

1

WIPIING the silver frame, Laura stared sadly at a picture of her and Matt skiing in the mountains. Her mind was lost in a white chill: empty, unconnected and exhausted. Too weary to feel, to think, to escape even into the usual comforting fantasy she had built for herself. This is what her world had shrunk down to.

She moved slowly and listlessly to the window without disturbing the stillness that had been her armour for three interminable years, 37 months, more than a thousand tired days and unrefreshing nights. She had seen the old pear tree at the end of the garden lose its fruits, the last of which were still rotting on the grass. Now the wind was taking its leaves and rain dripped from its branches.

This window was her eye to the world; its gentle quietness demanded nothing and spoke to her in language she could understand, especially during these winter evenings. The grey sky, the falling darkness, the approaching night...this was as much as she could cope with.

Holding her hand to her chest, she walked silently into her bedroom and buried herself in the empty bed. The room was stale and dark; the window shut, the heavy curtains drawn. The light was not welcome inside. The clock beside her bed had long since stopped. Time no longer mattered and her sleeping pills now lay where she used to put her jewellery before going to sleep.

Looking at the ceiling, she waited for sleep to come but her jumbled thoughts and feelings gave her no rest. There was no escape into the oblivion she craved which, in any case, would only last a few precious hours. She knew that the struggle for sleep would be fought again and again, tonight like every other one...

Reluctantly sliding her legs out of the bed, Laura pushed herself to stand up. This was the first battle of her day. The night hadn't brought any refreshment. Sleep had come, but not from anywhere pleasant. A heavy chemical blanket had smothered her consciousness, but had failed to conquer the dreams that had demonised her night.

Her first heavy step took her to the kettle.

Coffee.

Why do kettles have to be so bloody loud?

She reached for her morning mug and the coffee jar. Her hand trembled. The steam from the cup was the promise and the first gulp of the dark liquid was a reunion with her companion through the darkness.

Lightly stimulated, her eyes wakened as an unexpected knock alerted one of her other senses. Startled, she wrapped her dressing gown tightly around her and went to the door. Four years ago, when Matt had bought it for her as a Christmas present, they had both loved its sensuality. But now it was as ragged as she was.

She opened the door to be confronted by a fern tree. A freckle-faced boy with blonde hair peered at her from behind it. He thrust a small white envelope towards her.

"It came with the order," he explained.

"What order?" Laura asked, tearing open the envelope.

"Pay the boy and start decorating!" read the note inside.

Laura grinned at Carla's familiar tone. Stepping aside to let the boy enter, she shook her head and muttered: "I don't do Christmas."

"Where do you want me to put it?"

"Oh, right by the window."

After the boy had left, Laura stood in front of her tree. She smelled its resin, felt the chill that clung to it from outside and spotted the loose pines on the carpet that had already fallen from its branches. Why do I need this in my life? What is there for me to celebrate?

The ringing of the phone arrived like a rude poke in her ear, and she let it go straight to answer machine.

"I'm Laura, I'm not at home...so you know what to do!"

"Come on, girl, pick up, or don't because I'm coming over tomorrow anyway to take you out. I don't want any excuses. Five pm sharp!"

Carla was the only one of her friends who had defied Laura when she had stopped receiving visitors. Their pity, sympathy and inability to know her pain was too much for her to bear; their lives were continuing but hers had died, and she really didn't feel that there was any way back for her.

When she had thrown that handful of earth onto the coffin and heard its soft thud, her own existence, with its emotions, appetites and hopes, had stopped. Since then, isolation and pain were all that was left for her.

Only Carla continued to kick at the door she had locked in order to keep out the rest of the world. Carla visited her frequently, wiping away her tears, checking that she was taking her prescription medication and forcing her to have a bath and wash her hair.

Carla had kept her spare house keys ever since that day, three years earlier, when she'd used force to open the door and found Laura unconscious following an overdose. She continued to keep a close eye on her friend, adamant that such a terrible occurrence wasn't going to happen again.