

Avalon Calling

Published by Jennifer Wherrett

www.thelady.com.au (Avalon Calling)

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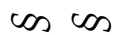


The wisdom of transcendence

Avalon Calling

*There is a mythical, mystical place.
Some know it as Avalon,
Some by other names.
Its name matters not,
For what matters is what it is.
Sages and wise men know of this place,
And they speak of it
In awed and reverent tones.
Minstrels and musicians sing its praises,
Poets create verse to pay it homage,
Story tellers weave epic tales of its glory and Light,
Its beauty and its magic,
And seekers whisper of its possible location.
Down through the aeons
Of your existence,
One generation after another
Have heard told its tale.
Your myths and legends tell you
Avalon is no longer in your world,
Hidden from you as it is
By a veil of mist.
And so it is.*

*But the veil of mist
Is within you.
Avalon did not pull away from you.
You pulled away from Avalon.
Remove the mist, you can.
Remove the mist, you must.
And when you do,
The priests and priestesses
Of this ancient and beautiful place
Await you,
Ready to embrace you,
To welcome you home with open arms.
For, you see,
Avalon is your birth right –
Your rightful heritage.
So come,
Come home.
Avalon is calling to you.
Come home.*



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Author's note:

I deliberately use capital letters for the following words:
Love, Light, Truth, Wisdom, Fate, Destiny, Knowledge, Purpose, Will, Way,
Work, and Process to distinguish these as higher-dimensional concepts from the
common usage of these words and from the misguided mindsets of lower
dimensionality, or third-dimensional physical reality.

Prologue

There is a place. Beautiful it is, though human eyes rarely see it. 'Tis the edge of a great and vast lake. The water of this lake is dark green, and, even on days of rough weather, is smooth like glass. The ancient trees growing beside the lake, around its edge, lean over the lake as if to sweep their leaves over the water's surface in a feathery-light, caressing touch, reassuring the lake of their continued presence. Their thick leaves match the dark green of the water, so, together, the scene they form, the lake and the trees, appear to the eye as though richly, darkly green. One would think, given the colour of the green, that the lake would appear murky and dark and forbidding. But 'tis quite the opposite. The air around the lake and its companions, the trees growing at its edge, is clear and cool and clean. The water, too, where it gently laps the shore of the lake is clear and clean – clean enough to drink from directly. Nourishing, its water is, and revitalising, but one would be well advised to exercise great caution when drinking the water of the lake, for not all who drink the lake's water are ready. In the purity and potency of the water there is great power, and if an individual is not ready, or if he or she does not understand that power, it can bring that individual to his or her knees. And not all brought so low are able to rise again.

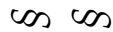
There is another defining feature of this lake – one that makes its own contribution to the beauty of the scene, and marks the lake as truly unique. A light white mist hovers protectively over the surface of the water, hugging it affectionately, and this no matter the weather of the day. In bright sunlight and muted, cloud-covered daylight alike, the mist hovers over the water, never dissipating, never waning, never disappearing. The mist is not a fog. You should know that. We must distinguish the two, for I would not have you mistake the mist for a murky fog. Nor must you think there is anything sinister in the mist, as many before you have done. Whilst one would

be unwise, indeed, to navigate the mist alone, without understanding its true nature, there is, in truth, nothing evil lurking in or by the lake, hidden by the mist. For anyone who stands on the lake's shore, the view of the lake in its entirety is blocked, hidden, and the one who stands there may see only as far out over the lake as two or three lengths of a tall man's arm span. Human eyes have not the wherewithal to peer through the curtain of the mist thence to perceive the vastness of the lake as a whole, nor to see into its centre.

The lake, though vast and ancient, appears in no guide books. Nor is it recorded or marked on any map, either modern or old. Those people who have lived near the lake for generation after generation know of the lake's existence, but they speak of it not at all. They believe, mistakenly, I think, that if they do not even so much as whisper of it, they can pretend to themselves and to each other that the lake does not exist at all. 'Tis remarkable, really, that they can live in such close proximity to something so powerful and, yet, remain so impervious to, and so utterly unaffected by that power. Still, impervious they are, implacably resistant to the pull of the lake, to its beauty, and its power. So implacably resistant are they, in fact, that anyone who unwittingly reminds them of the lake's existence will feel the sting of their rebuke, and their silent, or in some cases, not-so-silent punishment.

And then, of course, there are those who feel, in the depths of their soul, the lure, the irresistible pull of the lake's song as it calls to them, like the sirens of the sailors' legends of old. The sirens lured unsuspecting sailors to their deaths, but the song of the lake, for those who feel its cadences echoing in the depths of their soul, will, if heeded and followed, awaken within them such beauty as to be unparalleled by anything else they may encounter or experience. For these unique and special souls, the lake calls them home, to a place of paradise. And it sings to them of life, not death. It sings of creation, not destruction, and it sings of beauty, not ugliness. The sirens of old sung songs of malevolence and darkness. The song of the lake is a song of Light, pure Light.

Do you know what it is to feel gloriously and wondrously and vibrantly alive? Do you want to know? Then listen, deep in your soul, for maybe, just maybe, you are one to whom the song of the lake calls. If so, you will not hear it with your physical ears, nor will you recognise it with your conscious mind. The song of the lake does not speak to the head, only to the heart. So listen, go within and sense. Does the knowledge of the lake's existence, now, stir the longing within you? Does your heart begin to sing its own song in harmony with the song of the lake? If so, the lake is calling you home, as it has done to others just like you for the aeons of human existence. Heed the lake's song. Heed its call. Let your heart be your guide, for I promise you, your heart knows the way home. Your heart knows the way to the lake's shore. There, on the shore of the lake, you will be met by those who have gone before you. There, on the shore of the lake, you will discover that you are not alone. In truth, you never have been.



Avalon is always sending out its Song.

Avalon calls, always.

And sometimes,

There are those who hear its Song.

For these unique and beautiful souls,

The Song of Avalon

Wraps around their heart,

And they are guided

To the lake's shore.

Then, they answer Avalon's call.

They call back,

There is much celebration in Avalon when this happens –

Music, laughter, dance, and song,

And joy.

Yet another soul has returned home.

I

The Blossom Tree

They sat under the blossom tree. They always sat under the blossom tree. It was their favourite place to sit and talk, and to discuss, debate, and contemplate together. Rarely a day went by that did not see them sitting under the blossom tree, either in the freshness of the morning, or in the dwindling light of early evening. So often did they sit under the blossom tree, in fact, that some kind soul had placed a stone bench in the exact place they sat. They had minded not the necessity of having to be seated on the ground prior to the gift of the bench, for so engrossed in their conversations did they become that they noticed not any discomfort. They did acknowledge, though, that the stone bench was more comfortable, and so they were grateful to that thoughtful, kindly soul for giving them such a gift.

She had her own ritual when they came to sit under the blossom tree, for never, never would she have come to sit under the tree without acknowledging its presence, and its shelter, and, of course, its very great beauty. She always lightly touched some part of the tree in affectionate greeting when first they came upon their favourite place. Always, did she feel the tree respond. It sang back to her a greeting of its own.

Today, once they were seated on the stone bench, they continued a conversation they had begun on the way over to the blossom tree.

“You know we do not interfere in the affairs of men.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Why, then, do you contemplate doing so?”

“Because they do not know the way back home. They are lost, and there is none to guide them, now. And, there is a way for me to help them without violating our sacred laws. You know this as well as do I, wise one.”

He closed his eyes as he felt his heart sink to the depths of his being like a heavy stone in a pool of water, for he knew her heart was set, and he would not, now, succeed in dissuading her from the course of action upon which she was set.

“Tis a very great price you will pay for aiding them, dear one, a very great price indeed. And there is a very great chance they will neither hear you nor heed you. Thus, will not your sacrifice be in vain?”

“No sacrifice made with the purest of intents is ever in vain. And, yes, I know there is a chance they will not hear me. But, still, I must try. I cannot leave them to flounder on their own any longer. It breaks my heart.”

He sighed heavily – a sad sound. Her compassion was, perhaps, his very favourite part of her. Yet, now, her compassion, it seemed, would take her away from him.

“You will leave me, then, to walk the path of my old age alone?” he asked her, hoping to turn that compassion in a different direction.

She laughed at that. Turning towards him, she entwined a finger in the long white strands of his beard, curling the white hairs around her finger. “I am neither acolyte nor apprentice. You cannot fool me, wise one. You are not old. You have no age, for you are timeless, old man.”

Her playfulness could usually melt his heart, as well she knew, and always, he was unable to stop himself responding in kind. Today, though, he could not find it within him to muster even a semblance of a smile. And, where usually his blue eyes sparkled with his irrepressible humour, today, they were filled with a profound sadness.

“You will forget,” he said sadly. “You will forget everything.”

“Not if you guide me. Not if we stay connected, wise one. We are both strong enough to do so. Please, do not abandon me, for, I think, if you do, I will surely fail, and if I fail, then I will become very lost indeed.”

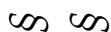
“I could never abandon you, dearest one, never. My guidance is assured. That is my promise to you. If set upon this course you are, I will be with you, every step of the Way, in spirit if not in body.”

She smiled at him and squeezed his hand in her own by way of expressing her gratitude.

“You understand why I must do this, do you not?”

Again, he sighed a heavy, heart-felt sigh. “That is perhaps the hardest part,” he replied. “Of course I understand. Of course I do. I understand all too well. . . .”

He sat, now, on the stone bench under the blossom tree, and he was all alone. Around him, soft pink petals fell silently from the blossom flowers like tear drops. The tree, he knew, felt the loss of her as much as did he. Being here, with the tree, was a painful reminder of what had been taken away, but none understood his pain as did the blossom tree, because no other felt his pain as did the blossom tree. United in their grief, they were, he and the tree, united in their sadness. Together, they mourned.



Caitlin flicked the windscreen wipers on and watched with satisfaction as the tiny droplets of water were wiped from the windscreen, clearing her vision of the road and the cars in front of hers.

“An inauspicious start,” she muttered to herself, leaning forward to look out the newly-cleared windscreen and peer up at the sky. Even though it was still only mid-afternoon, not yet four o'clock, daylight had all but disappeared, already turned to darkness by the low, thick, dark, heavy clouds that covered the sky. Any darker, she thought, and she would have to flick her lights on as well.

Lights. As soon as the thought flitted through her mind, she flicked on her parkers as a precaution. Her car was silver-grey, and everyone knew silver-grey cars were notoriously difficult to see in wet, gloomy weather.

She looked at her watch and sagged back against the seat in disappointment. She had planned to be there by now so as to have time to unpack and settle in before dark. But darkness, it seemed, had beaten her to it, aided and abetted by the weather and by this temporary but irritating hold-up in the flow of traffic. She flicked a concerned glance at the petrol gauge, relieved to see she still had a good half tank of petrol. Well, she thought cynically, at least she wouldn't run out of petrol whilst sitting stationary on the road. That would be a disaster.

Her patience was wearing thin, but she knew what the hold-up was, and so she knew it wouldn't last forever. The very large sign, placed on the side of the road a hundred or so metres back had warned of extensive road works ahead and given dates as to when motorists could expect delays. The date today, of course, fell well within the range of days listed on the sign. Surely, she thought, as she watched the wipers again sweep aside the droplets of water on the windscreen, they would not continue road works in this weather.

As if she'd spoken the thought loud enough for the crew of road workers to hear and agree with it, the car in front of hers started rolling forward, slowly at first, and then with ever-increasing momentum. Hesitant to thank the traffic gods just yet, or to get her hopes up that the delay was over, she eased her foot down on the accelerator, watching the car in front the way a hawk watches the distant ground for prey, but also aware of the needle on the speedometer slowly lifting to indicate the car was travelling at a decent speed. Finally, she allowed herself to breathe a sigh of relief. Thank the gods, she thought, not long now.

Three-quarters of an hour later, courtesy of two very brief stops on the side of the road to check the map on the passenger seat, she turned the car into a driveway, carefully manoeuvring it between the two stone columns that guarded the entrance. She drove a short way up a gravelled driveway, taking, as she'd

been instructed, the left of two options when confronted by a fork in the path. The driveway then circled around a pretty, well-manicured garden of dark green grass and colourful flowers, and brought her to the front door of a small, old, but very beautiful cottage.

She barely had time to turn off the engine and step out of the car before the front door of the cottage opened. The woman who emerged, wearing blue jeans and a white shirt, with dark, shoulder-length hair and brown eyes, looked almost exactly as Caitlin had pictured her. She walked towards Caitlin with a relieved smile on her face.

“Hi, you must be Caitlin. I'm very glad you made it. I was getting a little worried.”

Caitlin smiled at the woman as they shook hands. “And you must be Theresa. It's nice to meet you face to face. I'm sorry I'm later than I said I would be. I ran into a little traffic trouble courtesy of some road works. They had us sitting stationary on the road far longer than was decent, I think.”

Theresa made a clicking noise with her tongue and rolled her eyes. “Still? I thought they'd be finished that by now.”

“No, not nearly, I'm afraid,” Caitlin said. “According to their sign, they'll be working on the road for some time yet.”

“That figures,” Theresa said disgustedly. “Well, you're here now, so let's get you settled in.”

Although the two women had not met before, Caitlin already knew she liked Theresa. The two of them had been communicating via email for a couple of weeks, so while this was their first physical meeting, they both felt as if they knew each other. The choice, for Caitlin, of the village of Fennleigh as the site of her personal retreat had been an easy one in the end, and Theresa's nice cabins and easy-going, friendly but professional manner had played no small part in the process that had led to that choice. For Caitlin, the decision to get out of London had been a hasty one, made in an instant, in fact. Two and a half weeks of

frenetic planning and organising following that instant decision, including hours spent in her lounge room, sitting in front of her computer, searching lists of different types of accommodation, trying different links, pouring over maps, and trawling through hundreds of websites in search of the perfect setting, had, now, ended here in Theresa's driveway. Theresa and her husband, Graham, had easily accommodated Caitlin's request for a longer-than-usual let, even offering her a discount. So, for the next three months, one of their cabins would be Caitlin's new home, and Graham and Theresa would be her landlords, and her neighbours.

Theresa went back into the cottage to get the key to the cabin and, following her instructions, Caitlin reversed her car back around the garden to the fork in the driveway, this time taking the road that took her alongside the cottage and then past it.

Once past the cottage, the gravelled driveway opened up into an oversized cul-de-sac with five cabins sitting around the edge of the circle like numbers on a clock face. It was, Caitlin thought, entranced by the whole scene, like driving into a wonderland. No one standing in front of the conservative cottage would ever guess at what was behind it. Caitlin turned her car and parked it outside the first of the cabins in the circle, the one she knew was hers, and then got out to have a better look. The cabins, built of wood and all identical, resembled miniature churches, without the steeple, of course. Or, if they'd been made of candy, they would not have looked out of place in a child's fairy tale. Their sharply and steeply sloping rooves met in a sharp point at the top of the cabin, the design of which was repeated, albeit on a much smaller scale, in the porticoes at the left side of each building that sheltered the front entrance. And, adding to the picturesque setting, each cabin was nestled amongst its own manicured garden, similar to the one in front of the old cottage.

"This is lovely," Caitlin commented as Theresa joined her, key in hand.
"Who's the gardener?"

“We both are. Our love of gardening was the primary impetus for getting us out of the city and into the countryside. The cabins are our living, but the gardens are our passion.”

“I can see that,” Caitlin commented as she continued to drink in the beauty of the setting.

There was one other car parked outside another of the cabins in the cul-de-sac, so at least one other cabin was occupied.

“Honeymoon couple,” Theresa said, noticing Caitlin's eyes settle on the car for a moment. “You'll hardly see them, I suspect. *We've* hardly seen them. They've barely surfaced since they got here.”

Caitlin laughed. “And rightly so.” She turned to look at Theresa. “How long have you been up here?”

“Seven years now. When we first moved up here, we spent time doing up the cottage, and adjusting to the different pace of life . . . although we didn't need nearly as much time to adjust as we thought we would. We took to this new life like ducks to water. Once we'd truly settled in, and we knew we would stay, we developed the land back here, and built the first two cottages. A couple of years later, we built the next two, and then,” she pointed to Caitlin's cabin, “yours. So this is the newest.” She lowered her voice and leaned towards Caitlin conspiratorially, “And the one with the best view in my opinion, but don't ever quote me on that.”

Caitlin smiled at her. “My lips are sealed.”

When Theresa opened the front door of the cabin, and Caitlin stepped inside, she was again entranced. The cabins looked, from the outside, as if they'd be cute and cosy on the inside, so to walk into a light, bright, spacious and very modern room was a pleasant surprise. She breathed an inward and silent sigh of relief. She was going to like being here. That was, after all, the risk you took in arranging a long-term let on a cabin you'd only seen in a picture on a website. There was always that disappointing possibility of not liking it.

“This really is lovely,” she said. “It's even better than I thought. The photos on the website don't do it justice.”

“Well, we haven't photographed this one yet. We really should get around to it. In fact, I need to have a look at the website with a view to updating it, I think. Perhaps you could give me your opinion on how to improve it. I've had a look at yours, and, I must say, I'm impressed.”

Caitlin looked at Theresa, surprised. “Thank you. And I'd be more than happy to help you improve yours, if you think it really needs it.”

“I do. It needs a revamp. Now, let me show you around.”

The cabin consisted of three rooms only. A large, carpeted bedroom and a modern en-suite were connected to the remaining room – the room you walked straight into from the front entrance – by a door between the kitchen and dining sections at one end of the room. This room, the main room, was large, and consisted of an open-planned kitchen, dining, and lounge room all in one. The kitchen, immediately on the right as you walked in, was separated from the rest of the room by a bench-topped island of cupboards and sink. Caitlin glanced at the polished black bench top.

“That's not granite, is it?” she asked Theresa.

Theresa smiled as she nodded. “An indulgence.”

A dining table, surrounded by four chairs, on the other side of the kitchen demarcated the section of the room dedicated to dining, so the remainder of the space in the room belonged to the lounge. A large flat-screen television hung on the wall over a modern, artificial replica of a fire place, and both were directly opposite a white, plump-cushioned, three-seater lounge. A shaggy white rug covered the polished floor boards in front of the lounge, and the lounge itself was covered in colourful cushions, all making their own contribution to the comfort and homeliness of the room in general. Two small square tables stood like guards of honour on either side of the lounge, both of which held oversized lamps, and both of which matched the long coffee table in front of the lounge.

Despite the modern interior and the high ceiling, features that caught the eye as soon as you walked in, the defining feature of the room, and one Caitlin couldn't quite drag her eyes from, was an entire wall of floor-to-ceiling glass windows, each framed by thick wood, at the opposite end of the room from the kitchen. The view of the countryside through the glass windows was spectacular, and this despite the fact that the weather was dark and gloomy outside. Caitlin noticed there was no artwork on the walls, and nor, she thought, did there need to be. The wall of wood-framed windows *was* the artwork – nature's own artistic creation. Any paintings hanging on any of the other walls in the cabin would only have competed with the view, and come off second best.

Theresa walked over to the middle glass windows, and first stooped, then stood and reached up, flicking locks open as she did so.

“These open up like a fan, concertina-like,” she explained as she started to demonstrate, pushing open one side of the windows. The effect of the opened windows was stunning, even though only one half was open. The large deck outside, no longer separated by the wall of glass, was now joined to the room in a seamless transition so that the entire space was transformed. Caitlin walked out on to the deck and breathed in the fresh, clean, clear air, feeling utterly vindicated in her decision to make a hasty retreat from the city. The silence, the solitude, and the sheer beauty of this place were absolutely conducive to writing and contemplation. She should have come up here sooner. It was a pity it had taken something so ugly to get her moving

“Before I leave you to settle in,” Theresa said, coming to join Caitlin on the deck, “there are a few more things I need to tell you. We've got maps of the area within and around the village detailing the best local walking trails, and we've got a pile of pamphlets on interesting things to see and do – tourist attractions, really – nearby and further afield. We're very close to the Welsh border here, as you no doubt know, and there are some things worth seeing over the border in my opinion. As you've also no doubt gathered because you drove through it to

get here, the centre of the village is a ten-minute drive away. It'll take you about thirty minutes to walk it. In the village itself, the high street has just about everything you'll need: post office, newsagent, café, bakery, and a small grocery store. If you need to do a bigger shop, or if you feel the need for a movie, or a more lively night life, Oswestry is only a thirty- to forty-minute drive away. And, of course, very important, on the other side of town, there's the essential village pub. They don't have an extensive menu there, but their food is good. Graham and I eat there every week, and we're pretty fussy when it comes to food. She loves her cooking, does Jules. She and her husband, Mike, own and run the pub together, so you'll find the welcome there as wholesome and as good as the food. Actually, the pub has been in Jules' family for generations. I think she surprised everyone, including herself, by coming back to the village to run it when her father passed away unexpectedly."

"Did I see the pub when I came over the bridge?" Caitlin asked, picturing the white-walled building with colourful flower boxes she'd seen almost as soon as she'd driven over the stone bridge that was the village's unofficial entry.

"Yep, that's it. It's the first building you see when you drive into the village. Now," Theresa said, changing the subject, "normally, we have someone come in and clean the cabins on a weekly basis. If you don't mind, we'll continue that tradition even though you'll still be here

"You're kidding, right?" Caitlin asked, laughing. "All this," she spread her hands to indicate the cabin and its surrounds, "and I don't even have to do housework. I think I've walked right into heaven."

Theresa smiled back. "Yes, that *is* a very good point. Perhaps I should consider having a holiday here myself, leave Graham in charge Anyway, we don't want to intrude, so just let us know when it would suit you best to have someone come in. We'll arrange for our cleaners to come so that it causes you minimal disruption."

Caitlin shook her head. "I appreciate that, but I'm more than happy to fit in with you, so you let *me* know a time, and I'll work around it."

"Ok, thanks. So, that leaves only one more thing. If you need anything, anything at all, don't hesitate to ask. One of us is nearly always in the office at the front of the cottage. If we're not *in* it, we'll be around it somewhere."

Caitlin smiled her thanks and nodded. "Ok, thanks."

When Theresa left, Caitlin first made half a dozen trips to her car to empty it, and then spent the time necessary to completely unpack and make the cabin a home away from home. By the time she'd finished, her newly-empty suitcase was under the bed in the bedroom, the fridge in the kitchen was on its way to being full, and the dining table had been turned into an impromptu desk covered, as it was, by her laptop, her printer, and a myriad of different folders, papers, pens and notepads.

Satisfied, she poured herself a lime and soda, lit the modern, artificial burner, and went to stand at the now-closed glass windows, looking out across the darkening landscape, or what she could see of it. She stood for a long time, trying not to think. But thinking had been one of her reasons for coming up here, so, knowing prolonged procrastination would only ultimately make things worse, she turned back towards the lounge, leaning over on the way to flick first one and then the other lamp on, and sat down, cradling her glass in her hands, and looking at the flames of the artificial burner.

She hadn't been honest with anyone else about her real reasons for getting away from London so quickly, although most of her closest friends knew she'd been toying with the idea for nearly a year. Friends, work colleagues, family – it had been easy to conceal the truth from them all because none of them knew about *him*. Looking back, she realised she hadn't really, deep down, trusted him, and that's why she'd told no one about him, no one at all. It was as well she hadn't, too, because now the experience was hers and hers alone, shared with no one else . . . apart from *him*, of course. But he no longer mattered.

Well, almost. There was something she needed to know before she relegated him to the past where he belonged, and then left him there. Why had he happened at all? Why had the Process caused him to make an appearance? Or, put another way, why had she created him as a reality in the landscape of her life? She needed answers to these questions, and there was only one place she was going to find them. So, first putting her drink on the table, she then leaned back and relaxed against the lounge, allowing her mind to drift back to that first night – the night she'd first met him. She needed to relive the experience internally from start to finish. Something had happened – something significant – something she'd missed as it *was* happening. Whatever it was, it had changed her, so much so, there was, now, no going back to what she was.

She mentally focussed on that first night, thinking, as she did so, that it was hard to believe not even two full months had passed. All the events of that night, both trivial and non-trivial, were incredibly clear in her mind's eye, and yet, at the same time, felt as if they'd happened a long time ago. She had, that night, very reluctantly dragged herself out. She'd been editing someone else's manuscript all day, and it had tired her, even given her a mild headache. She'd wanted to spend the evening curled up on her lounge watching television, but she always made the effort to attend the opening night of Jasmine's shows. And a promise was a promise. Jasmine, a long-time and good friend, owned and ran her own art gallery. She passionately believed in giving new artists the break they needed so devoted time and her gallery every few months to doing just that. She had a good eye for new talent anyway, so her skill in this regard was matched by her passion – a potent mix from which many a new artist had benefited. Caitlin always attended the opening nights as a moral support. Knowing full well, from personal experience, what it felt like working for that all-important initial success, she liked and agreed with Jasmine's determination to give new artists a break.

In the crowded gallery, Antoine had caught her eye, from a distance, as soon as he walked in. Tall, slim, dark-haired, and good looking, it was hard *not* to notice him. He was wearing a dark suit with a pink shirt, but he wore it casually, and it looked stunning. After that initial glance, she'd thought nothing more of him. Good looking men were a dime a dozen in the art world. Even when, later in the night, he approached her and began a conversation with her, she still thought nothing of it. The more they spoke, though, the more she paid attention, and the more interested she became. When he asked her if they could go somewhere different for a quiet drink, she agreed, violating her own personal rules and ethics in the process. She didn't date strangers.

They'd found a quiet bar, and then talked and talked well into the night. He was educated, well-read, articulate, and just downright interesting. And, he was a deep thinker. When these characteristics were coupled with his looks, it was a seductive, intoxicating, irresistible mix. The power of the attraction between them was impossible to ignore, and, at one point during the night, she found herself wondering if he might be the *one*. She'd never before believed there was one person for everyone. She'd always believed anyone could make a relationship work with any number of different people. So, to be thinking Antoine might be that one perfect match took her by surprise, and in no small way contributed to her willingness to abandon herself in the experience wholeheartedly, without any of the usual resistances and reluctances. She doubted anyone would've had the wherewithal to resist attraction like that . . . she doubted anyone would've *wanted* to resist it. That night, she broke another of her own golden rules. She lowered her defences enough to allow a man whom she'd only just met into her home, her heart, and her bed.

The love affair that followed was, she had to admit, highly charged and intense. She wasn't sure either of them would have had the energy to sustain the intensity and the passion for any great length of time, but she'd thought the relationship would change, maybe settle down into something a little more

normal, whatever 'normal' was. It hadn't occurred to her the relationship would end.

But end it had, very abruptly.

Her suspicions should have been aroused when he suggested they go out to dinner instead of eating in as they had been. But her suspicions weren't aroused, and so she'd agreed. He wasted no time in getting to the point, his reason for suggesting dinner out. They were shown to a table, seated, the menus placed in their hands, and then, before she had a chance to even glance at the menu, he'd started the conversation with those ominous words.

"There's something I need to tell you."

In the pause that followed, she looked at him expectantly, wholly unprepared for what was to come.

"I'm in a relationship . . . with someone else, I mean."

It took a long moment for the meaning and implications of that one simple statement to penetrate, and even when she understood what he'd said, she still didn't really believe it. She abandoned the menu, dropping it on the table in front of her. "And you didn't think that important enough to tell me before now?"

"You didn't ask."

"I didn't . . . Oh, forgive me," she said, raising her voice, "for making the very *wrong* assumption that you were single when you asked me if you could buy me a drink and then ended up in my bed that same night." And then she lowered her voice and asked him calmly, "How serious is it?"

At least he had the decency to look guilty as he replied, "We're supposed to be getting married in three months."

She didn't say anything in response. What was there to say? But she felt something shut down within her, irretrievably and implacably. What it was exactly, she couldn't say, either then or now, but where she'd been open, now she was closed. Where she'd been functioning, now she was dead. Where she'd been soft and pliant, now she was hard and unyielding. After that, she sat at the table

opposite him, wholly unresponsive, only half listening to the platitudes and clichés that poured from his lips with effortless ease – those same lips she had so enjoyed kissing. The thought did occur to her, sitting there half listening to him, that so easily did the clichés pour out of him, he'd obviously used them all before, like a well-rehearsed speech.

“I didn't mean to hurt you I didn't mean for this to happen I never thought it would go this far I thought she was the one, but the way I feel about you I've never felt like this before I don't want to lose you”

None of it mattered. None of it moved her, or touched her, or stirred within her any emotion whatsoever. She didn't even believe him. Her heart had turned to stone within her – cold, hard, and impenetrable. He failed utterly to sense the change within her. Or maybe he just wasn't capable of stepping outside of himself for long enough to sense that kind of change in someone else.

When he ran out of clichés, there was a brief silence between them, and he looked at her as if he was waiting for her response. When he didn't get one, he asked her, “What are we going to do?”

She got up from her chair, leaned down to get her bag and coat, and then stood beside the table looking down at him. “You brought me here so I wouldn't have a tantrum and make a fuss,” she said flatly, recognising the truth of that even as she said it. “Goes to show how well you know me. *We* are going to do nothing. There is no *we*. This is me walking away from you. Whatever we had was a lie anyway, but it's over. I cannot be with a man I don't trust. Trust forms the bedrock of every *good* relationship,” she said, and then leaned over the table to look him in the eye, not aggressively, but not *unaggressively* either. “*Bad* relationships aren't worth a dime.”

She walked away then, and as she did so, she made that instantaneous decision to get out of London.

He had tried to see her a couple of times following the conversation in the restaurant, only once successfully when he'd ambushed her outside her flat as

she was getting into her car. He talked at her, but she heard only his last question.

“Can't we talk about this?”

“No, we can't,” she said as she opened the door of her car. And then she stopped and looked at him as a thought occurred to her. “How is it you can be in a serious relationship with another woman whilst spending so much time with me?”

And that's when he'd told her the other woman, his fiancé, had been out of the country on holiday with a group of girlfriends.

Caitlin rolled her eyes and shook her head dramatically. “Don't tell me, let me guess. She comes home this weekend.”

He hesitated, but instead of answering, he said, “Caitlin, wait. I miss you. I don't want to lose you.”

“Then I suggest you find solace in the arms of your fiancé because you *have* lost me.”

That was the last thing she said to him. Since then, she'd kept her phone off, only turning it on to check her messages, deleting, without reading them, all the ones he was still sending her.

By getting out of London and coming to Fennleigh, she wasn't running away from *him*, not really. She didn't need to run away from him. If anything, she needed to stop running away from herself, and this was the perfect place for her to do just that. No, she'd come up here to make herself inaccessible to him. He had no idea where she was. And, as a matter of fact, neither did anyone else, except Graham and Theresa, her new neighbours.

It was surprising, really, how good that felt.

And then, without warning, as if out of nowhere, realisation hit her, impacting her like a punch in the gut. Even her heart responded, increasing its beat in her chest. She leaned forward, intent on what she was seeing in her mind's eye. She was back in the restaurant, sitting opposite him while she half

listened to the utter crap that was pouring from his mouth. The frenetic organisation and planning of the last couple of weeks had, mercifully, allowed her to stop herself from thinking about the experience of him, and when she had, she'd thought of other things, like meeting him, and making love to him. The scene in the restaurant had been virtually disregarded, packed away, and labelled 'unpleasant', not to be retrieved. Now, though, it forced its way to the surface of her conscious awareness, and she saw it with fresh eyes.

She'd believed she had shut down and closed herself off to him irrevocably, and so she had. But while her emotional self *had* shut down, her mind had not. She had sat there, at the table, thinking one powerful thought over and over again: *it's all so wrong; it's all so wrong*. She even thought, in that moment, sitting opposite him, that she couldn't really blame him, except that everyone made their own choices. But choices in this modern era were made in ignorance, and with such shallow considerations. He was, as such, merely and simply a product of modern existence, and he had so easily, so effortlessly, and without any hesitation whatsoever dishonoured not one but two women. And why not? He had wanted what he wanted, and what he wanted he pursued with great success. Was he really any different from everyone else? All right, so some people had morals whereas Antoine did not, but people wanted many things, and, like Antoine, they pursued whatever they wanted with a near single-minded focus.

As if, in recognising and acknowledging the revelation, she had opened a door and given the *full* revelation permission to be, memories of other experiences, with other people, in other contexts, accompanied by other realisations, flowed through her awareness. Always, the same thought appeared, powerfully, filling her mind, and she realised she'd been toying with the idea of getting out of London for an entirely different reason than the one she thought was her motivation. *It was all so wrong, the way people lived*. Interactions, relationships, priorities, attitudes, choices, focus, perspectives, motives, drives and ambitions, aspirations, ignorance . . . it was all horribly wrong, and she

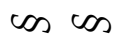
couldn't do it any more. She had been trying to fit in, but she'd been paying a great price to do so because she was only *pretending* to be like everyone else.

As if someone had thrown pieces of a jigsaw puzzle up in the air and she watched, now, as they fell back on to the floor at her feet, forming a picture as they did so, she saw herself anew, as if those pieces were parts of her that had, until this moment, been configured incorrectly, forming a discordant picture. The old picture had masked who she really was, but the new picture was unlike anything she had seen before, and she didn't fully understand it. She saw herself as a fine silver silk thread trying to fit into a fabric of course black wool. The beauty of the silver thread was utterly lost, swamped by the coarse, thick, black weave. But the simple truth was, the silver thread just didn't belong in that fabric. *She* didn't belong in this society. It was, in truth, an alien thing to her, and in trying to fit into it, she had become an alien thing to herself. And now, her experience with Antoine had brought the realisation of this to the surface of her conscious awareness. In that sense, she couldn't help but be grateful to him.

She laughed softly as she realised she'd come up here to drop out.

She hadn't just left London, she'd left human society. She'd walked away from that to which she did *not* belong, and she'd come up here to be with the one person to whom she *did* belong: herself, unmasked, revealed, living and being her truth.

And, furthermore, now that the realisation had washed through her, and she understood what had really happened, she knew she would never go back.



II

The Lake's Shore

The Council was seated, every member present, and the discussion, as was usual at the present time, was lively and passionate, not heated, never that, but the calm debates and conversations of the past were certainly no longer in evidence. The discussion flowed quickly, and there were not the pauses and brief silences that had, in the past, allowed for ease of interjection when any member of the Council felt to contribute. Now, those who sat at the round stone table in the Temple of the Thirteen Columns often spoke at once, sometimes talking over the top of each other in their need to make their point and have it heard and acknowledged.

It was concern that had transformed the calm conversations of the past into this new passionate discussion and debate. You see, many, many souls, all known to and dear to the members of the Council, had followed her into the dimension of the humans, and only a precious few had returned. As if the ongoing absence of those other souls was not concerning enough, those who had returned had done so with nothing but tales of woe to tell. The realm of the humans was such, now, that it was a place of horror, darkness, shadow and death, and so, each soul who returned home brought with him or her even more horrific stories of events witnessed and experienced.

What was the Council to do? Direct interference was forbidden, and none were willing to violate the sacred laws, for those laws were in place to protect the souls who existed in this beautiful, ancient place. Yet, the continued inaction was taking its toll, and, as such, hope was beginning to wane. To send more souls into the human dimension was, to the Council, unacceptable now, even though there were those who were willing to go there and continued to do so. But who would ask such a thing of any unwilling soul, there to wander lost in that dark and alien realm? If she had gone

there, never to return, what hope was there for others? What hope was there for any of them, those still there?

Only two sat silently, making no attempt to contribute to the discussion. 'Twas strange, really, for the two sat directly opposite one another. Their silence should have been conspicuous, very obvious, and not just because every other member was speaking vehemently, and they the only two silent. The two who were silent were important members of the group, leaders you could call them, although no one person, in reality, governed this place. The voice of no one soul who sat at the round table of the Council officially carried more weight than any other. Unofficially, though, when the two who were, now, silent chose to speak, every other member listened, paid attention, and heeded. And it was not rank or status that lent their words such weight, but, rather, Wisdom. The two who sat at the round table in silence were Wisdom itself, and, yet, each one of the two had traversed such different paths to that Wisdom. One was one of those souls who had traversed the human experience as a human, incarnating there, taking on the wounds of that dimension, and then healing, transforming, transcending, and then ascending it. He was one of those who had returned with tales of tragedy and woe, although he had also returned with tales of the beauty and courage of the human spirit. Just for undertaking such a journey, he commanded enormous respect. But he was one who had truly mastered the darkness and ignorance of the dimension of the humans. That is, he had taken on, fully, the fears and wounds of that realm, and he had transformed darkness into Light. And, he had brought forth the ancient Wisdom from within him and gifted it to that realm. Thus, very few understood the complex dynamics of that dimension as did he who now sat at the Council table in silence.

No other member of the Council noticed the silence of the two, so consumed by their discussion were they. Had they noticed, and had they enquired as to the reason for that silence, the discussion, perhaps, might have been rendered unnecessary.

Of the two who were silent, one appeared to be listening to something else entirely. Or perhaps he wasn't listening at all, but sensing. His head was slightly inclined, his eyes unfocussed, and there were tiny creases lining his forehead as if he was slightly puzzled by whatever it was he was perceiving. Or as if he knew what it was he sensed but wasn't certain, or doubted perhaps. The other silent member of the Council watched the one who listened, watched him closely from across the other side of the table, his own eyes narrowed in suspicion. When the one who listened stood, causing barely a ripple of disturbance in the ebb and flow of discussion, the other stood, too. The two walked out of the temple, leaving the Council to its debate.

"Salomon, what do you hear?"

"Someone calls to us. 'Tis a beautiful voice, but 'tis soft and faint, as if the caller is unaware that she calls, and, yet, the voice has such a familiar ring to it."

"She?"

"Yes, she. Could it be she has found her Way . . . ?" His own voice grew faint with the weight of hope and the fear of disappointment. For so long had he waited and hoped. He listened, once again, to the song he could hear.

The other put his hand on Salomon's shoulder. He had not ever seen the old man so agitated. "Be at peace, old friend. Rest easy. I will go and see if anyone stands at the lake's shore."

Salomon put his own hand over that of the other. "Thank you, my old friend. Yes, thank you. I would be so very grateful if you would."

He sat in the barque, sailing the smooth waters of the lake towards the distant shore. He had said nothing to the old man, but he had heard it, too, the call. And he, too, had responded to the familiarity of the voice . . . such a sweet, sweet voice, but rich and vibrant and melodious.

Even from a distance, he saw her. She was, indeed, standing at the lake's shore, looking out over the water with an expression of complete calm on her face. What was

she thinking of as she gazed out over the lake? He watched her, wondering. He wanted to call out to her, but he knew his voice would appear as though coming from the mist, and he did not wish to frighten or alarm her. For him, the mist did not exist. He saw all.

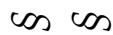
It was a shame he did not call to her. Frightened she may well have been, but she may also have understood. If she had understood, she would have stayed and waited for him. Instead, he watched, saddened, as she turned and walked away. Still a great distance from the shore of the lake, he watched helplessly as she disappeared from his sight.

He sat, then, in the barque and allowed it to drift, uncaring where it wandered. He did not notice, for his eyes were closed against the intensity of feeling that washed through him. He knew her. He had awaited her return every bit as much as had Salomon, although he spoke of the fact not at all, not even to Salomon. To speak of her only caused him pain.

But to have this glimpse!

She was here. She had found the lake. And she had called. She was ready to come home . . . at long, long last.

She would come back to the lake's shore. She must, now that she had seen it. She would know what it was, and she would come back. And if she did not, he would help her do so. He would find a way. The sacred laws would not stop him. He would find a way around them.



End of Excerpt