

Opening extract from
**Valley of the
Shadows**

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VALLEY OF SHADOWS

IN THE BEGINNING

THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK

Jack Shepherd leaned on the veranda rail. A slight smile of contentment played at the corners of his mouth. He was a tall, powerfully built man, with a handsome rugged face well tanned by the fierce Australian sun. His steely blue eyes stared out from under bushy black eyebrows as he squinted against the harsh sunlight. He ran his hand through a mop of dark hair, just beginning to show slight flecks of grey, and gazed around at his property. He had worked hard and was proud of what he had achieved.

His farm nestled in a sheltered valley on the edge of the Australian outback that stretched endlessly away into the vast interior. He had purchased it for next to nothing as it was derelict and abandoned. The vast acreage consisted mainly of poor grazing land, a huge area of desert and a small creek.

A couple of miles from the main highway the previous owner had erected a large bungalow style house with a wooden veranda surrounding it on all sides, but the whole building was in a bad state of repair and close to falling down.

Not far from the bungalow stood a barn built of wood and corrugated iron, which also looked as though it might crash to the ground at any moment, and a short distance from the barn were a few ramshackle out buildings. The whole property was run down and in desperate need of renovation.

Nevertheless, as soon as Jack saw the place he knew this was where he could fulfil his dream of breeding and racing Arabian horses and it would be a good place for his son Max to grow up. But what clinched it for him was the small creek which was about an hour's horse ride away from the farm.

Camped out on the property were some Aborigines, and they informed him that even in the hottest summer the creek didn't dry out completely.

They had been employed by the previous owner and stayed on when he left. One or two of them were getting on a bit, but there were some younger ones amongst them. They all seemed keen to stay and Jack knew he would need labourers, so as far as he was concerned if they were willing to work, then he would keep them on.

He decided to call the property Burrawang, due to the few sago palms that grew near the house and so, when all the repairs were done, that was the name he had put over the entrance.

It had taken him a number of years and a lot of hard work to sort things out, but now, where the big barn had been, there stood a large stable block that could house twelve horses.

The stables faced each other down either side of a centre aisle, with doors at each end of the building to allow for maximum air flow, even on the hottest day it was reasonably cool.

The old outbuildings had been bulldozed and in their place he had built a spacious tack room, a few separate stables and a covered ménage.

Some of the Aborigines had eventually left, but those who chose to remain proved to be loyal and hard working, especially a couple called Sol and Alice. Sol was a short man of slight build, but he was wiry and deceptively strong and proved to have a real way with horses. His wife, Alice, was also short of stature, but, unlike her husband Sol, she was very well built. She loved to cook and happily took over the rebuilt and newly refurbished house. She looked after Jack and young Max and did all the cooking and cleaning. The couple had become like family and were indispensable to the smooth running of the farm.

Life was challenging in this beautiful place, but it was all Jack had ever wanted.

And so eventually, when everything was ready, he shipped over from Saudi Arabia a young bay colt and two chestnut fillies and from this small beginning was born the Burrawang Arabian Stud Farm. He was soon winning many of the most prestigious long distance races and was becoming well known and respected as a breeder of fine horses.

His powerful black stallion Zsah had been the undisputed champion for the past two years and Jack was hopeful that he was passing on his great stamina to his progeny.

Zsah's young son, a chestnut colt that Jack had named Tuscan, certainly looked very promising and would soon be ready to break in and train.

Tuscan's mother Myah, an attractive grey mare, was also a tremendous racer, with incredible stamina and character. So there was every reason to hope that young Tuscan with his impeccable pedigree would soon fulfil his potential and prove to be a winner like his father.

However, of all his horses Jack's favourite was the old chestnut mare, Sulla. Many of her offspring had been sold on and were now racing successfully against Jack's own horses.

Then there was Symenta, a spirited black filly, who was so like her father Zsah. Young Max had broken her in and was busy getting her ready to enter her first race, they all had high hopes that she would prove to be a winner.

Then last but not least there was Melgrid, a good looking chestnut mare with a flaxen mane and tail. Jack had brought her in from another Australian stud farm and she was pregnant for the first time to Zsah and Jack had great hopes that she would produce a filly foal for him.

Life was full of promise and the fact that Max shared his father's love of horses contributed to Jack's feelings of contentment.

Jack straightened up and gazed out at the vast landscape stretching away into the distance. It was early summer but already the dark red earth was baked hard by the hot sun and crying out for some much needed rain, but its harsh beauty never ceased to fascinate him.

The few trees that managed to survive seemed to shimmer like silver ghosts in the early morning heat. *It's going to be another long hot summer*, he thought to himself.

Up on the roof of the house two kookaburras laughed loudly, their strange calls seemed to echo in the morning stillness.

He turned as Alice brought out some coffee and toast.

"Do you want it out here?" she asked putting the tray down on a small wooden table.

"Yes that's fine Alice thanks, have you seen Max this morning?"

"Oh yes," she replied grinning broadly, causing her face to take on the appearance of a sun dried prune and revealing a set of rather yellow and decayed teeth. "He took the old mare Sulla and went galloping off down to get the post; he should be back any minute now. Sol told him to go easy with the mare, but you know what he's like?"

Jack frowned and poured himself a cup of coffee; it was hot and strong, just how he liked it.

He buttered a piece of toast, all the while keeping a look out for his son's return.

"Where are you Max?" he muttered gulping down some of his coffee. "If you've got that old mare all lathered up there will be trouble."

Just then he looked up and galloping towards him and waving his arm frantically was Max. Jack could see he was holding something. They left behind a trail of dust as they turned towards the house and slowed to a canter.

Even before they reached the veranda Max pulled up the chestnut mare and jumped off. He ran up the veranda steps to his father leaving old Sol to take a very hot horse to her stable.

Jack stood up ready to give his son a piece of his mind, but before he could open his mouth Max thrust a bundle of letters at him.

"There's one there from someone in England," he said struggling to get his breath.

Surprised, Jack took the letter from him and stared at it, who would be writing to him from England? He wondered. He had no relatives over there. He was third generation Aussie, from a large and wealthy family.

However, there was one person who instantly came to his mind, "Bessie." But surely she wouldn't get in touch after all these years and for what reason? Yet deep inside he knew it was something to do with her, it was the strangest feeling and really unnerved him.

Jack had met Bessie while he was working in London; the Australian company he worked for had an office over there.

He was young then, in his early twenties and struggling to get over the break up of his marriage to Max's mother Cindy who sadly had a serious drug problem. The divorce and subsequent custody battle over baby Max was distressing and had affected Jack's work.

So his boss, who just happened to be his father, decided it would be a good idea for him to get away for a couple of years and as a position had become vacant in the London office it was decided that Jack should take it. His parents were more than happy to look after Max until Jack was settled and able to take care of the child himself.

For Jack it was the opportunity of a life-time. He worked hard and before he knew it, the two years had flown by. So when he received the email from his father, instructing him to return to Australia in four months' time, it was no great shock.

It just so happened that the day he received the email was his twenty sixth birthday and his mates had planned a night out in a west end club and that was where he first saw Bessie.

She was working behind the bar and from the first moment Jack saw her he was hooked. She was gorgeous, tall and slender, with long auburn hair and large hazel eyes.

They clicked instantly and for the remaining time he had left in London, they were hardly ever apart. He would spend his evenings in the club propping up the bar, watching her work. When she had her breaks they would find a quiet table and talk the hours away. He learned a lot about her in those few weeks and found himself growing very fond of her.

Their lives had been so different; whereas Jack came from a privileged background Bessie had spent most of her younger life in foster care and had no idea who her real parents were.

It broke his heart when she told him how she had been abandoned by her mother in the doorway of a shop, just wrapped in a blanket, on a cold autumn evening. And how an elderly woman had found her and looked after her until social services put her in the care of her first foster family. The elderly woman's name was "Bessie" so that was the name social services gave her.

"It wasn't all bad," she quickly reassured him one evening when they were having a drink together. "Apparently I stayed with my first family until I was about twelve month's old. Then social services took me away and I was fostered with a couple who had two young children of their own, Daniel and Sarah. They were a bit older than me, but we got on extremely well and as far as I knew, they were my brother and sister. We are still very close and keep in touch as often as possible.

We lived in a large rambling house, with a massive garden. We even had a pony which I loved, as I really enjoy riding. I think my parents bought it just to keep the grass down, but we kids enjoyed riding it."

"Yes I bet," said Jack. "I like to ride, but sadly I don't get much chance these days."

"Me neither, life's just too hectic," agreed Bessie, taking a long sip of her red wine.

"Sorry I butted in, please go on," said Jack.

“There’s not much more to tell really. I was happy and had no idea I was fostered until a few years later when one of the pupils in my class at school, a real bully, kept making nasty hints about my family. It upset me and aroused my curiosity. So my foster parents were forced to tell me the truth.”

“Wow, I bet that came as a bit of a shock,” said Jack reaching across the table and taking her hand.

“You could say that,” agreed Bessie, struggling for the first time with her emotions. “However, it did explain why I sometimes felt strangely insecure and sad for no reason, as far as I could see.

My parents told me that I was their first foster child and they had grown to love me as their own. So social services allowed me to stay with them on a permanent basis, they just came to check on me occasionally.”

She paused and took another sip of her wine.

Jack gently squeezed her hand.

“How on earth did you cope, when you found out they weren’t your real family?” he asked.

“Well for awhile after being told the truth, I admit I went off the rails, but my family were very supportive and helped me through what was a very distressing, and painful time in my life.” She stopped and, for a second, Jack thought she was going to cry, but she bravely carried on.

“I stayed at home until I was sixteen,” she explained, “and then I decided to move to London, where I enrolled in drama school, I love it. It’s something I’ve always wanted to do. But I have to subsidise my small scholarship with any work I can find. My parents help me as much as they can. But it’s still not enough, so that’s why I’m working here. So there, now you have it, my whole life story, there’s nothing more to tell you,” she said, giving him a cheeky grin. Jack leaned across the table and kissed her.

She had made a huge impression on him and the thought of going back to Australia and never seeing her again was unbearable. He had begged her to go with him but she refused.

Studying to be an actress was her dream, it was something she had always wanted to do and even though she loved him she couldn’t give it up.

Jack’s only other option would have been to stay with her, but the thought of just seeing his son Max occasionally and not being there to watch him grow up was too painful and not only that, he loved Australia. It was home, his family was there, and he knew it was where he belonged.

So they parted and his last memory of Bessie was a tearful embrace at the check in before his flight back home.

As Jack held the letter in his hand, he just knew it had something to do with Bessie.

Max watched his father with concern.

He was a handsome young man, not as tall as Jack, but with the same rugged good looks. His unruly mop of dark hair glistened with sweat from the ride and his deep blue eyes searched his father's troubled face.

Max's character was so like his mother Cindy, which ironically was the very thing that had attracted Jack to her in the first place, that wild spirit that knew no fear and an unbridled passion for life. Max was so like her and Jack loved that about him.

"Open it Dad," he encouraged, breaking in on his father's thoughts.

Jack walked to the edge of the veranda and tore the letter open; he pulled out the contents and quickly scanned them. As he read, his sun browned face turned a pale shade of grey. He walked back to his chair and sat down, the contents of the envelope held tightly in his hand. For a moment he was unable to speak, he could hear Max's voice but it sounded far away as if he was speaking through a fog.

"What is it Dad, what's the matter?" Max almost shouted as he sat down in the chair opposite and stared at his father, his face a picture of concern.

Slowly Jack struggled to get his thoughts together; without saying a word he read the letter again, this time more carefully. Enclosed with the letter was a cutting from a newspaper.

Max watched his father, his stomach churning as his imagination embraced the many scenarios that could be enclosed in this correspondence.

After what seemed like an interminable time to Max, Jack sat back in his chair and folded up the letter. His face had regained some of its colour, but he still looked tense and troubled.

Jack's main problem was what to share with his son and what not to. He could hardly believe what he had just read himself. Up to this point his life had been fairly simple and uncomplicated, in fact he couldn't remember a time when he had felt more relaxed and content. How wrong can you be? Out of the blue this letter arrives and like a hand grenade it completely blows his life apart. His stomach felt knotted and his heart was racing.

Clutching the letter tightly he turned to Max.

"I can't tell you everything that's in this letter son; I need to be clear in my own mind first. But do you remember me telling you about the two years I worked for your grandfather in the London office?" Max nodded, as Jack often talked about this time in his life and how much he had enjoyed it.

"Well, I had some mates there and one of them, a guy called Ted, sent me this information. Now I don't know if what he's saying is true or not, but I have to go to England as soon as possible and check it out. It is very sensitive so I can't share it with you just yet, I'm sorry. You will have to trust me."

"It's okay Dad, I understand. When do you have to leave? How long will you be away?"

Jack frowned; he could have done without all this. He had a valuable mare due to foal and

a couple of important races to sort out. To say nothing of the cattle that had to be shipped to market.

“I don’t know, only a week or so I hope, but I need to get on the Internet and sort out a flight as soon as possible. I’m not happy about this son; there is so much to do here. But, I have to go, if only to put my mind at rest.” He sighed and ran his hands through his thick hair.

“Look, I tell you what Dad, you go and start your packing and don’t forget your passport, while I get on the computer and see what cheap flights I can find for you.” He got up out of his chair like a man on a mission and disappeared into the house.

Jack leaned back in his chair and looked again at the newspaper cutting. It was a horrendous story that made his blood run cold.

It filled nearly a whole page of the newspaper, with the heading blazoned along the top in capitals.

“Village Shocked By Domestic Violence Tragedy.”

He read the article again, hardly able to believe it. There was a picture of Bessie. She looked older, hardly surprising, as a good many years had passed since he last saw her. He felt his mouth go dry with emotion as he gazed at the picture.

“Oh Bessie why didn’t you come back here with me?” he said softly, fighting back the tears that welled up in his eyes.

Standing behind Bessie was a tall bearded man; his cold dark eyes stared out at Jack from the newspaper. Bessie had her arm around a lovely young girl, they were both smiling.

As Jack looked at the picture there was something about the girl that fascinated him; but he just couldn’t put his finger on what it was.

As he read the article he could imagine himself there with the neighbours. They could only stand and watch as the firemen fought to bring the blaze under control.

The young girl in the picture is alive but only just. She is deeply unconscious having been hit on the head by a beam and suffering badly from smoke inhalation. Bessie and the man in the picture with her are dead.

The neighbours speak in the article of hearing loud shouts and screams, and of things being smashed which, it seemed, was nothing unusual, as the man was always drunk and constantly violent towards his family, especially Bessie.

Jack stared at the picture, his emotions in tatters, but it was what was in the letter that really shocked him and spurred him to get to England as quickly as possible. He struggled to believe it, but he was sure that Ted would not lie to him, especially about something as important as this.

The whole thing was incredible and such a shock, he was in a daze and felt quite numb. His whole body seemed paralysed. All he could do was sit and stare at Bessie’s face as she stared back at him from the newspaper.

Just then Max called to him from inside the house, which made him jump.

“Okay Dad,” he shouted “I have managed to get you a seat on a flight leaving early tomorrow morning.”

“So soon?” queried Jack getting up and going indoors.

He walked over to Max who was sat at the computer and leaned over him to see the screen. It was filled with flights and times.

“Yes you were lucky there were some cancellations; you pick up the internal flight tomorrow at seven am. That will get you to Sydney airport for your London flight which leaves at twelve noon. I hope that’s all quick enough for you?”

Jack rested his hand on Max’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

“Thanks son, I appreciate your help. I am sorry to leave you holding the baby, so to speak.”

“Look don’t worry about us, we will be fine, Sol and I can run this place with our eyes closed and if Melgrid has her foal while you’re away I’ll ring you, so don’t worry.”

“Thanks Max, oh and by the way, whether the foal is a colt or a filly, I want it to be registered as Sunrise.”

“Okay fine, I’m going out now to exercise Zsah. If I see Sol I’ll tell him what’s happening.”

Very early the next morning after a quick breakfast and help from Alice with the rest of his packing, Jack was ready to leave. Max and Sol had been given their instructions so there was nothing more he could do but leave everything in their capable hands.

Ted had offered to put Jack up during his stay in London, so they sent him an email to let him know what time the plane would arrive at Heathrow.

Sol and Alice followed them out to the truck; Alice was particularly concerned about this whole situation, but she kept her thoughts to herself as Jack gave her a hug.

“Take care of the place Alice, I won’t be away long.”

“I will, don’t you worry,” she said smiling up at him and flashing her yellow teeth. Then Jack turned to Sol and took his hand.

“Keep an eye on Melgrid for me; she should have her foal soon.”

“Now don’t you worry about a thing Jack,” Sol quickly reassured him. “Max and I will look after everything here. You have a safe journey and I hope you manage to sort out this problem, whatever it is.”

“Thanks Sol, I will keep in touch and I’ll see you all in about two weeks’ time.”

He climbed into the truck beside Max and stared out of the window. In the small paddock old Sulla and Symenta were grazing peacefully together. He could hear one of the other horses whinnying from the stable block.

He hated to leave, this was his home, his life and he had no idea what he was going into,

he didn't like surprises and what had happened over the past twenty four hours had been one big surprise, he felt as if the stuffing had been knocked out of him.

"Okay son let's get going," he said as he sat back and did up his seat belt.

He put his hand out of the window and waved goodbye to Alice and Sol, as Max drove the truck down the two mile stretch of dusty track that led to the main highway. They bumped along in silence, both men deep in their own thoughts.

When they came to the gate Jack got out and opened it, he waited as Max drove the truck onto the main highway. As he closed it he looked up at the sign above his head and smiled. It was painted white and blazoned across it in bold black print were the words 'Burrawang Arabian Stud Farm.' He was proud of what he had achieved.

He leaned on the gate for a moment and stared away into the distance; from here it was not possible to see the actual farm, just the harsh but beautiful landscape that stretched away as far as he could see.

His heart was torn, part of him felt like ignoring the letter and just getting on with his life here in the familiar surroundings that he loved, but he had no option, he had to go.

What Ted had put in the letter intrigued him, but more than that the photograph of Bessie's child strangely fascinated him and seemed to draw him on.

Something about her struck a chord within him and he knew that he would never rest until he discovered the truth for himself. Even though what he found out might change his and Max's lives forever, it was a risk he had to take.

CHAPTER ONE

Greyache House

Celia sat huddled nervously in her corner of the taxi. It was so dark she could hardly see a thing as she gazed out of the window and yet it was only midday. Angry clouds scudded across the sky threatening a storm.

She was tired and hungry as the train journey had been long and to make matters worse she had no idea where she was being taken, or even why. It felt as though her past life was shrouded in a grey fog. She couldn't seem to remember anything, as if her whole life before getting on the train was just a blank.

Sometimes she would experience little flashes, like a torch switching on and off but, no matter how hard she tried, she just could not recall her life before this moment. It was the weirdest and most disturbing feeling and added greatly to her unease.

She sneaked a quick look at Mrs Dowie, her reluctant and unfriendly travelling companion. Celia had no idea who she was, or where she had come from. She just appeared out of nowhere and almost dragged her onto the train.

The woman looked exhausted and had become increasingly grey as the long journey progressed. Her large glasses with their heavy black frame seemed to fill her whole face, accentuating her paleness and making her look even older than she probably was.

Her mousy hair, that earlier in the day had been neatly scraped up into a tight bun, was now threatening to free itself, bits of hair were hanging loose giving her an untidy and dishevelled appearance.

She had not wanted to accompany Celia on this journey, especially as the house they were going to was miles from anywhere, but she had no other choice as no one else was available.

Mrs Dowie studied Celia as the child gazed out of the cab window. It was hard to believe she would soon be fifteen, she looked so young and innocent. As she gazed at her lovely young charge she struggled with feelings of jealousy and resentment.

Celia was quite tall and well built for her age, with long auburn hair that fell like a wavy cascade around her shoulders. Her skin was flawless and as pale as marble, emphasising her large deep blue eyes; there was an ethereal quality about her and Mrs Dowie found her quite fascinating.

Celia was aware she was being watched; she turned her head and gave Mrs Dowie a disarming smile.

“Where are we going?” she asked, as politely as she could.

“Greyache House,” was the curt reply.

“Why?” asked Celia, beginning to feel a little nervous, she didn’t like the name ‘Greyache House.’

“How should I know? I’ve just been told to get you there,” Mrs Dowie snapped.

“Well how much further is it?” Celia persisted. “Are we nearly there yet?”

“No,” came the disgruntled reply.

Celia sighed softly and turned her attention to gazing out at the passing countryside. It seemed a little brighter, but the wind was still strong, occasionally buffeting the vehicle causing the driver to clutch the wheel tightly.

“Why do I have to come out here?” she asked with a sigh.

“How should I know?” replied Mrs Dowie with a distinct note of irritation in her voice. “I was just told to pick you up at the station and get you to Greyache House.”

Just then the taxi driver broke in on their conversation.

“If you’re interested we will be at Greyache House in a few minutes.”

As he spoke he turned the taxi off the road and drove between two rusty wrought iron gates and down a long gravel driveway, which seemed to Celia to go on forever. It was strangely dark and a heavy mist was rapidly descending, the driver switched on his headlights. On either side of the drive tall dark trees loomed menacingly out of the mist, their long branches seemed to reach out to them as they drove past. It looked very dark and spooky out there and she was glad to be safe inside the taxi.

The vehicle bounced and bumped its way down the rough unmade drive. They made rather slow progress as there were a good few potholes waiting to ambush them and damage the taxi, should they make the mistake of speeding up.

Then, as they rounded a corner, there was Greyache House looming out of the mist ahead of them. It certainly lived up to its name; it looked as dismal and depressing as the weather and somehow very eerie and unreal as it stood there shrouded in the thick grey mist.

From what Celia could see, it looked a large and imposing building, Victorian in style, with a grand portico that rested on huge great pillars. As they drew closer she could make out a tall figure standing in front of the open door.

As the taxi drew up and stopped, the figure stepped forward and opened the door. Celia

disliked him instantly; he was amazingly tall and skeletal, with a demeanour that was aloof and distinctly unfriendly. His thin lips looked hard and cruel and had a strange bluish tinge to them.

She looked into his eyes and immediately felt herself recoil; they were like black slits, empty and devoid of any emotions or feelings. And there was not a wrinkle on his pallid face as though he had never smiled in his life.

She was not a nervous girl, but the thought of having to live under the same roof as this man filled her with fear and trepidation.

“You’re late,” he grumbled his voice was dark and expressionless.

“The mistress is out and she will not wish to be disturbed when she returns, so hurry up and follow me.”

Feeling distinctly anxious and dejected Celia looked across at Mrs Dowie, but the woman refused to make eye contact with her.

“Come along,” she chided, “we don’t have all day.”

They climbed out of the vehicle and followed the tall man into the house. Celia didn’t like it much; it was cold and musty and had an unfriendly atmosphere, not dissimilar to the man striding ahead of them.

The taxi driver brought in her case and dropped it in the hallway.

“I’ll wait outside,” he said to Mrs Dowie. “Don’t be too long, I want to get back.” He seemed uneasy which did little to boost Celia’s confidence.

“I won’t be more than a few minutes,” she responded. “There is just a bit of paperwork to sort out before we leave.”

“This way,” instructed the tall dark man impatiently.

He led them into the large hallway, the floor was covered in ornate marble, it was cold and unwelcoming and their feet echoed loudly as they walked on it.

A threadbare carpet ran from the front door to the bottom of the stairs. It was a very grand staircase which wound its way elegantly up to the top floors.

To the right of the staircase there was a heavy brown door with a large brass key in the lock and just a short way from the door was a big open fireplace with a heavy marble surround. Stacked at the side of it was a pile of logs, with a few burning in the deep grate; however, they threw out very little heat as the entrance hall was so large and draughty.

Not far from the fireplace stood a very tall ornately carved grandfather clock. Its wooden case was dark, almost black, and in places badly chipped. The brass face was dull and stained with age and looked as though it would benefit from a good polish.

Etched into the brass were a lot of very ugly gothic style faces, they seemed to glare down at Celia and she disliked it instantly; it seemed to tower over the whole area in a very threatening manner and even though the hallway was huge, somehow the clock managed to

dominate the whole space.

Its large hands moved with a very sombre sound, as though it were a struggle for it to reach each numeral on time and every hour it would chime with a painfully loud and funereal tone, which seemed to vibrate and echo around the place adding to the already bleak atmosphere of the house.

On the other side of the stairs, facing the fireplace, there was another door which was open and a long dark passage that appeared to lead to the back of the house.

They followed the man through the open door and found themselves in a huge kitchen. At its centre was the biggest wooden table Celia had ever seen. He pulled out a chair for himself and sat down, totally ignoring them, which Celia thought was very rude. It also appeared to irritate Mrs Dowie, as she made it plain that Celia should pull out a chair for her.

Then the two of them busied themselves looking over the paperwork, which Celia guessed was all about her. Unsure what to do she just stood there looking around; then all of a sudden a woman came into the room and walked towards her.

She was about the same height as Celia but of a slighter build, with light blond hair pinned up at the back of her head. She looked pale and tired, but it was her eyes that struck Celia most; they were large and the deepest green she had ever seen, almost emerald in colour, but filled with such sadness. The woman walked over and picked up her small case.

“Come with me my dear, I will take you to your room.” As Celia followed her, she looked back at Mrs Dowie, but the woman just ignored her.

“My name is Mary,” said the woman giving her a warm smile, which caused her sad eyes to sparkle and come alive. “And I believe your name is Celia, a very pretty name I must say.”

Celia smiled at her and began to feel that perhaps this place wasn't so bad after all. She liked Mary and felt strangely drawn to her. She followed her up the steep winding staircase and along a dimly lit passage, which seemed to have no end.

On the walls there were a lot of paintings, the canvases were large and dark and because of the poor light it was hard to see them properly. She guessed that they were portraits of the family here in the house.

As she hurried along behind Mary she felt as if the people in the paintings were watching her and was greatly relieved when they eventually stopped outside a heavy old door, which Mary opened.

“Here we are my dear, this is your room and it's at the back of the house so you should find it nice and quiet.”

Celia looked around the room; it was spacious if a little tired looking. There was a small single bed and next to that a white dressing table, with a matching wardrobe against the far wall. Facing the bed was a fireplace, the logs crackled merrily as if to cheer her up and she did feel her spirit lift a little. The room had two separate windows that reached from floor to ceiling.

They were hidden behind heavy green velvet drapes that had been pulled across.

“Will this room be alright for you?” asked Mary, as she put her case on the bed

“Yes it’s very nice thank you,” replied Celia softly, feeling a little shell shocked.

“I have pulled the curtains across just to keep the draft out, it’s such a horrid day and so dull you won’t see very much of the view I’m afraid, hopefully it will be nicer tomorrow.” She went to a small chair by the fire and plumped up the cushion.

“Come my dear, sit down, I made some hot chocolate just before you arrived.”

She bent down and picked up a small silver coffee pot from the hearth and poured the steaming chocolate into a pretty china mug. Celia sat down and gratefully took the drink from her. She felt drained and abandoned and was very grateful for Mary’s kindness.

“Now you make yourself at home. You will find the bathroom just down the hall. I shall leave you now to get unpacked.”

She smiled at her and again her strangely sad eyes seemed to light up and almost glow with affection.

She opened the bedroom door and went to leave, but then she turned and looked back at Celia, with a strange expression on her face.

“Trust me my dear; there is a light at the end of the tunnel,” she said softly.

With that she left the room and closed the door.