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Sophie was strolling through her garden when she saw a man standing under the huge chestnut tree that overhung the wall to mesh branches with a similar tree next door. If he'd been facing her way she'd have run, but he had his back to her and didn't seem at all interested in her house. He was standing on a garden seat, hidden by the mass of leaves, peering over the wall at the house next door.

She stopped dead, wondering what to do. He must have come through the old wooden gate that led next door but it was closed now. Was he hiding from someone or spying on them? Curiosity kept her standing there even though she knew the sensible thing would be to creep quietly back indoors and call for help.

But she wasn't the sensible type, as her son pointed out regularly. William was still furious that she'd wasted her money on such a large house—not necessary for one person, he insisted regularly—but she loved living here. It wasn't for the prestige of a Chestnut Lane address, but because the house had spacious rooms and a larger than average garden and that felt good.

Curious to find out what was going on, she hid behind a bush. As she watched, the man rubbed a hand to and fro across his forehead as if he was tired and had a headache. He stiffened suddenly and she too heard something from the direction in which he was gazing—men's lowered voices, meant only for one another to hear. But sounds carried

clearly in the still air of an early spring day.

The stranger's fists clenched, then he stepped off the bench and swung round, his eyes scanning the garden as if looking for somewhere to hide. As he began to limp slowly towards her, his face was revealed, showing recent scarring on one side. She gasped in surprise as she realised who he was: *Jez Winter!* No doubt about it.

Why was one of the most famous pop stars of her youth creeping round her garden? He didn't do much performing these days but still had the ability to turn out albums that sold steadily and when he gave one of his rare concerts, he filled the biggest venues to overflowing. She loved his music and owned just about all of his albums. That hawk-like face was hard to forget and the years hadn't dimmed its appeal to her or to many other women.

Her gasp made him turn sharply in her direction, so she moved out from behind the bush and stood motionless. She hoped that showed him she meant no harm, but she had no idea what to do next.

As he saw her, his lips mouthed, 'Oh, hell!' and he froze, swaying a little, his face so pale it seemed as if his features had been drawn on white paper with a charcoal stick.

From behind the boundary fence one man called, 'I'm *sure* he went that way. Let's go after him. I'm not losing a good story now.' Footsteps began moving towards them again.

That must be the paparazzi, who had been in the news themselves ever since the accident for hounding Winter, trying to get photos of his injuries. Even Sophie, who didn't pay much attention to the doings of celebrities, knew about that.

It was the way her trespasser's shoulders slumped that touched her heart and made up her mind. Placing one forefinger on her lips, she beckoned with the other hand.

He stared at her so numbly she had to repeat the gesture before he mouthed the word

'Thanks' and moved forward.

She led the way back to the house, walking on the grass instead of the paths, trying not to make any noise. As they got near the kitchen door she heard a voice call, 'There's a gate here!'

Unlocking the rear door, she went quickly inside and waited for him to join her before locking the door carefully behind them. She'd had a burglar the previous year soon after she moved in, so she never, ever left an outer door or window unlocked, not even if she was only walking round her own garden. That seemed very sad, but she lived in an upmarket area and she'd accepted the fact that it made her more of a target for burglars.

'Come through into my sitting room. It looks out on to an internal courtyard, so you'll be safe from prying eyes there.'

He followed her, limping slightly. 'I'm grateful.'

She gestured to a chair. 'Do sit down. You look exhausted.'

'I am. It's taking longer to recover than I'd expected. I thought I'd covered my tracks today, but those sods seem to be psychic about sussing out where I'm going.' He studied her face and said with a wry smile, 'You recognised me.'

'Hard not to. I enjoy your music, have done for years. And when you had the accident, it headed the TV news for a few days, as have your visits to hospital for plastic surgery. I didn't know they'd let you out of hospital after the latest.'

'They haven't. I let myself out early this morning, couldn't face another day penned up in there. Thank goodness this was the last operation. The gutter press had been baying at the door for days and if I hadn't had a bodyguard outside my room, that fellow presently lurking next door would have got his precious photo of this and earned a fortune at my expense.' His voice was bitter as he jerked a thumb towards the scarred side of his face.

He stared blindly into the distance for a moment or two then said in a voice which grated with frustration, 'I'll pay you well to let me stay here until I can get someone from my security team to pick me up.'

She stiffened. 'Why should I need paying?'

Silence, then his shoulders moved in the tiniest of shrugs. 'People usually do.'

'Well, I'd be ashamed to take money from someone in trouble.'

He looked at her properly then, studying her face as if to peel off the layers of skin and find out what she was really thinking. His expression slowly softened, as if he liked what he saw. 'Then may I please stay here until someone can come and fetch me? I don't intend to go back to that hospital, but my security staff will have to set up a temporary refuge while I house hunt. I suppose it'll have to be a luxury hotel again because the journos know where my old flat is.' He sighed. 'And anyway, I hate that place. It's where I had the intruder. If I hadn't had the accident shortly afterwards, I'd have found a new home by now.'

She smiled. 'You've had a bad year.'

'Tell me about it. That's why I was looking at the house next door. I lost my last home in the divorce settlement, but that place was more to *her* taste than mine anyway. Well, one big house is much like another, isn't it?'

She didn't comment on his public quarrels and violent break-up with his second wife. That marriage had lasted less than a year. Although his music was beautiful, his private life hadn't been anything to boast about.

Sophie, on the other hand, had loved her husband dearly and been desolate when he died. Her two grown-up children still missed their father, she knew. She'd made a satisfying new life for herself because you had to move on, you couldn't bring them back. And ironically, she was quite well off now, hadn't needed his insurance money, because

she was suddenly wildly successful in her own right. 'Yes, of course you can stay here until your friends come for you. Is the house next door for sale? It's been empty for so long, I thought they were going to knock it down and build smaller places. Not many people can afford a huge house with staff quarters these days.'

'It is for sale. They couldn't get planning permission to knock it down because it's a listed building. I thought if I viewed it without the usual circus, if I stayed indoors all the time I was there and only looked out at the gardens, then perhaps no one would notice me and I could get a feel for the place. I got details of houses a day or two ago and sent for some of the keys but told them I'd show myself round.'

Another of those bitter twists to his lips. She ached to see anyone so unhappy, especially someone who'd given her so much pleasure. Best to let him talk it out, she decided.

'They couldn't send the keys over fast enough, knowing who I was. Anyway, this morning I took a taxi and went out without a minder, something I've not done for years. It was no good, though. Those pests must have had people watching the entrance to the hospital delivery area, where I sneaked out, or else someone tipped them off. I didn't even get inside the house. They turned up just after my taxi left. Luckily I saw them before they saw me, but I must have made too much noise getting away from them or left tracks. That garden's badly overgrown.'

He closed his eyes for a moment, muttering, 'I wish to hell they'd leave me alone.'

'It must be hard living in the limelight all the time.'

'You'd think I'd be used to it by now, but as you get older you crave a bit of peace.'

He still looked as wary as a cornered animal, she thought. Well, that's what he was, really. 'Would you like a coffee while you're waiting? I was just going to make some. And I have some home-made cake.'

He looked faintly surprised, then nodded. 'I would, actually. If it's not too much trouble.'

'No trouble at all.'

There was a knock on the front door and he stiffened again.

She got up. 'Better if I answer it, don't you think? It'd look strange not to.' She laid one hand on his shoulder as she passed him, could feel the tension there. 'Don't worry. I won't give you away.'

When she opened the door, she found three men waiting, one with a camera at the ready. 'Can I help you?'

'Did anyone come to your door?'

'No, but I did wonder if I heard a noise down that side of the house a few minutes ago.' She pointed. 'I thought it was a fox after the birds. I have a feeder out there and—'

Two of them ran off in that direction without a word. Only the third one bothered to toss her a quick 'Thanks', before pounding after his colleagues.

Nasty creatures! she thought as she locked the door again. She turned to see her visitor standing in the doorway of her living room.

'I'm grateful.'

'You're welcome. Now, coffee and cake. I'll bring it through.'

When she carried the tray in, he was slumped in a chair, one hand covering his eyes.

'Here you are.'

He mustn't have heard her coming because he jumped in shock, then tried to smile.

'Don't,' she told him gently.

'Don't what?'

'Force a smile. And you needn't chat at all if you don't want to. Just sit there quietly and rest. You can test the cake for me and give me your honest opinion. It's a new skill of

mine, baking. I always used to worry about being too big, but now I've given up on trying to look like a stick insect. My genes aren't programmed for it, anyway. I concentrate on enjoying life—though that doesn't mean I eat a ton of junk food.'

'That's the first time I've heard a woman say that.'

She grinned. 'I can't tell you how comfortable it is to eat what you want. And I've not put any weight on. This seems to be my natural size and it's comfortable to live with even if it doesn't suit the fashionistas.' She poured his coffee, gave him a piece of cake then cut one for herself, looking out at the small water garden in the central courtyard as she ate, not attempting to make conversation.

After a while he put down the mug and empty plate. 'Thank you. That's the first food I've enjoyed for a long time.'

'Good. It's the first almond cake I've ever made. It's hard to find recipes without wheat in them. I'm wheat intolerant, you see.'

'Coeliac?'

'Worse. I seem to be intolerant of all cereals except rice.'

'Must be a nuisance.'

'Sometimes. But far worse things than that can happen to a person.'

'Well, it's delicious, whatever's in it. Um, would you mind if I . . . ' He broke off. 'No, I shouldn't ask.'

'Go ahead. I can always say no.'

'Could I stay here for a bit longer, please? It's so peaceful. And you're the first person I've met in a long time who doesn't try to fill the silences with babble or pester me with questions about how I'm feeling.'

'I enjoy silence.'

'So do I. Which may sound strange coming from a muso.'

'I don't think so. We all need peaceful times in our lives. I love your music, by the way.' She waved one hand towards her CD collection. 'I have all your albums. Such beautiful melodies. *Tears May Fall* is my favourite track.'

This time his smile was unforced. 'It's one of mine, too.'

'Stay as long as you like.' She stood up. 'I'll be in my office. When you want some company, come and find me. There's no hurry. I'm at the far end of the corridor. I'm only working on correspondence today, so I can stop and start at will. Oh, and the cloakroom is on the left.'

It was a full hour before she heard movement, first the sound of him limping along the corridor then water flushing in the cloakroom. After that the footsteps came towards her office, so she turned to greet him.

He stood framed in the doorway, still looking utterly exhausted. 'I've just realised I don't even know your name. I do apologise. It was very rude of me not to ask.'

'Sophie.'

'No second name?'

'Sophie Carr.'

He frowned. 'That sounds vaguely familiar.'

She picked up one of her books and handed it to him in silence.

'You're a novelist.'

'Yes.'

'I've not read a novel for ages. I must buy a copy of this. Unless it's full of angst and violence. I couldn't stand that at the moment, I'm afraid, however well written.'

She wasn't surprised. A deranged intruder had broken into his home and held a knife to his throat, then a month later he'd been involved in a car accident, which had badly damaged his left side. 'You're quite safe with my books. I write relationships novels.'

Women's fiction, they call it sometimes, though men read my stories too and email to tell me they've enjoyed them. And the stories always, always have happy endings, because it's my choice for the hero and heroine to get together.'

His expression was bleak. 'It's a nice fantasy—that relationships can be happy, I mean.'

'My parents were happily married for fifty-nine years. Where's the fantasy in that?'

'Sorry. Didn't mean to sound so negative. But you must admit that's unusual these days.'

'I was happily married too, for twenty-seven years.'

'Was?'

'Bill died a few years ago. If he hadn't, we'd still have been together.'

His voice was gentle. 'I'm sorry.'

'I'm used to it now, but he just dropped dead one day, so it was a dreadful shock. Heart attack.' She wasn't sure her daughter was over it, even now. Andi had been such a daddy's girl. 'Anyway, how about some lunch? It's only leftover chicken and mushroom risotto.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I am.'

'I'd love to, but I'd better make a phone call first.'

'To your minders?' When he nodded, she said quietly, 'Do it later. Enjoy the meal first.'

The wary look had returned to his face, so she spoke bluntly. 'I'm not trying to get anything from you. If I can do a good deed—for anyone, anyone at all, doesn't matter whether they're rich or poor—I do it willingly. After I lost Bill, my friends were so kind to me, so tolerant of my grief and they helped me with—other problems. I vowed to pass on

that kindness.' She saw him relax. A smile lifted the corners of his mouth briefly and he put up one hand to brush back his jaw-length hair, a familiar gesture to his fans, something of a trade mark. The brown hair was streaked with grey now, but he was still a very attractive man.

'So I'm your good deed for the day?'

She chuckled. 'I suppose so. If I pull the blinds down, you could come and sit in the kitchen while I heat the risotto.'

She worked quickly, getting out cheese, rice biscuits and a bottle of sparkling water to finish the meal.

He didn't talk much, but he ate everything she set before him and looked much more relaxed.

'I'd forgotten how good simple meals can be,' he said as he pushed his cheese plate away. 'That was wonderful. They give me fancy towers of food at the hotel, which look beautiful, but there's not much substance to them and they're awkward to eat.'

She chuckled. 'I know what you mean. They fall all over the plate. Drives me crazy. Shall we take our coffee out into the courtyard? It's sheltered and sunny, and the wall's too high for people to see over.'

'I'd like that. You have a very restful home.'

'Thank you. It's what I was trying for.'

'Did you and your husband live here?'

'No. I felt it better to have a change once I'd sorted out a few problems and was thinking straight again. My books had taken off by then so I could afford to buy a place on Chestnut Lane.'

When he'd finished the coffee, Jez fell asleep between one sentence and the next, the faint frown that had seemed a permanent fixture smoothing from his forehead as his

eyes closed.

She tiptoed away and went back into her office. It had been a strange sort of day.

Poor man. Money didn't buy you happiness, did it? Well, she'd found that out herself, though she wasn't in Jez Winter's league money-wise, nowhere near. It was so unfair that she'd done well as a writer only after Bill's death, so the husband who'd supported her through all those years of rejections hadn't reaped the rewards.

A story idea slid into her mind, the way they did sometimes, and she sat very still, letting it flourish and bring other details about the characters with it. Suddenly she knew exactly how she was going to start this new book. Forgetting her guest completely, she created a new computer file and began roughing out the opening scene.

When Jez woke up, he couldn't think where he was and jerked upright in the comfortable recliner chair, staring round in panic.

It was a book lying on the table that reminded him of his rescue by—what was she called? Oh, yes, Sophie. An unlikely heroine, softly curved, gently spoken and nothing like the elegant, brittle women he seemed to attract these days.

He stood up, wincing at his stiffness. The left side, which had caught the brunt of the car smash, had been damaged in so many ways. He looked down at his hand. The feeling was nearly back in full now, thank heavens. At first it had seemed as if he'd lost the ability to play guitar or piano properly and no amount of reassurances by his specialist and a top physiotherapist that things would improve, had taken away that fear. It had haunted many a sleepless night till the improvement began to show and he was able to make music again, albeit very clumsily at first.

His hand was a little less dexterous than it had been but was still improving, and he could play well enough for his own pleasure, not to mention his needs as a composer. He

wasn't a concert pianist or a classical guitarist, after all. Even if he did more gigs—and he wasn't at all sure he wanted to bother—it was writing music he enjoyed most these days, and recording it in his own studio.

He also jammed occasionally with a few old friends, solely for their own pleasure. When these friends, also famous, were in London, they usually managed a get together, though that didn't happen often enough for him.

Half the guys who'd been his friends in the early days were dead now, though. Just like the cliché, they'd succumbed to sex, drugs and rock and roll. He'd tried all those things, too, but had settled for the music. Unlike drugs, it didn't come back to bite you. And sex was overrated, really. He hadn't felt much need since he and Cheryl had split.

He walked out of the sitting room, past a wide staircase and along to the cloakroom, then on to the office. Sophie was sitting at the computer, her fingers flying across the keyboard, her shoulder-length, honey-coloured hair gleaming in a stray ray of sunshine, showing occasional silver threads. Not dyed, then. What a pretty colour it was!

She seemed to sense his presence and swung round, her smile as gentle and friendly as everything else about her. He wished . . . he didn't know what he wished. But he'd enjoyed her company and her peaceful house so much, he didn't want to leave. It had been like an oasis in a desert.

'Enjoy your sleep?'

'Yes. Very refreshing. But now I really must phone my security staff for help.'

She nodded and turned back to her computer.

In the sitting room he took out his mobile, switching it on and dialling, then watching a bird come to the feeder outside and peck happily away. Someone picked up at the other end before the phone could ring a second time. Kevin. His chief of security and general factotum.

'Where the hell have you been, Jez?'

'I slipped the leash and went to visit that big house in Hampstead.'

'We saw the keys were missing and Craig went there. He found no sign of you.'

'Yeah, well, the press got on to me and I had to escape.'

'Where are you now? Somewhere safe, I hope?'

'I'm next door. I was given refuge by the owner. She's been really kind.'

'Why didn't you ring sooner?'

'I fell asleep. Best sleep I've had for weeks, actually.'

Kevin's voice softened. 'That's good. What number are you at?'

'Damned if I know. Have to go and ask her. It's one of a group of four desirable modern residences. Hold on a minute.' Jez strolled back to the office, feeling guilty about interrupting Sophie again. 'What's the number of this house, please?'

She told him, but he could see she was itching to return to her work. 'I'll—um, just . . .

By the time he reached the door, her fingers were clicking away again. He felt vaguely miffed, then shook his head at himself. *Conceited sod! You can't expect everyone to hang on your words.*

The voice on the mobile squawked at him, reminding him of what he'd gone to find out, so he passed on the house number to Kevin.

'I'll ring you back when we've got something arranged. Will she let you stay till then, Jez?'

'I don't think she'll even notice whether I'm here or not.'

'You must be slipping. Or else she's over eighty.'

'She's younger than me, but she's got a life. She's a novelist, Sophie Carr. Have you heard of her?'

'Yeah. She's one of my wife's favourite authors.'

'Get Donna to buy me her books.'

'Which ones? She's written quite a few.'

'All of them. I need something to do while I'm recovering. You can't play a guitar all the time.' And he'd still got a long way to go before he'd be bouncing around the universe again.

He didn't like to disturb his hostess so wandered through the ground floor rooms, hoping she wouldn't mind. It was a big place for one woman. He found a room set up with a walking machine and a TV, a formal dining room that looked unused, and finally, on the other side of the internal courtyard was a . . . damned if he knew what that room was for. A shrine was the nearest he could come to defining it.

The room was devoid of furniture, but had a couple of saris in glowing shades of deep rose pink, dull purple and rich blue draped across the two windowless walls, and a two foot high Buddha sitting serenely on a low, ornately carved table. A vase in front of it held one perfect flower. There was a stained glass panel in the window, floor to ceiling, showing lush tropical flowers. It cast jewel-coloured patches of light everywhere. Something as beautiful as that must have cost a fortune. With the saris, the whole room was glowing with colour, not garish, very harmonious.

On the floor was a quilted piece, like no rug he'd ever seen, with curving patterns and different textures in shades of white on white, coloured only by light falling through stained glass.

He had an inexplicable urge to sit on that rug and close his eyes. But he didn't want to intrude on her private place, so went back to ask her if he could make himself a cup of coffee.

'Go ahead. And have another piece of cake. There's plenty.'

‘Do you want a cup?’

‘Mmm? No, thanks.’

And she was typing away again.

The phone rang as he was walking back to the kitchen and he heard her answering it, telling someone not to come round today.

He smiled wryly. He’d have liked to find out more about her, but could understand what was driving her. He was just the same when he was writing a song, working out the words and arrangement, impatient of interruptions.

A dark limo arrived an hour later and turned into the drive. Hearing it, Jez lifted the corner of the kitchen blind to peer out. Before the limo had even stopped in front of the house the three journalists came running along the street to the gate.

Craig, his assistant minder, got out and stayed at the gate, arms folded, keeping them at bay, looking mean and powerful. Jez grinned. Craig wouldn’t hurt a fly, fought only in self-defence, but no one need know that.

Kevin got out of the limo, by which time Jez had opened the front door. ‘Just a minute.’ He went back to his hostess. ‘Sorry to interrupt you again, but they’ve come for me.’

Sophie swung round and blinked as if roused from a deep sleep, then smiled. She seemed to smile a lot.

‘Sorry. When an idea takes me, I forget about the rest of the world.’

‘I’m like that when I’m writing music.’

‘You’ll forgive me for being a poor hostess, then?’

‘You’ve been a wonderful hostess, given me a few hours of real peace. I can’t thank you enough.’

‘I’ll see you out.’ She walked with him to the door. Cameras flashed from the gates

and she looked towards them in surprise. 'Are they still here?'

'Ignore them. This is Kevin, my minder, or Chief of Security if you want his posh title.'

She shook hands, giving Kevin another of her lovely smiles, then turned back to Jez.

'Good luck with the house hunting.'

He held her hand in his for a bit longer than he should have. It was as soft and warm as a plump little bird and he didn't want to let go. 'Thank you for everything.'

'It was my pleasure.'

Again the cameras flashed and he saw her wince. He supposed they'd now have their photo of his ravaged face. And her with him. Damn, he should have thought of that and told her to stay inside. Suddenly, protecting his face didn't seem half as important as protecting her and the haven she'd created here.

He wanted what she had, a peaceful home where you could simply relax. He'd make that his next priority.

He was sorry when the front door shut behind her, sorry to be back in a limo behind tinted glass that made the whole world seem shadowed. There was more flashing of cameras as they drove out of the gates. As he turned to look back at the house, he saw the group of journalists move purposefully up the drive towards it.

'Maybe we should go back and help her?'

'It'll make things worse if we do,' Kevin said. 'Anyway, she won't be stupid enough to open her door to them.'

It took a minute or two for the sound to register with Sophie. She looked round in puzzlement. How long had someone been knocking? She glanced at her watch. Only a few minutes since Jez left. He must have forgotten something.

She hurried to answer the door. It didn't take long for it to register that it wasn't him,

but the press.

‘He’s left,’ she said and moved to go inside again.

A foot shot past her to jam the door open. As she turned to remonstrate, camera lights flashed. She shoved the foot aside and tried to get back into the house, only now it was a hand that was holding the door open.

She froze for a few seconds, nothing in her experience having taught her how to deal with this sort of thing. While she hesitated, the door was pushed further open and she began to feel frightened. ‘Please get out of my house!’

The man holding the door open ignored her request, his expression feral—there was no other word to describe it. It was as if he was the hunter and she the prey.

‘Get out of my house and off my property,’ she repeated, trying to close the door.

‘Just tell us what it’s like being Jez winter’s lover?’ he asked. ‘Is he good in bed? Is his temper as bad as they say? Has he ever thumped you?’

She gaped at him in shock, unable to believe these were serious questions. The man beside him started shouting at her, his voice a blare of meaningless sound.

The third man, who was her own age, pushed forward. She thought he was going to barge right into her house, but instead he elbowed the intruder away.

‘You’re out of order, Talbin.’ He turned to Sophie. ‘Sorry, love. I’m Peter Shane from “In Depth”. If you ever want to do a real interview, without the smut, call me.’ He pressed a card into her hand. ‘Better close the door now.’

She did so, grateful for his help, leaning against the inside of the door for a moment because her knees felt wobbly. Voices still yammered outside, two men having an argument from the sounds of it. ‘Stop being such a wimp!’ she told herself and went to telephone the local police station, explaining her dilemma.

In a short time she heard a police siren, then the sound of car tyres on the drive. After

that an authoritative voice outside told the group of men to leave the premises.

There was a knock on the door and this time she used the spy-hole to check who it was before she opened it, relieved to see the uniformed officer.

'Are you all right, Ms Carr? Can we come in for a minute?' The man flashed his ID and his companion did the same with hers.

Sophie held the door open. 'Thank you for coming so quickly. I was a bit worried when one of those men wouldn't let me close the door.' Though it was the man's expression that had frightened her most. He'd looked cruel, enjoying a moment of power. Thank heavens for the other fellow, Peter Shane, who had at least been courteous!

'Better be careful how you open the door from now on, Ms Carr. Care to explain what this is all about?'

'Yes. Come and sit down.' She explained what had happened that day, shuddering again as she relived the feeling of being hunted and trapped.

'Is Jez Winter likely to be coming back?'

'I shouldn't think so. It was just a chance meeting, because I could help him out. I'd never met him before. I'm doubly glad I did help, now that I've seen what those horrible people can be like.'

'You're quite famous yourself,' the female officer said with a smile.

'Not that sort of fame, and I wouldn't want it, either. It's my books that go out and face the public. I only give talks occasionally, and not to people like that.'

'You should think about getting some automatic gates with an intercom fitted to your drive,' the male officer said. 'Those fellows won't give up for some time if they think you're involved with Winter. Anyway, a famous woman living on her own is always a target. I hope you have a good security system here?'

‘Er—no.’

‘Might be worth getting one installed.’

When they’d left, Sophie made sure every external door and window was locked and went into her meditation room. She lit a joss stick, set it in front of the statue of the Buddha, inclined her head in a gesture of respect for what he represented, then sat down on the quilt cross-legged.

She sighed in relief as the familiar feeling of peace washed through her. She wasn’t a Buddhist, wasn’t anything really, but she loved meditating. And she was very fond of this particular statue of the Buddha, which she’d found one bleak day when there had felt to be no hope in the world. His serene smile had seemed to promise her a brighter future so she’d bought the statue.

It had meant a lot to her to set up this meditation room and its peaceful atmosphere always calmed her down.

Gradually, her body relaxed and she let her mind float, not thinking, not worrying, just being. When she came out of the meditation, she felt in tune with herself again, ready to write for another hour or two, strong enough to ignore outside annoyances.