

OLD FLAMES

Prologue

She'd finally gone; or more to the point I'd managed to exorcise her from my thoughts, from my consciousness, at least to a degree.

Initially I'd managed to reach a stage where she wasn't my every waking thought or the last thing that crossed my mind before I managed to descend into sleep; a sleep that invariably had her coursing through my dreams like a movie running on constant loop, an incessant reminder of how we had been, how good we were and how badly wrong it had gone.

Eventually I stopped seeing her in impossible places. I stopped having minor heart attacks every time I saw someone who was tall and slim, with shoulder length chestnut hair that shone in the light. I stopped thinking I had heard her voice or her laugh when I knew, if I managed to think about it rationally, that it couldn't possibly be her.

Because she had left me.

After about a year I had even started seeing other people but only occasionally and only casually, it was far too soon still to chance any kind of emotional attachment and besides, I didn't make it easy for the people I dated. No one wants to be constantly compared to their predecessor and much as I didn't do it deliberately, I still did it.

On the rare occasions when I slept with someone else I couldn't help remembering the way it was with her, the soft sounds she would make in the early stages of arousal, the way she could turn me on with a mere look or gesture. The way we knew each other's bodies so intimately that it was almost impossible not to give each other the utmost pleasure, sometimes almost fighting to be the person to give the most, to be the least selfish, although there is in itself a selfishness in wanting to make the one you love scream your name in ecstasy.

These memories made me distant to whomever I was sharing my bed with, made me aloof to any new experiences. I couldn't embrace being with someone who wasn't her, especially if there was a danger that these new emotions would replace her.

I was a captive to my own grief; desperately needing to let her go as she had let me go, to move on as she had done; and yet to diminish my pain, to finally let it go would be to admit defeat. To force myself to admit that she was gone for good and was never coming back.

I didn't do myself any favours.

After 2 years my broken heart, whilst still very tender, had started to mend. Oh I still thought about her on an almost daily basis; would still be reminded of her if I heard someone order a double espresso, or saw a dark haired woman driving a black & white Mini Cooper but on the whole I was finding myself again; was beginning to laugh more often.

I was even starting to feel comfortable going to some of the places we used to go to; the club where we first met was still off limits but I had begun to revisit my favourite restaurants that I hadn't used since her departure.

In my darkest times I still wondered if there was something I could've said to make her stay, something I could've done differently maybe. I know the answer, but the question still begged to be asked sometimes.

I know she still loved me when she left, I know it broke her heart too when I came home from work to find her bags packed in the living room; I know it took courage for her to hurt me and walk away from the love that we shared but apparently it took less courage than telling her parents that she was in love with another woman.

3 years is a long time to carry the burden of grief so totally, for it to be so all consuming. It actually takes an awful lot of energy to remain in a state of anger and devastation and so, after all that time and without even realising it I finally started to let go.

She would still permeate my thoughts and dreams occasionally but less often and more fleetingly. I can't say that I wasn't initially devastated when I heard through a mutual friend that she was getting married but I didn't let it crush me for long.

I loved her and if she was happy in her choice then it would be cruel of me to wish her anything but the best. If I couldn't be happy with her then I should at least be happy for her. Definitely progress.

I even thought about sending a card or a present. This would have to be accomplished via our mutual friend; I wouldn't trust myself to know her address in case the impulse to visit in person was too strong. I had mental images of me rushing up the aisle in a desperate last minute bid to halt the wedding. In the end though I just asked the friend to send my best wishes and left it at that.

CHAPTER 1

I had some long overdue annual leave coming and had decided to treat myself to a few days out of the city, so I packed my tent, rucksack and walking boots and headed for the beautiful Cornish coast.

I didn't have any real plans other than to enjoy some coastal walking and to reacquaint myself with the area where I had enjoyed so many childhood holidays. She and I had talked about visiting this part of the country often but we never did; there always seemed to be something more pressing to do, so I decided to do it on my own. To spend some quality time in my own company with no one to answer to but myself.

I'm good at spending time on my own. Much as I'm an outgoing and gregarious person by nature, I also like solitude sometimes and have no problem entertaining myself.

I had arrived in St. Ives late on Thursday evening and had intended to camp but the weather was against me, greeting me with the worst thunder storm I had encountered in years, the rain lashing down, driven sideways by the wind that would have made erecting a tent all but impossible.

I had found a small but comfortable B&B and being tired after my long drive I just grabbed something to eat and fell into bed, hoping that tomorrow would be calmer, allowing me to explore this ancient fishing town, with its quaint cobbled streets and flourishing artist community.

It had been a while since I'd slept so deeply and I was disorientated when I was woken by a gentle tapping at my bedroom door the next morning. Getting groggily out of bed I stumbled to the door in my pyjamas and opened it a crack, peeking through the gap and finding the landlady on the other side.

'I'm sorry to wake you lovey,' she spoke gently, her soft Cornish accent making the words seem almost musical 'but I know you wanted to have breakfast this morning and it's nearly 10 o'clock. Do you want me to cook you something before I close the kitchen dear?'

10 o'clock! I never slept that late and was completely amazed. I was indeed hungry but I also needed to wake up properly and take a shower before I tackled breakfast, so I thanked her for waking me and declined breakfast, intending instead to get a late brunch from a local café as I explored.

An hour later I was walking down cobbled streets toward the harbour, the late spring sunshine warming my face and a gentle breeze ruffling my hair. As I turned down one particular street I felt a chill, a shiver ran down my spine and I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I stopped abruptly, looking around for anything that could have caused such a strange reaction but found nothing untoward.

The road was narrow and sloped downhill quite steeply, looking no different to many other small streets in this part of the country. The houses on either side had brightly painted woodwork and many had window boxes, bursting with the colour of spring flowers. It looked inviting and yet that feeling of unease lingered.

I noticed that this street was in shade and decided that this had caused a drop in temperature which in turn had caused my reaction. I laughed out loud at my own stupidity, making my feet start walking again, heading toward the tinkling sound of the boat rigging in the harbour.

I rounded a bend in the narrow street and could see a couple of cafés ahead of me but their outside tables were still in shade and right now I needed to feel the warmth. I glanced into their windows as I passed, noting them for later when the sun had traversed far enough across the sky to bring them into the sunshine that I could now see at the end of the road, calling me on like a beacon.

I walked past one that looked particularly quaint and lovely, its blue painted shutters and door looking out onto a courtyard area with blue chequered table cloths to match the woodwork; hanging baskets and tubs filled with flowers as decoration. Deciding that this was maybe a nice place for lunch or afternoon tea later, I strolled over to look at the menu on the wall outside.

Again, as I browsed the menu a chill descended on me and I shivered, my rational mind marvelling at how the temperature could differ so much in such a short distance, trying hard to ignore the hairs on my neck that were starting to rise like a dog's hackles when they're fearful.

I glanced through the window into the interior of the café and caught sight of a tall dark haired woman disappearing through a door into the back, my heart skipping a beat. Then I was laughing at myself again as I forced myself to turn away and continue walking toward the sun's warmth.

I found a small café in the sunshine and sat at a table overlooking the water, the sea air permeating my nostrils with its salty tang as I sat and breathed deeply, calming myself as I ordered tea and a bacon sandwich.

It had been a while since I had thought I'd seen her. Once it had been commonplace, now it was a rare occurrence. The very idea that she would be working in a café was laughable in itself. She who was always the high flyer, the high earner, the ambitious career woman who didn't suffer fools gladly, regardless of whether they were below or above her on the career ladder.

She did like to cook though. In fact she was an excellent cook when she found the time to indulge herself, always making everything from scratch, never cheating by using anything that was pre-prepared. It didn't happen often though and she generally had to live off my cooking as I was generally home from work long before she was. Unfortunately my culinary skills were far more basic and much less fancy.

My ambitions were to keep her happy rather than to progress up a career ladder where the work life balance swung the wrong way for my liking. Ho hum, failed there I guess.

Mentally telling myself off for allowing thoughts of her to cloud my break, I poured my tea and browsed through a tourist guide as I waited for my sandwich, vowing not to allow her to encroach into my consciousness for the rest of my stay.

My sandwich arrived and as I smothered it in brown sauce and bit into the soft, white bread surrounding the crispy smoked bacon, I identified an art gallery, a pottery and 2 museums that I wanted to visit, as well as several small artist workshops.

I had only intended to spend 1 day in St. Ives but I had started the day late and I also wanted to do some walking along the coast. I was never going to fit this all into 1 afternoon, so I decided to spend at least 1 extra day here and as soon as I finished my breakfast I returned to my car, drove to a nearby campsite and set my tent up in a secluded corner.

It was still outside of the main tourist season and as I walked down the pristine beach back to the town, there were very few people taking advantage of the golden sand and the unseasonably warm weather that is so common in this part of the country. Yesterday's storm had may have subsided but the effects could still be seen on the sea; the waves high, breaking with some ferocity onto the beach and against the headlands, providing good sport for the handful of surfers that were braving the cold water in colourful wetsuits.

The tide was quite a long way out so I sat on some rocks, alternating between watching the surfers and poking about in a large rock pool by my feet, annoying the small crabs, shrimp and fish that had been temporarily stranded by the receding water.

My eye was caught by the brightly coloured sail of a windsurfer as it scudded along the wave tops beyond the surf. I became completely mesmerised by the speed, antics and tricks that the obviously experienced surfer was pulling and found myself squinting against the sun's glare on the water to keep them in view.

So enthralled was I that I didn't even see the large black Labrador that came bounding across the rocks toward me until it was too late. He came barreling over a neighbouring rock and jumped into the pool at my feet sending a small tsunami of cold, salty water into the air, most of which landed on me. To make matters worse he then stood next to me and violently shook the water from his coat, effectively ensuring that any parts of me that had remained dry were now also soaked!

I jumped up, squealing as the cold water hit me, my feet sliding on the slippery rocks until I ended up knee deep in the rock pool, just managing to keep the rucksack that had been on my lap out of the water.

I turned to the dog, initially furious, only to find myself laughing as he stood there looking at me with big brown eyes, a large piece of seaweed clinging to his neck and ear and his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth...