

Her Last Night Of Innocence / The Secret She Can't Hide (U.S. title)

The story behind the story...

I'll be honest and say up front that, in addition to the two titles above, Cristiano and Kate's story is known in my house and on my blog as 'The Book That Would Not Die' because it took so long to write. I began it properly in September, when the children returned to school. By November I'd re-started it three times, trashing ten thousand words on each occasion, and one bleak and despairing Wednesday just a few weeks from my scheduled deadline, even wrote the first chapter of a new book entirely. However, there was something about Cristiano and Kate that made me really want to stay with them. I knew the story could work if I could just get past the bit that tripped me up every time. After a long and needy conversation with my angelic editor (I wondering if a certificate in counselling is a requirement of the job?) I came off the phone with a new deadline, a feeling of cautious optimism and the certain knowledge that I'd started the story in the wrong place.

This is a secret baby book – the first one that I'd attempted – and once I'd realised that the real story lay in what happens *after* the night when Kate and Cristiano's son is conceived it got an awful lot easier to write! The plot morphed massively from the original spark of an idea (which, I think, centred on a journalist being commissioned to ghost-write a racing driver's autobiography) but the characters remained essentially the same. Cristiano is a racing driver, with all the necessary characteristics of the job – fearlessness, single-mindedness, an overriding need to prove himself and to win at all costs. Kate is just the opposite – a quiet, serious girl from a small town in Yorkshire who, having lost both her father and her brother in car accidents, wants nothing more than a secure, uneventful life.

I love writing books where the opposing character traits of the hero and heroine give scope for loads of soul searching and plenty of room for growth and change. In this book Cristiano and Kate originally came together because of an irresistible attraction, but even without Cristiano's catastrophic accident the following day attraction alone would never have been enough to keep them together, just as the result of the accident (Cristiano's memory loss) isn't the only thing keeping them apart. The heart of the book lies in stripping back the layers of each character to discover what made them into the people they are in the present, and what they need to learn about themselves to move on from the past and into the future.

The 'secret baby' aspect interested me a lot. Initially I felt it was important to show that Kate had tried to tell Cristiano that he was going to be a father, however the more I wrote myself into her character the less of a given that seemed to be. Her son is the most important thing in her life and she would do anything to keep him safe and close. The key aspect of her personality is her anxiety and I realised she just wasn't the kind of person who would let go of her child – even a little bit – unless she absolutely had to. It was fascinating exploring (through the endlessly patient Dominic) her feelings about getting back in touch with Cristiano, and discovering how much she *didn't* want to because it jeopardized the little happiness she had.

One of the other things I enjoyed about writing this book was the settings. I had a great time browsing luxury ski chalets in Courchevel one dreary winter's afternoon, and really loved putting some very familiar places into the Yorkshire part of the story. We've had some gorgeous family holidays around Whitby and our favourite beach at Runswick Bay, where fossils litter the sand beneath the cliffs, made its way into the book, as did the pub at which we always stop for lobster and chips on the way back. One of the best bits of being a writer is using places that have special significance to you in books, and giving them special significance to your characters too. It's like recommending them to friends. I knew Alexander would love the beach and the pub as much as my children had.



An Extract from the Book...

Looking around wildly she stifled a whimper of panic. Whichever way she turned she seemed to be hemmed in by people – swigging champagne, tossing manes of glossy hair, throwing back their heads and laughing – until she felt like she was in some grotesque circus. Then miraculously ahead of her she saw the tall double doors that led to the lobby. Ducking her head she gathered up the slippery fall of her skirt and broke into a half-run.

The lobby was empty now, and the cool air from outside fanned across her burning cheeks. The heels of her tortuous shoes rang on the marble floor as she headed for the exit, hoping that Lisa or Ian hadn't seen her and might come after her and try to persuade her to come back again.

'Wait.'

The word was low and fierce. Oh God, she was even hearing voices now. Echoes from the past, just as she did so often in her dreams. Any moment now she'd wake up and find herself staring up at the ceiling of her cramped bedroom back in Hartley Bridge. Please God, please let her wake up before the part where she had to watch the car he was driving hit the barrier. Turn over. Burst into flames...

'Wait!'

In dreams things happen in slow motion, and that's how it was then. Strong fingers closed around her wrist and she was being pulled back, a powerful wave of shock jolting through her body and her making her head whip round.

Her breath stopped.

He was inches away from her, his face darker, harder, leaner and even more terrifyingly perfect than she remembered. But it was his eyes that made her poor battered heart turn over as they burned into hers with laser-like intensity.

Her lips parted to speak but no sound came out.

And then...

And then his mouth was on hers, his fingers biting into her shoulders as he gripped her and kissed her and she kissed him back with all the pain and loneliness and desperate longing of the last four years. Showers of incredulous joy burst inside her head and spread through her whole body. She felt weak with relief, with joy, as their mouths devoured each other, brutal and ruthless, their tongues probing and fighting and their teeth clashing.

Distantly she was aware of the music coming to its thundering climax and the eruption of applause, which suddenly got louder as the door behind them opened.

‘Cristiano.’

The voice was sharp and impatient, and Cristiano was lifting his head, pulling away from her and the real world was rushing back in, in a blur of bright light and noise. He let go of her shoulders abruptly.

Kate staggered backwards, her hands flying to her mouth which pulsed and throbbed, covering the incredulous smile that she couldn’t suppress.

A beautiful and exotic-looking girl who she remembered from Monaco as Cristiano’s PA and had seen coming and going from the hospital was standing in the doorway. Her slanting, cat-like eyes flickered over Kate before going back to Cristiano.

‘Silvio is about to make his speech.’

‘Va bene,’ he said tersely. ‘I’ll be there in a minute.’

The girl stared at him for a second as if she wanted to say more, but then she turned and disappeared with a disdainful flick of her black, shiny hair. The noise from the crowded room was shut off suddenly as the door shut behind her.

Kate was trembling violently, with shock in the aftermath of the kiss, and with a sort of wild, excited anticipation; unable to take in the fact that the moment she’d waited for all these years was finally here.

He was here.

Her gaze travelled wonderingly over him, as if trying to make her dazzled mind believe what she was seeing. She had only ever seen him in racing overalls and jeans and a t-shirt before, but the black, perfectly tailored dinner jacket his shoulders added a whole new dimension of sexiness to his racing-driver’s physique, making his shoulders look wider and stronger, and his hips narrower. Or maybe they were narrower, she thought with a wrench of desire and compassion. He had lost weight since the accident. The realization made her want to wrap her arms around him and...

Slowly he turned back to face her. There was a curious stillness about him. In the golden light of the chandeliers his face looked unusually pale.

‘Mi dispiace. I shouldn’t have done that.’

His voice was toneless. Kate felt a pin-prick of icy fear at the base of her spine. She shook her head, twisting her hands together to stop herself from reaching out to him.

‘It’s OK.’

He smiled; a chilling echo of the lazy, sexy, delicious smile she remembered so well.

‘Not really. I’m afraid I mistook you for someone else. I apologise...?’

The fear blossomed and spread through her, as if it was being injected into her veins. She felt her own smile freeze on her face, a rictus grin of horror. Her whole body suddenly seemed to be made of stone, and it was all she could do to turn her face away so he wouldn’t see the desolation and utter humiliation there.

‘Kate. It’s Kate.’

Her voice was a cracked whisper. She had to leave. Now. Before everything she had every imagined in her worst case scenarios paled into insignificance.

He nodded curtly, taking a step backwards in the direction of the doors, giving her the benefit of his heartbreaking, ironic half-smile. 'Kate. Forgive me for my... impulsiveness. It was a pleasure to meet you.'

It felt like she'd been punched hard in the stomach. She wanted to double up and gasp for air. It had been a mistake. She thought he'd recognized her. Remembered her. But it had been.... A mistake.

He turned, his shoulders very rigid as he walked away. In a second he would open the door and go back into the crowded room and she would be alone. The moment would have passed.

'W-we've... met before, actually. I'm from Clearspring water. I interviewed you... once.'

Oh God. She sounded desperate. Unbalanced. Like some disturbed, obsessed fan. She wouldn't blame him if he alerted security now, so to save herself the humiliation of being escorted off the premises she gathered up her skirt and backed off a couple of steps.

He stopped.

For a moment he was absolutely still, as if turned to stone. Kate's heart was beating so hard it shook her whole body and she had to remind herself to keep breathing. Slowly, stiffly he turned back to face her.

'Kate Edwards.' His voice was soft, his tone completely neutral, but his face looked as if it had been carved from ice. 'You interviewed me the night before the Monaco Grand Prix four years ago.'

'Yes.'

So he knew. He knew who she was and yet he stood there looking at her across the cavernous space with eyes that glittered with some emotion she couldn't read, but which certainly wasn't love. Or happiness, or excitement or relief or any of the other things that she had felt when she saw him again. Her heart was beating very hard, very fast, shaking her whole body and pounding in her head as she began to back towards the door.

'I'm glad you're well again. I'm glad you're back – i-if that's what you want...'

Her skirt twisted around her legs, slowing her down. She managed a smile, though it felt like her face might crack. 'It was nice to see you again.'

She was almost at the door. She could feel the cold night at her back and she turned round and covered the remaining few feet as quickly as she could in her agonizing high heels and didn't slow down until she had reached the door of the Hotel de Paris opposite.

Reviews

THE SECRET SHE CAN'T HIDE by India Grey: Marketing executive Kate Edwards and race car driver Cristiano Maresca share one passionate night together before Cristiano is nearly killed in the Grand Prix race. Although he recovers physically, Cristiano has no memory of the day before the accident — including Kate. When they meet again four years later, his memories begin to return, aided by their 3-year-old son. But can Kate, whose family was killed in a car accident, embrace Cristiano's career? Does Cristiano love Kate enough to give it up? A great story where the characters drive the plot and conflict.

- *Romantic Times*, 4 stars.

India Grey always creates credible and convincing characters and *The Secret She Can't Hide* is certainly no exception. Both Kate and Cristiano are flawed and vulnerable, but also humane, resolute and truthful characters readers can relate to and sympathize with. I also enjoyed how in this novel India Grey gave us glimpses into the relationships which Kate and Cristiano had with their friends and relatives. This served to make the characters more believable and real, without once detracting from the romantic story.

- *Cataromance* 4.5 stars

What I liked was that Cristiano, upon seeing Kate again and still suffering from memory loss, is attracted to her again. Whatever connection Kate and Cristiano had four years ago wasn't fleeting. The amnesia of Cristiano's is used to affect the right amount of angst. Oh, the pain that Kate feels when Cristiano treats her like he has never seen her before is delicious. I ate it up with a spoon (I know this sounds macabre but this angst is exactly the reason I read HPs). What was surprising was the direction the story took. In many ways it was unpredictable even though it incorporated many of the HP mainstays – the secret baby, the amnesia, the marriage of convenience, misunderstandings... Kate and Cristiano seemed like equals, maybe not in the pocketbook, but certainly in all other areas.

Dear Author