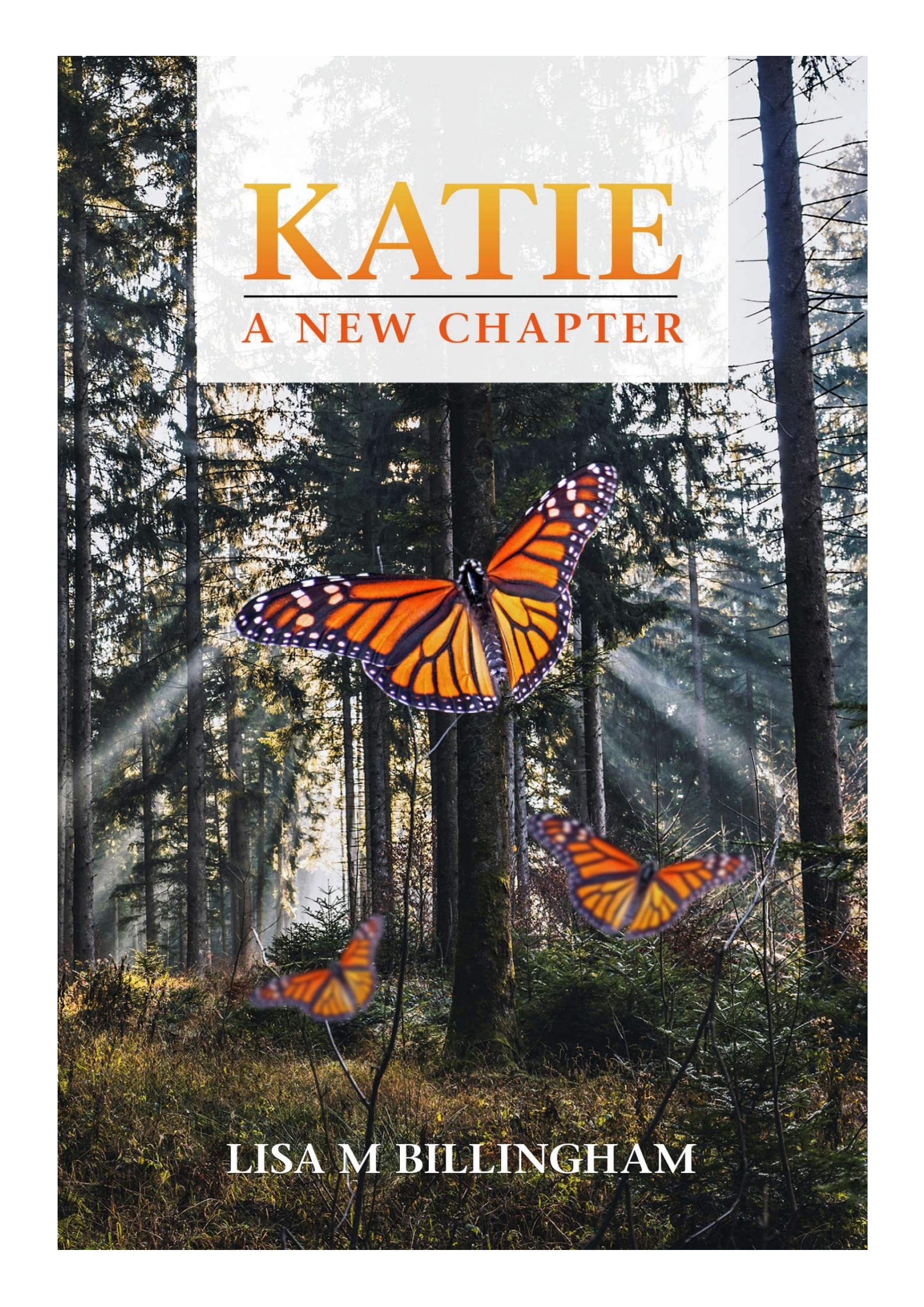


A monarch butterfly with vibrant orange and black wings is the central focus, positioned in the middle of the frame. It is surrounded by other monarch butterflies in various stages of flight, some appearing blurred to suggest movement. The background is a dense forest of tall, thin evergreen trees. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a misty, ethereal atmosphere with visible rays of light (crepuscular rays) streaming down from the top left and right. The overall color palette is dominated by the greens of the forest, the oranges and blacks of the butterflies, and the soft, hazy light of the sunbeams.

KATIE

A NEW CHAPTER

LISA M BILLINGHAM

Katie

A New Chapter

by Lisa M Billingham

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First published in the UK in 2020

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ISBN: 978-1-8382929-0-4

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the abundance of people who helped to make it happen. (You know who you are.)

Without the support of my parents, friends and followers this book would not have happened. The list is endless and some of the professional contacts are available at the back of this book.

March 1991

The Interview

Saturday, 9th March

Oh shit! Now I'm going to be late, and today of all days, my first interview in months. Untangling her limbs from the damp quilt Katie almost falls out of bed, her heart racing with panic. Grabbing the alarm clock in a temper, she looks at it in disgust through bleary sleep-filled eyes.

"Bloody stupid thing!" she screams at it as she throws it up against the bedroom wall. *Why me? Why now? Can my life get any worse?*

Staggering out of bed, she stubs her little toe on the large cardboard box that props open the wardrobe door as she stumbles to the bathroom.

Jesus! That bloody hurt! The pain stops her in her tracks as the tears start to roll down her cheeks. Today was not getting off to a good start.

Finally making it to the bathroom, still, in a state of tired confusion and still feeling disorientated, she forces herself to wash. Wincing as the cold water touches her lumpy, sore skin, the left-over signs of her teenage acne. *Why is there no hot water again?* Shivering as she turns to leave the bathroom, she catches a glimpse of herself in the cracked mirror hanging forlornly on the back of the door, horrified at her frizzy long brown hair and overweight form. Grabbing a scrunchie from the shelf above the sink she scrapes her hair back and ties it up.

Dressing quickly in black trousers and a thick cowl necked grey jumper, stopping to grab her watch from the floor and her bag from the hook behind the front door, she hotfoots it out into the warm morning sun, racing across the square to her destination pausing only to check the time. A feeling of relief washes over her as she realises that she is only two minutes late. *I never thought I'd make it.*

Standing at the small black wooden door just long enough to catch her breath she looks up at the sign above and laughs cynically. Trust me to apply for a job at 'The Black Dog' public house. There it was again. That sly little black dog that follows you around and lurks in the background waiting to pounce. When you think it's gone away back it comes again. If it was cute and cuddly it wouldn't be so bad, but it isn't, it's like an all-consuming permanent black cloud, like something out of a mystery video game.

Taking a deep breath, she rubs her sweaty, shaking hands down her trousers. *Oh well, here we go again, all I can do is my best, even if it means I have to beg.* Katie desperately hopes that it won't come to begging this time. Still fighting back the tears she manages to pull herself together just long enough to get through the ordeal. *What am I doing here, he's never going to give me a job, look at me?*

The bitch inside her head, the one that keeps telling her she's not good enough was admonishing her again. *You'll never amount to anything. Look at you, face like a smacked arse. Couldn't even be bothered with make-up but you have to work so you may as well knock and get on with it. You'll probably have to beg, but that's about all you're good for...*

Taking a deep breath to try to steady her already frayed nerves, she pushes the bitch's thoughts away. Before she can lose her nerve completely, she gently knocks on the door.

Oh god please don't let me mess this one up.

Strange, no reply. He must be expecting her... knocking again, louder this time and after what feels like an eternity, she hears the echo of footsteps walking towards her.

“Coming! Hold your ‘orses!” a voice shouts from inside.

The door opens and blocking the doorway with his rotund frame is the proprietor.

“Katie, I presume?” bellows the gruff raspy voice.

“Yes sir.”

“Well, come in then, come in. I’m Jack,” he introduces himself. Moving out of the doorway to allow her to pass, he surreptitiously eyes her up and down. *Mmm, odd-looking girl.*

Katie tentatively enters. Looking around her, mesmerised by the old-fashioned décor and the abundance of model aeroplanes which seem remarkably out of place. It’s smaller than she remembers it to be, small but perfectly formed and very cosy. Lost in thought she reminisces of the times her Grandad used to walk her here, her little legs struggling to keep up with his enormous strides, her, perching on the huge green wooden flower pot outside the window of the bar while he played dominoes with his mates inside and drank dark ale till the early hours.

“Don’t tell your mother,” he used to say when they made their way back home. Every Saturday without fail he’d be here. Those were the days, carefree and colourful.

“Would you like a drink lass?” *mmm, strange, she looks lost in her own little world, I don’t have time for this.*

“Drink or what lass?” gruffer and louder this time.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I was thinking about when I used to come here with my Grand...”

“Never mind that, I’m a busy man, let’s get on with this, orange juice do ya?”

Taken aback, Katie can only nod her head and quietly whisper. “Yes please.”

“Well go and get ‘em then, I’ll have a pint of best ale,” he says as he lifts the flap and opens the door to allow Katie access behind the bar.

Funny interview this, Katie thinks to herself, trying to avert her gaze from his large overweight frame and his beady brown eyes staring over his round-rimmed glasses at her chest.

“So, lass, what you been a-doin’ then?”

He perches himself on the edge of a barstool, watching her pull his pint.

“What do you mean, sir?”

Shaking his head in disbelief, *is this girl for real or what?* “For work girl, what you been doin’?”

Katie, already nervous, on the edge and out of her comfort zone is even more flustered by his abrupt manner and is tempted to walk out already, but she feels at home in this tiny little lounge with the new addition of the open fire, *lovely in the winter* she thinks.

“Well, speak girl, what’s the matter? Cat got your tongue ‘as it?” he almost shouts.

Taking another deep breath, Katie with her head bowed down, blurts out, “I was working in my Grandmother’s pub *The Frog & Snail* in Rose Bush but she passed away last year so I’ve just moved here and now I really need a job.”

Katie can feel the tears welling in her eyes, *how very awkward*, she thinks as she looks up, *probably overdone it there, he doesn’t look terribly impressed.*

Sipping the pint she hands him, he looks at her over the top of his rounded spectacles, eyeing her up and down. Again. *Mmm, bit pasty looking and spotty but there’s something about her, can’t quite put my finger on it and she doesn’t half pull a decent pint to be fair to her.*

Katie, subconsciously holding her breath and trying to pull her long dark hair around her face to hide her angry red spots, before realising she'd tied it up this morning, prays, *please don't let this be another rejection. There are no other jobs advertised within 10 miles, I have to get this one.*

Jack breaks the uncomfortable silence, "OK lass, I'm willing to give you a trial, see how you get on. Be here at ten-thirty on Monday morning and I'll show you the ropes. Oh, and don't be late!"

Shit, he noticed then.

Katie looks up at him through watery eyes, "I won't sir. I won't."

Heartily laughing he says, "What's all this 'sir' business. Call me Jack." And at that, he turns his back on her and walks towards the cellar.

Katie breathes an almighty sigh of relief as she makes her way more slowly this time back across the square towards home. *I have a funny feeling about Jack but I need the money, I have to work and I don't see much else on offer at the moment. Well, I'll have to see how it goes.*

Katie's stomach growls at her, "feed me, feed me."

It wasn't until then that she realised, she'd had nothing to eat yet today. The smell of the fresh bread emanating from the tea room in the square was not helping to dissuade her hunger.

Closing the front door of her tiny flat behind her, she says, "OK, I know, you'll eat soon!"

Trying hard to divert her attention away from her hunger, she pours herself a glass of cold water and gulps it down in one go, almost choking herself in the process.

Leaning against the tiny sink, she feels pleased with herself at last. She made it through the interview and landed herself a job. Feeling happier than she has in a long time but still very wary, that nagging feeling in the pit of her stomach about Jack not diminishing. Her stomach lets out an almighty grumble, begging her to give it sustenance. *I'd better eat now, I suppose.*

Opening the cupboard door, taking the last Weetabix out, and putting it in a chipped dish, she adds a few spoons of sugar and the last drop of milk. Carrying it through to the living room, she flops down on the tiny grey two-seater sofa to devour her much-needed lunch.

Almost satiated, attempting to take her mind off her still half-empty stomach, she looks across at the pile of boxes in the corner of the room containing her meagre possessions. *I should make myself useful and unpack the rest. I'd love to go back to sleep now, the rush of the day so far has been exhausting but I've only been up a couple of hours.*

Dragging the box across to the sofa so she can sort through it in relative comfort, *oh, my word, this is heavy, she thinks, whatever is in here?*

Discarding the newspaper packaging and bubble wrap which is holding everything upright, she takes out her books, a few old, chipped stripy plates, and the remainder of the dishes which her grandmother had left her. *How I wish I could speak to you now.*

Absentmindedly she continues taking her belongings out of the box and placing them on the sofa.

Her hand stumbles upon a rectangular brick-like shape towards the bottom of the box, pulling it out, she feels a tear spring in the corner of her eye. *Oh my, I remember this. My old faithful Walkman, a present from my grandmother last Christmas just before she died. She was sick of me playing my music so loud, even though we lived above a pub which played loud music every weekend.*

Laughing at the memories it restores in her haggled brain. Closing her eyes for a moment she remembers ripping the packaging off the present. Oh my, she feels like a child again. Reminiscing about the times she used to dance around her bedroom with her earphones around her head and her hairbrush microphone in her hand, *Tina Turner, eat your heart out.* She used it all the time, back then. In the bath, in bed, when she was out walking.

Not now though, now was completely different, the Black Dog, depression, they call it, wasn't in her life then. Unable to pinpoint the exact time things changed. Her doctors believed it was over several years and from not dealing with issues as they arose. *How could I when I didn't know they were issues,* she thought to herself. *Fluoxetine, that's what they're called. Evil substance if ever I did come across one.*