

## *Heart's Blood*

Gillian paused in the doorway, her gaze planted firmly on the beige carpet smothering the floor. People stopped talking, turned to stare as she stepped into the office. Embarrassment fought rage fought anguish as she forced her legs to carry her down the well-worn path to her desk.

Her colleagues discomfort pushed against her as she passed. *Your fault*, their darting glances said. *I know*, she agreed. While inside she crumpled, fleeing into the gaping, endless hollow within. The hollowness was so great at times that she felt like an over-inflated balloon, ready to burst at the slightest touch. Like now.

Muted whispers tickled her ears as she sat at her desk. They were talking about her. Why wouldn't they. She was the biggest story in the office. She wished they'd all go away.

Gillian was still staring at the dark computer when perfume overpowered her apathy. Marty. Like Marty, her perfume was sharp and persistent. Like Marty, it would outstay its welcome.

'Are you okay?' Marty's voice was uncharacteristically soft.

Gillian's chair squealed as she inched about to face the intruder.

'You look like shit, Gillian. You shouldn't have come back.'

'I couldn't stay home.' Gillian's voice broke on the last word. It wasn't home anymore. Not with *them* gone. The emptiness inside her was matched only by the echoing void inside her house.

'Still, you shouldn't have come back yet.'

'It's been two months.'

'You're not ready to be here.'

Gillian agreed with her, but the necessity of paying bills had forced her back into this fishbowl where everyone liked, *needed*, to know everything about everyone else.

Gillian fell into the silence which filled the space between them; let it wash over her, seeking equilibrium with the void within. She closed her eyes as a shaft of sunlight broke through the shadows which filled the cubicle. Marty sighed and shifted in her seat. She thrust a hand into her purse and pulled out a small velvet box.

'Take it,' she said, holding out the box. 'I thought it might help.'

Gillian just stared at her, afraid that by taking the box she might let the world in. Something

she wasn't ready for.

Shaking her head, Marty placed the box next to Gillian. 'I'd better go.'

The box sat where Marty put it. Throughout the day, Gillian's wary gaze darted over it. She wanted, yet feared, to open the box; not ready for Marty's idea of help. When the office had grown silent and the shadows of evening gathered, Gillian grasped the box between fingertips and carefully lifted it off the desk.

*It will be empty, Gillian told herself. Please.*

She prised off the top and stared into the box as the void within twisted painfully. A crystal rose nestled on a bed of red velvet.

Laughter vied with conversation as the guests finished their desserts. Through the course of the night, the carefully-prepared table decorations had been knocked askew or plundered as props for often incoherent stories.

The chime of knife against glass fought to be heard. Good-natured yells drew the rowdy crowd's attention to the head table where Brad was striking his glass. Raucous laughter flooded the room as the glass shattered.

'Taxi,' cried the crowd as one. A servitor hustled up to clear the broken glass and spilt champagne before returning with another glass.

'Don't break this one,' she muttered as she refilled the glass. Brad winked at her then turned back to the crowded room.

'The things I have to do to get your attention—'

'Get on with it.'

Brad saluted the heckler then turned to Jay and Jilly sitting at the places of honour. The grin fell from his face as he raised his glass in salute.

'You know why we are here,' he said. 'To congratulate Jay and Jilly—' the crowd cheered '—on finally tying the knot.

'I've been Jay's best friend forever. He's had plenty of girlfriends—and oh, boy, the stories I could tell you—but none have been as good for him as Jilly...'

Jilly smiled as Brad gave a half bow in her direction, laughing as he overbalanced. Her gaze

turned to Jay as he squeezed her leg. She was so full of emotion she wished she could run around the room screaming her joy. Given the crowd, they'd probably think that totally acceptable. In fact, she was pretty sure they expected something wild of her, to match the untamed wildness which defined her new husband. She was vaguely aware of Brad's continued speech, but the promise in her husband's eyes washed the rest of the room from her consciousness.

Jay plucked a crimson rose from her bouquet, carelessly destroying the meticulous arrangement. Its strong perfume blended with her husband's unmistakable musk as he leaned close.

'This rose is like my heart's blood which carries my love for you,' Jay whispered.

Tears spilled over Jilly's cheeks as Jay spoke. It was so like him. So kitsch. But so endearing.

The crowd bellowed its appreciation as he pulled her to him.

Gillian pulled the black sweater over her head, muffling Marty's voice.

'...you've been hiding away from the world for too long. It's not healthy. You need to get out of here.' Her waving hand took in the whole house. 'It's killing you.'

Gillian froze at Marty's words. Her breath came faster as panic teased the edges of her mind. She still didn't know why she let Marty invade her sanctuary. It threatened the acceptance she had slowly, painfully built over the three years since—

She jumped as Marty's hands slapped the table.

'Dammit, Gillian, stop doing this—this—*retreat* every time I suggest you need to let them go.'

Marty's words burned through the comforting fog encompassing Gillian's being, bringing the world into painful clarity. *How dare she*. Gillian struggled to distance herself from Marty's reality, to bring back the fog. The void within pushed against her viscera making her gasp and her heart skip.

'It's not fair of you to ask,' she said, forcing the words out. 'I'm not interested. I'm not doing it. Besides,' she added in a whisper, 'I'm too old.'

'What rot. Anyway, it's too late. I sort of told him you'd be there—'

‘You *what?*’ Gillian jerked to her feet, uncaring as her chair crashed to the floor.

Marty matched her, leaning across the table and thrusting her finger at Gillian. ‘You need to start living again. You can’t keep on like this. They are *gone*. I know that. I’m reminded of it every time I see you.’ Marty swiped a hand across her face, smearing vermilion lipstick like a wound across one cheek.

‘I know it doesn’t mean much to you,’ said Marty, ‘but I miss them too. Oh, why do I bother.’ She spun around and stormed out of the kitchen. The hallway beyond echoed with the violence of her passage.

Gillian sank to her knees as the front door slammed, head resting on the table’s edge. Her sanctuary had been breached and the world let in, reigniting her pain. Gillian’s scream followed Marty’s retreat. Defiant. Filled with need. A plea for her friend to return.

Her tears filled the silence while shadows seeped into the room, repairing the cracks in her sanctuary. Behind the walls, fog rolled in, smoothing the edges of reality.

The bright spring sun was swaddled in layers of fog, filling the world with a soft yellow glow. Jilly felt like the elf queen walking through a dream, her consort beside her, bright and crisp against the glowing backdrop.

Branches laded with liquid ice bowed low before her, hiding the snaking path. Jilly ducked under, shivering as the trailing leaves sent icy rivulets down her back. She glanced at Jay, eyeing his coat.

‘And I guess you want me to give it to you?’ he asked. She could hear the laughter in his voice.

‘No,’ she said with a wry smile. ‘I was the one silly enough to leave my coat in the car.’

Hand-in-hand, they approached their destination.

‘Hurry up, Mum, Dad,’ called Sandy from further up the path, ‘we’re nearly there’.

‘There’ was a picnic area in the middle of a nature reserve. While Jilly appreciated nature, she was more than happy to watch it from a distance. This insistence on an early morning walk on her fifteenth wedding anniversary was just wrong. She’d been hoping for raisin toast and a strong cup of coffee.

Unusually, Sandy had insisted on carrying the basket which held their breakfast. Chicken, champagne—at thirteen Sandy wasn't getting any of that—even strawberries. Jay had denied any involvement in the morning's walk, but Jilly had her doubts.

'Wait up, Sandy,' called Jay. He looked down at Jilly, a mock frown marring his face, 'always in such a hurry.'

'Takes after her father,' said Jilly, smiling.

Jay laughed and hugged her to him, their strides falling into unison. They were still giggling when they reached the end of the path.

'Oh, no,' said Jay softly as he spied the small crowd of people gathered around one of the picnic tables. 'Sandy will be so disappointed.'

Jilly pulled him close as they stopped at the first table. 'It will be special. We, our family, is here together.'

As Jay bent down to kiss her, Jilly caught sight of the crowd moving towards them.

'Mum, Dad, stop that,' cried Sandy.

They jerked apart as a handful of strawberries hit them.

'Get a room, you two,' said a familiar voice.

'Brad,' cried Jilly and Jay together. They'd not seen their friend for years. They engulfed him in their embrace.

'Surprise,' cried the crowd encircling them. 'Happy anniversary.'

Jilly looked at the crowd, her face flushed when she recognised people from their wedding.

'Surprise,' repeated Sandy. The grin on her face faltered as she saw tears on her mother's cheeks. 'Did I do bad?'

'No, sweetheart,' said Jilly grabbing her daughter in a tight squeeze. 'You did better than great.'

Moonlight painted the outside world in shades of grey and blue. A musty breeze drifted through the open window allowing the distant sounds of traffic to stir the stagnant air. Gillian could read the time on the clock by the blurred shadows cast by its hands. Four thirty. In the crepuscular light, everything about the room felt dirty.

She tensed as Jason rolled over beside her, draping a hand across her chest. Bile burned the back of her throat as disgust at him, at herself, burned away the last remnant of sleep.

She slipped from the bed, glad she'd insisted they spend the night in a motel rather than at her home—which had been Jason's preference. Pain shot up her leg as her toes crashed into a chair.

She froze as Jason stirred, his hand groping the hollow she'd left in the foam mattress, holding her breath until he returned to a deep sleep. Then, inching forwards, she crept across the threadbare carpet to the bathroom.

Closing the door behind her, she leaned her forehead against the cracked mirror. Shame leered at her from the shadows, forcing her to acknowledge her weakness. *I was lonely*, she cried, but its silent admonishment shredded her soul with guilt. *I need to move on*. Her excuses felt lame, felt like... well, excuses... like Marty's words. Gillian knew she not worthy of *them*.

*It won't happen again*, she promised.

Against her back she could feel a warmth, could almost imagine *him* standing there. She burned to turn around, to look on him again, but past experience had taught her the futility of that action. So she pressed her face to the cold mirror and let herself just *feel* his arms wrap around her, forgiving her betrayal.

Minutes, hours, seconds she stood there until he left. Left her alone. Bereft. *Not again*, she cried into the void as it flooded in where he had been. She had to get out, get back to where *he*, where *they* remained.

Jason grunted as she slammed the bathroom door open.

'What's wrong?' he demanded.

Gillian could hear anger, confusion in his sleep-filled cry.

'Gill, where are you going?'

'Don't call me that,' she screamed, dragging on her pants. She thrust her arms into her shirt but left it unbuttoned as she grabbed her shoes and purse.

'Wait—let me drive you home.' Jason struggled out of the sagging bed.

'Don't come near me.' Gillian's voice broke. 'I don't want to see you again.'

'What's wrong?'

'Just leave me alone.' She staggered away from him, clasping her belongings. Her bra

dropped to the floor, tangling her toes and sending her crashing into the door. Tears smeared across her face as she struggled to escape. With a cry, she fell through the door and fled, the stones of the driveway cutting her feet.

‘Gillian—’

She kept running, followed only by a trail of bloody prints. In the flashing red sign of the hotel her shame lurked.

Jilly sat at the kitchen table, shaking all over. She couldn’t believe it. Sandy was moving out. She looked at her hands and saw the wrinkles marring their once-clean lines. She was so old.

‘Come on, love,’ said Jay stopping next to her. ‘She can’t stay here forever.’ His hand gently squeezed her shoulder.

‘He could move in here.’

Jay’s silence refuted her statement. Her daughter had to have the freedom to make her own mistakes. But that didn’t make Sandy’s leaving any easier.

Jay sighed and his hand dropped away. ‘Try to smile and be happy for her. She’s in love.’

‘It’s Brad’s fault. If he hadn’t taken his son to our anniversary David and Sandy would never have met.’ *And she’d still be content to stay here.*

‘That’s not fair—’

‘—I know it’s not. But it’s how I *feel*.’

‘Mum,’ said Sandy hesitantly from the doorway. ‘It’s time I—we—left.’

Jilly’s heart lurched, sending her head spinning. Through blurring vision she saw David come up behind Sandy and wrap his arms around her. The look on Sandy’s face as she glanced at David mirrored Jilly’s feelings for Jay. With a deep breath, she stood up and walked over to the young couple. She clasped them both in a fierce hug.

‘Take care of each other,’ she demanded.

‘Oh, Mum,’ said Sandy laughing. ‘It’s not like you’ll never see us again.’

Jilly’s arms fell to her sides. ‘I know,’ she whispered as they walked away.

Jay took her hand and led her after the young couple. He paused in the doorway and kissed her deeply. The car horn honked, dragging them apart.

“Time to go,” he said. “You know I’ll be back tomorrow. I’ll get them settled and be back before you realise I’m gone.”

Jilly smiled at him as he got into their old red car. She waved as they drove up the street, even though she knew he couldn’t see her for the boxes piled in the back.

She stood on the doorstep as they disappeared while pain at their separation kindled.

As she turned to go inside, she felt more than heard the crashing of vehicles. She plunged after her family, praying she was wrong, forcing her legs to carry her up the road.

Towards the twisted remains of a little red car.

Gillian cradled the bottle of wine as she carried it into the bathroom. It was the same vintage they’d shared on their wedding day. He’d insisted on saving it for a special occasion. Sitting on the edge of the bath she stared at the bottle. *I guess today is that day.*

With a half-smile, she cut away the foil and uncorked the bottle before pouring the wine into the waiting glass. Heart’s blood, he’d called it. With a broken smile, she placed the glass carefully next to the bath. Far enough away that splashing water wouldn’t dilute the wine. Close enough for her to reach it.

Steam rose from the bath filling the room with a warm fog. She got undressed, carefully folding her clothes and placing them on the bench. She shivered as the fog kissed her body, raising goosebumps all over.

Gillian poured a measure of oil into the water and stirred it with one hand. She closed her eyes as the rising steam filled the air with roses. With a sigh she slipped into the hot water, relishing the faint burn as it closed over her. Currents in the water caressed her, reminding her of *his* caresses. Tears pooled in her eyes before mingling with the sweat beading on her face. She blinked away the tears and looked into the fog filling the room. Peace settled on her.

She frowned as the phone rang. It had been ringing all morning. Marty, she guessed, wanting to know what happened.

Gillian relaxed as the phone went silent. Wincing, she reached for her glass, letting the bottle opener fall from her hand. She brought the wine to her nose, disappointed as the steam dulled its rich aroma. She could almost hear their guests’ congratulations as she stared into the deep

crimson wine, suddenly unwilling to taste again her most treasured memories. Almost angrily, she gulped the wine, poured another glass and downed that in one swallow. She poured herself a third.

*That's no way to treat our favourite vintage—*

'Jay,' cried Gillian. 'Where are you?' Her head spun as her gaze darted around the room. Where was he?

He stepped out of the fog bringing the world into sharp focus.

'Oh, my g—you can't be here. You're—' Her words choked off. She couldn't talk for the pressure building up inside.

*I thought you missed me, Jilly,* he said, a grin lighting his face.

'How can you—'

*I brought someone else with me.* Jay looked behind him and held out his hand. Gillian thought her heart would burst when Sandy appeared.

*Mum!* Sandy moved forwards but was stopped by Jay's arm. *Why?* she demanded.

*She has to come to us,* he said.

Someone thumped on the front door and started yelling for Gillian.

Jilly smiled at her family, her life as Gillian falling from her shoulders like an unwanted shroud. She smiled at Jay and Sandy, her heart finally free of the void which had filled her since the accident.

*We're waiting for you,* said Jay.

'I know, my love. Can you hand me a towel?'

Jay smiled at her, making her heart melt as it had since they'd first met. Jilly ached to hold him, to hold them both. She pushed herself up then fell back in the water as her arms gave way.

'Damn,' she said, noticing she'd knocked her wine into the water.

Jay's look turned quizzical.

'I'm just tired,' she said. 'Let me rest a minute.'

Jilly leaned back in the bath. From under drooping eyelids, she saw ribbons of red dancing along shifting currents of water.

*Come on, Mum,* said Sandy. *Hurry up.*

'I'll be with you soon,' said Jilly. She leaned her head against the bath and let her eyes close,

soothed by the love flowing from her husband and daughter.

Someone started thumping on the front door, a tattoo of sound from someone else's reality. Jilly smiled as the fog rolled in, muffling the sound until it merged with her slowing heartbeat.

The thumping stopped.