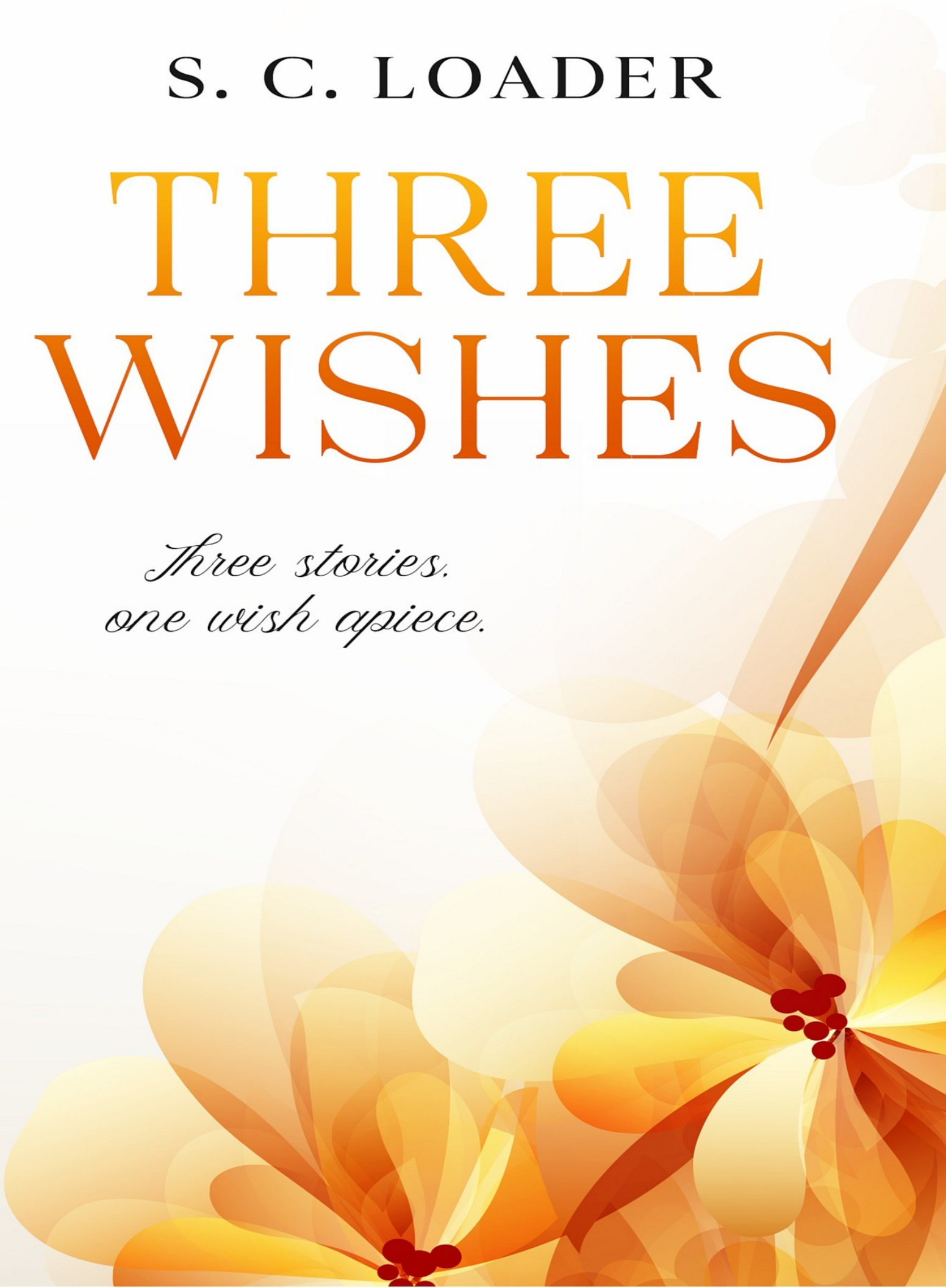


S. C. LOADER

THREE WISHES

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one wish apiece.*





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S. C. Loader

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Love
falls where it falls

An Angel's Wish

Pia's Birthday Wish

The Sorting Office

An Angel's Wish

S. C. Loader

Chapter 1

Friday the thirteenth, for those of a superstitious nature, a day filled with trepidation, a day to avoid the neighbour's black cat, the painter's ladder, or any one of a thousand other ill omens. To George, superstition was a fallacy nurtured only in the hearts and minds of the gullible, like those who believed in sea monsters, witchcraft, God and trustworthy politicians. Nevertheless, despite the apprehension of fools, this was also a particularly special day for him, a day he had planned for and had long-awaited. The sun had barely risen from its own bed when the morning chorus had drawn him from his. A hearty breakfast had followed the usual routine of a shower and a shave. Now he waited patiently for inspiration before the open doors of his wardrobe. Black beckoned, a particularly suitable colour given the occasion, but the promise of another glorious summer's day pleaded for something more celebratory, and formality surrendered without resistance. Fully groomed, and now fully attired in a crisp white shirt, fawn jeans and a brown waistcoat, George habitually strapped on a wristwatch, only to take it back off again once the realisation dawned that its role that day was unnecessary. After thoroughly tidying the whole flat, he paused at the open front door to cast a critical eye over his work, satisfied everything was in its rightful place he patted his pockets, again satisfied he stepped out of the door and in order not to disturb his neighbours quietly pulled it closed. As the latch clicked gently into place his stomach temporarily relocated itself, for in spite of intentionally leaving his keys behind, their absence left him feeling very uneasy.

The world outside was still peaceful, at five-thirty the early morning bustle of humanity had yet to overwhelm it, and the air was as fresh to the nose as it was to the skin. With a last glance over his shoulder towards his flat, George crossed the road and entered an eerily deserted park. A short walk later brought him within sight of the children's playground and a small

smile crept onto his face. Stopping briefly, he watched himself doing all those things that are a father's privilege to do, pushing, pulling, catching, running and everything else that his children were wanting. Alas, the excited squeal of his daughter on the swings, and the triumphant, 'Look Dad!' as his son reached the top of the climbing frame were not memories to be cherished, but the remnants of a dream of what could have been. The smile slowly faded just as the dream had done, reconciled with his fate, although still resentful of what it had withheld he continued on his way.

Within a few minutes, he reached his destination. Here a low garden wall beckoned weary travellers and unrealised fathers to rest their feet. Shortly after accepting this offer, the owner of this convenient resting place came to greet him and once their respective salutations had been exchanged, she quietly sat down beside him.

The proprietor of the newspaper shop opposite appeared through its doorway and busily set about positioning the small sandwich boards displaying today's headlines. Once laid out in a fashion that met with his approval he disappeared back into his shop, leaving George wondering whether these boards were intended to entice passers-by into buying newspapers or to warn them against it. Today's headlines were not entirely unpredictable given the controversy over a new piece of government legislation. Those newspapers appealing to the highly intellectual readers focused on its wide-ranging economic implications, for the less intellectual readers its long term political ramifications, and for those possessing little or no intellect there was enlightenment to be found in 'Our nights of passion with football star!'

'I think I chose the wrong profession!' George told his companion, who despite this obvious attempt to initiate a conversation remained discouragingly silent. Nevertheless, while he waited patiently for the first bus of the day, George was content to spend that time in the amiable company of this pretty, attention appreciative feline.

After zigzagging through the town in a fruitless search for further insomniac inflicted passengers, the bus finally emerged out into the open countryside, and shortly thereafter George's stop. As he stepped from the bus he thanked the elderly driver, receiving a 'Take care now,' in response, a parting sentiment that caused a broad, but unseen smile. The bus slowly disappeared from sight as it headed off down the country road, and once the noise of its engine had been swallowed up by the peacefulness of the early morning countryside George strolled back down the road a short distance then turned off down a little-used narrow country lane.

Once upon a time this gently climbing two-kilometre long lane served a quarry and a few workers' cottages at its far end, but with the closure of the quarry the lane had suffered the same fate as the workers' cottages, and soon fell into neglect.

A local farmer kept the ancient Hawthorn hedgerows trimmed back, but now the potholed tarmac surface was little more than a testing ground for a car's suspension and the driver's alertness. Strangely, although he had travelled this lane hundreds of times, both as a child and as an adult, it had always been either on a bicycle or in a car, never on foot. Walking gave everything a completely new perspective and provided the chance to really appreciate its beauty one last time.

Halfway along the lane, the low sun disappeared behind the hill to his right and without its warming presence, the air felt considerably fresher than it had done in the town. However, changing gear from dawdling to walking speed quickly chased away those goose pimples and subsequently soon brought the old roofless cottages into view. As a child, he had spent many happy hours here. Alone, he had explored the buildings and their gardens hunting for treasure. With friends, such mischievous things as young boys tended to do, and later as the fairer sex entered his life, such mischievous things as young couples tended to do. But what now drew him through the rusty wrought iron gate and their foreboding outer defence of waist-high nettles, was a mixture of sympathy and a wish to say goodbye. The sympathy derived from comradeship, each ruin had once provided a home,

a haven of comfort, love and security, but like himself they had been abandoned and no one ever again sought, nor wanted what they were willing to provide. The fourth cottage was the one he had the greatest kinship to, it stood alone from the other three and he had spent many hours in its company. Peering into the dark, dank, empty interior caused a sadness to rise in his heart. This building had played an important part in his own history, it had given rise to love, hope, dreams and even marriage, but those things like the building itself now lay in ruins. As he wandered around, in his mind's eye George watched himself and his friends careering around shooting at each other with sticks, arguing over whether they had been shot or not and if losing the debate, dying dramatically, often with acrobatic artistry. These were his halcyon days, a time before innocence surrendered itself to reality, and a time where the only limit in life was one's own imagination. Taking the few coins he had in his pocket he carefully hid them under a brick, 'Treasure for the next generation to find,' he told himself. With the heaviness of heart derived from a final farewell, he said a quiet thank you to the cottage for its past role, then made his way tentatively back through the nettles towards the lane.

After a short walk of fifty metres or so the lane came to an abrupt finish, to the right lay the entrance to the quarry and beyond, the gaping wall of the quarry itself. As a child, he could remember standing in wide-eyed, open-mouthed awe at this very sight, but now adulthood had drawn the colossal white chalk wall down to a far more realistic height, and adult eyes could no longer see past the disfiguring tarnish that age and neglect had inflicted upon it.

To the right of the quarry entrance was the start of a rarely used bridle path, skirting around the quarry it slowly led via its long, gently sloping overgrown track up to the vast forest behind. Although his destination could be reached via this route George preferred to take another. That lay directly in front of him and after picking up a handful of stones he circumvented the padlocked farm gate that separated public from private and continued on his way.

The potholed tarmac lane gave way to a deeply rutted, dusty dirt track and the ancient hedgerows in turn gave way to a mixture of hazelnut and elderberry. The scenery behind this enclosure also changed, the open fields remained to the left, but to the right now lay a steep wooded escarpment rising up rapidly towards the morning sun. Following a leisurely stroll, neatly poured concrete abruptly replaced the surface of the track, and from this point he had a choice, to either continue along the track and then climb up through the meadow to reach his goal, or take the arduous, barely perceivable pathway up the face of the escarpment and then work his way across through the beeches. The latter won, not because he particularly felt like inducing a heart attack, but because of the same reason he had visited the cottages, nostalgia. This had been the route he had taken all those years ago when he had first discovered his sanctuary, and it seemed the most appropriate route to take on this occasion.

An exhaustive while later he reached his intended goal, still a little breathless from the climb, and appreciating why adult strength was no match for childhood agility, he wearily sat himself down. Once composure had been regained, he set about counting out his ammunition only to find it summed up his entire life, disappointing! There was less than he had hoped for and it was of an inferior calibre, but this meagre handful would have to suffice. With the knowledge that this would be his last chance for revenge he eyed his six targets keenly, regrettably one would escape retribution as sadly he only had five stones worthy of use. While some men played golf to relieve stress and others played squash, George threw stones at old wooden fence posts. It had rules just as all sports had, the ammunition could only be gathered from the old quarry without consciously counting it, he had to be seated and always start with the post on the far right working to the far left. If he had insufficient ammunition the choice of targets was his, if more, then each post should be targeted at least once. A child's sport with just a hint of adult rules. The targets, six old worm-eaten fence posts individually represented someone or something that had adversely affected his life. Over the years they had symbolised many different people or events now mostly

forgotten, but for the last three years or so their associations had remained relatively fixed. With his targets chosen the first projectile was launched.

Post number one represented an ex-girlfriend who had told him after his very first sexual encounter that his performance was the worse that she had ever had to endure.

‘Missed!’

The second projectile was launched towards the next target his ex-wife, she was here because she deserved to be.

‘Missed!’

Post three represented his best friend, now his ex-best friend because he was the cause of his wife becoming his ex-wife.

‘Missed again!’

The next post had a mixed association, partly school, which was a nightmare due to the incessant bullying, partly university in which he was made to feel an outcast simply because of his lack of interest in drugs and alcohol, and finally his job which he once enjoyed, but now detested.

He saved his ammunition for the fifth post, and the reason why he detested his job, his spineless two-faced boss.

‘Missed AGAIN!’

The sixth and last post represented himself. He was there for more reasons than he cared to think about and for this target, he always took particular care with his aim. A hit, ‘YES!’ he shouted out aloud, raised his arms triumphantly and repeated himself, ‘YES!’

Self-conscious of his actions and although he knew he was alone, he quickly looked around to see if there was anyone who could have witnessed this uncharacteristic outburst, but there was no one, there never was, which was one of the reasons why he liked it here so much.

In a moment of thoughtfulness, George looked back over his shoulder, up through the massive beeches that populated this small hollow tucked into the hillside, to the undergrowth that lay behind. Beyond this was the edge of an extensive pine forest. In his walks there he had only ever met a handful of people, mostly joggers, but here throughout all the years and the countless visits he had never seen a soul. For a while, he reflected upon

some of the events that had led him on his long lonely walks deep into the forest, and of those that had brought him here. Saddened he turned around, adjusted his seat of old leaves and leant back against his favourite beech tree.

The sun, slowly climbing above the hill behind him had chased away the majority of the early morning mist leaving only one persistent patch lingering towards the end of the valley. Beyond this lay the small market town where he lived and worked. Alas, this was not the town of his birth, nor that of his childhood, nor was it the town where he had grown into adulthood. That town he had forsaken soon after his divorce, there were just too many reminders of the things he would rather have forgotten. One day in a desperate bid to shake off the ghosts of past embarrassments and ease the growing burden of resentments, he blindly spun a map and stuck a pin in it, allowing fate to choose his new home. Strangely, from a map of half the country, fate found it rather amusing to choose the closest town to the one where he then lived, a short drive of fifteen minutes. However, the rules of the game had been agreed upon beforehand and he was not going to cheat, although the temptation to do so had crossed his mind more than once. But at least fate's choice did allow for a continuing relationship with this small and uniquely beautiful corner of the world, which he had long ago claimed as his sanctuary. With fate having chosen his new home he severed his roots and with only one exception, he deliberately stepped into the future without a single memento of his past. Taking neither photographs nor keepsakes of any description, and even the few clothes he took with him were quickly replaced. Unfortunately, those unwanted memories of the past proved far more difficult to abandon than the memorabilia had.

A hand fumbled blindly around the inside of his collar and withdrew the exception, a small round gold disc. The chain on which it hung had been replaced a few times, but apart from those few necessary occasions, he had kept his childhood promise to his mother, never to take it off.

‘This will keep you from harm because it contains our love.’ He could still clearly hear his mother’s words as she lovingly placed it around his neck on the morning of his very first school day. In his mind’s eye, he could still see her kneeling before him smiling, and his father standing beside her, patting him on the head and proudly stating, ‘You’re a big lad now!’

As a child he never realised that there was a greater value in this gift beyond its obvious monetary worth, regrettably, that came only much later once it was too late to be able to show his appreciation. This small disc was now his only link back to a time when love had been given unconditionally, and to those who generously gave it. It was also a reminder of the principles he was taught to honour, and of those who had not only taught them but had also themselves set an admirable example to follow.

“With our love, forever.” Read the simple inscription, turning it over he slowly read aloud the inscription on the other side, “Mum and Dad,” thankfully the passage of time had hardened him against the heartache that for years had haunted these words. For a moment or two, he remained staring at the disc, his mother’s words still occupying his thoughts. Her prediction had only been partially right, on the outside their gift had kept him from harm, but not on the inside. Here the past had inflicted wounds that had never fully healed, and despite his success in eradicating all the physical reminders, these wounds would not allow him to forget it.

The idea to take the disc off crossed his mind, on this particular day it seemed inappropriate to wear it, but unlike so many other people of his acquaintance, he was unwilling to break a promise, not even one given many years ago as a small child. He caressed the disc thoughtfully for a while more before returning it to the inside of his shirt, then took a slow look around his Sanctuary, seeking something that would distract his thoughts away from this particular period of his past.

Gratefully the six target posts volunteered themselves as that convenient distraction. They were all that now remained of a fence that had once

separated the majestic beech trees where he sat from the steep, disused meadow beyond. These posts, the rusty wire that hung limply between them, and the meadow that occupied the lower half of the hillside had all seen their useful days pass into history. The once-proud hedge that enclosed the meadow on the far side was now little more than a dense, unkempt mixture of tall weeds and brambles, although the abundant wildflowers that grew at its base and those in the meadow were obviously unperturbed by its lack of beauty. On the other side of the hedge was the lane, the same one he had walked down earlier. This broad farm track first magically appeared on the left through a break in the hedgerow and continued to the right, partly unseen, to the far distant red brick farmhouse and beyond. This was not the typical type of track found on most farms, twisted, rutted and potholed, but a straight neat concrete avenue, strong and confident. Usually condemned as having no place in the countryside, George felt it complimented the landscape here, not detracted from it. Everything beyond echoed that same strength and confidence. Here vast fertile fields filled with strong upright rows of ripening cereals spread out across the valley, each one protected by sturdy, ruler-straight hedgerows, and as if the watchful eye of the farmer was not enough, occasional oak trees, tall, dignified and assertive stood like silent sentinels over this visual delight.

Finally, gently meandering through the middle of this man-made landscape and beneath the cosseting boughs of gracious willows was the river, the epitome of elegance, as only nature knew how.

Long ago, in the days when he still had the inner strength and the desire to find another woman to share life with, he would occasionally bring one here. Disappointingly the beauty and the peacefulness of this small haven found no favour in these women. One young lady found the tranquillity of the surroundings unnerving while another, referring to the scenery, had jokingly asked him to change to another television channel as she was bored watching this one. A joke maybe, but one that summed up the attitude of all the women he had ever brought here. He found it rather ironic that these so-called *modern* women, themselves creations of nature and each a masterpiece of its artistry, failed to appreciate the wonder that their own

creator had crafted for their pleasure. Perhaps if nature had provided a few buttons which beeped in the fashion of those electronic gadgets that controlled their lives, then maybe it would have stood a better chance of impressing them.

The full glory of nature lay before him and much to his deep regret, its ever-changing theatre played for an audience of one, the rest had left before the performance had even begun.

Today however, would see even that last member of the audience leave. He felt that the time had come to move on and although one half of himself was impatient to do so, the other half had wanted to stay a while longer and savour for the last time this beauty that had seduced him all those years ago. As there was no rush, he had been quite content to grant the latter half this last request, but that time was now slowly drawing to a close and soon it would be time to leave.

Unexpected movement in the lane below drew his attention from his thoughts; it was a woman making her way towards the farmhouse. Her red dress and white wide-brimmed sun hat spoke of the joys of summer, something he felt unable to share with her, and her walk clearly demonstrated something that had long been missing from his life... purpose. As he watched her, his eyes slowly lost focus as his thoughts drifted back into the past, but memories of the joyful and carefree variety eluded him, too deeply buried beneath the layers of broken promises, misplaced trust, and the disappointments of unrealised dreams to be unearthed.

Instead, his thoughts roamed through all these people he had ever known and how each one had broken his personal expectations of decent human behaviour. Whatever had happened to the good side of human nature like consideration, honesty, trust, or even simple courtesy? Did they take a bribe? Were they dismissed through lack of use? The answer to this question had persistently avoided him, as had those to the all other questions that so often sprung to mind, but no matter what these answers were, they would only amount to a pitiful excuse rather than a realistic

reason why good manners and desirable virtues were a rarity rather than the norm within modern society.

In this respect, he just hoped that during his lifetime he had set a good example.

‘But did anyone notice?’ he asked himself aloud.

A small sigh preceded a resignedly toned, ‘Probably not.’

By the time his attention had returned to the woman below she had vanished from view, and while he waited for one of the obscuring hedgerows to reveal her whereabouts he centred his last heartfelt hope upon her. Whoever she was, he wished for her something that had unhappily evaded him, the security of lasting love and true happiness in marriage.

As the hedgerow still refused to reveal its secret and with thoughts of his own lost opportunity in mind he slowly drew his eyes back to his feet, along his legs and onto his hands that rested in his lap. Spreading the fingers of his left hand out wide his eyes came to rest upon the ringless ring finger. He stared at it for a while, lost in the thoughts born of regret.

With a big sigh, he closed his fingers, wiped away the moisture from his eyes that had threatened to become tears and stretched his arm out a little, slowly turning his hand palm up and then down. The slightly trembling fingertips drew a wry smile across his face, an outward sign of how he felt inside despite the strength of his desire to leave. After a deep steadying breath, he patted the left-hand pocket of his waistcoat and withdrew a small tin and as calmly as his nervousness would allow he opened it.

‘Wait!’ advised a voice from somewhere inside his head.

‘Why?’ he asked himself aloud, ‘Haven’t I waited long enough?’

Only silence answered his enquiry.

Chapter 2

‘Hello.’

The sudden and unexpected sound of another human voice startled him.

‘Do you mind if I join you?’

His heart was still recovering from the missed beat when he looked up to see a young woman, a particularly beautiful young woman. He struggled to stand up while simultaneously stuttering out a greeting of sorts.

‘Sorry I did not mean to startle you.’ Her voice was as beautiful as she was.

‘No, that’s okay,’ indicating with his hand a suitable place where she could sit, ‘please.’ He hoped that his ‘please’ did not sound too eager. She smiled a thank you.

They both sat down. George returned to his previous seat and she sat to his left and unusually close he thought considering he was a complete stranger to her.

He would have said she was in her late twenties, but then she could be five years older or younger and he would never be able to tell the difference. Guessing a woman’s age was a minefield to him and invariably he always managed to step on one.

She wore a red, very feminine off-the-shoulder dress, which snugly fitted her contours down to the hips then flared slightly ending just below the knees. She certainly knew how to dress to capture a man’s attention, subtly hinting at her feminine charms without actually displaying them. An art he felt so many women no longer possessed.

Her arms were bare, as were her shapely legs. Her feet were small and she wore classic, short heeled, red leather shoes, which perfectly matched the colour of her dress. These especially delighted him, as he disliked the modern shoe styles intensely.

She was slim, but unlike those undernourished matchsticks that parade up and down catwalks, she remained perfectly proportioned. He was of an

average height and pleasingly she was half a head shorter and contrary to the popular convention promoted in the media she was ‘beautiful’ although she was shorter than a lamppost. The reason behind the media’s insistence on only using ‘beautiful’ to describe tall women and ‘pretty’ or ‘cute’ for those of lesser stature had always baffled him, especially as they seemed happy to bend the rules for those shorter women who were either rich or famous.

‘What an idyllic place it is here and just look at that wonderful view!’

He was beginning to like her, not only did she possess an admirable beauty but also here at last was someone who appreciated the things he did.

‘Do you really think so?’

‘Oh yes! It is so peaceful here,’ her eyes widened with delight, ‘and look at all those beautiful flowers and these magnificent trees!’

Yes, he really did like her.

As she seemed content to continue admiring her surroundings, George contented himself by admiring her. A plain golden bracelet with a matching necklace and small golden loop earrings complimented her simple but elegant style. There were none of those unsightly adornments so popular with modern women, no studs through her nose or lips, no tattoos, no chains, no unwieldy rings decorating her fingers, in fact, she wore no rings at all, nor was she wearing a wristwatch. She also appeared to be without the accursed mobile telephone, or even a handbag of any description which he considered somewhat unusual, but the conspicuous absence of two further items raised his curiosity to a point where he asked himself, ‘How did she get here?’ She was without keys so she had not driven here, she had no purse so she could not have taken a bus nor a taxi, and although she could have cycled he deemed it unlikely that a woman in possession of such elegance of movement and attire would choose such a mode of conveyance. Even setting aside the transport question, how did she find her way to his sanctuary? The solution to this may have been easier to find if he had seen

or heard her approach the tree, then he would have known from which direction she had come from, but he had not and her shoes did not provide any clues either. They were perfectly clean so she could not have come through the forest, even at this time of the year the tracks were still very muddy, nor could she have climbed the hill from the farm track below, which although dry was very rugged and required far better footwear than hers. After a minute or so mulling over his thoughts on the subject, he decided the question was of no importance and returned his full attention to admiring her, a very enjoyable task indeed.

The predicted light breeze had arisen and could now be felt as it gently made its way through the trees. As it passed by en route to its mysterious destination, it playfully lifted the loose strands of her long brown hair into the flickering rays of sunlight that had managed to penetrate nature's parasol. As they passed through the light, that age-old cliché perfectly described this enthralling spectacle, each hair shone like a thread of pure gold.

Alas, even hair as beautiful as this cannot compensate for an unsympathetic hairstyle, which is how he felt about hers. Artistically, rather than accidentally, a lock of hair on either temple had been allowed its freedom while the majority had been drawn tightly backwards and constrained by two plaits, one above the other. As a decorative touch, each played host to a small bow whose colour once again, perfectly matched that of her dress. Although not a style he particularly liked, it did have the very agreeable advantage of not only exposing the sides of her face but also her neck. Being no different from the great majority of men, he also enjoyed admiring beautiful women and found, as all men did, certain parts of the female anatomy to be far more appealing than some others. Breasts and legs commonly appealed to most men, however, he favoured eyes and necks. Unfortunately, unless he was on intimate terms with their owner, eyes were often difficult to admire without triggering a woman's self-defence system, her tongue. A repercussion worth avoiding, especially by those like himself

who lacked that extraordinary skill of producing an instant, resistance crumbling response when verbally confronted.

Happily and rather curiously, admiring necks never provoked the same reaction. Whether it was because women found this form of admiration less threatening, or were simply unaware that their necklines held the same sensual seductiveness for some men as their breasts and eyes held for others, he did not know, but whatever the reason was he was not going to seek it, admiring necks was considerably safer than asking potentially dangerous questions about them.

The neck of the young woman sitting opposite him was certainly worth admiring and engrossed in its alluring, elegant beauty George failed to notice that she had turned her head towards him. When he eventually looked up, his eyes fell straight into hers. Quickly he turned his head away in an attempt to hide his embarrassment at having been caught.

‘Do you like what you see?’ she asked.

Having recovered his composure sufficiently he turned back to her, ‘Yes you’re very...’ he paused desperately trying to find a suitable adjective that would be truthful yet inoffensive. Experience had taught him that some women, especially the more attractive ones, often view an overt compliment negatively, believing it to show that a man’s interest in them is only sexual. ‘Pretty, very pretty,’ came his considered compromise.

Avoiding her eyes he quietly spoke the words that the lack of courage did not allow, ‘Stunning, absolutely stunning!’

‘Thank you, I must admit I am very pleased with it myself.’ She looked herself up and down, ‘This really does make a pleasant change.’ Pausing to lightly cup her breasts in her hands, ‘Usually, I have to carry around abnormally large breasts and they always cause such dreadful backaches.’ She moved her hands down to her waist, ‘Look! A real waist!’ Then giving a gentle tug to the hem of her dress, ‘Sensible clothes and proper shoes too!’ and she stretched out one of her shapely legs and rotated

her foot so that she could admire her shoe fully. 'Those high heels are so difficult to walk on, why do men like women to wear them?'

George knew exactly why, but shrugged his shoulders to indicate otherwise, he felt that now would be an inappropriate time to explain the relationship between men, visually lengthened legs and sexual attractiveness.

'Do you have a mirror?' she enquired with a hint of expectation in her voice, 'I would love to know what I look like, am I really as pretty as you say I am?'

George looked her up and down quizzically, 'I'm sorry, I do not mean to be offensive, but one of us isn't making a great deal of sense,' adding an apologetically toned, 'and... it's not me.'

'Why?' she asked with an innocence that denoted she had either not understood his comment or had chosen to ignore it. She precluded any opportunity for a reply, 'So you do not have a mirror. Shame, I would like to have seen myself before I go back.' She gave a little sigh and with a sorrowful look turned to him, 'No one has ever described me as "Stunning" before.'

Wide-eyed and somewhat sceptically he enquired, 'You heard that?'
She did not answer.

Fidgeting about uneasily George tried to hide another bout of embarrassment while hastily evaluating his situation and his limited options.

She was physically a dream come true, but she was also to his mind behaving very strangely, so what should he do? Leave now and avoid any further uncomfortable incidents, or stay?

Eventually, after removing a small excuse-serving twig from where he had been sitting, he settled back down.

With his decision taken his gaze slowly returned to the beauty sat beside him.

She had also changed position, leaning against the tree on her right shoulder her upper body now almost faced him squarely and her outstretched legs had been drawn up and turned sideways so that both knees pointed towards

him. A position that oddly made him feel very comfortable in her company despite his misgivings about her behaviour.

He said nothing and restricted his gaze to her hands that now rested together on her lap. He had already made two mistakes and was not keen on making a third, which he concluded might be the one that would drive her away, and he would rather spend his last few hours admiring this beautiful example of nature's artwork than the one in the valley below.

The discovery of her own hair induced a delightfully broad smile and although conceding that her hair was indeed extraordinarily beautiful, he could not understand her obvious joy at this discovery, nevertheless, he smiled in response.

'Talk to her or she'll leave,' he thought to himself, 'say something!'

She was still admiring her hair when he finally plucked up enough courage to break the silence, 'Do you not have any mirrors where ...' he paused slightly, 'where you go back to?'

He mentally kicked himself for not thinking of something far more interesting to ask, yet again proving his university education was insufficient to overcome the affliction caused whenever his admiration and a beautiful woman met for the first time, the lack of co-operation between his brain and his tongue.

Seemingly undisturbed by the lack of intellect in the question she calmly replied, 'No, we have no use for them.'

'Then why did you just ask me for one?'

'Because I am here,' and she gestured with her hands to indicate their present idyllic surroundings, then without the slightest hint in which direction it lay added, 'and not there.' Brought to her attention by her own gesturing she looked up momentarily from her hands, 'I am different every time I come here and I was curious to know how I looked on this occasion.' Each time she spoke, her words only confirmed his belief that not everything inside her pretty head was quite as it should be, 'Beautiful but unbalanced!' he thought to himself.

Surreptitiously George looked her over once again while she was busy admiring or examining, he was not sure which, the lines in the palms of her hands and spun his thoughts further. If she was unbalanced he could possibly trigger a violent reprisal simply by saying or doing something completely innocent. What would he do if she did attack him? He pictured a possible scenario in his head, she suddenly leaps up and brandishing a razor-edged kitchen knife, she charges at him screaming. Although fully capable of dealing with a man in such a situation, his principles would cause him great difficulties with a woman assailant, for they prohibit him, even in self-defence, from striking a woman.

Urgently seeking evidence of a potential threat his eyes passed her over once again, her apparent innocence, serenity, and radiant beauty quickly defused his thoughts, 'Besides,' he happily concluded, 'nobody could possibly hide a weapon under that dress anyway!'

'OK, perhaps she's not dangerous, but she's still deranged.' Feeling highly ashamed of his own discourteous description he hurriedly corrected himself, 'Eccentric,' and slowly nodded as if to agree with his new assessment.

A few minutes passed in an amicable silence as he continued to watch her odd, but somehow delightfully innocent behaviour of self-discovery. She had by now removed one of her shoes and her attention was drawn towards five wiggling toes, leaving her face endowed with a broad captivating smile. Not the normal everyday type of smile, but one that comes from the heart, a smile that can be seen in the eyes and brightens the whole face. A smile that is heart-warming and infectious to the beholder, unconsciously he smiled that same smile in response.

Although beguiled by her beauty and her odd but somehow enchanting behaviour, the whereabouts of her 'there' and the reason for this very strange behaviour played upon his mind. The thought occurred to him that she could be a member of some weird sect, the particular behaviour of some of these people often left the rest of the population feeling much as he did at the moment, totally bemused. After pondering on the thought for a while he

discounted it, nevertheless, he still found himself needing answers to these niggling questions.

‘I hope you don’t mind me asking, but how do you apply make-up without mirrors?’ he thought the addition of a compliment would help in case she did, ‘because I think your make-up is terrific.’

His question drew her attention back and she looked straight into his eyes. His heart sank. Had his compliment been misinterpreted? Was she about to get up and leave?

‘Thank you, it is not often men find make-up something worth complimenting women over,’ adding as an afterthought, ‘and Maurice will be pleased to hear his artistry was appreciated.’

‘Maurice!’ exclaimed George, ‘who is Maurice? A Boyfriend? Your husband?’ Until that moment he had presumptuously assumed she was unattached and had not given any thought to the prospect that she may be in a fixed relationship, or far worse, married. Really beautiful women, he conceded, only marry muscular bound, hunky men with IQs equalling that of adolescent gorillas. Therefore, it is good for one’s health to maintain a discrete distance from these women, which on this occasion he had failed to do and the prospect of facing up to a jealous husband was not something he relished the thought of.

Her puzzled expression suddenly transformed into another broad smile, it was as if she had suddenly understood the punch line from a joke, ‘No, Maurice is neither,’ and as if to clarify her last comment added, ‘I am not spoken for.’

George found her use of such an outdated turn of phrase appealing, it also drew his attention to the absurdity of his own thought process. He was sat on the last seat he would ever occupy and there would never be another tomorrow. Yet subconsciously an instinctive sense of self-preservation had stepped in to warn him about the potential future dangers of a relationship. His brain, a claim he knew many would refute he possessed, had gone through the long and exacting process of planning the exclusion of a future, however, there remained one small part of his subconscious that was planning the exact opposite with this woman. He was still wondering

whether there was a message to be found within this observation when her voice broke into his thoughts.

‘Maurice was the one who applied my make-up for me. Without mirrors, it is very difficult to do these things oneself so I had to ask one of the other angels to do it for me and Maurice kindly agreed.’

‘Oh! Okay,’ his words were more a courtesy than a reply, for it had occurred to him that she might be toying with him, playing one of those irritating senseless female games to which, in his youth, he had twice fallen victim to.

Both incidents had left him deeply resentful and consequently always wary of unduly positive female attention, furthermore, he had no desire to be publicly humiliated yet again because of some woman’s idea of a practical joke.

Discreetly and on the pretext of adjusting his seat, he took the opportunity to visually search his surroundings, behind tree trunks, the distant undergrowth, and even the treetops because to be successful this joke would require witnesses, but he saw no one.

Relaxing a little, but still distrustful of her motives, he thought over everything she had said and done. If she was playing a game then she was playing it exceptionally well but if not...

Somewhat sarcastically he suggested, ‘And I suppose Maurice-the-make-up-angel also did your hair for you?’ Her smile remained fully undisturbed by his undisguised sarcasm, ‘No, that was Constantia, one of the other angels. She always manages to create a hairstyle that fits all the descriptions, unfortunately, I rarely have an opportunity to see them.’ Then abruptly pointing towards her feet she whispered, ‘Oh look! How sweet!’ Their attention was now drawn to a bird that had landed surprisingly close to her.

George leant slowly back against the tree and watched as she talked to the bird like a mother would do to her newborn baby, quietly and soothingly. She asked the bird, a large magpie, simple questions and like all mothers repeated the simplistic answers they imagine their child would give.

Remarkably the bird was not startled by the sound of her voice, on the contrary, it seemed quite content to stay and listen to it.

Were her actions completely natural? If she was playing a game was it possible to maintain her 'character' during an unanticipated event such as this?

He thought back to those two incidents many years ago that even today gave rise to great resentment, of his failure to notice the verbal and visual signals that would have saved him from so much humiliation, and of the resulting wariness that he had treated every new relationship with ever since.

He had learnt his lesson and had learnt it well... or had he? Was this resentment really caused by what these two women had done, or was it due to his own failures? Oddly, this was a question that he had never thought to ask of himself before, and the more he thought about it the more he came to realise that it was himself he resented. Anyone can fall into a well-laid trap once, but it takes someone unbelievably foolish to fall into that very same trap a second time. He slowly shook his head, self-realisation did not always result in shouts of joy and triumphant arm-waving.

While watching her continuing natural display of rapport with nature, or was it motherly tenderness, the latter certainly felt far more appealing, he began to wonder whether he had made another mistake. Was he treating this young woman with the same habitual wariness with which, as he now realised, he had unjustifiably treated all of her predecessors? Consequently, was he automatically considering anything unusual she should say or do as a potential threat? Did her strange behaviour really warrant the assumption that it was all an act? If it was, then to what conceivable purpose? She was no longer a teenager that needed to prove to her friends that she had the prowess to manipulate the male gender and there was no victory in proving him to be a fool without witnesses.

Whichever way he thought about it, he could find no justification in continuing to believe she was a spiteful woman playing a game based solely on her strange behaviour, but if she wasn't, then what were the alternative reasons for this behaviour? Mental delusion? Schizophrenia? Dementia?

There were probably far more afflictions of the mind, but these were all that he knew, and if it were one of these then surely she deserved his sympathy rather than his distrust.

He looked at her dress, it was perfectly clean and well ironed and the colour was bright, almost like new, her polished leather shoes also looked relatively new. Her shoeless foot had been well pedicured, her fingernails were well-manicured and her long hair shone with health. Absolutely nothing about her appearance gave him the impression that she was suffering any form of mental affliction but then, would it have shown in her appearance? He had heard that this was often the case with those suffering severe depression, but could this rule be applied to those illnesses he had thought of? Perhaps it was something completely different, but what? And how should he now deal with her not knowing what lay behind this strange behaviour?

Abandoning his concern over her intent was easy, it was unwarranted and unjustifiable and as he now realised, it was born entirely from his own failures, but should he now replace that concern with another, that over her mental state?

Thinking about why he had come here this particular day was all that it took to convince him to simply appreciate her delightful company for as long as it lasted, regardless of her questionable level of sanity, after all... tomorrow it would not really matter.

Having dealt with his concerns left him feeling far more relaxed, however, it had not helped piece together the intriguing puzzle that this young lady had become and although her every word and action added new pieces to it each time, they appeared only to confuse the picture, not clarify it. Nevertheless, he enjoyed puzzles, and this one was becoming of personal interest to him. His only concern now was whether or not he had time to solve it.

He set about his task, if he could uncover the whereabouts of her 'there', her only reference to the place where she came from and presumably lived,