

*Summer at  
the Lake*

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ERICA JAMES



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## Chapter One

It had been a mistake to open the envelope.

She should never have done that. If only she had left it to deal with when she returned home from work, or if only the postman had been late, her day wouldn't have been ruined. As it was, her thoughts had been constantly drawn to the Christmas card from Seb with its ruddy-cheeked Santa up-ended in a snowdrift.

But it was the high-quality card tucked inside that was the real shock. Embossed with fancy gold calligraphy it requested her to save the date of 10th July next summer for the wedding of Imogen Alicia Morgan and Sebastian Hughes.

On the back was a scrawly handwritten message from Seb – *Floriana, I do hope you'll come, it would mean a lot to me.* An email address she didn't recognise had been tagged on at the bottom.

Would it mean a lot to Seb for her to be there? Would it really? Floriana found it hard to believe. For two years there had been nothing from him. Not a single text, email or phone call. Now, out of the blue, this announcement. An announcement that made her feel as though she had been slapped. Then slapped again, hard. And just when her mind managed to blank it out – *wham!* – there was another slap.

Turning off the High into Radcliffe Square, where earlier she had been explaining to an enthusiastic group of American tourists that it was England's finest example of a circular library, she hurried along in the bitter cold to Catte Street, passing the Bodleian on her left and the Bridge of Sighs on her right. It was always at this spot in the road that she warned people to look out for approaching cyclists – she had lost count of how many tourists had very nearly come a cropper here as they stopped to admire and take photographs of the bridge.

No two days were the same for Floriana; it was one of the

things she loved most about her job as an Oxford blue badge tour guide. Yesterday she had taken a group of fiercely clued-up fans on an *Inspector Morse* and *Lewis* tour – some of whom had been determined to catch her out on some minute detail or other. But blessed with an excellent retentive memory – Seb used to refer to it as her dark arts super-power – they’d have to be up early to get one over her.

Today she had been conducting what Dreaming Spires Tours called their Classic University and City Tour, culminating in afternoon tea at the Randolph Hotel. From there the group of Americans had been picked up by coach and taken to spend the night in Woodstock. Tomorrow they were scheduled to visit Blenheim Palace for mulled wine and carol singing. When Floriana had been saying goodbye to them – while accepting their discreetly palmed tips – she had inexplicably wanted to clamber on board the bus with the jolly, carefree group and run away, if only to Woodstock. Anything than go home and deal with Seb’s card – a card that had scratched at the dormant and humiliating ache of her love for someone beyond reach.

But home in North Oxford was exactly where she was now heading. Avoiding Broad Street and the tangle of bus queues on St Giles, she took the quieter route of Parks Road. Usually she cycled to work, but this morning, on top of the shock of opening Seb’s card, she had found her bicycle had a puncture.

Fixing the puncture was another job to add to the growing list of things she had to do. Mostly they were things she kept putting off because she couldn’t be bothered to deal with them. Such as changing two of the halogen light bulbs in the kitchen that hadn’t worked for the last month, or getting a handyman in to replace the cracked window pane in her bathroom. The guttering also needed clearing and that tap in the bathroom was dripping too. At the back of her mind was the thought that if she waited until everything that was going to go wrong went wrong, she’d get someone in to sort it all out in one go.

‘For heaven’s sake, Floriana,’ her sister would say, ‘stop procrastinating!’ Doubtless Ann would add that they were all simple jobs anyone with half a brain could do for themselves and why on earth didn’t she roll her sleeves up and get on with it?

Four years older than Floriana, Ann never put anything off; she was the last word in getting things done. She was what the

world would class as a proper grown-up – wife, mother, domestic technician, and workplace Hitler. She was eminently sensible and led a thoroughly organised and blameless life and never missed an opportunity to make Floriana feel that she had somehow messed up, even when she hadn't. Her every comment, so it seemed, was weighted with the sole intention to make Floriana feel inadequate and recklessly irresponsible. And though it was true there had been times when her impulsive nature had got her into a close shave or two, she had, it had to be said, always escaped actual outright disaster.

Most notably was the occasion in her first year at college here in Oxford when she spent a night in a police cell. She had thought she'd been successful in keeping it from Mum and Dad, but then a letter for her had arrived at home with the words *Thames Valley Police* stamped on the envelope. Ann had gone to town on making a ludicrously big fuss as to why Floriana was receiving letters from the police.

'Just the one letter,' Floriana had retaliated, 'which I might add is none of your business.'

Poor Mum and Dad had been mortified when Floriana had confessed to a 'lark' that had got a bit out of hand. 'It won't be in the newspapers, will it?' Mum had asked with a trembly catch in her voice.

'Of course not, Mum,' Floriana had assured her while crossing her fingers. 'As misdemeanours go, this is very small potatoes and will be of no interest to anyone.'

'And you won't be busicated?'

'It's rusticated, Mum. And no, the college won't do that to me.' Again her fingers had been tightly crossed.

As luck would have it, both she and Seb – her partner in crime – had been let off with nothing more than a warning. The principal of Floriana's college had said, 'I'm sure you don't need me to point out the error of your ways,' and had gone on to do exactly that, detailing the folly of their drunken caper: that of scaling a wall to peer inside the building the other side of it – a building where, and unknown to them, animal research took place, which made it perhaps one of the most highly sensitive and well-guarded buildings in Oxford. The second they were atop the wall, security lights had flashed on and they'd been deafened by a siren blaring. Before they'd had a chance to scramble down, a

police car had appeared and they were taken to the police station. The following morning, and after their college rooms had been searched, and their laptops and mobiles thoroughly scrutinised for any animal rights activity – they were told they wouldn't be charged and were sent on their shamefaced and chastened way.

Floriana was thirty-one years old now but Ann wouldn't hesitate to raise the incident as an example of her wilful nature always to do the wrong thing. But compared to Ann anyone would look reckless and irresponsible.

And that was Ann without an E. Giselle Anne Day had never forgiven their mother for giving them the names she had – names that would make them stand out as being different. Just as soon as she was old enough, having had enough of being teased and bullied at school, she had insisted she be called Ann and had stripped back her middle name to the simplicity of just three letters, as if that superfluous E would somehow invite further trouble.

In contrast, Floriana had loved her name as a young child and had never once been tempted to abbreviate it to Flora or, heaven forbid, Flo. Anyone who tried received short shrift. The exception to the rule had been Seb who had called her Florrie.

It was dark now and at the top of Parks Road she joined the Banbury Road and pictured Seb's handwritten message. He'd written *Floriana*, not *Florrie*, and it served to emphasise how horribly distant they'd become. Even the fact that he'd sent the card to her old address and it had been forwarded to her new home underscored the gap between them.

Yet as big a shock as it was to know that Seb was actually marrying The-Oh-So-Beautiful-The-Oh-So-Perfect Imogen, the save-the-date card was an olive branch. Unless ... unless Imogen was behind it. What if she had suggested they invite Floriana just so Imogen could show that she had won and Floriana had lost?

She turned left into the peace and quiet of North Parade Avenue, waved to Joe behind the counter in Buddy Joe's and wondered if she was being stupidly paranoid. With the passing of two years, surely the invitation was genuine and had been sent with the right motive?

At the bottom of the road she turned right and, nearing home, she reached into her bag for her keys.

But what if Seb had done this behind Imogen's back? What if

he wanted to let bygones be bygones and be friends again with Floriana? How would Imogen feel about that?

More to the point, did Floriana want to rekindle their friendship and risk being hurt all over again?

No, she thought decisively, she couldn't do that, and with equal decision, she stepped into the road to cross over for Church Close where she lived.

Strange, she thought sometime later – though with no real conscious understanding of the passing of time – why was she lying on this hard gritty surface, her face pressed to it painfully? And why did she feel so leaden, yet as if she were floating? How odd it felt.

## Chapter Two

Adam Strong drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. It had been a hell of a week. But at least it was ending on something of a positive note. The sale on the house in Latimer Street he had exchanged contracts on three weeks ago had gone through this afternoon and he'd just picked up the keys from the agent. He was on his way there now.

Or rather he would be if he weren't stuck in traffic. He should have waited until tomorrow to see the house, when it wasn't dark and when it wasn't rush hour. It would have been better all round. But he needed to be busy, to keep himself from brooding.

The traffic lights up ahead changed and he slowly moved forward, at the same time acknowledging that the addition of a new project to his property portfolio would serve the purpose of taking his mind off Jesse.

Seven days ago – last Saturday – Jesse had informed him that she couldn't see a future for them as a couple, that she now only viewed him as she would a brother. And how, he thought with a flash of irritation, would she know how that felt when she was one of three sisters? *Bloody hell, a brother!* Was that what she'd felt when they'd been in bed, that she was having sex with a brother?

They'd been together for nearly two years and he honestly hadn't seen this bombshell coming. OK, he'd been working crazy long hours, so perhaps he'd been preoccupied and perhaps not quite so on the ball, but that worked both ways: she was the one who had been constantly away these last eleven months, driving round the country as a medical rep, and let's not forget those drug company jamborees and conferences she was forever attending.

She had denied there being anyone else – that had been his first question – but he wasn't so sure. Lying to him might be her way

of believing she was sparing his feelings. But he'd have money on someone else being in the picture, some guy she'd met while away. 'I promise you,' she'd said, 'there's no one else.'

'So why end it between us?' he'd asked, dazed with disbelief and fighting hard to keep in check the swell of painful emotion that was threatening to spill over. 'Whatever it is that isn't working between us, let's fix it.'

With tears in her eyes she'd shaken her head at that. 'Adam, this isn't something you can fix up like the houses you buy and sell on.'

He'd been stung by the accusation, as if he saw things so simplistically. 'You make me sound like some kind of emotionally challenged halfwit,' he'd said. Which he was sure he wasn't. He knew there were complexities in every relationship and that compromises had to be made. It wasn't as if he was a total rookie when it came to these things.

But he'd gone wrong somewhere along the line and missed the signs that Jesse wasn't happy. He thought back to her birthday a few weeks ago when he'd taken her for an overnight stay at Cliveden House. She'd appeared to love everything about it, particularly the spa and the Mulberry handbag, which he'd surprised her with before dinner.

Had she known then that she was on the verge of dumping him? The question, which had spun around inside his head too often this week, caused him to take the corner too fast onto the Banbury Road and suddenly he was rammed up close and personal to the car in front. Another inch and he'd have made contact.

Keeping his distance and his speed low, he reckoned the answer to his question was yes, Jesse had known for a while she was planning to leave him. Because when he looked back to her birthday, he could remember thinking that when they'd made love that night in the hotel, she had seemed less than involved, as if she was merely going through the motions. He had thought at the time that maybe she was tired, having been on the road for most of that week.

She had been staying with a friend since the weekend but was coming back tomorrow – Saturday – to move her things out. He had told her he wouldn't be at the house, but a part of him

wanted to be there, to try and convince her that they shouldn't throw away the last two years.

And what about all the plans they'd made? Only a fortnight ago they'd been discussing how to carve up Christmas without offending either set of parents. Not only that, they'd booked a holiday to St Lucia for next March.

How could he have got it so spectacularly wrong? Because, he supposed, self-rationalisation and the lies we tell ourselves was human nature, it guaranteed we saw only what we wanted to see.

With a weakness for over-analysing things, he stopped the direction of his thoughts. He'd gone round in enough futile circles this week trying to figure out Jesse and what precisely had gone wrong between them.

He turned into North Parade Avenue where the shop windows were attractively lit with Christmas lights. It was an area of Oxford he particularly liked and he knew that buying here was a smart move. The university owned much of the property in the neighbourhood, but Latimer Street was one of the few roads that was predominantly residential. The house he'd bought – number six – was a compact four-bedroom Victorian villa built of yellow and red brick, and it needed gutting, rewiring, replumbing – re-everything in fact – but it would be a gem when he'd finished with it. He hadn't made up his mind yet whether he'd add it to his lettings portfolio of flats and houses, or sell it on straight away. Time would tell.

It was stupid going to see it in the dark, but ever since he'd bought his first property, it was a ritual of his to head off immediately after he'd taken possession of the keys and claim the property as his own. He would use the torch from the boot of his car and wander from room to room, confirming in his mind the plans he had in store for the house.

He'd bought his first property when he was twenty years old, borrowing an absurd amount of money from the bank to do so – those were the days when banks couldn't dish out loans fast enough. The house had been a wreck, a tiny two-up two-down, which he'd spent six months putting right – learning on the job – and effectively camping in it before selling it on for a reasonable profit, much to his parents' surprise. They'd been appalled when he'd dropped out of university in his second year and announced – rather grandly – that he was going to be a property developer.

He might just as well have announced his desire to be a drugs dealer. He'd been glad to leave university; being mildly dyslexic, he'd found it a bit of a slog at times.

He was now thirty-seven and despite the impressive buy-to-let portfolio he now had, he very much doubted if his father had given up on the idea of him one day getting a proper job like his brother, Giles, who worked for a prestigious bank in the City. But then these days, when banks were considered as great a threat to mankind's survival as nuclear weapons, prestigious was perhaps not the *mot juste*.

'There are enough over-achievers in the family as it is,' Adam had told his parents when they'd expressed their disappointment at his career choice. 'In my special and unique way I'm bringing a level of normality to the family,' he'd joked. To which his mother had told him he wasn't too old, or too tall, for her to box his ears, and what, she wanted to know, did he mean by *normality*?

At the junction with Winchester Road he turned right and had just accelerated away when a dazzling glare of lights on full beam appeared in his rear-view mirror. He knew he was doing nothing wrong, but even so he slowed down – he'd been caught by an unmarked police car on the M4 for speeding two months ago and was still in the early stages of flashing-light paranoia, worrying that any vehicle on his tail was a police car sneaking up on him. To his relief the car shot out from behind him and overtook with unnecessary speed. With a shake of his head, Adam tutted self-righteously and wondered where the police were when there was somebody seriously breaking the law.

But his relief was quickly replaced with an innate and reactive bolt of alarm. It was what his driving instructor had taught him and which he'd never forgotten – good intuitive drivers have an unconscious sense of danger being only seconds away and are perpetually on full alert for acts of arbitrary madness, because it's the unexpected that gets you killed. And something unexpected was happening up ahead: the driver who had overtaken him had simultaneously hit the brakes and swerved erratically before speeding off.

It was then, in the light cast from the street lamp, that Adam saw an elderly woman hastening towards the unmistakable shape of a body lying in the road.

## *Chapter Three*

Esme Silcox had lived in North Oxford for over sixty years and during that time she had seen plenty of changes, along with a veritable kaleidoscope of human life.

So when she snapped her handbag shut and pulled on her kid leather gloves and Joe showed her to the door, as he invariably did when the shop wasn't busy, it was a gesture she not only appreciated but which made her think of days gone by.

To look at Joe one wouldn't expect such old-fashioned courtesy. With his shaven head and multiple piercings and curious tattoos, he looked every inch the type of man one might choose to cross the road to avoid. But Esme knew better: one simply didn't live in a place like Oxford without learning that a book should never be judged by its cover.

'You take it carefully,' Joe said in his velvety-smooth voice while towering over her. 'It's dark out there now. And don't forget, anytime you want, we'd be happy to take an order over the phone and deliver your shopping to you. Just give us a tinkle, that's all you have to do.'

Had he not spoken with such a genuinely considerate tone, she might have felt patronised, but she didn't. 'Thank you,' she said, 'that's very kind of you. I shall bear the offer in mind.'

Out on the street, with her shopping bag in one hand and her handbag hooked over her forearm, she set off in the cold evening air with a brisk determined step. At least in her head it was a brisk determined step, but given that she was eighty-two years of age, it was likely that she was being somewhat optimistic about the speed with which she was able to move.

Away from the shops and restaurants and at the junction with Winchester Road, she turned right, waited for a succession of cars to pass, then crossed over, taking care in the dark not to miss her footing when she reached the pavement on the other side. This

time last year her only remaining close friend had popped out for some crumpets for tea and had slipped on an icy pavement. Poor Margaret, she had suffered the ignominy of being taken to hospital by ambulance with a broken hip and a fractured elbow and by the time she was deemed fit enough to be discharged she had lost all confidence and had gone downhill rapidly. By Easter she was dead. It happened all the time: a trivial accident and then that was that.

Perhaps if the weather did turn particularly inclement in the coming weeks, she would take Joe up on his offer and have him deliver her shopping. The previous owner of the shop had never been so thoughtful. Quite the contrary. He'd been a ghastly man, rude and bad-tempered, he'd thought nothing of arguing with his customers and snapping at anyone, particularly students, who had the temerity to touch anything. Earlier in the summer he had tried to dupe Esme. He'd called her a liar, that she had given him a ten-pound note and not the twenty as she knew perfectly well she had. The wicked man had accused her of being gaga and not knowing what she was doing. When she threatened to call the police, he backed down and handed over the correct amount of change to her. It was a month later, at the beginning of September when, without warning, the shop was stripped bare and a To Let sign went up.

Joe and Buddy arrived in October along with their attractive wicker baskets of fresh produce – bread, eggs, fresh fruit and vegetables and a delicious line in pies, pasties and cakes. They stocked all manner of organic and Fair Trade items as well as cheese, ham, salami, and olives and recently freshly made sandwiches and baguettes had been introduced, with the day's specials written on a blackboard behind the counter. Home-made soup was now being considered, so Joe had just informed Esme. She hoped their enthusiasm and enterprise would be richly rewarded with a steady flow of loyal custom. Certainly they provided everything she needed.

She was very much aware that as she grew older, her own world grew smaller, to the point that it had now shrunk to this little part of North Oxford, wedged as it was between the Banbury and Woodstock roads. Eventually, she supposed, it would shrink to just Trinity House and then quite possibly to just the one room. Life in miniature, she thought with a wry smile.

Rarely did she go too far afield these days. Occasionally she had a sudden longing to catch the bus into the centre of town, or take a taxi to see a play at the Playhouse or enjoy a concert at St Mary's, but in general she was quite content to sit alone at home and read while listening to the radio. Her favourite spot was in the window of the drawing room. From there, looking onto the road, she would watch the comings and goings of those who lived near her. They mostly seemed to be in a tearing hurry and had little or no time to get to know the people around them. They were all – just as she was – little islands of self-containment.

A long time ago she had known her immediate neighbours, but following a rapid turnaround in newcomers, the ever-changing faces had brought with them a barrier of anonymity. There had been a half-hearted attempt at a street party for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, but Esme had not joined in. Hidden from view behind the net curtain she had watched from the window and observed people standing awkwardly in the road making small talk with glasses of wine and beer in their hands. She had feared some well-meaning soul might knock on her door and force her to participate out of a sense of pity – poor old dear, she had imagined them saying amongst themselves, we'd better invite her. But no one had come. Which had left her both relieved and perversely disappointed.

She couldn't remember who it was, but someone once said that the past is a place, not a time. It was true. For her the past was a place more richly vibrant than the present; it was crowded with memories – of climbing Magdalen Tower to watch the sun rise on May Day, of picnics down by the river drinking Pimm's and feasting on strawberries, of walks through the deer park and the Botanical Gardens, of parties talking late into the night with earnest young men and women who thought they were going to change the world. She could see them now, their eyes burning with the zealous conviction they had all the answers.

There were no answers, she had long since learnt, only questions.

As she walked in the dark along the road, she thought about the house next door to her: it had stood empty for eleven months. The owner, who had lived in London and rented it out to a succession of tenants, had died and it was only now that probate had been settled the house could be sold. Esme knew all this

because she had been in the garden one afternoon and overheard the conversation taking place the other side of the wall between the estate agent and whoever it was he was showing round. Very probably, whoever bought it would do it up and turn it into flats.

She paused to shift her heavy shopping bag from her left arm to her right and heard a car behind her. Glancing over her shoulder and momentarily dazzled by a blaze of headlamps, she took an involuntary pace away from the road as the car zoomed past at a terrific speed and with a loud roar of engine. A split second later and there was a sound that made her gasp out loud.

Her heart pounding, she quickened her step.

## Chapter Four

Floriana had the weirdest feeling that something wasn't quite right.

Stranger still, a man she didn't know was asking what her name was. Never mind what *her* name was, what was *his*? Who was he and why was he asking her if she knew where she was? Of course she knew where she was, she was ... she was ... Hang on a moment, where exactly was she?

She was working, that was it! She was at the Randolph having afternoon tea with her cheerful group of Americans. But where were they? Oh hell, she hadn't lost one of them, had she? That was always the nightmare, somebody wandering off. Honestly, the number of times she'd lost a person because they'd slipped away to the toilet without telling her. She turned her head to look around for her group and found that she couldn't. All she could see was a man.

He must be the man who'd asked what her name was. He had an interesting face. Sort of courtly looking with a noble nose, long and straight, and a wide forehead and a smooth jaw and chin. When she thought about it, he was awfully close to her, but maybe that was because it was dark and he couldn't see her unless he was a few inches away. He also seemed to be at a peculiar angle. Or was it she who was at a funny angle? She tried to change her position but stopped when something hurt. She tried to work out which bit of her hurt, but couldn't.

Whoever he was, she'd say this for him, he was persistent because he was asking again what her name was. To shut him up, she said, 'Floriana. What's yours?'

'It's Adam,' he said. 'An ambulance is on its way, it'll soon be here.'

'An ambulance,' she repeated, her curiosity piqued; she tried and failed to look around her again. 'Why?'

‘It’s probably best if you don’t move,’ he said. ‘Just try and stay still. What’s your surname, Floriana?’

Wow, was he trying to chat her up? ‘It’s Day,’ she said. ‘Floriana Day.’

She heard another voice. A woman’s voice that was low and refined and had a distinct edge of authority to it. ‘Ask her where she lives. Ask her if there’s anyone we should telephone to be with her.’

Wondering who the woman was talking about, Floriana closed her eyes and tried to think which one of her group it was who was missing at the Randolph.

Except there wasn’t anyone missing, was there? More to the point, she wasn’t at the Randolph. She was ... she was walking home, that was it! And she was upset. But why?

She battled her way through the fog of confusion. It was something to do with Seb. He ... he had sent her a Christmas card. Now she remembered. He and Imogen were getting married.

As if the mere act of remembering unleashed it, a wave of pain swept through her and she suddenly felt sick. And dizzy. She began to shiver and her teeth chattered.

She started at the feel of something touching her. Opening her eyes, she realised that the man who had been asking her name was now covering her with a blanket. No, not a blanket, but a coat. A soft woollen coat that smelled nice. That was kind of him. ‘What happened?’ she tried to say through the chattering of her teeth. ‘What’s wrong with me? What have I done and where am I?’

‘You’re in Latimer Street and you were hit by a car,’ he replied.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘That doesn’t sound good. Am I badly hurt?’

‘We don’t know.’

‘At a guess?’

‘The paramedics will have a better idea.’

Floriana thought about this, and at the same time she tried to work it out for herself. But it was beyond her. All she knew was that she felt more tired than she had ever felt in her entire life and sort of spacey, as though she was on the edge of dreaming. The other definite was that somewhere in her body there was an epic amount of pain. Maybe if she could just sleep, the pain would be gone when she woke up. She closed her eyes and immediately felt herself drifting away. She was back at the Randolph, pointing out the Morse Bar to her group and shepherding them into

the Drawing Room for afternoon tea. They were laughing and chatting amongst themselves, but one of the women was saying, 'Keep her talking, don't let her go to sleep. It's important to keep her awake.'

But it wasn't one of the American women in the group who had spoken, it was the woman who had spoken before, the one with the distinctive voice.

'Floriana,' the man said, 'can you hear me? Come on, tell me about your day. What did you do today?'

'I just want to sleep,' she mumbled, keeping her eyes closed.

'I know you do, but humour me. Tell me where you work. Or are you a student?'

With a massive effort, she opened her eyes and found herself staring straight into his. 'I'm a tour guide.'

'That must be an interesting job. I expect you meet all sorts of people, don't you?'

'Are you making me talk because you're worried I'm going to die? It's what they do in films, isn't it?'

'You're not going to die.'

'That's good to know. Are you a doctor?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'So you don't really know, do you? What did you say your name was?'

'It's Adam.'

'Well, Adam, I think I must be OK if I'm talking to you, mustn't I? Or ... or am I imagining this conversation?'

'No, you're definitely talking to me.'

'But what if I just imagined you said that?'

He adjusted the coat around her. 'An interesting line of argument and unfortunately it's not one I can easily disprove for you. You'll just have to take my word for it.'

She liked the tone of his voice; it was very calming. 'My head hurts,' she said abruptly, realising that most of the pain she was feeling was located there.

'Even more reason to keep absolutely still,' he said.

'Ask if there's anyone we can get hold of for her.'

It was the well-spoken woman again. This time she sounded even more insistent.

'Who's your bossy friend?' Floriana asked. 'I don't think I'd like to get on the wrong side of her.'

‘I’ve no idea who she is; we’ve only just met. But I think perhaps it’s alarm and concern rather than bossiness she’s projecting. Ah, that’s the ambulance coming.’

Hearing the sound of a siren rapidly approaching, and the relief in the man’s voice, she said, ‘I’ve never been in an ambulance before.’

It was actually a police car that arrived first, followed quickly by an ambulance. It was when the two paramedics, having made a quick assessment of her, were lifting her carefully onto a stretcher that Floriana got a glimpse of the woman who had been giving out orders. She couldn’t be sure in her dazed state, but she had the feeling she had seen her before.

The ambulance had driven off, and the handful of onlookers who had been lured out onto the street by the excitement of the sirens and flashing blue lights had now returned to their homes, their names and contact details taken by the police officer. Since they had seen nothing of any help, it was Adam and the elderly woman who were of most interest to the police officer. Their witness statements taken, the officer then set about checking the road for anything that might count as evidence.

It was now, after he’d put his coat back on and brushed the dirt from his trousers from kneeling on the ground, that Adam looked properly at the elderly woman at his side for the first time. She was small – not even level with his shoulder – and was smartly dressed in a black coat trimmed with fur at the cuffs. Her white hair was partially covered by a surprisingly stylish black beret with a brooch in the shape of a panther pinned to one side. At her throat was a red and black silk scarf and clutched tightly in her leather-gloved hands was a shopping bag, along with a handbag that looked very like it had once been part of a crocodile. Elderly and frail she might appear, but Adam strongly suspected there was steel in those old-lady bones of hers.

‘It doesn’t seem right the poor girl being on her own,’ she said, looking up at him.

‘I expect the paramedics or someone at the hospital will contact her family or a friend.’

The woman frowned doubtfully. ‘I’ve seen her about. And never with anyone. Do you think one of us should have gone in the ambulance with her?’

‘I should imagine the last thing she needed was a stranger getting in the way.’

‘What if they don’t?’

‘Don’t what?’

‘What if no one rings her family or friends? What if she doesn’t have anyone?’

Buttoning his coat up, Adam said, ‘In the circumstances, I think we’ve done all we can.’

He knew it sounded feeble, but really they had, hadn’t they? They had witnessed an accident, they had called an ambulance, they had waited for it to arrive and then they had left it to the experts. What more could they do?

‘She seemed so young and so vulnerable,’ the old lady said. ‘I do hope she’s going to be all right. I don’t think I shall be able to rest until I know she’s not too badly hurt. Aren’t you in the least bit worried about her? It’s outrageous that the driver didn’t stop. I wish I’d been quick enough to make a note of his number plate.’

OK, this was fast turning into one of those surreal nights you never think is going to happen to you. He was now in the A&E department of the John Radcliffe and, as instructed, he was keeping schtum and was leaving the talking to his elderly companion: Miss Silcox.

Within minutes of their arrival, she had effortlessly convinced the woman behind the reception desk that she was *Mrs Silcox*, Floriana Day’s grandmother, thereby getting round any potential problems regarding family members only being given information about a patient. He was pretty sure there was no need for such subterfuge in a case like this, but who was he to question her thinking? He had to hand it to her, though, she was a canny old thing. Canny enough to play on his conscience and persuade him to drive her here.

It wasn’t that he didn’t care about the girl who’d been knocked over, he did; he just didn’t want anyone to accuse him of interfering. Odds on, the girl herself would think it weird what they were doing. In all likelihood, a friend or a member of her family – or even a boyfriend – was already on their way here and frankly it was going to look pretty strange when it came to explaining themselves. On top of that, he hated hospitals. He

hated the smell. He hated the sounds. And most of all, he hated the threat of death that hung over them. The sooner he could get out of here the better.

‘Shall I see if I can find us something to drink?’ he asked, in need of something useful to do.

‘A cup of tea would be most welcome,’ Miss Silcox said. ‘A splash of milk and no sugar. Thank you.’

He was about to go in search of a vending machine when a nurse appeared. ‘If you’d like to come with me, I’ll take you to your granddaughter,’ the nurse said to Miss Silcox. ‘I’m afraid she’s still a little woozy, but she seems anxious to see you.’

*Uh-oh*, thought Adam.

## *Chapter Five*

Floriana had been told that she was lucky.

She didn't feel lucky. What she felt was pathetically sorry for herself, lying here all alone in her curtained cubicle with her clothes stained in blood and her body feeling as though it had been put through one of those car crushing machines. No, she didn't feel as though good fortune had come her way at all.

She also felt anxious about this grandmother business. She hadn't said anything when the nurse had mentioned her grandmother was waiting to see her in case it set off the medical alarm bells and she was deemed too unwell to be discharged. The thought of being packed off to a ward for the night filled her with dread. All she wanted was to go home and get into bed with a hot water bottle and a cup of tea and a plate of peanut butter and Marmite toast and then sleep until next week.

But the thing was, she was pretty sure she didn't have a grandmother. Not a living one at any rate. If her memory wasn't altogether shot, Nanna Tricia died when Floriana was too young to remember her properly and Nanna Betsy had died a lot more recently. She was fairly sure of it because she could distinctly recall going to the funeral and feeling that it had been the saddest day of her life.

Which begged the question, who was the 'grandmother' waiting to see her?

Or did she have some sort of amnesia? Was her memory all muddled up? Was she misremembering things? God, what if she'd gone back in time somehow and had turned into a time traveller?

But that was stupid, she was letting her imagination run away with itself; better to focus on the very clear memory she had of walking home after work, her mind meshed in a tangle of thoughts about Sebastian's card and the news that he was getting

married next summer. That was absolutely 100 per cent real, wasn't it?

It was just all a bit fuzzy from then on, as she'd explained in her statement to the policeman who'd showed up after she'd returned from having her head X-rayed. She still couldn't remember the actual impact of the car hitting her but the paramedics seemed to think that it must have only clipped her otherwise her injuries would be a lot worse. She squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated hard on picturing herself walking home. She could remember walking down North Parade and waving to Joe, and then crossing the road and ... But no, there was nothing else. No matter how much she willed her brain to remember, it just wouldn't, and the effort of trying to make sense of those last crucial moments – and the fact that she had a grandmother who was alive and kicking – made her head feel like it was about to burst open like a watermelon dropped from a great height.

She cringed. Where had that awful image come from? Her eyes open, she put a hand tentatively to the side of her head and touched the dressing, beneath which a very nervous trainee doctor called Suzy had spent ages fumbling to put in six stitches. That was when the nurse, standing next to the trainee doctor and observing her closely, had said that Floriana was lucky because the gash was close to her hairline and the scar would eventually be hidden. She'd also had a dressing applied to her chin and her cheek, which had been badly grazed and goodness only knew how horrible that looked.

From the other side of the curtain she heard voices and footsteps, then with a sudden movement the curtain was swished back as if it was part of a magician's act and the big reveal made – *Ta-daar!* The same nurse who had been keeping an eye on the trainee doctor appeared at the end of the bed. Smiling warmly, she said, 'Here's your grandmother and a friend. I'll leave you to it for a while.'

Floriana stared first at the diminutive elderly woman, then at the tall, rather good-looking man next to her. Her gaze returned to the woman. Trim and neat, she stood ramrod straight with old-school elegance. But she was unquestionably not Nanna Betsy who had been a taller and much more rounded sort of woman.

‘You’re not my grandmother,’ Floriana said at last.

She noticed her words made the man suck in his breath and his face colour, but the woman stepped forward. ‘That’s perfectly true, and I’m sorry for misleading you, but I hope you’ll forgive a little subterfuge on our part. You see, we ... or rather I, told a minor fib at the desk so we could be sure of learning how you were. I was worried they wouldn’t tell us if we told the truth. By the way, by name is Esme Silcox and I live in Latimer Street, not far from the junction with Church Close where you were knocked over.’

Very slowly, a piece of the jigsaw slotted into place for Floriana. ‘Your voice,’ she said, ‘I remember your voice. You were ...’

‘That’s right, we were at the scene of the accident. Mr Strong here –’ she indicated her good-looking sidekick – ‘called for the ambulance.’

Floriana turned her attention back to Mr Strong and thought of the Mr Men books she had loved as a child; Mr Tickle had been her favourite. This Mr Strong looked extremely awkward, as if he wished he could be anywhere but here in this stifling heat and small curtained cubicle. You and me too, she thought. ‘Yes,’ she said faintly, ‘I remember you as well now. You talked to me, didn’t you? You said your name was ...’

‘Adam,’ he said.

‘Mr Strong was wonderful,’ the old lady said. ‘He was most chivalrous and used his coat to keep you warm.’

Floriana smiled gratefully at him, remembering not just his name now, but how calm and reassuring he had been. ‘Thank you. But why are you both here?’

‘We were worried,’ the old lady said, moving closer to the side of the bed. ‘We didn’t want you to be on your own. Is anyone on their way to be with you?’

‘Um ... actually no.’

‘But you have someone who will come?’ she said.

‘I don’t need anyone, I’m fine,’ Floriana said with more spirit than she really felt. ‘Just as soon as whatever needs to be done, I’ll be out of here.’

‘Do you think that’s wise?’ the old lady said, surveying her patched-up head and face with a long and scrutinising stare.

‘They’ve done X-rays and stuff and nothing’s broken, so there’s no need for me to stay.’

‘What about concussion? Won’t they want you to stay in overnight so they can keep an eye on you?’

Floriana’s heart sank at hearing her fears confirmed.

‘And I dare say they won’t be happy unless they know there’s somebody at home to take care of you. Is there somebody at home?’

What was this? Why was this old lady giving her the third degree? And why did the truthful answer reduce her to a pitifully teary state and make her wish that the one person in the world she wanted to be here with her couldn’t be? Why should she even think of Seb that way when for the last two years he had been so resolutely absent from her life? One bloody card from him and she was a mess!

Anger. That was better. Better to be angry with Seb than turn into a snivelling fool. After all, it was his fault she was here. His fault entirely that she stepped into the road and ...

She stopped herself short, realising that another glimmer of memory had surfaced. She chased after the glimmer, but like quicksilver it slipped away and was gone.

‘Do you have somebody at home?’

Oh, for heaven’s sake, Miss Marple was at it again with her questioning! ‘I think that’s my business, isn’t it?’ Floriana replied with a show of what she hoped was assertion, but which she suspected made her sound more like a stropky teenager.

‘You’re right,’ Mr Strong – aka Adam – said, stepping forward and putting a hand on the old lady’s arm. ‘Come on, Mrs Silcox,’ he added, ‘I think we’ve achieved what we came to do, now it’s time to go.’

‘It’s *Miss* Silcox,’ the woman corrected him, ‘and please don’t patronise me and make out that I’m some old dear with nothing better to do than poke my nose in where it’s not wanted.’

‘Then let’s leave before that accusation is made, shall we?’

*Ooh*, thought Floriana, Mr Strong lives up to his name!

But then the crestfallen look on the old lady’s face had Floriana feeling sorry for her and ashamed of her own rudeness, she said, ‘Please, I appreciate your concern, really I do, it was extremely kind of you both to care so much.’

‘Thank you,’ Miss Silcox said with a slight lifting of her chin. ‘And to reassure you, I’m the last person on earth to interfere in anyone else’s business, but in this instance I felt it was not only

my duty as a good citizen to come here, but because . . . because I should like to think somebody might do the same for me.'

Floriana now felt utterly shamed and a quick glance at Mr Strong told her he felt the same.

'How are we all getting on in here, then?'

It was the nurse from earlier.

'Fine,' Floriana said. 'Can I go home now, please?'

The nurse smiled. 'That's what I came to tell you.'

Forty-five minutes later Floriana was discharged and she gratefully accepted the offer of a lift home with her Good Samaritans.

When they drew up outside 10a Church Close, she thanked them, took their contact details, which Miss Silcox insisted she have, and waved them off with cast-iron assurances that she was absolutely fine.

She wasn't fine, and they probably knew that, but they'd been considerate enough not to push it. In the kitchen she put the kettle on and was about to load the toaster when her mobile rang. When she looked at the screen she saw that it was her sister. Floriana was in no mood to speak to her, but she could see that Ann had rung several times already.

'At last!' Ann said. 'Where've you been? I've been trying to get hold of you all evening.'

'Why, what's wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong, I'm just trying to sort out Christmas. You said you'd tell me definitely by today whether you were coming or not.' The reproach in Ann's voice pummelled away in Floriana's ear and made her head thump more painfully than ever.

'I'm sorry,' she said feebly, 'I was going to call you, I really was, only I—'

'Well, that's you all over, isn't it? You're always going to do something but you never get around to it, do you? Honestly, I give up! So, what's the excuse this time?'

'I was knocked over by a car on my way home and—'

'You shouldn't make jokes like that,' her sister said, exasperated. 'The next thing you know it will really happen – it's called tempting fate.'

'I'm not joking. A car really did hit me. I've just got back from A&E.'

There was a pause the other end of the line while her sister

presumably regrouped her thoughts. ‘Why didn’t you ring me?’

Typical Ann, no enquiring how Floriana was, just straight to indignation. ‘What would be the point?’ Floriana responded. ‘It’s not as if you could help, you’re too far away. And thanks for asking how I am.’

Another pause from Ann as she realised her mistake. ‘Sorry,’ she said, almost sounding like she meant it. ‘So how are you? You sound OK, for what it’s worth.’

‘I’m not, as it happens. I feel bloody awful. I’ve got half a dozen stitches in my head and a battered face and a body that feels like hell.’

‘But nothing broken? No internal damage?’

‘No, thank goodness.’

‘Well, that’s good,’ Ann said. ‘What about the car that hit you, what are the police doing about the driver?’

‘The driver didn’t stop.’

‘*What?* Were you able to get the number plate?’

As she always did, Ann managed to make Floriana feel inept, as though she had been deliberately negligent in this oversight. She explained that she had no actual memory of being hit, that it was a blank.

‘Any witnesses?’

She told her sister about her Good Samaritans, then to her horror Ann said, ‘I’d come and be with you if I could, but I can’t get away from work right now. Why don’t you come to us?’

‘There’s no need,’ Floriana said quickly, knowing she had to downplay the accident or who knew what her sister would unleash on her. ‘I’m just a little bruised and shocked, nothing serious. Really.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Yes, totally sure. All I need is a good night’s sleep and I’ll be as right as rain in the morning.’ Nothing like a bit of misplaced optimism!

The kettle began to boil and switching it off she heard her sister say, ‘I think it would be better if we didn’t tell Mum and Dad about this, it would only worry them and it would be awful if you spoilt their holiday. You know what Mum’s like, she’d come rushing back if she knew you’d been in an accident.’

Their parents were part-way through a round-the-world cruise. The trip, many years in the planning, had been a present

to themselves after Dad had finally sold the family business and retired, so Floriana knew that what Ann had said made sense, it would be wrong to ruin the holiday for them. But as was so often the way, it was the manner in which her sister made the comment that rankled.

‘Of course I won’t tell them,’ she said defensively, ‘I’m not that stupid. Now I’m sorry to hurry you, but I need to have something to eat and go to bed, I’m shattered.’

‘Of course. I’ll ring you in the morning to make sure you’re all right. Oh, and please, have a think about Christmas, I need to know final numbers.’

And I need to come up with a twenty-four-carat-gold excuse why I can’t come to you for Christmas, Floriana thought when she rang off. She feared that only her death would provide a plausible excuse for not fitting in with her sister’s exacting plans.

Not funny, she told herself with a shiver. Had the timing been fractionally different this evening, that car could very well have finished her off. A tingle ran down her spine and it suddenly came home to her that the nurse at the hospital had been right; she had been lucky.

Lucky also that two such helpful people had been there on the scene. She would have to thank them properly tomorrow for their help. It was the least she could do.