

David Marchmont glanced towards his passenger as he steered the car along the narrow lane. The snow was falling in earnest now, making the already dangerously icy road even more precarious.

‘Not far now Greta, and it looks as if we’ve made it just in time. I reckon this lane will be impassable by morning. Does anything seem familiar?’ he asked tentatively.

Greta turned towards him. Her ivory skin was still unlined, even though she was fifty-eight years old, and her huge blue eyes dominated what David had always thought of as her doll-like face. Age hadn’t dimmed the vividness of their colour, but they no longer shone with excitement or anger. The light behind them had disappeared long ago, and they remained as blank and innocent as the inanimate china facsimile she reminded him of.

‘I know I once lived here. But I can’t remember it, David. I’m sorry.’

‘Not to worry,’ he comforted her, knowing how much it distressed her. And also thinking that if he could edit out of *his* memory that first grisly, devastating sight of his childhood home after the fire – the pungent smell of

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charred wood and smoke remained with him to this day – he almost certainly would. ‘Of course, Marchmont is well on its way to being restored now.’

‘Yes, David, I know. You told me that last week when you came over to me for supper. I cooked lamb cutlets and we had a bottle of Sancerre,’ she said defensively. ‘You said we were staying in the house itself.’

‘Exactly right,’ David agreed equably, understanding that Greta always felt the need to give him exact details of recent events, even if the past before her accident was inaccessible to her. As he navigated the ice-rutted lane, the tyres struggling to maintain a grip on the slight incline, he now wondered if bringing Greta back here for Christmas was a good idea. Frankly, he’d been amazed when she’d finally accepted his invitation, after years of trying to persuade her to leave her Mayfair apartment and receiving a firm ‘no’.

At last, after three years of painstaking renovation to restore the house to some semblance of its former glory, he’d felt it was the right moment. And for some reason, out of the blue, so had she. At least he knew the house would be physically warm and comfortable. Although emotionally – for either of them, given the circumstances – he didn’t know . . .

‘It’s getting dark already,’ Greta commented blandly. ‘And it’s only just past three o’clock.’

‘Yes, but I hope the light will hold long enough so we can at least see Marchmont.’

‘Where I used to live.’

‘Yes.’

‘With Owen. My husband. Who was your uncle.’

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‘Yes.’

David knew that Greta had simply memorised the details of the past she’d forgotten. As if she were taking an exam. And it was he who had been Greta’s teacher, told by the doctors who cared for her to steer clear of any traumatic events but to mention names, dates and places that might stir something in her subconscious and provide the key to recovering her lost memory. Occasionally, when he went to visit her and they chatted, he thought he saw a flicker of recognition at something he mentioned, but he couldn’t be sure whether that was through what he had told her since or what she actually remembered. And after all these years, the doctors – who’d once been certain that Greta’s memory would slowly return, as there was nothing to indicate it wouldn’t on the numerous brain scans she’d had since the accident – now talked of ‘selective amnesia’ brought on by trauma. In their opinion, Greta did not *want* to remember.

David steered the car slowly around the treacherous bend in the lane, knowing that within a few seconds the gates that led to Marchmont would come into view. Even though he was the legal owner and had spent a fortune on the renovation of the house, he was only the caretaker. Now the restoration was almost complete, Ava, Greta’s granddaughter, and her husband, Simon, had moved from the Gate Lodge to take up residence at Marchmont Hall. And when David died, it would legally pass to Ava. The timing couldn’t be better, given the couple were expecting their first baby in a few weeks’ time. And just maybe, David thought, the past few years of a family history which had

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gone so badly wrong could be finally laid to rest with the breath of new, innocent life.

What complicated the situation further were the events that had happened *since* Greta's memory loss . . . events he'd protected her from, concerned about the effect they might have on her. After all, if she couldn't remember the start of it all, how could she possibly deal with the end?

All in all, the situation meant that he, Ava and Simon walked a tightrope during conversations with Greta, wanting to prompt her memory but constantly wary of what was discussed in front of her.

'Can you see it, Greta?' David asked as he drove the car between the gates and Marchmont came into view.

Of Elizabethan origin, the house sat low and gracefully against the skyline of undulating foothills that graduated into the majestic peaks of the Black Mountains beyond. Below it, the River Usk meandered through the wide valley, the fields on either side sparkling with the recent snowfall. The mellow red brick of the ancient walls rose into triple gables along its frontage, while the intricate panes of glass in the mullioned windows reflected the winter sun's last, rosy rays.

Even though the old timbers – bone dry as they were – had given the hungry flames of the fire a healthy supper that had resulted in the roof being destroyed, the outer shell had survived. As the fire services had told him, it was partly due to the luck of a huge downpour an hour or so after the first small ember had caught light. Only nature had saved Marchmont Hall from total destruction and there had at least been something left for him to restore.

'Oh, David, it's far more beautiful than it looked in the

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photographs you showed me,' Greta breathed. 'What with all the snow, it looks like a Christmas card.'

And indeed, as he parked the car as close to the front door as he could, David saw the warm glow of lamps already lit and the twinkling lights of a Christmas tree through a window. The picture painted was so at odds with the dark, austere atmosphere of his childhood home – indelibly imprinted on his memory – that he felt a sudden sense of euphoria at its apparent transformation. Perhaps the fire *had* burnt away the past, metaphorically as well as physically. He only wished his mother were still here to see its remarkable rehabilitation.

'It does look rather lovely, doesn't it? Right,' he said, opening the car door and causing a shower of snow to slide off the roof, 'let's make a run for it. I'll come back for the cases and presents later.'

David walked around the car to open the passenger door and Greta climbed out cautiously, her slip-on town shoes disappearing, along with her ankles, into the deep snow. As she looked up at the house and then down at her snow-submerged feet, a sudden memory stirred.

*I've been here before . . .*

Standing stock-still, in shock that this moment had finally come, she desperately tried to grasp the fragment of remembrance. But it was already gone.

'Come on, Greta, you'll catch your death standing out here,' said David, offering her his arm. And together they walked the few yards to the front door of Marchmont Hall.

After they'd been greeted by Mary, the housekeeper who had worked at Marchmont for over forty years, David

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showed Greta to her bedroom and left her to take a nap. He imagined that the stress of deciding to actually leave her home for the first time in years, coupled with the long journey from London, must have worn her out.

Then he wandered into the kitchen in search of Mary. She was rolling out pastry for mince pies at the newly fitted central island. David cast his eyes around the room, admiring the gleaming granite worktops and the sleek, integrated units that lined the walls. The kitchen and bathrooms had been David's only concession to modern design when he'd planned Marchmont's restoration. All the other rooms had been modelled on the original interior, a daunting task that had involved weeks of research and days spent poring over archive photographs in libraries, as well as dredging his own childhood memories. Armies of local craftsmen had been employed to ensure that everything from the flagstone floors to the furniture was as close as possible to the old Marchmont.

'Hello, Master David.' Mary's face broke into a smile as she looked up. 'Jack telephoned ten minutes ago to say your Tor's train was delayed because of the snow. They should be here in about an hour or so. He took the Land Rover, so they'll be fine getting back.'

'It was good of him to offer to pick her up. I know how hard it is for him to spare time away from his duties on the estate. So, how do you like the new facilities, Mary?'

'It's wonderful, *bach*. Everything is so fresh and new,' she replied in her soft Welsh accent. 'I can't believe it's the same house. It's so warm in here these days, I hardly need to light the fires.'

'And your flat is comfortable?' Mary's husband, Huw,

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had died a few years ago and she had found it isolated in the estate cottage all alone. So, whilst he was working with the architect on the new plans for the house, he had incorporated a suite of rooms in the spacious attic for Mary. After what had happened before, he felt happier having someone permanently on site if Ava and Simon had to go away.

‘Oh yes, thank you. And it has a wonderful view over the valley, too. How’s Greta? To be honest with you, I was amazed when you told me she was coming here for Christmas. Indeed to goodness, I never thought I’d see the day. What does she think?’

‘She didn’t say much,’ said David, not sure whether Mary was referring to Greta’s reaction to the renovations or her return to the house after all these years. ‘She’s resting at the moment.’

‘You saw that I put her in her old bedroom, to see if it would jog her memory. Although it looks so different now even I don’t recognise it. Do you really think she doesn’t know who I am? We went through a lot together when she lived at Marchmont.’

‘Please try not to let it upset you, Mary. I’m afraid it’s the same for all of us.’

‘Well, maybe it’s best if she *doesn’t* remember some of what happened,’ she replied grimly.

‘Yes,’ David agreed with a sigh. ‘It’s going to be a very odd Christmas, one way and another.’

‘You can say that again, *bach*. I keep looking for your mother in the house, then realise she’s no longer here.’ Mary bit back her tears. ‘It’s worse for you, of course, Master David.’

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‘Well, it’s going to take some getting used to for all of us. But at least we have Ava and Simon, with their baby on the way, to help us get through it.’ David put a comforting arm around Mary’s shoulder. ‘Now, can I try one of your delicious mince pies?’

Ava and Simon arrived back at the house twenty minutes later and joined David in the drawing room, which smelt of fresh paint, and woodsmoke from the vast stone fireplace.

‘Ava, you look wonderful. Positively burgeoning with good health.’ David smiled as he embraced her and shook hands with Simon.

‘I seem to have suddenly ballooned in the past month. I’m obviously having a rugby player, be it a boy or girl,’ Ava answered, looking up fondly at Simon.

‘Shall I ask Mary to make us a pot of tea?’ enquired David.

‘I’ll go,’ said Simon. ‘Ava, darling, you sit down with your uncle and put your feet up. She was called out in the middle of the night to a distressed cow in labour,’ he added to David with a despairing shrug as he left the room.

‘And I hope someone will be there for *me* when I’m in labour and distressed,’ Ava retorted with a chuckle, sinking into one of the newly upholstered chairs. ‘Simon’s always nagging at me to slow down, but I’m a vet. I can hardly leave my patients to die, can I? I mean, the midwife wouldn’t leave me, would she?’

‘No, Ava, but you’re due to give birth in six weeks’ time, and Simon is concerned that you’re doing too much, that’s all.’

‘When the locum arrives at the practice after Christmas



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it'll make things a lot easier. But in this weather I can't promise I'm not going to get called out to warm up sheep suffering from hypothermia. The farmers have done a good job of bringing them down from the hills before the bad weather set in, but there's always the odd one that gets left behind. Anyway, Uncle David, how are you?' Ava had always called him 'Uncle', even though they were, technically, first cousins once removed.

'I'm very well, thank you. I recorded my Christmas show in October and since then, well . . . as a matter of fact' – David reddened with sudden embarrassment – 'I've been writing my autobiography.'

'Have you now? That must make interesting reading.'

'My life does certainly, and that's the problem. There are parts of it I can't talk about, obviously.'

'No—' Ava's expression became serious. 'Speaking honestly, as you know I always do, I'm surprised you agreed to write it. I mean, you've always kept your private life scrupulously private.'

'Yes, but sadly some gutter journalist has decided he's going to pen the unauthorised version, so I decided I'd better put the record straight first. As far as I can under the circumstances, that is.'

'Right. Then I can see why you'd want to do it. Goodness,' Ava breathed, 'having had a movie star for a mother and a famous comedian as a cousin has made me loathe the thought of celebrity. You won't mention anything about . . . what happened to me, will you, Uncle David? I'd die if you did. Especially after last time, when I was splashed all over the front page of the *Daily Mail* with Cheska.'

'Of course not, Ava. I'm doing my utmost to keep the

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family out of it. The problem is, that doesn't leave much to tell. There've been no drugs, nervous breakdowns, drink problems or womanising in my life, so it makes for a very boring read.' David sighed and gave an ironic smile. 'Talking of women, Tor should be here soon.'

'I'm glad she's coming, Uncle David. I'm very fond of her. And the more of us here this Christmas, the better.'

'Well, at least we've finally managed to get your grandmother to join us.'

'Where is she?'

'Upstairs, resting.'

'And how is she?'

'The same, really. But I'm so proud of her for finding the courage to come here.' Car lights flashed beyond the window. 'That must be Tor. I'll go and help her in with her luggage.'

When David had left the drawing room Ava mused on his enduring and loyal relationship with Greta. She knew the two of them had known each other forever, but she wondered just what it was about her that appealed to him so much. Ava's great-aunt, David's mother LJ, who had died only a few months ago, had said that her son had always loved Greta. And certainly, Greta still looked very youthful, almost as if her memory loss had erased the physical signs of fifty-eight years of living, which normally manifested themselves on a face like an outer emotional map.

Ava hated to admit it, but she found her grandmother rather vacuous and childlike. On the few occasions she'd seen Greta over the years she'd felt it was like talking to a perfectly formed but hollow Fabergé egg. But then again,

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perhaps any depth and personality she'd once had had been wiped away by the accident. Greta lived like a recluse, rarely venturing out of the front door of her apartment. This was the first time Ava had ever known her to leave it for longer than a few hours.

She knew she shouldn't judge her grandmother, having never known her before the accident, but at the same time she acknowledged that she had always compared Greta to LJ, whose indomitable spirit and zest for life made Greta – even after everything that had happened to her – seem weak and colourless. *And now*, Ava thought, biting her lip, *Greta is here for Christmas, and LJ isn't.*

A lump came to Ava's throat, but she swallowed it down, knowing her great-aunt wouldn't want her to grieve.

'Best foot forward,' she'd always said when tragedy had struck.

Ava couldn't help but wish with all her heart that LJ had been here for a little longer so she could have witnessed the birth of her baby. At least she'd lived to see her marry Simon, and had known when she died that Marchmont – and Ava – were safe.

David came back into the drawing room with Tor.

'Hello, Ava. Merry Christmas, and all that. Goodness, I'm cold. What a journey!' Tor said, walking to the roaring fire and warming her hands by it.

'Well, you made it, and just in time, apparently. Jack told me they've cancelled any further trains to Abergavenny tonight,' said David.

'Yes, I must admit I didn't fancy spending Christmas in a bed and breakfast in Newport,' Tor said drily. 'And the

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house looks wonderful, Ava. You and Simon must be thrilled.'

'We are,' said Ava. 'It's so beautiful, and we're so grateful to you, Uncle David. Simon and I would never have had the resources to renovate it ourselves.'

'Well, as you know, one day it will pass to you, anyway. Ah, Simon.' David looked up as he entered the room. 'A nice fresh pot of tea. Just what we all need.'

Greta awoke from her nap feeling disoriented and unable to remember where she was. Panicking, she fumbled for a light in the pitch blackness and switched it on. The strong smell of fresh paint jogged her memory as she sat up in the comfortable bed and admired the newly decorated room.

Marchmont Hall . . . the house she'd heard so much about from David over the years. Mary, the housekeeper, had told her earlier this had once been her bedroom, and it had been in here that she'd given birth to Cheska.

Greta got out of bed and walked to the window. The snow was still falling. She tried to access the fleeting memory that had been kindled when she'd stood outside the house, and sighed in despair when her mind stubbornly refused to give up its secrets.

After freshening up in the smart en-suite bathroom, she dressed in a new cream silk blouse she'd bought a few days ago. Adding a dab of lipstick to her mouth, she stared at her reflection in the mirror, feeling anxious about leaving the sanctuary of her bedroom.

It had taken everything that was left of her to make the decision to join her family here at Marchmont for Christmas. So much so that after she'd said yes, and watched

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David's astonished expression as she did so, Greta had experienced severe panic attacks which had rendered her sleepless, sweating and shaking into the small hours. She'd visited her doctor, who had prescribed beta blockers and sedatives. With his encouragement, plus the thought of spending yet another miserable Christmas alone, she had managed to pack, climb into David's car and get here.

Perhaps the doctors would disagree with her motivation; they would argue in their usual psychobabble that maybe at last she was ready, that her subconscious finally deemed her strong enough to cope with returning. And certainly, since she'd taken the decision, she'd been dreaming vividly for the first time since the accident. None of her dreams made sense, of course, but the shock of having what the doctors would term a 'flashback' when she'd stepped out of the car and looked at Marchmont Hall a couple of hours ago gave some credence to their analysis.

She knew there was a lot still to face. 'Company', for a start, and for an extended period of time. And among those gathering here for the festive season there was one person she was particularly dreading spending time with: Tor, David's lady-friend.

Even though she had met Tor occasionally when David had brought her round for tea at Greta's Mayfair apartment, she had never spent longer than a few hours with the woman. Even though, on the surface, Tor had been sweet and polite and seemed to be interested in what she had to say – which wasn't a lot – Greta had felt patronised, as if Tor were treating her as some kind of mentally deficient, senile old lady.

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Greta looked at her reflection in the mirror. She may be many things, but she wasn't *that*.

Tor was an Oxford don. Intellectual, independent, attractive – in a practical sort of way, Greta had always thought, and then reprimanded herself for her instinctive female derision of a rival.

Put simply, Tor was everything Greta wasn't, but she made David happy and Greta knew she must be happy for that.

At least David had said that Ava would be here with her husband, Simon. Ava, her granddaughter . . .

If anything about her memory loss particularly upset her, it was Ava. Her own flesh and blood, her daughter's daughter . . . Yet though she'd seen Ava periodically over the past two decades and liked her very much indeed, Greta felt guilty that she was unable to connect with her granddaughter like a close relative should. Surely, even though she had no recollection of Ava's birth, she should instinctively feel some deeper emotional bond?

Greta thought Ava suspected – just as LJ had – that she remembered more than she did and was somehow shamming. But despite years of sessions with psychologists, hypnotists and practitioners of any other form of treatment for memory loss she'd read about, nothing stirred. Greta felt she lived in a void, as if she were merely an onlooker to the rest of humanity, all of whom found it easy to *remember*.

The closest she felt to another human being was her darling David, who'd been there when she'd finally opened her eyes after nine months in a coma and had spent the past twenty-four years caring for her in any way he could. If it hadn't been for him, given the emptiness of her exis-

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tence, she was sure she would have lost all hope many years ago.

David had told her that they met forty years ago, when she was eighteen and working in London at a theatre called the Windmill just after the war. Apparently, she'd once explained to him that her parents had died in the Blitz, but had never mentioned any other relatives. David had told her that they had been very good friends, and Greta had surmised that their relationship had been nothing more than that. David had also said that, soon after they'd met, she had married a man called Owen, his uncle, once the squire of Marchmont.

Over the years Greta had wished endlessly that the friendship David had described to her had been something more. She loved him deeply; not for what he had been to her before the accident but for all he meant to her now. Of course, she knew her feelings were not reciprocated and she had no reason to believe they ever had been. David was a very famous and successful comedian and still extremely attractive. Besides, for the past six years he'd been with Tor, who was always on his arm at charity events and awards ceremonies.

In her darkest moments Greta felt she was little more than a liability; that David was merely doing his duty, out of the kindness of his heart and because they were related by marriage. When she'd finally come out of hospital, after eighteen months, and moved back into her apartment in Mayfair, David had been her only regular visitor. Her guilt at being dependent on him had grown over the years and, although he told her that popping in to see her was no

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hardship, she'd always tried not to be a burden, so she often pretended she was busy when she wasn't.

Greta moved away from the window, knowing she must pluck up the courage to go downstairs and join her family. She opened the bedroom door, walked along the corridor and stood at the top of the magnificent dark oak staircase, its carved balustrades and elaborate acorn-shaped finials gleaming softly in the light of the chandelier overhead. Gazing down upon the large Christmas tree which stood in the hall beneath her, she smelt the fresh, delicate scent of the fir and, again, something stirred. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, as the doctors had told her to, trying to encourage the faint memory to grow.

The residents of Marchmont Hall woke up on Christmas morning to an idyllic, snowy scene outside. At lunchtime, they tucked into a goose, and vegetables grown on the estate. Afterwards, they gathered in the drawing room by the fire to open their gifts.

'Oh Granny,' said Ava as she unwrapped a soft white baby blanket, 'that will be so useful. Thank you.'

'Also, Tor and I would very much like to buy you a pram but, given that neither of us has a clue about all those new-fangled contraptions parents use these days, we've written you a cheque,' David said, handing it to Ava.

'That's more than generous, David,' Simon said, topping up his glass.

Greta was touched by Ava's gift of a framed photograph of the two of them, taken when Ava was a tiny baby and while Greta was still hospitalised.

'That's just to remind you of what's to come,' Ava said



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with a smile. 'My goodness, you'll be a great-grandmother!'

'I will, won't I?' Greta chuckled at the thought.

'And you look barely a day older than the first time I met you,' David commented gallantly.

Greta sat on the sofa, watching her family with pleasure. Perhaps it was the effect of far more wine over lunch than she was used to but, for once, she didn't feel unwanted.

After the presents had been unwrapped, Simon insisted he take Ava upstairs for a rest, and David and Tor left for a walk. David asked Greta to accompany them, but she tactfully declined. They needed time together, and three was always a crowd. Greta sat by the fire for a while, dozing contentedly. Coming to, she glanced out of the window and saw that the sun was now low but still shining, the snow glittering beneath it.

On impulse, deciding she could do with a breath of fresh air, too, she sought out Mary and asked if there were any boots and a thick coat she could borrow.

Five minutes later, dressed in a pair of wellingtons that were far too big for her and an old Barbour, Greta strode out across the virgin snow, breathing in the wonderful, clean, crisp air. She paused, wondering which way to go, hoping some inner instinct would guide her, and decided to take a stroll through the woods. As she walked, she looked upwards at the deep blue sky above and a sudden joy filled her veins at the sheer beauty of the scene. It was such an unusual and rare feeling that she almost skipped as she zigzagged her way through the trees.

Arriving in a clearing, she saw a majestic fir tree standing in the centre of it, the rich green of its bushy, snow-laden branches a contrast to the tall, bare beech trees that made

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up the rest of the wood. Walking towards it, she noticed there was a gravestone beneath it, the inscription covered by snow. Surmising that it was almost certainly the grave of a family pet – perhaps one she had known – Greta reached down and scraped away the hard, icy flakes with her gloved hand.

Slowly, the inscription began to appear.

### JONATHAN (JONNY) MARCHMONT

Beloved son of Owen and Greta

Brother of Francesca

BORN 2ND JUNE 1946

DIED 6TH JUNE 1949

May God guide his little angel up to Heaven

Greta read and reread the inscription, then fell to her knees in the snow, her heart pounding.

Jonny . . . The words on the gravestone said that this dead child was *her* son . . .

She knew Francesca – Cheska – was her daughter, but there'd never been any mention of a boy. The inscription said he'd died at just three years of age . . .

Weeping now with frustration and shock, Greta looked up again and saw that the sky was beginning to darken. She gazed around the clearing helplessly, as if the trees might speak to her and give her answers. As she knelt there, in the distance she heard the sound of a dog barking. An echo of another moment created a picture in her mind; she'd been here in this place once before and had heard a dog . . . Yes, *yes* . . .

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She turned and focused on the grave. ‘Jonny . . . my son . . . please let me remember. For God’s sake, let me remember what happened!’ she cried, half-choking on her tears.

The sound of the dog’s bark faded away and as it did so she closed her eyes and immediately saw a vivid image of a tiny baby wrapped in her arms, nestling against her chest.

‘Jonny, my darling Jonny . . . my baby . . .’

As the sun dipped below the trees and into the valley below, heralding the arrival of night, Greta’s arms reached wide to clasp the gravestone as, finally, she began to remember . . .