

THE LAST DAYS OF SUMMER

Vicki Thornton

They'd driven for hours in near silence. The radio was on low, and muted songs and the discordant mutterings of deejays occasionally filtered to the surface, battling the noise from the open windows. He'd asked whether she wanted the air conditioner on but she'd refused. Slowing for a corner he glanced at her. Her face turned to the window, the wind tearing at her hair. Her eyes shut.

He'd stopped at a small town. One of those with one main street, a pub and a post office, an over priced supermarket and a craft store with the grand title of gallery. She'd wanted to look in the gallery. At the highly priced, badly painted landscapes. At the bright silk scarves that swayed in the breeze from the open windows. At the sculptures of bloated chunky animals, most of them unidentifiable. 'She's a local,' said the woman behind the desk, made from local timbers, or so stated the sign. 'Sells some of her stuff in the cities. Gets good prices.'

He nodded and turned, wondering whether people actually bought the stuff. They'd each gone their own way, wandering where interest sparked. He finally found her standing in front of a painting of a small girl and her horse. The girl was mostly in shadow and looked as though she needed a good feed, the opposite was true of the horse.

He stood in silence and watched the play of emotions over her face. He knew what she was thinking, although not what she was feeling. That could be their daughter, their little girl. If...

It had been a girl. A beautiful, perfectly formed little girl that they called Amy Louise. Perfectly formed except for her heart. They buried her in a doll's size white coffin. They grieved for her, they cried and they screamed and they had momentarily frozen their lives. But then he had gone on, he dared to live.

He saw the flush across her face as she realised that he was watching her. She turned away and he followed her out of the store. In the small supermarket they bought makings for a picnic. Crusty sourdough loaves from a bakery the next town along. Blocks of cheese. Although the selection was small, he chose a Brie that looked decent and a matured cheddar. They added some grapes and a few very expensive peaches. He looked for sun dried tomatoes and realised that he was now far too country for that purchase. He found a bottle of white wine made locally and added that to the basket. 'Should visit the winery if you have the time,' said the man behind the counter. 'It's up towards the mountains, follow the road and keep on going.'

Back in the car he turned towards the river. Driving until they found a spot, away from the road, well treed and with a grassy area. He parked the car and watched as she settled the picnic rug beneath the shade of a tree. The rug had been a wedding present and over the years had received ample wear and tear. Numerous times, in quiet away places, they had made love on the rug. The two of them sharing so much more than mere sex. The two of them sharing love.

He walked to where she sat and began to unload their lunch. They ate watching the sun play across the river, casting diamonds and throwing shadows. Neither talked. They listened to the birds around them, to the water stumbling over pebbles in the river, to the wind moving through the trees high above them.

For a moment he thinks of her, of a warm body and tumbled sheets. Of heat and passion and living. Then he looks at his wife. She is lying back on the rug, eyes closed, face expressionless. She couldn't understand when he had left. Couldn't understand it wasn't for the other woman. It was for himself. He had to find a place where he could breathe, where he could go on living. He had lived for eight months. He'd missed her for eight months. Now he had returned.

They were trying to learn to live together, to mend their marriage. He walked a short distance away to the brambles that clawed at his hands, scratched his skin and drew blood. He picked blackberries, sunwarmed and slightly bitter on the tongue. They stained his fingers, his lips. He offered them to her and when he bent to kiss her, she turned away.

He felt the blackberries crush in his hands, felt the juice run down his arm. He decided it was now time to move on.