

# The Glade



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To my family for their unerring support, and especially to my sister for agreeing to be my guinea pig and continuing to be a constant source of encouragement and inspiration.

Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty One

Twenty Two

Twenty Three

Twenty Four

Twenty Five

Twenty Six

Twenty Seven

Twenty Eight

Twenty Nine

Thirty

Thirty One

Thirty Two

Thirty Three

Thirty Four

Thirty Five

Thirty Six

Thirty Seven

Thirty Eight

Epilogue

The End

# The Glade

## Prologue

*(Monday—April 1<sup>st</sup>—2013)*

“Mrs Wenstrop, I am arresting you for the murder of your husband.”

The policeman grabbed hold of her forearms and continued, “You do not have to say anything. But it may harm your defence if you do not mention, when questioned, something which you later rely on in Court. Anything you do say may be used in evidence.” The officer snapped the cuffs closed around her trembling wrists, and then gave her a hard look and asked her: “Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Dullness, from deep shock, fogged Helen’s brain.

She kept glancing toward the door, which led to the hallway, where she knew the narrow stairs would take her up to the bedroom—to where her husband’s dead body still lay. She had left him lying in bed, and he looked for all the world as though he were asleep. But she and the police knew better. Helen wondered if this was some kind of crazy, twisted April fool. But no, it was after midday, so the joke would have to have been given up by now. Besides, Geoff would never put her through this—no matter how angry they might have been with one another over the past weeks. This was for real. Her brain refused point blank to process her situation. Even though she had killed him with her own hands, she couldn’t accept that he was dead. They would never, not in a million years, believe her story. No, they were more likely to admit her to the mental hospital than anything else. Hell, she couldn’t even believe her tale herself.

The hard faced policeman tugged on her cuffed hands and moved her toward the dreaded door. But instead of ascending the stairs, he turned her toward the front door, and led her into the silent garden. She followed him down the long, winding, gravelled pathway, through the small ornate gate and to the waiting squad car, which sat on the narrow unpaved track to the front of the house. The rough track transformed into smooth blacktop just a few hundred yards away, no more than half a mile. The officer pushed her firmly into the back of the panda car, and placed his hand on the top of her head, so she wouldn’t bang it on the top of the door frame. She lifted her hands from her lap as he reached

across and buckled her in. And was grateful that at least they'd cuffed her to the front, and not behind her back—that would have been very uncomfortable. The officer walked around to the offside and slid in next to her on the back seat, so he was sitting behind the driver. She'd expected them to request a police van to take her away in—they mustn't feel she was currently a threat. She swallowed as the engine started, and they moved slowly away from the house. Helen turned her head, and managed to get one last glimpse of the idyllic cottage she and Geoff had thought would be her final resting place. Hers, not his.





## One

*(Friday—April 2nd—2010)*

The rain beat heavily on the roof of the car, and ran in thick streams down the windscreen—the water was coming down so solidly that the wipers could barely keep up. Helen and Geoff had decided to take a much needed holiday in the Forest of Dean over the Easter break, and had taken extra leave from work so they could make a week of it. Helen had been feeling under the weather for some time. It was a short drive from Gloucester, just thirty miles, but proved to be arduous. Thankfully Geoff drove. She could handle the weather, but this incredible fatigue seemed to be more than what she could expect from simple overwork and stress. The driving had been difficult enough on the main A road, and was even worse as they traversed the single lane route through the forest. Eventually, they reached the village of Parkdean and sighed in relief; this tiny village seemed at that moment to be the epitome of civilisation. The satnav directed them to a quiet road, to the south of the hamlet, and said:

“You have reached your destination.”

Which they obviously hadn't, but they couldn't be too far away now. Geoff and Helen peered out of the windows into the pitch black night, as they drove slowly, and searched for the cottage they had rented for the week. It was a hundred yards further on, nestled serenely behind a low stone wall, with the forest approaching right into its back garden. Geoff switched off the engine, and turned to Helen with a soft smile tugging the corners of his full lips. He unsnapped his seatbelt, leaned over to give her a light kiss, and released her belt for her as he pulled away.

“Okay?” He asked; concern etched into his face. She guessed she probably looked pretty pale and drawn. Helen smiled and told him:

“I'm fine, honey. Just a bit tired is all. Glad we're here ... I can't believe it, a whole week to ourselves.”

He nodded and gave her another fleeting smile, but his creased forehead and pained expression showed her he was still concerned.

“Come on, let's get inside.”

The owner of the cottage lived a few houses away, about four hundred yards or so down the quiet road.

“Wait here whilst I get the key,” Geoff said, being solicitous.



In this downpour, she wasn't about to argue. The ferocious wind drove the rain into the car as soon as he opened his door, and she was soaked immediately. Geoff hunched over and disappeared into the night. She opened the glove box and pulled out a soft cloth. Then folded it into four and tried to dry the steering wheel and driver's seat. The satnav repeated yet again that they had reached their destination, and she switched it off. Useful as they were, they could be damned annoying at times.

By the time Geoff returned, she was chilled, her damp clothes stuck to her body, and the car windows had misted up. He opened her door a fraction and she shivered.

"Sit tight until I get the bags inside," he shouted over the rain. "I'll come back for you."

Normally, anything that undermined her independence like this would test her patience, but she felt so unwell that this time she was thankful. He returned within minutes, opened her door, reached in and helped her up. He held her elbow, and rushed her along the short garden path, as he flicked his other hand over his shoulder, and pressed the lock button on the key fob. The alarm beeped three times, and then all was silent, except for the pounding rain and gusting wind. Even this faded to almost nothing as Geoff pushed the door closed behind them. He leaned against it for a couple of seconds, and sighed in relief.

"Boy, am I glad to be out of that!"

"Yup. Do you think it's set in for the week?" Helen asked.

He shrugged.

"I don't much care. We'll have a nice time anyway. I'm not sure we want to do too much walking at any rate."

Now she did lose her patience. "I'm fine, I keep telling you! All I need is a good night's sleep, and some peace and quiet. What could do me more good than a gentle walk through the woods? I've just been working too hard is all."

He just shrugged again, and bent to lift their bags, declining to engage her grumpy mood.

Guilt squeezed her chest; she knew he was refraining a lot just lately. "I'm sorry hon. It's just ... I feel so frustrated. You know I hate being babied. I do appreciate you looking after me, I really do."

He put the cases down again and wrapped her in a warm, if damp, hug. “I don’t mean to smother you, love, I’m worried. I wish you’d go to the doctor.” He gave her a final squeeze then picked up the bags and trotted up the stairs.

Helen bit her tongue—this was a conversation they’d had a lot. She kept telling herself—and Geoff for that matter—that if she was no better after their Easter break then she’d go and see her GP. But felt like a bit of a fraud though, as she’d managed to convince herself it was nothing more than too much work and not enough play. However, if she was honest, she was a little bit afraid of what the doctor might say. What if it was more than simple tiredness? She closed her eyes, to shut out the frightening possibility, and massaged her forehead and eyelids. She opened her eyes again and decided to take a look around the cottage, even though the only thing she wanted to do was to fall straight into bed.

Geoff found her as she explored the kitchen. He came up behind her and pulled her in close. He wrapped his arms around her waist, and nuzzled into her neck. Helen reached behind and hooked her hands around his neck, and then turned her head to give him a kiss.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, as she leant into his shoulders. She felt safe and warm in his embrace.

“I’m glad you like it, love. It’s cosy upstairs too. Sheila said she’s heated the water tank; would you like a bath?”

“Mm, sounds like a good plan. You joining me?”

“Does a duck like water?” He asked and laughed.

Fifteen minutes later they luxuriated in the large corner bath. She had been pleasantly surprised by the bathroom, having expected the typical pokey little cottage affair. But the whole house had been a revelation, being deceptively spacious and modern inside. The bath even had a couple of spa jets built in, which were currently giving them a gentle massage beneath the water. Already she could feel some of her tension draining away, although there was still that nagging headache which pushed against her skull, and assaulted the backs of her eyeballs.

“You’ve lost weight, Helen.”

Oops, there was some of that tension sneaking back. She concentrated on breathing deeply, then opened her eyes and fashioned a

smile. It would be best to make it into a joke.

“Mm, glad I can’t say the same for you, honey—you make a great cushion!” She wriggled her back and shoulders further into his body to emphasise her point. He chuckled: he’d taken the bait. “You’re absolutely not allowed to get all skinny on me.”

“Not much chance of that with that ginormous Easter egg you bought me! I can see now you obviously had an ulterior motive.” He gave her a playful tickle under the ribs, and then let her relax back against him.

They stayed there until the water cooled, as they enjoyed the heat and companionship. A huge plus in their marriage was that it was about more than sexual attraction, they were friends too. They still got on well together, even after all these years. Until recently, and her unreasonable moods were largely the cause. She owed it to Geoff, if not to herself, to get checked out if she saw no improvement after this week’s holiday. It wouldn’t be fair to continue on as she had been. If it did turn out to be work related stress she’d have to think long and hard about changing her job, because as much as she valued her career, her marriage was far more important.

“Time for bed?”

“Yes please. I feel like I might actually get some sleep tonight.” She pulled the heavy towelling robe around her as she stepped out of the bath, and could feel it draw the water from her skin.

The next morning dawned bright and clear, and a light breeze rustled the tops of the trees around Deer Nook. Helen awoke to the smell of frying bacon and eggs, and was surprised that she hadn’t only slept the night through, but had even missed Geoff getting out of bed and dressing. She noticed her headache had gone, which pleased her even more. This was the first morning in ages she could remember being without head pain. For long enough she’d woken with it and gone to bed with it. Helen stretched and yawned luxuriously, then sat up and dangled her legs over the edge of the bed. Then thought better of it, and snuggled back under the covers, sure that Geoff intended to bring her breakfast in bed. She wasn’t wrong. Helen heard him climbing the stairs five minutes later, and the smell of bacon and coffee preceded him. Her stomach rumbled loudly just as he walked into the bedroom. He chuckled at the sound, and brought a fully laden tray over to her.

“It’s nice to see you looking so refreshed,” he said, as he put the tray onto the bedside cabinet and bent over to kiss her. She sat up and leaned against the headboard, then brought him in for another kiss.

“I can’t believe you’ve cooked breakfast,” she teased him.

“Eating is believing.” He placed the tray on her lap then walked around to the other side of the bed, and carefully climbed on top of the covers. Once he was settled he leaned over and grabbed a piece of toast, then winked at her with a mischievous grin. “You’d better eat up quick.”

“Did you already eat?”

“Uh huh,” he said, around his mouthful of toast, and nodded.

“What time is it?”

He chewed and swallowed frantically, so he could answer her. “Bit after ten.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope. Slept like a babe you did. Your snoring wasn’t quite so cute though.”

She gave him a light slap in playful indignation. “I do not snore.”

“Do too.” He laughed with her, and then reached out toward her tray again. She took the hint, picked up her knife and fork, and started on her eggs. This was the first morning she could remember having an appetite for breakfast in months; these days she couldn’t even stomach the smell of coffee until after lunchtime. This had been a huge departure from her norm, as until recently she’d been unable to begin her day without her dose of strong hot coffee. So much so, that one of her last birthday cards had sported the motto “Give me Caffeine and you won’t get hurt.”

Geoff sat next to her, a happy look on his face as he watched her clear her plate. When she was done, he took the tray and put it on the cabinet on his side of the bed, and then scooted over and pulled her in for a cuddle.

“What would you like to do today?” He asked into her hair.

“Make the most of this break in the weather. I can’t believe how different it is this morning. Do you fancy a short walk? Explore Parkdean and maybe a bit of the forest?”

“Sure thing, hon. If it stays warm we can have dinner in the garden too, it’s a really nice little set up here.”

“You did really well finding this place, it’s a real gem.”

“The landlady is lovely too, she left the fridge stocked for us—didn’t have to go shopping before breakfast. I’ve never heard of anybody doing that before.”

“We’ll have to be sure and thank her.”

“Already have, she came by whilst I was in the front garden, making sure everything’s okay. Must be in her sixties at least, but really spritely. Heck, she looks like she’s got more energy than the two of us put together.”

“Must be all this country living. Mm, I suppose I’ll have to get myself moving or we’ll be here in bed all day.”

“Suits me,” Geoff said and laughed. He moved from behind her back and held himself above her instead. “We can stay in bed as long as you like.”

“We could, but we wouldn’t get much fresh air.” She tried half-heartedly to wriggle from under him, but he just laughed and pinned her in place.

“If it’s fresh air you want I can always open a window.”

“What—and let all the neighbours hear us at it?”

“You’re so romantic you know.” They giggled together, as Geoff worked his way beneath the duvet.

By the time they surfaced at lunchtime the sun was streaming directly into the back of the cottage. Helen opened the patio doors and strolled out onto the decking, whilst Geoff made tea. It was mild enough for her to be comfortable in jeans and t-shirt; even the gentle draft was warm. Her hair hung down her back, slightly damp from the shower they’d just shared.

“We should do this more often,” she called into the kitchen.

“Which bit?” His voice drifted out to her. She chuckled and took a seat at the small iron table, and surveyed the garden. Its boundary was the forest, with a clear footpath leading from the lawn into the trees. Her husband joined her, and brought with him two cups of tea.

“Can we go for a walk in a bit?” She asked, as she took her drink gratefully, and indicated the footpath with a nod.

“Sounds like a plan.”

They sat in companionable silence for a while, sipping their tea.

Finally, it felt like spring. The cool wet had dragged on and on so far this year. Helen's headache had returned, although it remained nothing more than a dull ache behind her eyes. She decided she would say nothing to her husband, there was no point in worrying him unnecessarily. They both needed this break badly, and this was the first bit of time they'd spent together without a shadow hovering over them.

She was delighted when a squirrel jumped onto the lawn from one of the trees and ran fearlessly towards them. It paused now and again to take a quick look around. About two feet away it stopped and studied them. Both she and Geoff were sitting stock still by this point, not wanting to scare it away. Seemingly satisfied, it nosed around the grass.

"What's it doing?" Helen whispered.

"Don't know. Could be searching for buried nuts," Geoff whispered back.

After a short time it gave up and trotted back to the trees. Soon after, Helen and Geoff roused themselves, and got ready to go for their walk.

They followed the footpath through the trees from the bottom of the garden, and ambled along at a leisurely pace for just over an hour. The sunshine held and its warm rays shone brightly down through the canopy, and bathed them in a soft green/gold glow as they walked, talked and laughed together. This early in the year the foliage was not that thick, the track would be much darker in full summer with the trees in full leaf.

Up ahead the narrow grass trail they were following bent round in a long curve to the left, then disappeared from sight behind the tall wide oaks. As they rounded the bend they both stopped talking and came to an abrupt halt, stunned into stillness. They stood in a clearing, surrounded on all sides by the majestic old trees, and illuminated by the glorious sunshine. To the centre stood the remains of what looked like an old cottage, roofless with its stone walls tumbled down and grass growing where once floorboards or carpet would have lain. A little way past the cottage was a deep, still forest pool, which glinted impressively in the sunlight.

It was a magical scene, straight out of a fairy tale. It wasn't just the beautiful setting, it had a feeling entirely its own. The deepest sense of peace and contentment overwhelmed Helen. Mesmerised, she slowly

made her way toward the dilapidated dwelling by Geoff's side, unconsciously holding his hand. Her footfalls were quiet, and she hardly dared to breathe. Such was the power of the stillness of this place. Without speaking, they walked the circumference of the clearing, and then returned to the tumble down cottage, where they seated themselves on the thick grassy ground, backs against the remains of a stone wall. They sat still, breathing in unison for an unmeasured amount of time, before finally Geoff broke the silence with a whispered:

“Wow.”

Helen squeezed his hand, which she still held, for they hadn't let go of one another since entering the enchanted dell. She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he draped his arm around her.

“This is truly exquisite,” he murmured, his voice so low it was almost a caress.

“There's something here, Geoff, I can feel it.”

“Yes.”

“I feel like I'm being held in a warm embrace.”

“Yes.”

They sat like that, once more unspeaking, for another hour, just soaking in the atmosphere. They turned their faces to one another and brushed their lips in the lightest of kisses. They pulled apart very slightly and gazed at one another for a brief moment, then touched their lips together again, this time in a deeper, more sensual kiss. Geoff's tongue probed into her mouth, teasing her tongue, her lips. His hands ran through her hair, as he pulled her deeper into the embrace. As they kissed, he laid her down on her back, and let his hands roam up and down her body, and rubbed her through her light clothing. A soft groan escaped her lips. She was inordinately aroused. This was love making such as they'd never experienced together before. It was soft, gentle, but oh so sensual. Her senses felt heightened, which took her experience to a whole new level, and she was certain it was the same for her husband. She wanted him so badly, yet at the same time there was no question of this encounter being rushed. There was more than passion here; this seemed a bittersweet moment, with her feeling a love so deep it was exquisite pain.

They lay together, naked, in the soft grass, as a gentle breeze played



over their exposed skin. They stroked, caressed, kissed, and explored, for a long time, before finally he entered her. As desperately aroused as they both were, their lovemaking continued at a slow, tantalizing pace, as Geoff moved himself slowly in and out of her. It took a long time for her to climax, and when she did it was with great emotion. He kissed her deeply through her spasms, and continued to penetrate her with slow movements. A little time later he came himself, and she was shocked to feel tears on his cheeks. They lay together for a long time, cradled in one another's arms.

The next few days saw a return to the wet and wild variety of weather, and they spent a lot of time relaxing in the cottage. They ventured out occasionally in the car, to take leisurely drives through the huge forest, on the many narrow roads crisscrossing through the heavily wooded terrain. They didn't speak at all about the clearing in the woods, but each knew it was an ever present preoccupation on the other's mind. So it was no surprise that on the first afternoon of dry warmth, they took the path from Deer Nook's back garden once again.

The ground was still wet and soggy from the deluge of the last few days, and very soon their feet and lower legs were sopping wet through, their trainers caked in cloggy mud. The energy Helen had felt infused with on her return to the cottage, after spending the afternoon in the clearing, had quite dissipated by now. Her headache was back with a vengeance, and she felt drained much of the time, despite sleeping soundly each night. She and Geoff had found a new closeness since that afternoon, and were much more touchy feely with one another than they were used to being. They walked hand in hand, in companionable silence. The feeling of anticipation a palpable presence between them.

The day was warm and dry, but the sky remained overcast, as the grey cloud obscured the bright light of the sun. As a result the forest path was darker than when they'd last traversed it, and when they reached the clearing it lacked the glorious illumination which had graced it before. This didn't, however, detract from its beauty or its peace. They didn't enter the open space this time, but stood on the fringes, and looked on quietly, filled with longing. They stood there, hands entwined, for a long time. Only a light rainfall that dripped through the sparse canopy roused them. As they walked back, Geoff spoke quietly, yet

determinedly:

“We’re going to live there, Helen.”

She turned to look at him in pleased surprise, her eyebrows raised in question.

“I’m going to ask Sheila if she knows who owns the plot,” he continued.

She reached up and kissed him.

“Oh, Geoff, I love you.”

“Love you too, honey.” They carried on walking, and Geoff continued talking. “We’ll get planning permission, I reckon, considering there’s an existing dwelling there, such as it is. We might even be able to extend the existing floor space on it, I think, as long as we don’t raise the roof too high they’ll be fine about it. We can put in the plans that we won’t disturb the trees at all.”

“What about access?”

He thought for a while, and then his eyes lit up. “I’ve got an idea, honey. We’re going for a drive as soon as we get back.”

He lapsed into silence again, and Helen was content to leave him be. He could find a way to make anything work, once he’d set his mind on it.

They had followed some of the narrow lanes through the forest, and were parked in a passing place just to the side of the road. They got out of the car and made their way through the thick grass and crowded trees, forcing their own path. Geoff elaborated as he pushed forwards, talking to her over his shoulder:

“If my reckoning is right, we should come upon the back of the clearing, near the small pond, somewhere around here. With the road being so close, I’m sure we could get permission to put a small track right up to the cottage.”

The going was tough, and Helen tired quickly. Already her ankles and arms were scratched and sore from various brushes with thorns, sharp bits on branches, and the odd patch of nettles. She was just about to suggest they give it up and head back, when Geoff let out a gleeful whoop.

“I knew it,” he said.

She followed the trail he’d flattened in the grass and came up beside

him. She looked around and realised they were indeed back at the cottage in the dell. The rain fell heavily, and soaked them to the skin, but neither one noticed, so enthralled were they. It was nearly full dark before they came to themselves and made their way back to the car. By the time they got back to Deer Nook it was late and they were tired and wet, so they put off speaking to Sheila until the morning.

Sheila, surprisingly, was none too pleased with them. She'd gone from warm welcome to cold formality in the blink of an eye.

“You want to live in the glade?” She had repeated with an incredulous look on her face, once Geoff had outlined his plan, and asked her if she knew who owned the land. As they'd looked at her, stunned into momentary speechlessness, she'd launched into a tirade. “That place is bad, couldn't you feel that? How could you be so stupid? Live there indeed! No, I won't help you, and if you have any sense you'll go home and never enter that place again. Stay away. You hear me? Stay away!” She stopped talking, red faced and breathing heavily. Geoff tried to reason with her—bravely or foolishly, Helen wasn't sure.

“But, Sheila, it's a long way from bad, we've spent time there—if anything it's a healthy safe place to be. I know this sounds crazy, but I'd say it has protective qualities.”

“Then you have something it wants. Mark my words. Stay away.” She ushered them unceremoniously from her house and closed the door firmly on them.

They met a similar response from anyone they approached in the village; the friendliness they had encountered on their arrival had entirely evaporated. Despite this reaction, they couldn't stay away from the glade, as everybody called it. Regardless of the weather, they took the small track from garden to glade each day for the couple of days they had left. They remained no less determined to track down the owner and make an offer for the place. Once they were home, it was easy to put down the negative reaction of the locals to small minded superstition, or even a deliberate ploy to try and keep outsiders from settling in their close community. Either way, they didn't take the warnings at all seriously.



## Two

(Monday—April 1<sup>st</sup>—2013)

“Just in here, Mr Simpson.” Detective Inspector Murray Mullholland showed the tall solicitor into the tiny interview room, and gave Helen a hard look as he turned his back and left the two of them alone. Helen felt small seated at the bare table, and her slumped shoulders and lowered head clearly reflected her feelings. She looked up wearily as her solicitor entered.

“Hi, John. Thank you so much for coming.” She was relieved to see a smile of encouragement on his face as he took a seat opposite her at the rudimentary desk.

“How are you, Helen dear?”

“Oh you know, bearing up.” She tried to smile, but suspected it probably wasn’t that successful. He reached over and squeezed her hand briefly, then bent to pull papers from his briefcase. Friendly, but straight to business, she noted. Perhaps that was for the best. He *had* been Geoff’s friend after all.

“Now the first thing I want to do is to make sure you understand your rights and the implications of them, okay?”

Unable to speak for the moment, she swallowed around the hard lump that had arisen in her throat at the memory of John and Geoff, at the house party they’d held just a few weeks ago, and nodded at the tall thin man in front of her.

“Okay, so basically the rights you were read upon your arrest, are laying out the choices you have. I’m not going to tell you what to do or say, but I will do my best to explain these choices and to summarize your position. You have the right to have the case proven against you, you don’t need to convict yourself with anything you say, which means you have the right to remain silent—clear so far?”

“Yes.” Her voice was small, meek, scared.

“However, if you do have a case—a defence—then I would recommend that you give that now. If you wait until you are in court, the judge and jury will likely wonder why you didn’t speak up before, which is where the ‘it could harm your defence’ comes in.” He looked

up at her again, to check if she was still with him, and she nodded her head again. "They might think you have made it up in the meantime if you say nothing now and wait until the hearing. So, the best thing now is for you to talk me through what happened, in your own words, and then I can best advise you whether or not you do have a defence at this point." He gave her a piercing look then bent to his papers once again.

"Oh, John!" A sob escaped her, and she buried her face in her hands. He waited quietly, giving her time to recompose herself. Helen sniffed and wiped her eyes dry on the backs of her hands. Not meeting his gaze she tried to find a way to begin. "I did it, but I didn't do it, if you know what I mean?" She chanced a glance his way. He sat stock still, a look of consternation on his face.

"Not entirely, Helen. Go on."

"He's dead because I touched him. I didn't mean for anything to happen to him, John, it was an accident. And now they're saying I murdered him." She stopped, took deep breaths to calm herself, and then tried again. She looked at the table as she continued: "This whole thing is crazy, and by the time you've heard me out you'll think I'm a mental case." She looked up, and shrugged. He gave her a long look, before he answered slowly:

"Not necessarily, Helen. You should know that Geoff spoke to me just last week. I must admit I thought he was having some kind of an episode, now I'm not quite so sure. Why don't you try just telling me events, as you recall them from the beginning, and leave me to draw my own conclusions."

"Can you tell me what Geoff said?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't. You have to understand that because Geoff spoke to me it is possible that I may end up being called as a witness in this case. It may be that I cannot actually represent you, as this would be a clear conflict of interest. So, I cannot in any way put words into your mouth. If I am asked under oath, I need to be able to say that I told you nothing. I need for you to tell me what you think happened. I need for you to explain to me how come Geoff is dead, and you are sitting here. And if, at the end of it, I do feel I cannot represent you, I will find somebody I trust to take over from me, okay?"

"Okay, I guess I can't ask for fairer than that."

“Look, Helen, I am aware that you are putting a lot of trust in me—in asking me to represent you fairly, even though Geoff was my close friend. For that I respect you immensely. I would understand fully, however, if you decided now that you want somebody ... independent to represent you. In fact, if I am honest—and sensible—that is exactly what I should be recommending to you at this point. Perhaps it would be best for me to find someone else for you.”

She tried to speak, but her throat had closed up. She tried to clear the tight dryness away, but when she continued her voice remained croaky. “Whatever happens from here on in, I need to at least explain to you. You of all people deserve an explanation, appropriateness be damned. In fairness, how could anybody accuse you of wrongdoing, if you hear me out? How can you make a decision to represent me or not until you’ve heard the details? Please, John, let me talk. We can decide later.”

“Okay, I can do that much for you. I can do that much for Geoff.”

She cleared her throat again, and began. He made notes on his yellow legal paper as she talked, in a broad scrawling hand.

“It all started with that damned glade—that damned bloody clearing in the forest. We never should have bought the place, let alone built a house and lived there. Oh God. How stupid could we have been? You know the villagers all warned us, they warned us and we didn’t listen. Bloody fools is what we were. It just seemed so good, ha—too good to be true, that’s what it was. Then, of course, I got sick—or sicker, I should say. Turns out I’d already been sick a long time without knowing it. That changed things. That changed our decision making even more. I was supposed to die there, John, not Geoff. It should be him you’re sitting and talking with, not me. I’m supposed to be dead by now. I wish I were dead.” She couldn’t help the tears that ran afresh down her cheeks. They dripped off her chin, and snaked down her cleavage, cold and uncomfortable. John reached into his briefcase and produced an unopened packet of paper tissues. Helen couldn’t suppress an ironic chuckle:

“You come prepared I see.”

He gave her a sad smile as he passed the hankies to her. She took them gratefully and ripped the plastic wrapper open with trembling, wet



fingers, sniffing all the while. Then opened one out and dabbed her face and neck dry, and then put it to her nose and took care of the gross snottiness to be found there. But needed a second tissue, and then she was ready to continue. She started by asking a question. “How long have I been in here? It feels like forever.”

“About five hours. Are they giving you plenty to drink and such? Are they looking after you properly? Sorry, I should have asked that as soon as I got here.”

“They’re treating me fine, John, thanks. It’s not exactly the Hilton you know, but I can’t complain. Five bloody hours, my God. How long can they hold me?” She swallowed as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“That depends on whether or not they charge you, Helen. There is a limit on how long they can keep you without charges, but once they do that it changes things. We can always apply for bail of course, but in this case I’m not entirely sure we’d get it. Even were it granted, I’m not entirely sure you could afford it, my dear, the judge would most likely set it pretty high.”

“Tell you what ... I don’t want to know how long after all. It’s easier to deal with if I don’t know what to expect, I think. It’s probably best if I just get on with it, take each thing as it comes. You know, I’m really glad I didn’t take criminal law like you and Geoff did—I’d be imagining all the worst case scenarios about now. Corporate law keeps me in blissful ignorance.”

“Did you mean it when you said you wished you were dead?”

“I’m not suicidal if that’s what you’re asking me. I just meant that would have been the natural course of things. Geoff would still be alive and well. I’d sooner it were me than him. Oh God, how I wish I could turn the clocks back and do it all again.”

“You would change things?”

“I would change everything. We wouldn’t even have gone to the Forest of Dean for that bloody Easter break. I wouldn’t be so desperate for life. I would die with dignity, and not put up the same fight. That would be better for everyone all around. Better that than this.” John nodded in understanding, and she took up another tissue and wiped her eyes again, which felt sore with all the crying she was doing. “Do you

think they'd let us have coffee?"

"Why don't I go and ask?" He stood up, crossed to the door and knocked. It was opened immediately by a young constable, who looked far too innocent to be involved in police work. As he looked over John's shoulder into the room, she dropped her gaze to the table, too ashamed to risk meeting the young man's eyes. Helen came to herself a few moments later, and realised she had shredded the damp tissue all over the table. She'd created quite a mess. She scooped it up into her hands and looked around her, only to find there was no waste bin present. With a sigh, she tidied it into the far right corner of the table, and hoped it wouldn't be in the way. She could feel herself blush with embarrassment as her friend and solicitor returned to the desk.



## Three

*(Monday—May 9<sup>th</sup>—2011)*

Helen dry heaved some more, as her stomach still tried to eject everything possible, even though it was completely empty. She had hoped, vainly, that she would be able to endure this journey from the Cheltenham General Hospital to the Forest of Dean without throwing up. Her body had other plans though, in spite of the anti-emetics she'd been given just before she left. She had been an inpatient on the private Kingsbury ward for a long time, and was relieved to be released at long last. Even though this was a death sentence, she wanted to be at home to die, with Geoff by her side. They had nursing care all arranged, and her husband wanted her home too, so much he'd disregarded the difficulty and disruption her presence would bring.

The paramedic took the nearly full cardboard vomit bowl from her and gave her an empty one in return, despite them both being aware she had nothing left to bring up. Absurdly, it felt comforting to hold the rough grey bowl whilst she heaved, somehow better than simply retching into thin air. Her bald head itched like mad, and she was covered in a sheen of cold damp sweat. At last the convulsions of her stomach ceased, and she lay back on the pillows gratefully, exhausted. The paramedic sat on the bunk opposite her and took her hand in his—his latex glove felt strange to her touch. Geoff was waiting at the house for her, the house she hadn't seen since its completion. The agency nurse should be meeting them there, to help get Helen's room and equipment set up and ready for her.

She cast her mind back to the year previous, when they'd discovered the glade in the forest, and to when she'd found out how sick she was. It seemed her delay in obtaining medical help hadn't altered her prognosis one iota, as her cancer was inoperable, and had been from its beginning. No matter how early on it had been discovered, intervention would have been impossible. The chemotherapy she'd received had been palliative rather than curative, and had done nothing more than buy her some time. Much needed time. She and Geoff had needed some breathing space, an opportunity to come to terms with her impending death. A chance to say their goodbyes. Had they appreciated how sick she was, they never would have embarked upon their project in the glade. Once