

# PARALLEL TRIANGLE

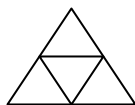


Earth and Earthzad ... parallel worlds so close, yet destined never to cross paths – until a technological breakthrough allows one man, Orion, to be the first Earthzadian to cross dimensions and walk among Earthlings for a short time. With events on Earth sometimes affecting areas of technologically more advanced Earthzad, the people of Orion's region have a vested interest in Earth and its problems. For Earthzad's safety, it is decreed that Earth must never learn of the existence of its sister parallel world.

A group of gifted Earthzadian women can communicate with receptive Earth women through limited telepathy known as the Sight. Orion's trans-dimensional device makes him visible only to Earth women with the Sight. During his momentous first brief visit to Earth, Orion checks on a modest English woman, Elizabeth, who's recently been given the Sight. A new Seer, Elizabeth is supposed to prevent the kidnapping of a young girl. Unaware of what's happening to her when she experiences the visions sent to her by the Earthzadian women, Elizabeth begins to doubt her sanity. Orion wants to help Elizabeth in her task to protect the child, but he is not permitted to reveal himself or let it be known that his parallel world exists. And so he must observe Elizabeth from afar. As he watches her, he realizes how persistent and courageous she is, and his respect and admiration for her grows.

Upon his return home, Orion hopes to be a hero to his people for accomplishing a feat thought until then to be impossible. But he finds himself more interested in being a hero in the eyes of Jacosta, the beautiful woman who rules his region of Earthzad. He and Jacosta clash on a personal level that makes him even more determined to win her. Falling in love with Orion, Jacosta nevertheless rebuffs him for private reasons unknown to him. On the rebound, he finds himself becoming increasingly involved with Elizabeth in successive trips back to Earth, and eventually reveals himself to her.

Jacosta and Elizabeth are dimensions apart, but Orion is drawn to both of them. Can a man love two women at the same time – while one resides in another dimension where he cannot remain? Orion knows he must choose between Jacosta and Elizabeth, but circumstances – and their hearts – dictate otherwise, trapping the three of them in a love triangle spanning parallel worlds ... a parallel triangle.



## PARALLEL TRIANGLE

by

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Licensed and Produced through

**Penumbra Publishing**

*www.PenumbraPublishing.com*

Printed in USA

ISBN/EAN-13: 978-1935563303

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Also available in EBOOK – ISBN/EAN-13: 978-1935563297

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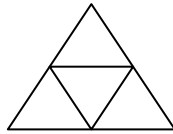
*Publisher Note:* Original British spelling and terms used by the author have been preserved in the US edition of this book.

~AUTHOR DEDICATION~

To Leon, my dear husband and truest friend.



# PARALLEL TRIANGLE



by

**Sandy Hyatt-James**



## Chapter One

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The stinging December wind swooped and switched, lifting up the musicians' sheet music and whipping underneath the shoppers' coats and hats. With each gust, they huddled together like Emperor Penguins.

To help her stay warm, Elizabeth bought a steaming cappuccino and joined the crowd, waiting outside England's Leamington Spa indoor shopping centre. The band struck up the opening chords of *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*, her favourite carol, just as she wedged herself in between an elderly couple and a group of teenage girls.

Four carols later, the afternoon grew darker and colder. The band took shelter in the indoor shopping precinct and the crowd dispersed. Elizabeth hurried inside Loots, the chain-store chemists, to get a passport photograph.

Finding the photograph booth occupied, she passed the time while waiting by watching a small boy over in Santa's grotto. He'd taken a dislike to a shabbily-clad Santa, who offered him a present. The child's mother looked on. Hot and embarrassed, she tried to get her son to stop wailing. Elizabeth felt sorry for her, especially when the child refused to stand any longer and slumped into a spluttering bundle on the floor.

"Are you going in now?"

Turning around, Elizabeth saw an auburn-haired girl, whose eyes peeped through a thick layer of eye make-up. "It's vacant," the girl said, pointing to the photo booth.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was daydreaming." Elizabeth stepped inside and arranged the back curtain to her liking. After feeding the money-slot, she sat throughout the four flashes with a fixed smile.

Moments later, the strip of photos dropped through the chute. She took them and, knowing that she always took a bad photo, prepared herself for disappointment. However, she wasn't ready for what she actually saw. Frowning, she held the photos closer to her eyes before waylaying the auburn-

haired girl as she came out of the booth. "What do you think of this?" she asked. Her now trembling fingers pointed to the third photo on the strip.

The girl looked confused, but nevertheless did as asked and glanced down at the particular photo. "Um ... it's not as good as the others, but it'll do for a passport."

Elizabeth's incredulous look startled her, and both women gawped at each other for a couple of seconds. The girl's own photographs dropped down the chute and broke the silence. She took them and turned to go.

Elizabeth gripped her arm harder than she'd intended. The girl swirled around with a shocked expression and opened her mouth to protest.

"But what do you see in this one, the third one down?" Elizabeth asked. "It's not a photo of me, is it? It can't be!"

The girl shook off Elizabeth's hand and rubbed her arm. She looked down at the strip of photographs once more. "Yeah, it's you. Who else would it be?"

Elizabeth gave her a dumb stare.

Unsure whether the stranger before her was all there or not, the girl hesitated for a moment. "The only thing different about it is that you look sort of miserable in the third one." She waited again for a response. When none came, she hurried away.

Elizabeth wandered towards the dispensary section. She told herself that it must be a fault with the machine, even though she knew that explanation was feeble.

She noticed two middle-aged women chatting beside the cold and flu remedies. Two heavily laden carrier-bags lay at their feet.

"Excuse me," Elizabeth interrupted. "This photograph ... it isn't a photograph of me, is it?" She pointed to the third image on the strip.

Both women responded with surprised gazes. However, they answered the request and looked down at the image in question. They then glanced up to compare it to the odd young woman standing pale-faced before them.

"Yes, it's you," the larger woman replied.

Elizabeth sat on the chair to the left of the dispensary.

"Are you all right?" asked the smaller woman. "She does look pale, doesn't she?"

The larger woman agreed.

Concerned now, both women moved closer to Elizabeth. "Are you going to be sick, dear?"

"I ... don't think so. Thanks, I'll be all right now."

The two women hurried back to their shopping bags, scooped them up, and walked away.

Elizabeth sat for a few moments until finding the courage to look at the odd photograph again. It should have been a picture of her, but instead was of a small girl aged around seven. The child had a lost and fearful expression on her face.

After five minutes of adjusting to the shock, Elizabeth got up to leave. The photographs dropped from her lap, and a passing Loots assistant picked them up for her.

"I don't want them."

"Are you sure?" said the assistant. "It's a waste to throw them away."

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment and then said, "I suppose I've got to take them."

The assistant smiled and handed them back. "Merry Christmas."

\* \* \* \* \*

Outside, the early evening darkness added a keener chill to the cold. Frost had formed on the shop windows, and ice skimmed over puddles on the ground.

Elizabeth looked up at the sky and guessed it was going to snow. This would have made her excited only a couple of hours before. *But not now*, she told herself. *Not after this*. She pulled her scarf further up to her chin and headed for the car-park. After only a few paces, she felt compelled to look at the photos again. Stopping in a jeweller's doorway, she got them from her coat-pocket and looked at them again. Her hope of the whole thing being an illusion crashed. The child's face, in lieu of hers, was still there. Scared and lightheaded, she leaned against the wall and whispered, "This is unreal; it has to be!"

Two teenage boys, passing by, stared at her in the doorway. "This is

unreal; this is unreal!" they mimicked.

To calm down, she concentrated on breathing slowly. Moments later, her gaze fell on a pavement waste bin. *It would be so easy*, she thought, *to take two steps forward and deposit the photos in it*. But her inner voice told her not to. *Why?* she whispered in her head. *Just keep them*, came the reply. She put them back into her pocket and headed for the car park.

The thought of going back to her lonely house troubled her. She wanted to tell her sister what had happened, but Emma lived in the Warwickshire countryside, and it was about to snow. Deciding that if she hurried, she could get there before it got too deep, she broke into a trot. After only a few paces, however, she almost collided with a couple of people at a bus stop, slipped on some ice, and then fell down. One of her knees hit something sharp in the gutter, but instead of stopping to check it, she got up and carried on running.

Once in the car park, she leaned against her vehicle, put her head in her arms, and waited for her breathing to return to normal. Despite the cold, sweat trickled down her back, and she felt nauseous.

"Are you okay?"

She turned and saw a woman getting out of the car next to her. "Yes, thanks." she said. Embarrassed, she hurried inside her car and took care to fix her eyes on the windscreen.

When pulling away, she saw the dark figure of a man ahead, who seemed to be watching her. She drove towards the exit and searched for him again in the rear-view mirror, but by then he had gone. The sighting was so fleeting, like an old cinema projection, but enough to push her fight or flight button further.

It began to snow, lightly at first, but by the time she'd driven to the outskirts of the town, her windscreen wipers struggled to cope with a full-blown blizzard. Even though desperate to get to her sister's house, she had no choice other than to slow down to crawling pace.

Her leg throbbed. She stretched downwards, touched the wound, and swore loudly. At least Emma would be able to deal with it. And, when she thought about the odd photo of the little girl, her wound was nothing to worry about, by comparison.

## Chapter Two

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Orion savoured the moment of being the first Earthzadian to jump the Barrier and get to the Earth world. While standing invisibly in one of its department stores, fulfilling his voluntary assignment by watching an Earth Seer called Elizabeth, he knew he was making history.

In his hand he held an amazing piece of equipment, shaped like a five-sided pocket watch. The instrument had physically transported him from Earthzad into the Earth world. As the very first human to field-test the technology, he would receive a hero's welcome when he returned home – if he managed to get back in one piece.

Looking around at the Earth people hurrying about, he grew fascinated by the way they exchanged pieces of plastic for things they then put in receptacles. Apart from dressing differently, they seemed the same as Earthzadians. Their browbeaten expressions, however, compounded the Earthzadian view that, for the most part, Earthlings were dull and uninteresting. He'd also heard that many of them were warlike, capricious and self-serving.

He didn't know why Earth people were like that. According to Earthzadian palaeontologists and archaeologists, both Earth and Earthzad were the same age. When Earth came into existence, its smaller, parallel world – his world – was created at the same time.

He laughed for a moment. In the now defunct Earthzadian ancient language, the word *zad* was a preposition, meaning behind. So the name Earthzad literally meant *behind Earth*. Yet, there was nothing behind about his world. Earthzad was far more advanced technologically than Earth. There were fewer Earthzadians, though, since Earthzad had only a quarter of the population of that on Earth.

His thoughts returned to the present and the excitement of the occasion. At such a momentous time, he felt proud to be from Mardak. All Mardakans had taken an oath to respect the people in the other, parallel

world, despite their weaknesses, and help them whenever possible. Up until now, this help had come in the form of communicating between minds. With the help of the new Varat technology, though, he knew other possibilities would soon be explored.

Noticing Elizabeth's shocked expression when she viewed her photographs, he jolted out of his reverie. She looked upset, frightened even. But then, he knew she had good cause to be scared, because now she would become inexorably mixed up in what was going to happen to her!

Dorta had informed him that morning that this particular Earth Seer would receive the first of her premonitions from them. "We'll find a way of letting her know today," she'd said. "That way, the Seer's message will coincide with your sighting her. We know that she intends to get a photograph of herself, so we're going to try out a new, innovative way of transmitting our telepathy. Exciting, isn't it?"

Orion frowned. Dorta's new method of changing images of photographs was certainly exciting for *her*; but clearly not for the Seer.

Taking care to stay out of her sight, he followed Elizabeth outside and saw her stop to look at the photographs again. Her chilled features expressed even more dismay. Making matters worse, two youths came by and mocked her. For a moment, he was tempted to reach out and bang their heads together. He couldn't. Even though they wouldn't be able to see him, Elizabeth would, since she had the Sight.

*Why, he thought, couldn't his people have chosen male Earth subjects to be Seers?* Men, being less highly strung than women, were much better at dealing with general stress. But then, he knew that certain select Earth women, the intelligent, sensitive ones, proved to be more perceptive and better able to receive Earthzadian messages than any of the men.

He wondered whether all the efforts his people had put into helping those on Earth were worth it. After all, so much crime and so many misdeeds went on in the Earth world, a small parallel universe like theirs couldn't hope to contain it all. Dorta and her women were always complaining that there weren't enough Earth Seers to help them in alleviating the sizeable amount of grief on Earth.

This woman Elizabeth had become a precious commodity to them, and

the Disseminators would transmit messages from their minds to her mind, as they did all Seers, via a process which the Earth people termed 'telepathy.' He knew from Dorta that many Earth people thought such a phenomenon was hokum. It wasn't. For centuries, ever since the world began and the division between the Earth and Earthzad had happened, Mardak women had been facilitating telepathic premonitions to selected Earth women – those who were hyper-perceptive.

He broke into a trot to follow his subject. Moments later, he saw her slip and injure herself. Instinctively he surged forward to help her, but again reined himself in, knowing that he mustn't let her see him. The Varat experiment, for now, must remain unknown to the people of Earth. Perhaps some time in the future, when Earth society was more stable, the people of Earthzad could openly commune with their Earth counterparts. But that time certainly had not yet arrived. For the safety of Earthzad, he had to maintain anonymity.

The Seer Elizabeth got to her feet and continued running. While following her, he thought it might be better if Earth Seers knew why they were singled out by his people to receive telepathic messages. But they had no idea, due to the ignorance imposed on them by the reigning people of Earthzad. For better or worse, Earthzad's own protection came first, and the people of the Earth with the Sight must never know about their twin dimension.

Now in the car-park, he watched Elizabeth lean on her vehicle to rest from running. At that moment he wanted to go back to Earthzad and get away from the crowd and the cold weather. And, if he was honest, he didn't really care about this Elizabeth woman. Nevertheless, he felt he couldn't just leave her in her current emotional state.

When her car pulled out of the car park, he glanced at the Varat's tracking device and noted she was journeying south. He pressed the device's green dial and dematerialised to travel with her in the back of the vehicle. Once she arrived safely at wherever she was going, he decided he would be able to return home.

## Chapter Three

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“Lizzie! What are you doing out on an evening like this? Bloody hell! What happened?”

Elizabeth hobbled into her sister’s house. “I had to drive like a comatose snail because of the snow. On top of that, my car’s heater’s had it, and I’ve hurt my leg.” The sharp change in temperature rushed to her face, down her throat, and made her cough. Her injured leg throbbed harder. She collapsed at the bottom of the stairs with a groan.

Emma turned from Elizabeth to battle the wind outside and close the front door. When she turned back, she adjusted the hall’s light-switch from dim to bright. Elizabeth blinked and put up her hand to shield her eyes from the intensified light. Emma tried to help her to her feet. “Come into the lounge. There’s a lovely fire in there and ... God! How did that happen?” She gazed at the tear in her sister’s jeans, surrounding her swollen wound. She called for her husband Geoff.

Their two children stood in the doorway. “Is Auntie Lizzie poorly?” eight year-old twins Helen and Andrew asked. Andrew moved forward and brushed against his aunt’s wound when he hugged her. She cried with pain, gritted her teeth, and pointed to the offending area. In response, the children positioned themselves on her good leg’s side.

Geoff appeared and helped Elizabeth into the lounge, onto a comfy chair. He then poured her a shot of brandy.

Emma kneeled to inspect the injury and told the children to fetch a couple of blankets.

“How bad is it?” Elizabeth asked.

“I’ve seen worse.” Emma glanced up at Elizabeth. “I’ll have to make sure you haven’t got any debris stuck in it. It’s a good thing I’m a nurse, but you still should have gone to the hospital. It should have been stitched.”

Elizabeth groaned again while her sister prodded about. When the pain got too much, she took a large swallow of brandy.

“How did it happen?”

“I slipped on some ice. Emma, I’ve got to tell you something.”

“In a minute, let’s get this leg seen to first.”

The children returned, dragging two car rugs behind them. These, they helped their mother wrap around their aunt. Now satisfied that Elizabeth was comfortable, Emma herded Geoff and the children out of the room in search of bandages and antiseptic.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alone, Elizabeth turned her head towards the fire and felt her muscles warm and soften. Her eyelids drooped. The brandy numbed the pain in her leg and, because she’d had no food since breakfast, it also made her drowsy.

In the corner of the room, the grandmother clock’s rhythmic ticking further relaxed her. She yawned and took another sip of the brandy. Her eyes watered. She closed them. The last conscious sounds she remembered hearing were the clock’s ticking and the sound of the wind rattling against the window behind her.

\* \* \* \* \*

*She stood in the middle of the High Street, humming Hark, the Herald Angels Sing. It wasn’t dark. Instead, it was that twilight only known to the unconscious mind. Ahead of her, across the road, was Loots the Chemist. A feeling of foreboding accompanied her as she crossed the street and she searched for other people. But she knew she was alone. Everywhere was silent.*

*When stepping over the store’s threshold, she felt the draught from the swing-door as it blew on her back. But Loots wasn’t warm and busy now. It was empty and cold. There were no people, no assistants or merchandise, nothing except for a shape in the corner at the other side of the long room. It was a photograph booth.*

*She walked forward and heard her own footsteps echoing as she walked. Upon reaching the entrance to the booth, she put her hand on the*

*curtain, but felt afraid to draw it aside. She heard a sound from inside and stepped back. The curtain swished and drew back, and a small child appeared. The little girl stepped outside the booth. Elizabeth knew then that this was the child in the photograph.*

*She knew also the child needed help and tried to get to her, but her sore leg wouldn't let her go any further. She sank to the ground as the pain in her leg grew more terrible. The child ran towards Elizabeth, but something from within the booth dragged her back again.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Sorry about the pain, Lizzie. I thought I could avoid some of it by cleaning the wound while you were asleep." Emma's voice came to Elizabeth faintly, like a distant telephone link.

"It's the little girl in my photo again," whispered Elizabeth, "She's in danger!"

Emma tapped her cheek. "Wake up, Lizzie, you're mumbling a load of nonsense!"

Elizabeth looked up and saw two worried faces peering down at her. She closed her eyes again and tried to squeeze away the memory of the child's face.

Emma turned to Geoff. "We shouldn't have given her that brandy!"

"I'll go and make some coffee," he replied.

While watching Emma cut some gauze for the wound, Elizabeth wondered how she should recount her extraordinary tale.

Geoff returned and handed Elizabeth a cup of coffee.

Emma glanced up from her bandaging. "That was quite a dream you were having then, Lizzie."

"It wasn't a dream. It was a prediction, or a premonition of some sort."

"Yeah, right." She smiled, threw her sister a disbelieving glance, and continued dressing the leg.

Nobody spoke for a few seconds, until Elizabeth said, "Emms, would you fetch my coat for me?"

"You're not thinking of going home now, are you? In this weather?"

"No. But there's something in my coat pocket that I want both of you to see."

The bandage now in place, Emma got up and fetched her sister's coat.

Elizabeth produced the strip of photographs from one of its pockets and handed it to her.

"What's so special about these?" Emma asked.

"One of those pictures isn't of me – the third one down."

Emma smiled. "Not of you?"

"Before you say anything, I know that what you're seeing is a picture of me. But I'm seeing a picture of a child, and not a very happy one at that!"

She felt foolish in the midst of Emma and Geoff's bewildered expressions. "That photograph and the dream I've just had; I think they're premonitions," she said.

Emma sat beside her.

"I know it's crazy, but I've got to tell you what I think is going on. I have this power, you see. I thought about it a lot when I was driving here. Do you remember when we were children, Emma, and I said I'd seen a ghost?"

Emma frowned and looked puzzled.

"You know, when I was alone in the classroom?"

"Oh yes. But none of us took you seriously. I remember Mum and Dad saying you'd been reading too many of those Tolkein stories, and they'd made you fanciful."

Elizabeth laughed at the word her parents used all the time to describe her. "I'm not fanciful! That ghost was real to me!"

She sipped her coffee and wondered what she could say next that would be more convincing. "Since then, nothing else like that has happened, and over the years I thought that maybe I wasn't different after all. But now this has happened ... this photograph thing." She glanced at the photos, now in Geoff's hands.

"You mean," he said, pointing to the third picture, "that you don't see a picture of yourself in this one?"

"No. I showed it to three people when I was in Loots. They all saw what you see – me. But what I see is a child, a small girl that I sense is in

some kind of trouble. It's a premonition ... I'm sure of it."

The more she spoke, the more absurd Elizabeth knew it must have sounded to them. "I ... don't know why I'm experiencing these weird happenings. Maybe the child's going to be caught up in something dangerous, and maybe I'm supposed to be the one to get her out of it. Or perhaps I'm supposed to warn somebody else that she's about to be in trouble."

Geoff put the photos on the coffee table. "That's bloody ridiculous!" He was about to launch an attack on the very idea of the supernatural, the occult, and any other like phenomenon. However, he noted Elizabeth's embarrassment and said in a softer tone, "You surely don't believe all that crap about ghosts and premonitions do you?"

She didn't answer, and the three of them avoided each other's faces for a moment. Emma eventually got up to draw the curtains.

"Well, somebody has to believe me!" said Elizabeth. She looked hopefully at Geoff, only to see him pick up the paper and hide his face behind it.

"I know you well enough to know that you never lie, unless you have to," said Emma.

Elizabeth sighed and whispered, "Thank God somebody around here doesn't think I'm a lunatic!"

"I believe you," Emma added. "But ... bloody-hell, Lizzie, this is scary."

\* \* \* \* \*

After putting the children to bed, Emma returned to the lounge and peered out of the window. "I don't think you should go home tonight, Lizzie. It's still snowing, and you've got that leg to contend with."

"I don't like the idea of driving home in it either." *And*, she thought to herself, *if some awful clanger is about to happen, I don't want it to be when I'm alone in my house.*

"You can stay as long as you like. You know that." Emma sat opposite her. "Damn, I'm on the early shift tomorrow! I'll have to set off early; there's nothing else for it. It's going to take me ages to get to work in this weather."

She got up. "I'm going to turn in now. You should as well. You must be tired after all that's happened today."

She helped Elizabeth to hobble up the stairs. "I'll get some pyjamas and other bits and pieces you can borrow." She noted Elizabeth's worried face. "Look, don't get all panicky about that photo thing. I believe what you said, right enough. But don't forget that you've always been, well, artistic and dreamy."

"Yeah, and you think that goes with the territory?"

She hugged Elizabeth. "We'll discuss it tomorrow, when I get back from the hospital. She hurried off to find the promised night requisites for her sister.

Later, while preparing for bed, Elizabeth looked again at the photographs. *Geoff was right*, she thought. *The whole thing was preposterous*. But what was she supposed to do? Just wait until this ... whatever is was, decided to let her know what it expected of her?

She felt resentful at that moment, for it seemed that she was now enslaved to an unknown body which, for all she knew, might only have been a figment of her imagination. She threw the photographs down on the dressing table and resolved not to think about them a moment longer.

Picking up Emma's spare hairbrush, she sat before the mirror and brushed her hair. Her mind wandered back to the strange woman, who really didn't seem like a ghost, whom she'd met all those years ago in the classroom. Was she a dream? Were Emma and her parents right? Had she read too many imaginative books that warped her perceptive capability?

She knew she had a powerful imagination. How else could she do her job without one? Being a freelance illustrator of children's books and comics required her imagination to soar away. Still, she couldn't convince herself that she'd inadvertently conjured that strange woman up like that.

But then ... why hadn't she seen her since, or any other ghost for that matter? Maybe ... maybe she *had* been dreaming then. A flicker of relief came to her until she remembered the shadowy figure of a man in the car park. "And who the hell was he?" she whispered to her mirror's image.

Shivering, she pulled Emma's spare dressing gown around her and gazed again at her reflection in the mirror. She wished then that she was

blonde and pretty like her sister. Instead, she had this thin face and a stubby nose. Her blue-grey eyes were interesting, she decided, and her coppery-brown hair was long and passable. She was slim and didn't have to diet like her friends. But, dammit, there was no getting away from the fact that her face was *plain*. She poked her tongue out at herself and turned away.

Before getting into bed, she picked up the photographs again, hoping the mirage or whatever it was had deserted her. It hadn't. The child's image was still there. But now there was something different: a bruise on her left cheek, which hadn't been there that morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first thing she did the following morning was check the photographs again. Nothing had changed. "Thank God for that!" she whispered out loud, and dropped the strip back on the dresser.

On her way downstairs she peeped through the hall window and saw that more snow had fallen in the night. That, she knew, meant she wouldn't be able to get back to her home to finish off some sketches. She'd wanted those out of the way so she'd have the weekend free to go out with her friends. The deadline for handing the work in was the following Monday. However, another look outside at the white wilderness, with no discernible paths of any description, told her that going anywhere by car right then would be crazy.

*There was nothing else to do*, she thought, while hobbling further down the stairs, *but stay put and pray for a swift change in the weather.*

The smell of toast greeted her when she entered the kitchen. Emma paced back and forth in the kitchen while speaking on her mobile. When the conversation finished, she abandoned the phone on the kitchen cupboard and cut two doorstep-sized pieces of bread.

Elizabeth smiled. Ever since they were children together in Lancashire, toasted doorsteps were the only things that her mother could ever get her sister to eat in the morning. "Our Emms doesn't sound too happy," she whispered, turning to Geoff.

He looked up from settling the children down to breakfast. "Oh, she's

just been phoning the hospital to tell them she's snowed in. She feels guilty because they're always so short of staff up there. There's a flu epidemic as well, which is putting them all under pressure. Bloody NHS, can't attract enough nurses into the profession, and who can blame them on that pay!" He yawned, pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose, and passed Elizabeth the coffee pot. He glanced at the children. "These little reprobates, on the other hand, are delighted with the weather, though. It means, among other things, that they don't have to go to school." He ruffled Andrew's hair.

"It looks as if I'll have to stay here until the roads clear a little, as well."

Emma joined them at the table. "How's the leg, Lizzie?"

"It still hurts a bit, but not nearly as bad as yesterday."

"I'll change the dressing for you after breakfast." She put her elbows on the table, cupped her chin in her hands, and sighed with frustration.

"Hey chill out," said Geoff. "Why don't you just enjoy the rest?"

"But it's not fair on the nurses who live nearer to the hospital, who can get there by foot. They'll be working around the clock, if this snow holds out. This country just isn't geared for this kind of weather, that's the trouble. It's so frustrating!"

Elizabeth passed her sister the coffee pot.

Emma, noticing Elizabeth's mocking pout, tapped her sister's hand as she took the coffee pot from her.

"Auntie Lizzie, come and make a snowman with us!" said Helen.

"Yes you make the best snowmans ever," said her brother.

"Snowmen," corrected Emma with a yawn.

The children ran off to find coats, hats and Wellingtons from the lobby leading from the kitchen. At the same time, an odd smell permeated the kitchen.

Emma got up, zoomed to the grill, and then let out a string of unrepeatable words while removing two smouldering doorsteps from it. These she threw into the sink in disgust. Geoff broke into loud laughter, making his wife even more thunderous.

Elizabeth decided that, bad leg or not, it would be a good idea to join the children outside. When she fetched her coat from the lobby, she

experienced a strong compulsion to look at the photo of the child again. No silent rationalising could persuade her to do otherwise, and she dropped the coat before hurrying off.

Emma and Geoff's curious eyes followed her as she rushed past them. She clung to the banister on her way up the stairs and ignored her wounded leg's protests.

When she reached her room, she picked up the photographs. The child's image was still there. The bruise was still there. But the expression on her face had changed from sad to fearful. There was something else as well, which she couldn't put a name to at first. Moments later, she sat on the bed. *Despair*, she whispered in her head. *That little girl's in complete despair.*