

## PROLOGUE

### Journal Entry

*Today I feel insignificant, not dissimilar to other days. It is a feeling I am becoming accustomed to, like an old familiar overcoat wrapping itself around me but giving me only cold comfort. As I walked I marvelled at the beauty of the day, so fresh and crisp like fresh washing on a line blowing contentedly in the breeze. The scent of daffodils and bluebells pervaded the air with their intoxicating fragrance. The day was bright and there was just a hint of warmth from the sun. A gentle wind blew through the daffodils and they seemed to dance before my eyes. I squinted against the sun and for a moment lamented my sunglasses which I remembered leaving on the hall table. I pulled my scarf tighter, its roughness chafing my neck. I wouldn't wear it but for Rosemary Peterson, who seemed to stand like a centurion at the front door whenever I made to go out.*

*"You'll need your scarf Rector, it's chilly out there today and we can't have you catching your death can we? Not you of all people," she would say, making me sound like the Prime Minister.*

*Sometimes I want to retort, "Yes, we do want me to catch my death," for then I would finally be released. Then, I found myself wondering as I walked, how does one go about catching their death? Would death show itself in all its dank macabre state and like a playful child expect you to give chase until finally you caught it? Hence you catch your death. But then what? You may decide to let it go and not keep it after all. Did I want to catch my death? I wondered. Perhaps at times I wanted death to catch me.*

*The reason I am writing this is because I want to remember all my thoughts this morning, for it is remarkable to me that it should be this morning that I was again allowing myself the shameful thoughts of death, my own death in fact, while appreciating at the same time the pleasure and beauty of life. The green rolling hills that overlooked the cemetery and continued for miles, the bright blue sky as though painted that morning by an artist, devoid of cloud, the flowers dancing in the breeze celebrating the arrival of spring. It was a day to celebrate life, not to contemplate death. But perhaps I was not considering death in the physical sense. There are many types of death. This morning I once again felt as though my soul had died and I had paled once again into insignificance. If one died emotionally, what would be left? Without love people wither like flowers starved of water.*

*It was as I turned to walk back that I saw her, she was kneeling on the ground intent on something in front of her. I walked closer and on hearing me she looked up. Her eyes were a soft pale blue and she looked pleadingly at me.*

*"Can we help it?" she asked, holding out the baby finch that was cupped in her hands.*

*"Its wing is broken," she explained, her voice was soft and held a slight huskiness to it. She looked pale and seemed more fragile than the broken bird she held. I bent down and gently took the bird from her noticing her slender fingers. There was a sadness that pervaded her and I embraced it, immediately sensing her need but not knowing how to fill it.*

*"I will take it to Thorton, he's our local vet," I said and she looked reassured. She had stood up then, revealing a rather odd bohemian shawl style coat, and beneath it I glimpsed the hint of a colourful skirt. Her long dark hair was tied back and she wore no makeup but I thought her the most beautiful creature.*

*"I'm Virginia, we moved here yesterday." The huskiness was more apparent now, like someone who smoked too much. Virginia, the name suited her. She smelt of jasmine and vanilla instantly reminding me of hot summer holidays at Aunt Vanessa's. Mother would lean across and marvel at my sand castles and I would smell her delicious fragrance, a mixture of Nivea cream and some wonderful perfume that would smell of Jasmine and Vanilla.*

*"So clever aren't you poppet?" She would say admiringly and I would swell with pride.*

*They had moved to 'Starkfield House' she said, but she seemed restless and preoccupied with the injured bird held loosely in my hand. I promised to take care of it immediately and sadly had to make a hasty, if reluctant retreat, from her. Thorton had later assured me the bird would be fine. Would the fragile broken bird named Virginia also survive I wondered? I could visit but then perhaps...*

*"Jonathan," it was a panicky cry followed by a crashing sound and the pen slipped from his fingers, scratching a dramatic black line across the page. He looked at the large oak grandfather clock given to him by his parents. It was seven p.m. Mrs Peterson would most certainly have left and a grateful sigh escaped his lips. How did they manage to live this lie? Or did they? He closed the journal with a thud and wearily Rector Jonathan Byrnes left his study, locking the door behind him.*

# Chapter One

I arrived earlier than expected. I thought my journey would take me a day and half at the least and had anticipated the possibility of finding lodgings and continuing my travels the following morning. However, to my surprise I reached the town closest to the village of Millbridge late in the afternoon on the same day of my departure. A sign ahead directed me to the village that was now ten miles away. I was breathlessly impressed by the snow-covered landscape that seemed endless. The small country lanes that directed me to Millbridge had been roughly cleared and mountains of snow sat on the roadside. It was bitterly cold but I wore only a shirt and trousers for the car heater was keeping me comfortably warm. On the back seat was my jacket and overcoat. I began to feel pangs of nervousness. I knew how close knit villagers could be and this was my first post as rector. I was armed with very little information. I knew that Saint Marks was one of the oldest churches in England, but of the previous reverend I had been given no explanation. It was surreal. Three weeks ago I had been ordained and now here I was a few miles from my new community. A sharp bend took me over the bridge of an iced stream and then I saw the sign, 'Millbridge, please drive slowly through the village'. Ahead of me was a clearing and I took the opportunity to stop and study my instructions although I knew them off my heart. 'Key to front door of Vicarage will be under doormat. All other keys for house will be on hook in the porch.' I couldn't help but wonder who had arranged the keys for me and what the house would be like. I again read the directions to my new home. I was to drive through the village, past the post office and then about hundred yards to the left I should see the entrance to the Rectory. I drove slowly as the sign had instructed and admired the small hamlet of Millbridge. All the front gardens were covered in snow, and the delicious smell of burning wood stealthily crept into the car. Smoke billowed from chimneys and I pictured the inhabitants sitting snugly in front of their open fires and dearly hoped the Rectory had some other form of heating for it would take me forever to get a fire going, should I need to. There were no street lamps and I silently cursed, for it was becoming quite dark now and I had not thought to bring a torch. I then glimpsed what appeared to be the post office but in the gloom it was difficult to distinguish. Reluctantly, I stopped the car and climbed out, the icy air cutting through me like a sword. As soon as I read the words 'Millbridge Post Office' I ran back closing the door quickly behind me. For a while I sat shivering and again dread seized me when I realised there may be no heat at the house. I drove a little further and it seemed as though I was leaving the village when suddenly I saw a house on the left. An outside light was

on and I could make out a plaque on the old wooden gates, 'The Rectory'. Carefully I manoeuvred the car onto the gravel driveway and with a contented sigh turned off the engine, leaving the headlights on. The house was larger than I had imagined. I grabbed my overcoat and struggled to put it on. Finding the key was quite easy and once in the house I began wandering from room to room. I was astonished to find them all fully furnished. My allowance for dwelling would now go much further. I had been advised the house was partly furnished but this surpassed all my expectations. Had my direction to the Rectory not been so clear, I would seriously have considered myself in the wrong house. The sitting room was as cosy as I could ever want. A large sofa and a comfortable old chair occupied most of the room, apart from an old dresser that housed a single bottle of whiskey, the sight of which filled me with comfort. Faint dust covered the dresser like talcum powder but I could distinguish small areas that had avoided the dust onslaught. On closer inspection one could see the marks of where, once, perhaps there had been a photograph or an ornament of some kind. All the rooms were the same, each adequately furnished. One however, I could not enter for it was locked, immediately arousing my curiosity.

Surprisingly the sitting room was still warm from the dying embers of a fire. I was about to collect my luggage when the door opened and an elegantly dressed woman entered.

"You must be Reverend Kelston. I'm afraid you have taken us a little by surprise, we were expecting you tomorrow. I'm Jessica Ridgeway, deacon of the parish." Her voice was as clear as crystal. I imagined her to be about mid-sixties and admired her appearance, she was well built but not overweight and carried herself with a superior sophistication. Her hair was thick and wavy and just reached her strong jaw line. Her eyes were wide and watery and she dabbed at them several times with a tissue, which she then transferred to her small neat nose. I presumed she had a cold.

I held out my hand.

"Please call me Matthew. Thank you for the fire."

She barely touched my hand before pulling it away again.

"There is a basket of wood by the fireplace and lots more outside. I made a casserole for you, it's in the fridge. The beds are freshly made, I will drop by tomorrow and take you to the church."

She turned to leave and I was disappointed she had not mentioned the reverend that had previously occupied the house.

"The Rector that was here before, what happened to him? Most of his furniture is still here. It's rather nice for me but quite strange." I tried to sound light hearted as I had already deduced something odd must have taken place and wanted to tread carefully.

She stopped instantly and became, for a second, very still and then I saw her breathing had become rapid and her motionless figure seemed suddenly to tremble.

“We don’t like to discuss Rector Byrnes, I hope you will respect that. All keys for the house are hanging in the porch. I will see you in the morning. Good night.”

I stood transfixed as the door closed behind her. My mind began churning. Something was amiss here of that I was certain. Bewildered, I walked to the fire and threw on some logs, then realising I was quite hungry, went into the kitchen and put the casserole dish in the oven. I then went out to the car to fetch my luggage. This took me close on an hour as I had brought many books. In all that time not one person came to acknowledge my arrival, which I thought surprising, as there were many cottages nearby.

It was much later after feeling satisfied from my meal that I chose to explore. Most of the rooms were uninteresting and all the drawers in the bedrooms were empty. One bedroom I somehow felt to be more masculine and chose that for myself. Tomorrow, I decided, I would try the keys and attempt to enter the locked one. I went into what seemed to be the study and began to rummage through the drawers. This time, I struck lucky, finding headed stationery, which, disappointingly, I couldn’t use, but instead tried it in the old battered typewriter that sat on the desk. It was rather quaint but I decided life wouldn’t be the same without my laptop. Yawning, I realised it was time to retire. Just as I was about to close the top drawer, I saw a leather- bound book pushed to the back. Curiously I pulled it out and opened the first page. The words were beautifully written and simply said, ‘Journal of Jonathan Byrnes’. Suddenly my breathing became rapid, and I closed it abruptly. I couldn’t read another man’s journal, or could I? For if Jessica Ridgeway, had been speaking for the whole village when she said ‘we don’t like to discuss Rector Byrnes’, then perhaps only one person could tell me what had happened to him. Instantly awake now, I opened the journal. A small sheet of paper fluttered to the floor. I retrieved it swiftly and read the untitled hand written poem slowly.

*The life that I have  
Is all that I have  
And the life that I have  
Is yours  
The love that I have  
Of the life that I have  
Is yours, and yours, and yours.  
A sleep I shall have  
A rest I shall have  
Yet death will be but a pause,  
For the peace of my years*

Lynda Renham

*In the long green grass  
Will be yours, and yours, and yours.*

There was an indiscernible single letter scribbled at the end, presumably the mark of the writer.

Not understanding what it meant, or from whence it came, I carefully replaced it and then with apprehension, began reading the journal.

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## Journal Entry

*Mrs Peterson knows our secret, or at least one of them. Rowena collapsed again last night. Poor Rosemary Peterson, such a pious woman, I could not lie. But I would have done had it been anyone other than her. I saw the horror in her eyes and also the pity. She thinks I am God, if she knew of my sin what would it do to her? So many people I am lying to.*

*Dear Rowena, how she is tortured. I ought to free her, allow her to be what she is. I no longer know how to help. I cannot take away this thing that eats away within her. Almighty Father, why do you test me unmercifully? I am helpless. I watch this suffering every day and I know I am the only one that can release her. Today I wrote my sermon for Sunday and as I did so I could not help wondering if Virginia would come. Suddenly she is a light in my slow decline. I sense a pain in her. I can see she is imprisoned in much the same way. Or am I just trying to find a kindred spirit? I, unlike everyone else, can never share my hell. I am in a dark abyss where there is not a chink of light to show me the way. I am alone in this painful void. I feel so weak. I give hope to so many people. I am the one with all the answers. I am entombed, hovering on the brink of something I don't understand. I now only have questions and who will give me the answers. It is ironic how afraid I am to let go. My life once had purpose. I am a lost soul. Why will they not aid me? Once angels protected me, now I am tormented by those who represent what I once believed in. We will move you to a new diocese that will help Rowena, give her something to focus on they had said half-heartedly. They didn't want to know about her, she was a shame they would extinguish like a candle if they could. But Rowena is my wife and that makes her somewhat a liability. What should I do? Take her to a doctor and ask him to remove this thing inside her? It cannot be done. Only she can free herself, by releasing her strong religious beliefs. If I let him go from my life what will I do? Could I stand the loneliness and isolation? Without his love and guidance, how would I live? But, I no longer feel I can continue. Answer my questions Lord and restore my faith. I watch Rowena suffering and although it goes against all my beliefs, I cannot condemn it for I no longer believe it to be a sickness. I do not know where I am heading but I am desperately afraid, for I feel you are no longer with me and I fear maybe you never have been. I no longer believe in your existence. I cannot see you but I can see Rowena's pain and*

*am so torn. If I reveal my lack of faith I may release her and she could accept herself, but at the same time I have to disillusion so many people. If only I had someone to talk to and share this with.*

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I closed the book abruptly. It was incomprehensible to me for a rector to lose his faith. What terrible tragedy could have befallen upon him and presumably his wife? I felt my hands tremble as nightmarish thoughts entered my head. What had been wrong with her? How could he say they would extinguish her like a candle? I couldn't for one moment imagine the church abandoning him. I knew if I read on I would probably discover more but as a newly ordained reverend I was almost afraid of what I should read. I leant back in the large leather chair that I imagined he had once reclined in, and sipped from the whiskey I had allowed as an indulgence after my long journey. Why did he leave it behind? I found myself wondering about the woman named Virginia and shuddered when I remembered his words. Did she still live in the village? How many secrets did this village hold? My heart sunk at the realisation that I might never be accepted here. I looked at my watch and gasped. It was almost one a.m. I closed the door of the study wearily and went to bed where I had a fitful sleep. The Journal had disturbed me immensely. I arose early and was relieved to find fresh bread and jam in a plentiful pantry. It occurred to me that I would need to ask Jessica how I would go about finding a housekeeper, for there would be precious little time for me to undertake domestic chores, that was, of course, if I chose to stay. I felt quite angry but was not sure whom with. Certainly, someone should have informed me about what had happened. Most importantly, I had resolved to elicit from Jessica all she knew about Rector Byrnes. After breakfast, with a bunch of keys in my hand I attempted the locked door. I was bitterly disappointed when none would fit. I went back to the study and again hunted through the drawers, only to be left frustrated. In earnest I began to search frantically throughout the house but to no avail. Then, as if sent a vision I raced back upstairs and reached above the door with my hand, encountering a pile of dust as I slid it along the ledge. My heart lurched when I touched it. How simple, why did I not think of it before? Now I had the key, I felt trepidation at opening the door. I took a deep breath, turned the key and flung the door wide. Light filled the room for the drapes had been tied back. I stared uncomprehendingly. It was the room of an artist. Paintings covered both the wall and the floors. The room was large. Shelves full of art books lined the wall were and littered with artist's paint, brushes and the odd blank canvas. The light in the room was almost magical casting strange illusions on the paintings. In one corner was a large easel with an unfinished painting. I began to walk towards it when a voice stopped me.

"Good morning Rector."

Jessica stood in the doorway. I felt cross with her and I hoped it showed.

"Mrs Ridgeway." I acknowledged

I gestured with my hand.

"So Rector Byrnes used to paint?"

She gave me a cold stare.

"Would you like to see the church?" She asked as if I hadn't spoken.

I sighed.

"Actually, no."

She inclined her head and her eyes widened.

"But..." She began, before I quickly interrupted.

"You see, there is no point. I am not staying. I cannot gain the confidence of a community that seems to have a secret. I am well aware that no one in this village is going to tell me what happened here. I shall inform my superiors and ask for another diocese."

I was being unreasonable and knew it but I couldn't stop myself. It was petulant of me to judge a whole village so readily but I felt I ought to be told the truth. She seemed to have difficulty in swallowing. Then she straightened her body and looked me directly in the eyes. I noticed her eyes were clearer today and all signs of her cold had gone.

"You may wish that you had never been told." She warned leaning towards me almost menacingly.

"I think that is my choice, don't you?"

Continuing to look directly at me she seemed to consider her next words.

"Actually, it was Rowena who painted, not Jonathan. Rowena was his wife."

She turned from the room.

"Could we perhaps have some tea?" She asked.

In my excitement I almost rushed her downstairs. I told her about the journal as I made tea.

"It does not seem right to read further." I said virtuously.

"It was left for a reason. Besides he won't need it now." She sounded weary. Perhaps, for her, there had already been too much talk of Rector Byrnes.

We sat at the kitchen table and through the eyes of Jessica Ridgeway and the words of Jonathan Byrnes I discovered the story I am about to relate to you now. For, you see, this story is not about me but another rector. I am simply the storyteller. It all began one hot summer in London just over two years ago with preparations for a birthday party.