a biscuit. Do you like horses, Winter?’

Her small, booted feet swung against the lower cupboards and I suddenly realised her rather eccentric clothing choices weren’t indiscriminate: her leggings, wellingtons and bike helmet were all approximations of riding clothes.

‘I used to ride, when I was younger. Daisy and I had a pony called Jack when we were growing up. We had to share but she was a lot keener than I was, so she rode him more than me.’

Scarlet’s face turned to me as I poured her a mug of milk. She had a rapt expression, as though her eyes had found me magical all of a sudden. ‘*Really?* What was he like? Have you got any pictures? Did you do gymkhanas?’

‘Er, no, but I did do a lot of falling off.’ I dredged through my memories of growing up. We’d lived in the countryside just outside London, small house but near enough to fields to make childhood a stretch of free running and kite flying, dam building and paddling. Never short of a playmate because Daisy and I did everything together, except riding Jack, when some of our most fierce arguments took place, one of us having to cycle alongside or sit on the fence and watch while the other got all the fun. I started telling Scarlet about it – about the time Daisy fell off and cried, about jumping bareback, about leaning against the barn eating an apple while my sister tried to make our small, fat pony do dressage in the lumpy grass of the orchard.

Her eyes grew rounder, as though I was letting her into the secrets of the universe, as she sipped at her milk and ate her biscuit, her rubber-heeled feet clonking against the cheap vinyl-covered cupboard door. ‘Alex and Granny won’t let me have riding lessons,’ she said, eventually, turning her gaze to her toes. ‘Mummy would have let me.’

I wanted to know. I wanted to know about Alex, all god-like shape and stone dust like a Michelangelo statue in a slut’s household, about her mother, now under that bland grave, about Light Bulb and his fabric face but I didn’t know how to go about asking, and before I got the chance to worm my way around the subject, there was another knock at the door and Scarlet slithered off the side, her upper lip masked with milk. ‘Granny’s back.’ She made her way through the maze of furniture. ‘Thankyouverymuchforhavingme.’

But it wasn’t Margaret out there in the bustling street. It was Alex. He’d got a shirt on now, a red T-shirt with a misshapen neck and splashes of something across the front, but his hair was still pomaded with fine sand. I smiled. ‘Hello.’

His mouth opened, then he saw Scarlet over my shoulder and shut it again.

‘Alex stammers,’ she said, squeezing past me in the doorway. It was very matter-of-fact, not defensive or ashamed. ‘So he doesn’t say much.’

Alex rolled his eyes. ‘I c- ...’ and the pause was longer than I’d expected. We’d had a boy at primary school who stammered and our teacher had told us not to interrupt him but give him time to speak, although, in the careless way of the young, we’d usually ended up talking over him, or not listening at all. But that had been then, and I hoped that the ways of the world had softened me a bit over the years, although Alex being six feet of gorgeous didn’t hurt either. ‘Came to fetch Sc- ...’ He didn’t seem frustrated by the stoppage of the words. More as though he was using their staccato delivery as time to formulate the rest of his sentence. ‘Scarlet.’

‘Did Granny tell you I was here?’

There were similarities, I thought, watching him as he looked down at his niece. He had the same grey, serious eyes and the same generous mouth. His slightly crooked front teeth spoke of a similar thumb-sucking habit, although hopefully his was long gone.

‘Look, it’s fine if you want to leave her with me.’ Then, remembering the pictures I had to download and the text I had to write, added, ‘Sometimes. I mean, not right now but if she ever wants to pop in.’

He smiled. He had a similar expression to Scarlet’s as well, I realised now as he lost it in favour of a grin that showed dimples and made his eyes gleam, a slightly wary look as though he suspected that someone was creeping up on him, just out of sight. ‘That w-would be great. C-can I email? Or f- ...’

I really hope he’s going to say Facebook. It’s way too soon for anything else.

I found one of my business cards lurking in the back pocket of my jeans and held it out, figuring it was better to pre-empt the ending of that sentence thinking the best of him. 'It's got my email and my mobile and my Facebook author page and everything.'

He took it. His fingers were coarse with engrained rock dust and his nails were ragged and I had a sudden, awful flashback to long, careful fingers and the way they'd curved around the coffee cup, stirred a single sugar lump.

'Won't you?' Scarlet was hopping from foot to foot. 'Winter?'

I breathed deeply. My heart was settling now, its slurring pulse no longer deafening me. 'Sorry? Let you come again? Yes,' I said without thinking, without having heard anything but my rising blood.

'Yay!' I was the sudden object of a rushed hug. 'Thank you! Come on, Alex, Light Bulb needs a haynet and Granny won't let me use her plant holder so we need to buy some oranges or something. And some hay.'

Alex smiled at me again over the top of the child's over-excited head and raised his eyebrows. 'You're a s-star,' he said. 'I'll ...' and he flipped at my card.

As he led the bouncing Scarlet off down the road towards the main run of shops, I wondered what I'd agreed to do. I closed the door on the street and felt the quiet settle back around me. Time to turn on the computer, check my emails. Tweet my new project to keep the interest of those who'd, inexplicably in some opinions, made my last book a huge hit. Make sure my editor, make sure *Dan* knew I was working.

But instead I turned on the small radio. Listened to some indie music and let the noise fill that empty hole that surrounded any thoughts of Dan.

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