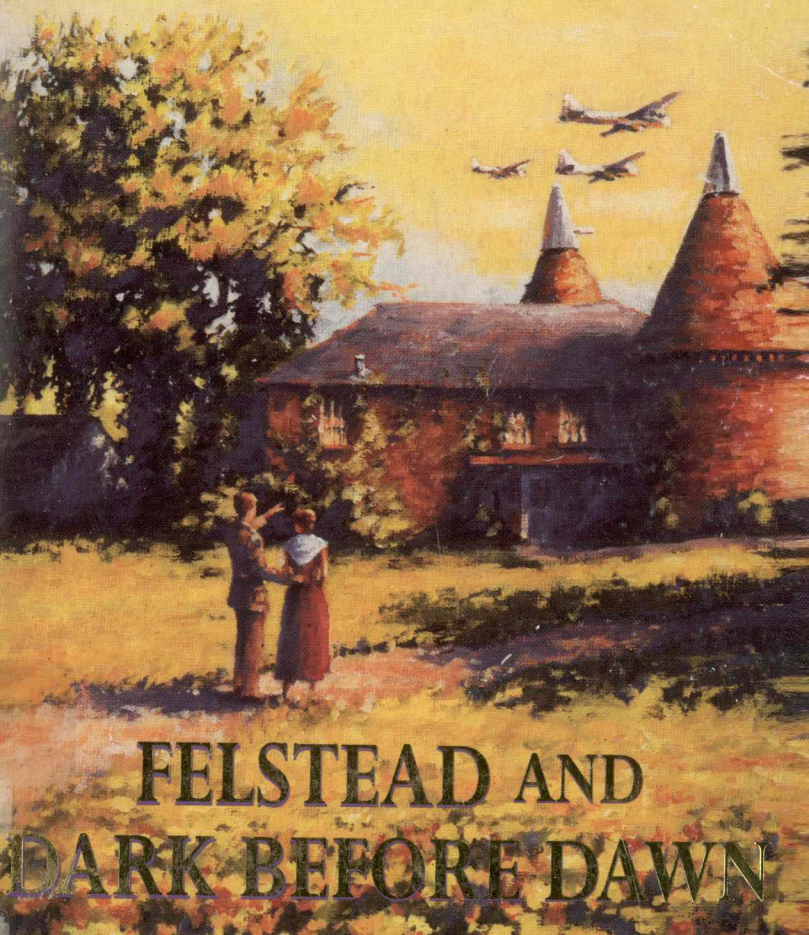
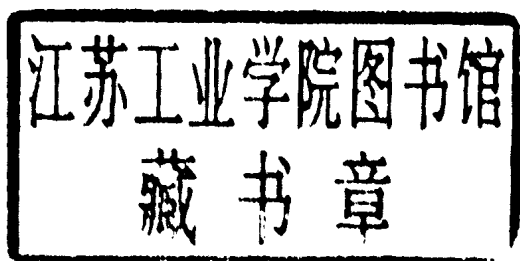


KAY STEPHENS



FELSTEAD AND
DARK BEFORE DAWN

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and
DARK BEFORE DAWN



Kay Stephens was born and brought up in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Her love of books increased while she spent the first seven years of her working life as a librarian, and throughout a subsequent business career she cherished the urge to write.

Although now living with her husband in Kent, Kay's affection for Yorkshire ensures that its valleys and moors frequently feature as the setting for her novels.

Away from her desk, she enjoys reading (for which there is never sufficient time), walking and gardening, and exploring the seashore, the countryside and old houses. Her other interests including travelling, languages, crossword puzzles and ballroom dancing.

Kay is a member of The Romantic Novelists' Association, The Society of Authors, and The Society of Women Writers and Journalists.

FELSTEAD
and
DARK BEFORE DAWN

Kay Stephens

Felstead/Dark Before Dawn



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FELSTEAD

Chapter One

A lone sea gull wheeled majestically, soaring phantom-white against a sky darkened to indigo by the threatening storm. Jay shivered as the gull's keening cry pierced the thrumming of the Lancia's engine. It was Good Friday afternoon—a time which no amount of rationalizing could dissociate from death.

She reached the top of the gradient and sighed. The house was visible already—a gaunt mansion dominating the moor, its blackened York sandstone as forbidding as the surrounding sky. Wryly, she smiled. Paul had warned her that Rhys Felstead was no more welcoming than his house; whatever this Easter brought, she'd expect no joy.

Jay was accustomed to the reluctance with which she was taken into a home. Being an art expert frequently involved breaking the news that someone's treasured painting was worth far less than they'd supposed. This time, the authenticity of seven paintings was in ques-

tion, and Rhys Felstead would reject anything but incontrovertible proof that they were faked.

Hailstones rattled on the windshield as she drove over the straight road leading to Scree Carr. The icy particles were hurled toward her like a deterrent and again Jay smiled, though again she shivered. She needed no elements to reinforce her longing to be somewhere else. But for Paul's insistence, she'd have opposed Mr. Felstead's wish that she spend Easter here.

His telephone call had been terse, a command intimating that if Paul Valentine valued the opportunity to auction the Felstead collection, he would send someone immediately to prove or disprove that these seven pictures were forged. And so Jay was the victim.

Victim wasn't ordinarily the way she'd describe herself. Having studied, feverishly acquiring knowledge, until she equaled and then surpassed most men of similar age in her field, she wasn't readily deterred. At present, though, she *was* exhausted. It had been nearly a year since the terminal illness through which she had nursed her mother, yet somehow, Jay hadn't managed to throw off the lingering weariness.

Paul had been more than good to her. Spending time that he could ill-spare from expanding the business, he'd wined and dined her in fashionable restaurants in and around London. They'd visited Paris and the States, mingling business with pleasure, easing their occupational pressures together, in romantic surroundings.

It wasn't Paul's fault that Jay had been unable to unwind and let the atmosphere take effect; he'd been patient, even when she couldn't explain why she didn't respond to him. They were more than friends, after all. They were companions as well as associates; the fact that their relationship went no further was an enigma to Jay herself as much as to Paul.

The heavy iron gates set in a high stone wall seemed implacable. Hauling up the collar of her fur coat against the driving hail, Jay impatiently stepped from the car. As if triggered by some secret release, the gates swung open while she was still four or five paces away.

Returning hurriedly to the car, Jay drove through, sensing, ridiculously, that they might close just as inexplicably. A movement drew her glance sideways to a compact cottage in the lee of the wall. At its window an impassive old man raised a respectful hand in brief salute before he pressed the electric button, closing the gates behind her.

The house she approached was three-storied, solid as the Yorkshire folk who had fashioned it centuries ago. In summer the extensive gardens might soften its glowering appearance. Today, with hailstones whitening out the contours of flower beds and lawns and the storm inking out yew hedges and shrubs, Jay felt the place was drained of color as well as warmth.

The front entrance was imposing, with solid mahogany doors beyond a portico reached by a flight of stone steps. But the windows to either side and above the door seemed as bleak as the landscape, empty and cold.

Jay left the car hastily, dismissing her reluctance, as she raised her shoulders and straightened her spine. She breathed deeply and evenly, preparing herself for the encounter with Mrs. Godfrey, the housekeeper. From Paul's description, the woman was as dour as her master.

The doorbell surprised her, its tone melodic, far removed from the clanging she'd anticipated. Her second surprise came when the door was opened, not by the woman, but by a lean elegant male whose spectacles failed to mask the most penetrating brown eyes she'd ever seen.

"Miss Stanmer?"

"Yes." Jay found she couldn't say more.

"Rhys Felstead." He did not offer to shake her hand, but motioned her through. Jay felt irrationally that she was being snared.

"I'll take your bag." He extended a hand for her case. "My housekeeper is away, but you won't be uncomfortable. My daily woman comes in to clean and cook. If anything fails to satisfy, you need only say."

The icily formal words, delivered as he led the way briskly to the staircase, were devoid of any warmth.

He opened a door on the first floor and indicated that she should enter.

"I trust you will be comfortable," he said, still coolly indifferent. "You'll wish to freshen up after your journey. Dinner will be at eight."

And that appeared to be that. He set her case inside the door and disappeared, his retreating feet inaudible on the thickly carpeted landing. Paul certainly hadn't exaggerated. Surely any other host would have shown her the bathroom or explained how to find the dining room when she was permitted to emerge from her room.

Jay glanced around, admitting that the room was very beautiful—the ideal sanctuary for an art connoisseur. The dark paneled walls were a good foil for the lovingly restored oil paintings. She identified a Constable, one of Turner's most appealing sunsets, and a Reynolds portrait. There could be no doubting their authenticity, and the five or six lesser works seemed equally genuine. But then, she supposed Rhys Felstead wouldn't place anything less in the room that could be scrutinized at leisure by someone of her experience. Whatever one might accuse him of, it wouldn't be stupidity.

The walls were hung also with a large tapestry

depicting a battle scene, and three gilt-framed mirrors, the largest facing the bed, were set between huge windows from which icy drafts penetrated.

The windows were curtained with heavy brocade which, although obviously not antique, had been carefully chosen to complement the room. Jay smiled to herself. Rhys Felstead could justly claim to be artistic. No matter how lovely the room, however, it was terribly cold; Jay hurried toward the open grate where logs blazed.

Crossing the carpet, she noticed a door standing ajar and found it led to a bathroom. Once she'd unpacked the few belongings that she'd brought, she intended to take a leisurely bath. Everything indicated that she was in for a tough weekend, and she had to face it with every possible advantage.

While hanging up garments and setting out makeup, hairbrush, and comb, Jay noted that, as with everything in here, the furniture appeared well chosen and expensive. The mahogany surfaces gleamed like newly purchased reproductions, yet she recognized them as genuine Regency pieces.

Jay was drying herself in the enormous cold bathroom when someone rapped on the bedroom door; donning her robe, she hastened to open it.

Rhys Felstead was standing there. He looked briefly embarrassed at bringing her to the door, but instead of apology his voice was heavy with rebuke.

"I see you have left your car at the front entrance. Didn't Manners tell you where to garage it?"

"Manners?"

"At the lodge. The old fool's becoming incompetent—"

"Perhaps he didn't realize who I was."

"Of course he knew, I advised him of your arrival. I

don't encourage casual visitors. However, will you kindly place your car in one of the garages to the rear as soon as you're dressed?"

"Certainly," Jay responded tersely, resenting his reproving tone.

Instead of dressing hastily, she deliberately took her time, brushing her long blond hair until it gleamed, swirling it high at the back of her head, then anchoring it with an antique gold clasp. And she went downstairs only when she was ready for dinner. She may be here at his request, but she'd show Mr. Rhys Felstead she wasn't obliged to suffer his heavy-handedness.

They met in the echoing entrance hall as she crossed toward the front door, and Jay felt his piercing brown eyes assessing her appearance.

She was wearing a mid-calf dress of a soft blue woolen material, and anticipated another rebuke for not dressing for dinner. She glanced toward him, observed that he himself was wearing nothing more formal than a perfectly tailored lounge suit, and raised her gray eyes challengingly.

Astonishingly, the eyes behind the lenses seemed briefly to glint with amusement, and he gave a tiny snort that might have been laughter.

"You evidently are not aware of the severity of our North Country climate, Miss Stanmer. We don't venture outside without some protection."

About to turn and fetch her coat, she felt a surprisingly gentle hand on her arm. "There's no need—here, use this."

He grasped a heavy sheepskin jacket from a nearby hook and then held it out for her. "I know it won't fit, but it'll prevent your catching pneumonia while you walk back from the garage."

"Thank you," Jay murmured, feeling rather awk-

ward as she thrust her arms into its sleeves, then caught the coat about her. But when she turned to smile her acknowledgment, he was striding away from her.

The evening air was cold, although the hail had passed and the last traces of white had melted from the lawns. Jay started the car, puzzling over which way around the house she was supposed to go. Her headlights showed that the drive circled the building, so perhaps the direction was immaterial.

Halfway around the side of the house, she met a blank wall. Sighing heavily, she turned the car in the opposite direction. This time she made her way to the rear of the house, and was confronted with triple garage doors. She was wondering which door to try when, possibly activated by some photoelectric cell, one of the doors began to rise. She smiled, despite herself; whatever his circumstances, Rhys Felstead denied himself no modern gadgetry.

After locking her car and securing the garage door, Jay drew up the collar of the coat, hugging it around her against the bitter cold. The moonlight revealed that this side of the estate was fenced, and the wind rushed toward her as if it came over vast arctic wastes.

Moonlight appeared to be the only illumination here; surprised that no lights shone from any of the rooms, Jay stepped back and glanced up. She shuddered, so chilled that the thick sheepskin failed to warm her. Above and to either side of the garages, every window had been boarded over.

Finding her way to the front without light took a while, and Jay suspected her host had meant her to experience some difficulty. He was still standing beside the fire in the hall, holding a whisky tumbler and sipping pensively. He scrutinized her as she entered.

"You took your time," he remarked sharply.

"Thanks for the loan of your coat," Jay said, returning it to its hook. "You were right, it was much colder than I imagined."

"I would have expected that you might have hurried then."

"You didn't tell me which way to go," she observed, her tone as sharp as his. "And a flashlight might have come in handy."

He made no comment. "Sherry?" he inquired, sounding reluctant.

"No, it doesn't matter, thank you. You seem anxious to dine."

The dining room was splendid, its imposing furniture old, well-preserved oak. The sideboard was carved, matching the heavy backs of the chairs ranged along both sides and at either end of the long table.

"This is beautiful," Jay remarked, and momentary pleasure warmed his dark eyes before he glanced away. He took the carver chair at the head of the table, and Jay sat to his right, feeling thankful he hadn't sent her to the farthest end.

"You have excellent taste." She admired the gold candelabra, wine coolers, and salvers which vied for brilliance with the delicately cut crystal goblets. Ruby-red velvet curtains shifted in the draft from the windows.

"This furniture is original, almost as old as the house, unlike the pieces in the room you're using, which were purchased later by an ancestor."

"Everything seems perfectly chosen, to create a composite picture."

"One tries," Rhys said coldly.

Jay wished he would unbend a little in response to her very real appreciation. They both liked beautiful things; couldn't they make that their common ground?

A neat little woman in a dark dress served soup that was welcomingly hot and delicately flavored with herbs. As Rhys passed Jay the crusty bread rolls, she decided she had to try to establish some sort of rapport with him.

"I imagine you're reluctant to admit a stranger to assess some of your possessions," she began, trying to smile sympathetically.

He appeared surprised and shrugged. "I need to know if the pictures in question have any real value." He hesitated. "But yes, I do resent that need—you understand why I can't welcome you."

If not why you must adopt a coolness that borders on being rude, Jay thought, then stifled the thought, trying to establish some cordiality.

"Was one of your antecedents anxious to evade window tax?" she asked.

"No." The word was rapped out, and his eyes behind the glasses were veiled. Jay couldn't imagine why he was perturbed by such an innocent question.

"But all the windows to the rear have been boarded over."

"That's not your concern," Rhys snapped.

"I'll keep my thoughts to myself then," she hissed back. The man really was impossible. Did his loathing of the situation excuse his determination to make her hate every moment of her stay?

She felt him gazing at her again, but kept her attention on the soup, thankful it was good. If the rest of the food was as superb, she would have one thing for which she could feel grateful.

"Wine?" he invited, his voice warming as he reached for her glass.

"Please."

"I hope that you drink red. I assure you this is excellent."

"I'm sure it will be." Jay matched her cool tone to his own.

"I try to compensate, in the quality of what I provide, for any shortcomings in the way it's offered," he said smoothly—so smoothly that Jay wondered if she could really have heard correctly.

She was compelled to look at him. Rhys smiled, if ruefully. "You see, I'm not unaware of your thoughts, but I don't apologize. I believe I'm old enough for people to take me as I am—or *not*, if they prefer."

"You don't care what anybody thinks of you, do you?" she exclaimed.

"Should I?"

The question was unanswerable. Jay glanced down at her plate and was relieved when the daily woman came in with their second course.

"How soon can I see the paintings?" she inquired, anxious to find some topic that wouldn't invoke further perturbing answers.

"Is after our meal soon enough? Are you so eager to escape?"

Checking the impulse to echo the word took all her willpower. Had she made her uneasiness so obvious? And was he enjoying the fact?

Rhys laughed wryly. "You needn't pretend. When Paul Valentine was here, he didn't trouble to disguise his feelings. I can't imagine he failed to warn you of the atmosphere."

Jay swallowed hard, but somehow could not conceal her smile.

"Ah." He was gazing intently at her, and their eyes met.

"Do you enjoy making people uncomfortable?" Jay asked quietly.

"I don't expect enjoyment from life, Miss Stanmer, nor, as we've established already, from this situation."