

Sitting here, breathing in the familiar smell of wild flowers and sheltering under the huge old tree, I still found it difficult to comprehend everything that had happened. The air smelt slightly damp as though a storm was coming and I gave an involuntary shudder. Even now, knowing the truth, the fear of those storms had not completely dissipated.

I leant my head back against the trunk, fitting nicely into the spot that I had occupied so many times before. Although I now knew I could do this at will, my stomach clenched with apprehension at what was to come. I knew that I would never want to revisit this period in my life again, I just needed to make sense of it this one final time. I just needed to be careful, to make sure I didn't change anything that had happened, otherwise there would be consequences.

Opening my laptop, I returned to the messages I had sent my best friend, Jen. All I needed was a trigger, to place me in the right moment in time. As I started to read, I smiled, remembering the friendship and familiarity of that time before everything changed. Then I let myself start to float, drifting back, allowing myself to occupy my old body and thoughts, carefully and silently, avoiding anything that could bring the change to the attention of those around me.

Jen,

Well, we've finally unpacked - or I should say that I have! Dad's been at work most of the time, though I guess that doesn't surprise you. His behaviour is still off - I'd really hoped it would improve once we got away from the old house and the constant reminders. He's been going on about my needing a new start again - but after that last row, I just daren't argue with him anymore. His mood swings can be just so scary and the temper has definitely not improved - in fact if anything it is getting worse. So much for the fresh start he banged on about!

How's Aber? I am SO jealous. Bet the sun's shining, isn't it? Where's your room - is it facing the sea, or the mountains? Still wish I could have come with you, like we'd always planned but I lost that argument the day Mom died ...

Still Warwick should be ok. It's got a good reputation and the course seemed just right, so need to keep my focus on that now, not worry about what could have been.

Anyhow, this place is ok really - even though it's very old. Kenilworth town itself is a bit old school but you should see the Castle. I love it up there. I can take my music and wander around for hours, or if the weather's good I can just snuggle into a corner and read. No-one bothers me and it's SO Goth - you'd love it. I looked it up on Google and apparently there are parts of it that date back as far as Norman times and it also played quite an important role in some siege. Some of it has been rebuilt, turned into offices, tea rooms (with the blue rinses to match LOL), but I like the ruins best. There's an old Abbey too at the other end of town but there's not much of that left, with far too many kids playing in the park for me and it's not like I've got anyone to play tennis with here.

The cottage itself apparently dates back to the 17th Century and has some connection to Walter Raleigh and the potatoes. It has three little corridors leading off to different, really odd shaped rooms - some people would hate it but I don't and I know you won't either. It's easy to hide in the attic and pretend not to hear Dad. Can't wait 'til November when you come to stay - I'm going to hold you to that promise!

Has Freshers started there properly yet? I don't start for a few more weeks but I feel physically sick when I think about it. I'm not looking forward to being the new girl but I guess we have that in common.

At the moment though I've still got some time to myself - not that Dad likes THAT of course. I'm sure he thinks Greg will turn up out of the blue or something - as if! That boat sailed back in Clifford and I don't ever want to see HIM again. Men are most definitely off the agenda and not just because of the promise Dad forced out of me. Wonder if that has something to do with these dreams I'm getting ...

Can't wait to hear all your news, don't keep me waiting.

L

The Beginning

“Leah, you have to listen to me, you’re in real danger.”

I jumped, glancing towards the shadowy figure beside me.

I shook my head in confusion. How could anything here be dangerous? It felt so safe. I sensed his arm wrap around my shoulders, holding me tight against him, protecting me.

There was a nagging voice in my head telling me not to be stupid. Who was this person and what gave him the right to tell me what to do, let alone touch me like this?

As though in defiance of these thoughts, I felt myself respond to his touch in a way I’d never felt before. Instinctively I responded to his touch, feeling compelled to snuggle in even closer. I didn’t move, unable to pull myself away but at the same time angry with myself for not moving away from this stranger.

The noise grew closer. I still couldn’t quite work out what it was. It was loud ... persistent ... a kind of roar. It was so loud that I couldn’t make out where it was coming from. We don’t have wild animals like wolves or bears around here anymore and it didn’t really sound like an animal anyway. There wasn’t that much life to it ...

His arm suddenly tightened around me. The sensation spread throughout my body, warming me as it went. Despite the noise and everything else, I felt as though I could stay here forever.

Suddenly a car pulled alongside us. “Get in!” screamed the driver. I flinched, not expecting to hear that voice, not now. He grabbed my arm, and before I knew it we were in the back of the car and he was struggling to get my seatbelt on. I snatched it off him as he dived into the seat beside me. “Go!” he yelled. The car accelerated away, filling with the scorching smell of burnt rubber.

Where was I and who were these faceless people? He turned towards me but his face was hidden by the shadows. With both of his hands on my shoulders, he pulled me in close to him. “Thank God you’re safe,” he said, burying his head in my hair. Without any conscious thoughts, my body relaxed and all of a sudden the last thing I wanted was to be alone.

Abruptly, there was a huge crash from somewhere right alongside the car. “Step on it!” he bellowed, reaching across me to grab something ...

“Leah, Leah! It’s ok! Sweetheart, wake up.”

Reluctantly I dragged myself away from those safe arms as Dad gently shook me awake. I opened my eyes and looked up as his face hovered into view next to me. In the haze of sleep, just for a split second,

there was something not quite right about his eyes; they looked bizarre, almost devoid of anything. Then, as I focussed on him, he smiled gently,

“Another one of those bad dreams?” he asked, gently rubbing my back. “Tell me about it,” he asked.

The stranger’s voice echoed again in my head: “Tell no-one!”

I shook the sleep from my thoughts and smiled weakly up at his face. “Just the usual, nothing new this time,” I replied, already feeling guilty as I glanced at the clock by my bed. Why did I feel the need to keep the details of the dreams from my Dad? After all, it was only a dream ...

Still, I didn’t want Dad to worry. He had enough on his plate and he needed to believe that moving away had been the right thing to do for us both. Even though I had already realised that the dreams had become significantly worse since we had come here.

“Just give me a minute, Dad, and I’ll go and make us both a coffee.” I tried to hide the resentment in my tone. This was just one of the jobs I’d had to pick up over the last five years, and even though the nightmares wouldn’t allow a lie-in, sometimes it would have been nice for Dad to make me the coffee first thing in the morning.

He smiled at me softly for a few brief seconds before ambling away. A few moments later I heard his bathroom door close. I lay there for a moment trying to piece together the face from my dream and recalling the feeling from when the stranger had held me.

Shaking myself, hard, I laughed. I’d promised my Dad to steer clear of boys after the break up with Greg and it felt like a betrayal even thinking about some man in my dreams. Besides, that sensation had been nothing like I’d felt when I was with Greg.

Swiftly I went downstairs to start breakfast and put the coffee on. As it started to gurgle, the smell began to permeate the kitchen and I heard Dad coming downstairs. Anxiously I rammed my book and sandwiches into my bag and went to pour the coffee, shaking the vitamin bottle loudly so that Dad would believe I had taken them.

“What are your plans for today, then?” he said as he came into the kitchen, eyeing the thermal cup I was also filling. He nodded with satisfaction as he saw me replace the vitamins on the shelf. It was so bizarre how obsessed he was with making sure I took one of them every single day. It wasn’t as if I needed them. As I did all of the cooking these days, I made sure we both had a properly balanced diet. After all, we only had each other now.

Instinctively I tensed. “I thought I would go for a walk up to the castle and explore for a bit,” I

responded, nervously waiting for him to react.

He looked at me sideways. I didn't need him to remind me that he didn't like me wandering around up there on my own; neither did I want another one of his lectures or for him to lose his temper again.

"It'll be fine, Dad. Honest, there are so many tourists around with the good weather, it's not like I'll really be on my own." I tried to reassure him before his temper had time to build. What on earth could happen to me anyway in this sleepy little town? There was far more danger from my own home and in my dreams.

Dad drank his coffee and quickly ate the toast that I had prepared for us both. He kissed my forehead, already preoccupied with thoughts of work, and left the house. I sighed with relief; the normal lecture had been avoided. Dad had a real issue with my being on my own, especially here in this new town and around the ruins.

I loaded the cups and plates into the dishwasher and switched it on, making sure that everything was ready for dinner later - yet another chore I had picked up. Checking I had my phone and keys, I picked up my bag and left the house.

It was still quite early and it was only a ten minute walk up to the castle. I preferred to enter it from Mortimer's Tower, even though the path by Leicester's Gatehouse and the Stable was probably a little closer. They were part of the renovated area so were often busier. It was strange, though, seeing the fresh terracotta stone on such an old building. I guess that the whole place had been that colour when it was built and they had simply cleaned these parts during the renovations. Once you had got past the ticket office and down the long path, you could turn left at Mortimer's Tower and soon be away from the tourists.

Dad said that he found it morbid there. There were decent rambling walks around the grounds and across into the fields but it was the ruins I loved the most. They'd tried to make it attractive, with the renovation and the new Victorian Garden, but there was a lot just left as nature intended and this was exactly what drew me to it. Despite the renovations, the oldest part of the castle, with its huge lumps of brick blackened by time and surrounded by the beautiful Warwickshire countryside, seemed eternally peaceful. The fields went on for miles on this side of the grounds.

Wandering around the ruins listening to my music, or simply sitting and reading in the quiet, I felt safer here than anywhere else. I'd lean back against the walls and imagine Mom was here with me. I'd tell her everything - my worries, my insecurities and my fear about Dad and his temper. In my mind she would answer, making sense of it all and helping me get some perspective back

Dad thought it was odd that this was where I liked to spend my spare time. I hadn't told him about

feeling closer to Mom; that would have sent him off the rails. He'd never understood my desire to be on my own for long periods of time, so I left it like that. Explanations could be difficult.

* * *

I was out of breath by the time I reached the top of the hill. My spirits rose when I saw that the car parks and pathways were still relatively deserted. Only old Bill and his retriever could be seen. That meant I had the opportunity to find my spot and settle in before the tourists arrived. I wondered idly if this town was always full of them or if it was due to the unusually warm summer that we were having.

I wandered through the ruins, smiling to myself as I took in the smell of the newly cut grass and the wild flowers which continually defied any attempt at cultivating the area. It was so beautiful here but it should be left wild; that was how it was meant to be after all these years of belonging only to the elements.

I turned the corner and sighed with contentment. My favourite spot was right here, to the back of the Great Hall, amongst the longer grass and flowers, and it was still deserted. I snuggled into the corner, leaning comfortably against the corners of the ruined walls, the long grass making a wonderfully soft aromatic cushion beneath me. I shuffled backwards until the wall bore most of my weight and put my head back, letting the morning summer sun warm my skin.

I closed my eyes, allowing my thoughts to wander. There were just a few weeks left until the term started and I had carefully chosen my new clothes. The University didn't have a real uniform, of course, not like my old school, but I knew it was still important to fit in. When I hadn't been idling away my time around the ruins, I'd carefully watched and analysed what the other local kids were wearing. My wardrobe for the new term now consisted of the standard items that most of the girls seemed to wear: several pairs of denim, baggy jumpers and shirts, boots and trainers. I ran through my choices in my mind. That should help keep me relatively anonymous. The last thing I wanted was to stand out or make a fool of myself like I had that day I'd tried to dress up for Greg ...

There was that sound again. It sounded as though it was right on top of me. What the hell was it? My unconscious mind searched for an answer. There was something innately familiar, scarily so, but I still couldn't place it. I felt my heart begin to race as that same voice shouted to me.

"Come with me Leah, now!"

The snap of a twig made me start with fright. Shakily I looked up at the shadow standing to the side of me. The sun behind it made it impossible to make out who it was, and besides, I still didn't know anyone from around here.

"Is everything ok?"

The voice brought me back to my senses. I must have dozed off in the warmth of the sun but the dreams had never occurred away from home before.

Squinting in the sunlight, I shaded my eyes, trying to make out the figure standing over me. Every nerve in my body was suddenly on edge.

"Sorry, I really didn't mean to startle you. Here, let me help you. I'm Ben." He put his hand out to help me up but I ignored the offer, still more than a little shaken.

Scrambling up, I walked around to his side so that I could see the stranger more clearly. For some reason it felt important for me to also establish myself as being in control of the situation, despite this unwanted interruption.

Feeling that I had made the point, I breathed an inward sigh of relief and started to calm down a little, even though my heart was still pounding. The stranger was a young man, appearing to be roughly the same age as me. I turned fully towards him, trying to see him properly now that the sun wasn't in my eyes. Immediately I was struck by his height. He must have been at least 6ft as he seemed taller than Greg had been when standing next to me. The morning sun revealed the slightest hint of red in his wavy brown hair and the glint in his striking blue eyes somehow encouraged me to smile in return.

Tearing my eyes away from his face, I noticed that he was wearing the type of understated jeans and t-shirt that didn't come cheap. As I registered more of his appearance, I felt the heat start to rush to my face and forced myself to look away. Normally, I didn't react to a boy in this way, or certainly hadn't before, even with Greg, but there was definitely something about him. I'd even go as far as to say he was totally hot.

The heat burned brighter in my cheeks as I struggled to compose myself. I didn't know Ben and, after all, I had a promise to keep.

"Hi, I'm Leah," I said awkwardly, starting to wonder why I had felt quite so annoyed, after all he had only tried to help. Now that I had the chance to look at him properly and register his age, I realised he would probably be going to the University too. I desperately wanted not to be on my own that first day and Ben was likely to be my best chance to avoid that.

"Seriously, are you ok?" he asked, the concern in his voice evident.

"Yes, of course ... why?" I asked, confused, both by his show of genuine concern and the light-

headedness that I guess still lingered from jumping up so quickly.

“I thought I heard a really strange noise and came to check everything was ok, but there’s only you here,” he replied.

“It was probably just my snoring. I fell asleep in the sun,” I joked, suddenly anxious to get away. I didn’t want to have to try and explain anything to a complete stranger, let alone my dreams. I couldn’t even talk about those with my own Dad.

He laughed and the warmth of the sound made me start to relax again. He wasn’t some freak about to jump me, just a nice guy thinking he had heard something. Most people would have just ignored it rather than coming to check everything was ok.

“Look, do you fancy a coffee or something?” It came blurting out and suddenly he looked really self-conscious, as though he regretted being quite so bold, and a pink tinge coloured his cheeks. Not having the heart to embarrass him, I agreed and picked up my bag, checking everything was in there.

The fifteen minute walk to the coffee shop flew by as we talked. I discovered that his family had lived in this area for generations and he had a younger sister. Most importantly for me, he was starting at the University next month too.

“I haven’t seen you around here before, have I?” he asked once we were seated with our drinks. The smell of roasted coffee wafted around us as we talked, with the occasional breath of vanilla or mocha as other people walked by.

I explained that Dad and I had moved earlier this month from a little village in Hertfordshire because of my starting University, although it was mainly due to the relocation of Dad’s job. The explanation seemed to satisfy him but I didn’t elaborate about Mom other than explaining she had died; it was always hard, having to explain. Thankfully he didn’t pry and diverted the topic away to our impending studies. I was planning to read Business Studies with Marketing, while Ben explained that he would be doing Physical Sciences, so it was immediately obvious that we wouldn’t be in any of the same classes.

As the time passed, we talked about what we were hoping to choose as our first year supplementary courses and the all-important clubs to be chosen during Freshers Week at the University. Before I knew it the rest of the day had flown by and the coffee shop was turning quiet.

I glanced at my watch. “I’m sorry,” I muttered, suddenly really anxious, “I really need to go. Dad will expect me to be there when he gets home.” It was a good twenty minute walk back to the cottage and Dad would be home at just about the same time. He would be furious if dinner wasn’t almost ready when he arrived.

“Here, why not let me give you a lift?” Ben said, noticing my concern. “It’s more or less on the way

and it is partly my fault that you've been out all day." He smiled and I felt a strange flutter in the pit of my stomach.

Concerned about the time, and despite my normal reluctance to accept such an offer from someone I barely knew, I agreed gratefully and we walked quickly to his car. I'm no expert when it comes to cars but I knew this one - it was a Mini John Cooper. The boys back at my old school had all longed for one of these. Pictures of the various options had been plastered all over the sixth form common room walls. It had obviously been customised but the British Racing Green was unmistakable. The growl that came from the engine indicated the power the car had and we quickly sped along the road home.

"Do you think we could meet up again before term starts?" he asked as I clambered out. I turned back, surprised. "You're not the only one who's going to be new to the University and it would be nice to have a familiar face to walk in with on Day 1," he smiled, looking a little sheepish.

Feeling awkward and also guilty, I agreed to meet him for coffee a couple of days later, then said goodbye and rushed into the cottage.

* * *

Suddenly grateful for my normally organised state, I started to throw the salad into the bowl, filling the kitchen with the smell of fresh onion and lettuce. Despite the activity, my mind started ranting again at the unfairness of it all. How many other nineteen year olds were confined to domestic routines like this? It was hardly my fault that Mom was gone, yet it felt as though I was the one being punished by her absence, while Dad's life continued as normal.

Shaking my head in frustration I continued to finish the food preparation. Dad got home just as I was placing the saucepan onto the hob and I was instantly ready to cook the pasta, leaving him none the wiser to what I'd been up to.

"How'd your day go?" he asked as we sat down to dinner.

"Not bad," I replied. "I met another newbie in town. We're going to meet for coffee on Thursday."

"That's nice," he said, reading the paper as we talked and paying very little attention as usual. Although annoyed at his lack of interest in my life, I was also glad he didn't ask too many questions. I can't begin to explain why but somehow I didn't want to have to elaborate on how Ben and I had met and what we had been talking about today. Besides, his temper would flare if he thought I had been talking to a person of the opposite sex ...