

Crossing Paths
by
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-ONE-

You can run but you can't hide. Maybe. Maybe not. She was ready to give it a try. Sweat snaked between her breasts as she pressed 'Send' and self-reproach arrived as quickly as the email departed. She'd every right to inform her client she wouldn't extend her consulting contract, but she'd barely given ample notice. Had she wrecked her growing reputation? Did she have any choice? She bit her lips and sampled the sharp aftertaste of humiliation. She'd never put herself in such a situation again. Ever. She stared at her empty suitcases and determined to pack them with the courage to start over.

That same resolve soon enough carried her to a British train platform, where she plunked her bags down and scanned the sparse crowd for the limo driver scheduled to pick her up. In New York City she spotted them instantly by a come-on look, but apparently not in the Midlands of England, hours from London. The Chesterfield station was small, which should have made it easier for her to pick out the driver, or for him to spot her, a solitary figure on the platform.

Had she become so invisible?

Wait. Wasn't that what she wanted? To disappear and remake herself with a new client? But it also meant being alone with her secret. Her mother would've understood the necessity to use her inheritance to shunt the situation behind her, but sympathy couldn't be unearthed from a grave. As for her father, pray God he never discovered the details of her precipitous departure from her last assignment. Personal humiliation didn't count in his book, especially if it was intertwined with career. No doubt he'd see it as his duty, and a favor, to remind her of every error she made in her 30 years, most especially trusting a man he warned her against.

"Ma'am, would you be Merideth Bradley?"

She jumped and answered too sharply, but the driver took her bags and marched ahead without comment. Once in the back seat she apologized for being abrupt. He simply nodded, but she'd been right to express regret. Manners were something her parents insisted on and she believed in wholeheartedly. Preoccupation with her own mistakes was no excuse for rudeness.

Soon they'd left the small city center and entered a rolling countryside that more than lived up to her imagination and provided a welcome antidote to the chaos of New York City. Twenty minutes later the driver told her, "We're on Chartsfield property now."

Good, she couldn't wait to see the storied manor house. But after a mile or more she'd yet to glimpse it. "All this belongs to Chartsfield?"

"Aye. Some farms are let, some estate run, but they're all Chartsfield."

She hoped the farms broke even at the very least. If they were a cash drain, fundraising for a property this extensive would be a challenge bigger than anything she tackled before. A grand challenge might be a better way to think of it. She could do it. Do or die.

As though reading her mind the driver remarked, "It's a wonder the owner's able to hold the property together. Not easy these days, and some say not worth the trouble."

She wasn't sure where the driver came down on this point, but she resolved to find out in time how the locals felt. To keep up an estate on this scale would require the good will of the community.

The driver pointed as they turned a bend. "There it is then."

The alluring landscape showcased a grand Palladian structure with an imposing central facade flanked by graceful wings.

"Impressive pile of stone, that much I'd say for it," he added.

An impressive pile indeed. Chartsfield was an English country house done up in part by the great Robert Adam that had survived time, and death taxes, to live on in private hands. It held her gaze throughout the approach until they turned away to drive down to the village where her cottage awaited. Her employer had offered lodging within walking distance of the main house, a relief since driving over here on 'the wrong side of the road' held little appeal and she needed to economize now, not indulge in the luxury of a long-term car rental.

The driver left her bags on the stoop of the ancient stone barn meant to be hers the next six months and said goodbye. She tucked her hair behind both ears before unlocking the oak door with the outsized key he'd given her, and held her breath. She understood she was a city mouse fresh from Manhattan about to discover life in the country.

A relieved sigh escaped her lips when she crossed the threshold. High windows filtered sunlight onto a glossy wood floor through chintz curtains of blue and yellow. Two gold corduroy chairs with hand-loomed multihued throws flanked opposite sides of a wood-burning fireplace, and a small blue gingham sofa faced the fireplace. Blue ginger jar lamps perched on side tables, and a braided country rug in matching colors set off the seating area from a small oak dining table. Perfect for cozy entertaining, not that she'd have the time or friends to host here.

Jet lag and the allure of a bed and bath gave her the strength to cart her bags upstairs. That didn't mean she ignored the charm of tiny slit windows cut into the stone to provide natural light in the stairwell. The pale green bedroom at the top of the stairs invited her inside. It held a double bed covered by a patchwork quilt, and an antique dark polished oak bureau with a matching nightstand. A small desk and straight ladder-back chair took up the rest of the pint-sized room. Hooray for the desk because she would have far more need of it than a double bed to share with someone.

She let that thought drop and focused on the flawless conversion of this eighteenth century structure. This didn't happen by chance and, if it was the work of the owner of Chartsfield, then her new boss was a man of taste and high standards. She'd have to be at the top of her game from Day One, which meant she needed to appear for work rested and ready to go. A tall order, since she hadn't slept through the night in weeks.

She flung herself onto the bed. This place oozed the perfect calm to offset a troubled personal life, but she failed to sleep. Finally she gave up in favor of a walk.

She'd read that Chartsfield lay in the center of the Peak district, and walkers came from everywhere to enjoy the trails in this area called the "Switzerland of England." Maybe she should take advantage of the late summer weather and go for a short walk herself. Afterwards she could grab something at the village pub she'd noticed on the way in and hear what the townspeople had to say. Who knew, with some exercise and a little bit to drink she just might exhaust herself enough to sleep.

She dug out a pair of jeans, a white shirt, and the sturdy sneakers she brought for hiking. After a quick look in the bathroom mirror, she pulled her hair into a ponytail, but couldn't ignore the prominence of her cheekbones. She'd lost weight, but didn't her old high school boyfriend say her tall, trim, athletic figure didn't hide her curves? Of course he was referring to her breasts, and she hadn't taken it as a compliment.

Why was she thinking about men, boyfriends in particular? She swore to avoid getting involved with anyone during her time at Chartsfield. Dwelling on the shortcomings of old boyfriends was a waste of time. She blanked her mind and headed out for exercise, always a cure for uninvited thoughts.

The village proved postcard-worthy, filled with cottages, farm buildings, a church, and the pub all in the same grey stone as her converted barn, with multipurpose single lane roads and paths meant to be shared by animals, people, tractors, and cars. The human scale reassured her. She breathed the scent of manure on the nearby fields, beyond which Chartsfield glistened in dappled afternoon sunlight in the distance. The sounds of drifting leaves, birdsong, sheep, and cows lulled her senses.

Spying a walking path icon, she moved down the lane toward it, engrossed in every detail she passed: stained glass church windows; town hall community bulletin board tacked to the door; steep hillside pastures peppered with sheep; convoluted stone walls separating one field from another. The village center had a single crossroads. She noticed the walking symbol on the opposite side and stepped into the road.

Tires screeched, a horn screamed, and a powerful force yanked her from danger to safety. Her heart pounded in triple time even as she perceived events in the strange slow motion of panic. A strong hand gripped her arm before she slammed into an immovable object, which jarred her back to the here and now. The object turned out to be a man whose fingers still grasped her upper arm.

She looked up at his frowning face.

He loosened his grip, but didn't let go entirely.

"Thank you, I . . . er . . . wasn't paying attention."

"Right, I see, obviously not."

Only then did he drop his hand, and his cool, almost irritated attitude caught her off guard. She backed away from him, but since he'd kept her from being hit by a car she had to say something. "Thank you, I'm new here."

"Ah, an American," he said, as if her accent explained everything. Then he continued, in crisp British upper crust tones, "In future look right, not left, or you'll not live to enjoy the paths."

"I'll do my best," she fired back. Now he looked vaguely amused. He might be good-looking and aware of it, but she didn't have to grovel simply because his quick reactions had saved her from harm.

He gestured toward himself and told her, "My name's Robert."

To her his expression still smacked of arrogance, but maybe she was being oversensitive. "Merideth," she relented, her heartbeat only marginally slowing.

He nodded in the direction she'd been headed. "Are you looking to follow that path? I know the paths around here well. May I join you?"

-TWO-

Meri wanted to be alone and the man's superior manner tempted her to forthrightly refuse his offer, yet she didn't want to be impolite after he rescued her. "I'm not going all that far, but suit yourself," she said, and crossed her fingers that her ambiguous invitation would discourage him.

It didn't. He simply moved to her side making it clear he planned to tag along. "Are you here to hike on holiday?" he asked.

"No, I'm starting a job in the area."

"What kind of job?"

"Consulting." She hoped a one-word answer dampened his interest.

"For Chartsfield? They employ most people in the area. What type of consulting?"

Nosey guy. "Fundraising and estate management."

His eyebrows rose. "Chartsfield needs money?"

Any fool should be able to see that a big property like Chartsfield in this day and age would need money and lots of it. She sighed and launched into the sort of professional patter meant to put people to sleep. "Fundraising is essential for large properties. Trusts, estate planning and taxes, fiduciary responsibilities, etcetera, are complicated. Financial systems have to accommodate assorted regulations."

He persisted. "You understand British trusts and such?"

Her hackles rose. "From an American perspective, yes, but there're lots of similarities."

"And you think you could be useful?"

Her lips tightened. His behavior bordered on offensive, but she refused to show her annoyance. "I hope so. The owner seems to have done a good job and I'm looking forward to working with him."

"I hope he lives up to expectations."

Another forward remark, but this time she chose not to respond and was pleased when he didn't elaborate further as he guided them off the road and onto a dirt track cut into a gentle hillside where he started to point out local shrubs and flowers they passed. Good, because he was as handsome as he was arrogant and she was determined to resolutely look anywhere except at his almost too-perfect face. Mercifully the beautiful countryside offered a delightful alternative. Clouds painted moving shadows across the slope below, and a flock of starlings rose from the earth to wheel away in raucous chorus. Here was balm for her spirit, until her companion suddenly paused and she struggled to avoid bumping into him.

"*Geranium robertianum*."

She gazed down on a low growing plant nearby whose dainty flower had five pink petals.

"Known around here as Herb Robert. Blooms all summer long. It's Puck's flower."

Now she had to look him in the face. "Herb Robert? Puck's flower? Did you make that up?"

He squinted at her. "I never prevaricate regarding flowers."

He was offended she'd accused him of lying – no, *prevaricating*. He was an odd one. Unfortunately, she was partial to curiosities and had barely spoken to anybody for two days, so she couldn't help but ask, "Puck's flower?"

"Puck," he repeated. "The fairy. Local lore says Puck brings ill luck to those that deserve it and good luck to those he favors."

She sure hoped Puck favored her in this new place and job. "Local lore? Did you grow up here?"

"In a way, yes. I spent a lot of time here as a boy. I've family in the area."

"Seems your family taught you a lot about plants and flowers."

"Actually, that's my interest. I'm a botanist, boning up for a stint as guest lecturer at London University. Not that I presume to boast of my knowledge."

But he was, and the peculiar arrogance she noticed before showed up again paired with that amused smile. Still she had to give him his due because his plant knowledge so far was plentiful. "Well, I probably would've walked past without noticing Herb Robert, or any of the other things you've pointed out."

"Doubtful. Not much gets by you, except autos, perhaps."

For the first time his grin turned mischievous in a friendly sort of way and, before she knew it, she joked back in return. "From now on I promise to look right . . . or was it left?"

"As long as you look at me, you'll be safe."

"Doubtful," she shot back, only too aware she spoke the truth.

He laughed and led her on. Words burst forth when he stooped to inspect leaves and petals. His expertise was impressive, but his lean graceful movements and the corded muscles in his arms evoked an athlete more than a professor. Very tall, well over six feet, he looked to be in his early to mid-thirties. His striking chiseled face and square jaw, aquiline nose between blue eyes, and long wavy sandy blonde hair made her think of the Normans who'd conquered the British Isles. And then there was that perpetual attitude she couldn't quite identify. Did a demon fairy, Puck's evil twin, include him as part of the charming cottage and captivating landscape to throw her off kilter?

More likely jetlag and lack of sleep made her lose touch with reality. Pointedly, she stared at her watch. An hour had passed since her walk began! Time to turn back.

He offered to show her a short cut to the village. Her instinct was not to trust in strangers. But she was long past that decision point since she didn't know her way around these paths and was already relying on him. Besides, throughout their walk he'd been more interested in plant life than her life.

And all men weren't like Daniel, a beguiling angel of darkness. In the beginning her friends thought she hit the jackpot, and so did she. He was amiable, handsome, creative, a good lover, and willing. Yes, willing to enter into her business world, look great in a tuxedo at fundraising events, and charm the pants off donors with his smooth, sexy Irish lilt, happy to enlighten them about the world of a performance artist. Performance artist, yes, you could say that. But her name for him now was con artist, and he had access to her former client's anonymous donors. She blinked away his image when Robert cleared his throat to let her know he was waiting for her up ahead.

So she followed Robert when he turned left at the next fork, taking them onto a thin winding path rising up and over the hillside. They reached a narrow paved road that he insisted was the long way around. He led across fields teeming with stone walls, which they crossed by slipping sideways through a narrow gap formed by two upright granite blocks, or climbing up and over with the aid of uneven steps protruding horizontally

from the wall. The route felt illicit; surely they traipsed through some farmer's property. Her inner compass disoriented, she wished she hadn't placed her trust in a stranger, and then the welcome sight of the village materialized.

He extended his hand as she climbed over the final stone wall.

Not so fast. She jumped down on her own, unwilling to hazard his touch.

"Care for a cask ale?" He gestured to the waiting pub. "Grant Ayre keeps the best in these parts."

She should go straight home and eat another energy bar, but her plan had been to stop by the pub for a quick bite all along and his company shouldn't deter her. Anyway, eating with him might be better than sitting alone and having all the bar's male patrons looking her over. "Okay," she agreed. "But I need to eat too."

"Trust me, Merideth. I'll keep my eye on you."

Exactly what she was afraid of.

The crowd at the bar acknowledged Robert while he ushered her to a seat by the window. He leaned his walking stick against the wall. She studied its worn brass ID tag with the initials, RCC, while waiting for him to return from the bar with two cask ales.

"I've brought a Blackthorn and an Abbot. Taste both and have the one you like."

He plunked himself down next to her rather than across the cramped table, handed her a menu, and recommended the Shepherd's Pie. He was a formidable presence, even in worn out hiking clothes, the sort of man whose natural inclination was to take control of a situation. He simply assumed she wanted his company. She felt too tired to object.

"I'd like to show you another path tomorrow."

"I have work to do." True enough, but her real motivation for refusal was her determination to push back against his innate assumption of supremacy.

He frowned. "Tomorrow's Sunday. You're going to Chartsfield on Sunday to work?"

His words surprised her. Didn't the British work the occasional Sunday? "I have reading to do and documents to review before Monday."

"Sorry." He ran his powerful hands through his hair, pushing away an errant wave that fell forward on his brow. "The thing is, to really understand Chartsfield you must get to know the countryside. It's sustained the place over centuries. The hills and dales are as vital to preserving the way of life here as the grand house."

His intensity signaled deep emotion and piqued her curiosity yet again.

"I'm taking the Broomley Edge hike tomorrow," he stated. "Noon. I'll be at the right turning fork, just beyond where we first inspected Herb Robert."

She pictured astonishingly vivid details of the place, the plant, and their exchange.

"The hike to the Edge offers the best views across the dales. If you change your mind, meet me there. I'll wait ten minutes. If I see you, fine. If not, so be it."

She didn't know what to make of this unusual offer, and nodded noncommittally as the food arrived. They ate without much conversation and she insisted on putting down half the cost of the meal and beer. Robert didn't object and remained seated as she said goodbye. The way out passed the bar, where Grant Ayre, the pub keeper who introduced himself when he brought the Shepherd's Pie, held forth to all present while drawing amber ale into large pint glasses.

"And how were you finding the Blackthorn, luv?" Grant called out to her.

"Delicious. The Shepherd's Pie too."

He lit up. "Made fresh daily. The best for miles around."

"I'll be back for more." And she would since this was the only restaurant in town.

She headed toward her cottage without looking left or right, but inside where speculation about Robert crowded her. Part of it was her normal interest in other people. And their afternoon together had exposed her to just how much of a draw Chartsfield's grounds were. But the other part? Well, if she happened to get her paperwork done in time she just might take another hike with Robert tomorrow and learn about the estate property from one who was clearly knowledgeable. On-the-job training, right?

As for her plan to swear off all male relationships, today's encounter had been superficial. As long as things remained on this level she'd be fine.

-THREE-

Robert brought food and drink for two in his backpack, anticipating the poised American would appear. Her chin firmed when he first suggested the Broomley Edge hike, and she pled the demands of work. He understood, having come to the countryside to rusticate and prepare his lectures, not seek female companionship. Yet the chance encounter with her presented an opportunity too appealing to pass on, and the curious glint in Merideth's eyes as they parted told him she was as intrigued as he.

He judged her age about thirty. Clearly a serious professional woman, her brisk impatience at his questions about Chartsfield and decision to use double-speak to silence him was brilliant. She was sure of herself, unlikely to be the clinging kind, and he liked that. He chuckled recalling her clever retorts. If anything, she ranked slow-witted males slightly below algae.

When he spotted her in the distance satisfaction buoyed him. Jeans hugged her long limbs beneath a white tee shirt belted into her slim waist. A broad brimmed canvas hat encircled by a colorful bandana imprisoned her hair, showing her wise enough to protect her flawless skin and savvy enough to know a sweatband could be useful during a hike. The sun was out, the temperature ideal for a vigorous ramble, and she'd chosen him as the preferable alternative to working inside on a lovely day. Definitely his sort of companion.

"Hello, Merideth." She smiled and her high cheekbones above a straight nose and tantalizing plump lips arrested his speech momentarily. She was even prettier than he recalled. When he remembered to return her smile he added, "I'm pleased you decided to join me."

"Join you? That sounds a little one-sided."

He watched as she concentrated on working a pound coin out of her tight pants pocket.

"Heads I join you, tails you join me. Agreed?"

Her sly grin as she flipped the coin invited no reply, but he parried the thrust. "Either way, I win," he quipped.

"Me, too," she replied. "I get to learn more about the countryside around Chartsfield."

Delighted by an open humor that challenged his naturally reserved nature, he led them on a path that began with a gradual incline. Today's hike would be much more taxing than yesterday's, and he wished to gauge her strength before they reached the Edge. He strode beside her, close enough to touch if he dared, and covertly examined the wisps of chestnut hair with gold streaks escaping her hat. How easy to imagine himself tucking in those wayward strands. Her fitted tee shirt outlined her clavicle, below which the teasing swell of full breasts rose. He forced himself to turn away lest he be caught staring and gazed instead across Chartsfield dales, a view he'd treasured since childhood.

The slope steepened, yet the incline had little effect on her pace or breathing. When the track narrowed he moved ahead of her. Years of climbing and guiding others had taught him to read the sound of footfalls, and hers remained steady and sure despite the increasing gradient. Fit as well as witty, she obviously exercised her legs as well as her tongue.

They came out atop Broomley Edge, a sharp escarpment with views of the valleys beyond. Memories of coming here as a boy, when he followed behind his father as Merideth now followed him, overwhelmed him with a sense of loss. What fun they had climbing the sheer rock below and picnicking afterwards, his youthful introduction to thrill and companionship. The sound of Merideth walking behind him made those sentiments stir anew, but now with a tantalizing adult difference.

How did the view appear to Merideth? Would its lush beauty suffice? Or would she have her work hat on and be more interested in learning how this vista, formerly the sole possession of Chartsfield's owners, had been opened to the public through the Freedom of Passage Act?

He slowed, stopped, and turned to speak. But an uneasy look clouded her face and she stared down at her feet, not at the splendid scenery. Perhaps she was more winded than he realized. "Was the climb more than you had in mind? I know another route down."

Her brow knit. "It's not too steep," she snapped. "I can manage."

Clearly he'd hit a nerve, but even if she wasn't fatigued something was amiss. "Shall we stop here? I brought lunch."

"Here? No! Definitely not here."

Suddenly he recognized vertigo. Even veteran climbers experienced it occasionally, although he never had it even in the highest elevations. He pointed toward a flat spot perhaps a quarter mile away and subtly turned direction so she'd not be looking down or out into thin air. At the same time he picked up the pace and she moved in tempo behind, confirming it was vertigo and not exhaustion she suffered from. When they reached level ground he stopped, took off his backpack, passed her some juice, and sat down. As she followed him onto the welcoming earth he wondered if she thought him inconsiderate, having chosen a route that excited him but scared many. Instead, eyes of shrewd appraisal took his measure.

"You knew I was scared of the height," she complimented him.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Happens. It's easy to feel exposed on the Edge. Do you feel better now?"

"Yes."

He wasn't certain she answered truthfully until he watched her begin to relish the view of his beloved dales – infinite ripples of land unfolding to eternity.

"It's breathtaking!" she cried. "I'm glad I came. I wouldn't want to have missed this."

"It's a special view, my favorite."

"I understand why." And then she apologized, "I'm sorry for what happened on the way up. That never happened before. I'm embarrassed."

"Don't be. I've seen the most experienced hikers get vertigo unexpectedly, on trails nowhere near as precipitous as the Edge."

"Now you're being kind."

"No, I'm being honest."

"That's right," she teased. "You never prevaricate!"

"And nothing gets by you," he countered.

She granted him a smile that blinded like the noonday sun. Then the vista reasserted itself and she commented, "It's strange how it's stark, steep, and rocky here, but just opposite it's greener and more wooded."

He made every effort to listen, especially since her astute observation pointed to one of the most unusual aspects of these dales. But all he could think of was how her nipples, aroused by the cool breeze after the exertion of the walk, thrust against her taut shirt. She gestured toward the valleys below, her breast lifted in concert with her arm, and he made himself shift his eyes in the direction she pointed while his brain labored to process her language and find something, anything, to say. "Right, that's characteristic of these dales."

Having rediscovered his capacity for speech, he began to explain the variation in the landscape. "The dales are mostly limestone with areas of thick woodland where there's less sun and more bare rock where they're exposed to big temperature swings. When the temperature drops swiftly at night, the ground freezes and then thaws in the sunshine. Especially harsh on plants. We should do a moors hike another time. They too are exquisite in a completely dissimilar way, with lots of heather and bracken."

Fearful of droning on like a pedant in a lecture hall, he chanced to look her way, at her face, not her breasts, and found her eyes attentive rather than bored. Well, probably best to keep on talking. Yes, best to give her ample time for the vertigo to pass.

And so he revealed the complexities and peculiarities of the locale he loved most, the Peak District, to a welcoming audience. A strange wooing for sure, and one he never found himself practicing before, always reluctant to show a woman his scholarly side.

He could have spoken forever, and she looked ready to hear him out, but rather than press his luck he offered lunch. "I've brought sandwiches. Local cheese from nearby Hartsdale. May I interest you?"

"Sure, I'm starving. I only had an energy bar for breakfast. Must get to a food store today."

"We can walk back by way of Hartsdale. There's a provisioner open on Sundays. I'll help you carry."

"Thank you, Robert, but I couldn't impose. A personal botanist and local guide is one thing . . . but a personal shopper?"

"Perhaps you'll reconsider after tasting your lunch."

He passed her a sandwich and then an apple, and each time their fingers brushed he wished he'd brought more food so he might touch her again. A piercing hunger signaled the mating game had begun, but he clamped down any expectation of an early conquest. She didn't appear the type to fall into lust without due consideration.

He brought them off the Edge on a longer, more gradual path and she showed no signs of becoming dizzy. Along the way he spoke of this plant or that, and once he grasped her hand when describing the spotted orchid. But she withdrew from the contact courteously, and upon his conclusion asked, "What do you love most about this countryside?"

He recognized her ploy to change the dynamic but accepted it. He took his mobile from his pocket and displayed it to her. "Not a single bar. One of the few places left on the British Isles where this bit of technology won't function because the countryside has been preserved from transmission towers."

When her shiny brown eyes locked on his gaze he read approval, and the pleasure of her response rooted him to the spot. He'd climbed some towering mountains, but she offered a glimpse of an altogether different summit, a woman who just might prize him for his passions.

The feeling of intimacy between them was implausible given how little time they'd spent with each other. Why, he didn't even know her surname. She never asked him for his full name either, and he hadn't offered because too often his name carried undue weight rendering him a specimen to be studied like one of his plants.

Then again, perhaps Americans had a completely different notion of class. Maybe that was why Merideth asked only about his interests, not his breeding. Certainly, she'd set the rules of engagement from the start. First names only, no talk of personal history, equal payment at the pub, the coin toss at the start of today's walk.

Yes, she'd defined the game between them: a contest of equals where all that mattered were the words and feelings you brought to the moment. He was fine with that. He excelled at gamesmanship and was eager for the challenge. Especially when victory might introduce him to the taste of her intrepid lips.