

## Dust

by Juliet Robinson

The wind was up. It pulled at the eaves and found its way into cracks even mice wouldn't bother with. Allie gave up on sleep. It wasn't something that came easily to her, especially not since Ruaridh had passed, when you've shared a bed with someone for five decades it's hard to find peace in their absence.

Downstairs she made herself a cup of green tea (which according to her granddaughter was good for her arthritis) then headed over to the window. It was one of those odd nights where even though the moon kept vanishing behind racing clouds it was never properly dark. If she'd had more than just a view of her street, Allie would have been able to see for miles, perhaps even all the way to the coast, where the waves would be racing tonight.

She sipped her tea and watched a fox trot down the street, taking its time. And why shouldn't it, except for Allie at the window it apparently had this nighttime world to itself.

A light flickered across the street causing Allie to frown. Ava's old house nobody lived there. She lent forward trying to get a better view, but the wind tossed the branches of the ancient oak tree, obscuring the window and when they swayed back the light was no longer on. Perhaps Allie had imagined it.

She still missed Ava, even though it had been decades. They say we are sleep until we fall in love, but for Allie it wasn't fairy tale love that woke her soul it had been the love between friends. She had never had a connection with anyone like the one that had sparked between her and Ava, two peas from the same pod. Ruaridh, she had loved, but not like her childhood friend, the one person she could really be free with.

Ava's family had left town decades ago, and the house had changed hands only a few times since then, but none of the new residents had stayed. In the end it had been bought up by some lawyer from London and now it sat empty. Allie could still walk its rooms in her mind. She had spent most of her childhood in that house. She smiled remembering the endless hours she and Ava had spent exploring the attic. Ava had been convinced it was haunted and Allie had been happy to play along.

The next morning after aqua aerobics Allie paused at the gate of Ava's house. It was hard to explain but it felt like something was calling to her, drawing her in, the wind in trees seemed to be whispering and before she knew it Allie was on the front step. Feeling foolish she tried the door, expecting it to be locked, but the handle turned and the door swung open.

She laughed nervously, then after glancing around before entering the house. It still smelt the same inside, rosemary and wood polish. Funny. A few pieces of furniture remained, and everything was coated with dust. A scurrying sound told Allie that mice now roamed the house freely.

She wandered the rooms, fighting the urge to go straight to the attic. Finally, it was the only place she hadn't explored and up she went, grateful another resident had improved the ladder for otherwise she would never have made it up there.

The attic was empty. It hadn't been like that when Ava lived here, back then it had been stuffed to the rafters. It was funny how small it seemed despite the lack of clutter, it felt different, somehow oppressive.

Allie sighed; she didn't know what she had expected. She turned to leave when a scratching sound echoed around the rafters.

She glanced back and there at the back of the attic a sliver of light shone. Despite a creeping sense of anxiety she crossed the floor, trailing footprints in the dust. A door, how had they never found this in all their adventures?

Allie pushed it open revealing a small room, it was empty except for a notebook which lay on the floor just by the door. Allie picked it up and at once recognised Ava's writing. A diary?

She started to flick through the pages and almost immediately regretted it. It was Ava's diary, but what was written here didn't match with Allie's memories of Ava. Here was a bitter and angry young girl. Over and over again she complained about Allie, criticized her and belittled her.

As Allie read on it seemed her childhood was unravelling, being picked apart with each cruel word Ava had written. The festering resentment Ava had felt towards her burned even across all those years. None of it had been real, her one true friend had never loved her.

The diary ended abruptly on Ava's sixteenth birthday. Numbly Allie left the attic and wandered home still clutching the diary. She had mourned the loss of her and Ava's friendship these past sixty years only to find out none of it had been real.