

## chapter one

If Alexander hadn't kept the house after their divorce, the letter might have lain undiscovered on some stranger's doormat. When he'd brought the cream envelope to their Thursday sushi night, Grace had been intrigued by the US postmark and the doodle of a purple flower across the flap. The contents had been a jolt but after so many years of hiding the truth from everyone, it was a relief to tell him her story.

"How didn't I know this about you before we got married?" he'd asked, remarkably calm under the circumstances. "Didn't you trust me with your secrets?"

"I told you enough bad things about me. I didn't want to put you off."

"An adopted baby's more important than that, Grace. And what happens now? After all this time, you can't turn up on Sam's doorstep and casually announce he's the father of your secret lovechild."

"But I can't turn her away, after twenty years of wondering about her."

Eventually, Alexander had fallen asleep. Grace envied the way he could always switch off but he had an early flight and she didn't have the heart to wake him. She longed for the comfort of his arms around her while she battled with her conscience. She should never have married him at such a low point in her life, however kind and persuasive he'd been. But she was even more of an idiot for divorcing him.

She tucked her feet beneath her on the window seat and snuggled into the tartan throw. The floodlit bridges of the Tyne below shone violet and blue in the pre-dawn darkness. Despite the mild summer night, the cocktail of dread and excitement shivered the length of her spine. As if he sensed she couldn't wait until morning to tell him what she'd decided, Alexander stirred and fumbled for his watch.

"It's three o'clock," he groaned. "Haven't you slept at all?"

"Too much on my mind." She smoothed the corners of the snapshot she'd barely had out of her hand. "I have to tell Sam she's asking about her father."

"Sam has a right to know he has a child," he agreed, his tone suggesting he didn't quite approve. "But Dixie's his wife. You can't keep it from her and how will you explain her mother being in the thick of it?"

"You're making it sound like a conspiracy."

Alexander's rueful smile didn't reach his kind brown eyes as he flipped over the edge of the duvet. He plumped the pillows and Grace slid into bed beside him, grateful for the warmth of his arms. Breathless from the onslaught of long-buried guilt, she clutched the duvet under her chin.

"Giving up my baby for adoption was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I wish I could make you understand there was no way I could keep her."

"It's Dixie who'll need to understand. She's meant to be your best friend but if she has suspicions about you and Sam, this will confirm her darkest fears."

"That's ridiculous! She knows Sam's like a brother to me."

"A brother who travels hundreds of miles to see you? You talk about him all the time."

"I'm sure I don't," she insisted. "He comes with his mates, a few times a year for the football. We can barely fit in a catch-up drink."

"You were childhood sweethearts and you had his baby."

"It wasn't like that," she said, tears smarting her eyes as she realised how hard it would be to put all that history into words.

"Try telling that to Dixie. She'd have to be a saint to take all this on board."

Grace hid her face as he drew her in closer. "She's never going to forgive me."

"But you're going ahead with it anyway? What will you do, go down to Penrowan?"

"I think I have to. It's not a conversation for over the phone. But you know how much I love that house. It's the nearest I ever got to a family home. What if they throw me out and I can't go back?"

"It's just an old house, Grace. Other things are more important."

Alexander was always the calm voice of reason. What was she going to do without him? She'd known about his trip for months and it was meant to be the clean break they needed. It was too late now for second thoughts but she couldn't resist voicing them.

"I wish you weren't going to New York."

He planted an affectionate kiss on her temple "Afraid you won't get a present for your big birthday?"

"My daughter getting in touch is the only present I need. But I wish you could be here to meet her."

"Hopefully there'll be other opportunities. I'll only be gone for a year."

"A whole year? I don't think I can bear it."

“If this merger comes off, I can retire. And you’ll be sick of the sight of me.”

“I doubt that,” she scoffed. “You’re too much of a workaholic.”

“Speaking of which, what’s the latest with you on the job front?”

“I’ve had a couple of offers but to be honest, I’m fed up with temporary stop-gaps. When I get back from Cornwall, I’ll put more effort into finding something more challenging.”

“That’s good to hear. It’s long overdue. I used to love you in those sassy little suits.”

“Alex! That wasn’t why you hired me.”

“Not entirely,” he teased. “You did have other skills. Let me remind you what they were.”

He nuzzled her neck, his hands drifting over her breasts. She lifted her face for a kiss, pressing her willing body against him. Fit and tanned from hiking round the beaches and castles of the Northumbrian coast, he gave much younger men a run for their money. She’d always been flattered to be on his arm and she hated being saddled with the label ex-wife. Too bad she’d left it too late to realise that.

“If we’d managed to have a baby,” she whispered. “You wouldn’t have dumped me.”

“I didn’t actually dump you. I’m still in your bed. Still doing this.”

“But you’re dumping me now to go to New York.” Her breath caught in her throat as his fingers worked their usual magic.

“We’re divorced. That’s how it works for normal people.”

“How many normal people stay friends with benefits after their divorce?”

“If it works for us, it’s nobody else’s business,” he insisted. “For the record, it hurts like hell that I didn’t give you a baby. Especially now, finding out you had one with Sam. I wish you’d told me.”

“I didn’t even tell Sam. I didn’t want to cause trouble.”

“Fingers crossed he sees it that way.”

As she lost herself in Alexander’s special brand of therapy, it was hard not to make wishes about turning back the clock. It was unsettling to sense his relief at being out of the way. It was doubtful he could help her, anyway. There were no rules for what she had to do. How exactly do you tell your oldest friends you’ve been living a lie for twenty years?

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A couple of weeks later, she’d invited herself to her beloved Penrowan. The garden basked in a September heatwave as she dozed in a steamer chair, lulled by the butterscotch scent of honeysuckle. She was exhausted after the long drive south but that excuse wouldn’t wash for long. She’d have to get on with her confession and face the inevitable fallout.

“Shit! Sorry. I didn’t know anyone was out here.”

Grace started. Of course, she hadn’t been asleep. She’d only been resting her eyes. So why was he having such trouble keeping a straight face?

“I’m Danny Wilkinson, the gardener.”

Hidden by her Tom Ford sunglasses, she had a good look at him. Gorgeous in a rumpled, faded Levis kind of way. Young, though. Mid twenties, maybe.

Sam had said something about a gardener last night. But she’d been so desperate to get to bed, she’d forgotten. Why was he scuffing his Timberlands in a tangle of overgrown mint, very obviously trying not to laugh? Then she remembered she was sunbathing topless. He’d think she’d been lying in wait for him, like some desperate cougar housewife.

“I don’t like strap marks.” She cringed at how dim she sounded as she retrieved her red bikini top. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I wasn’t expecting such a great view. Thanks for the welcome.”

Damn! He’d made her blush. She snatched her shorts from the grass and glared at him until he turned his back. She pulled them on while he made a big show of tramping round the overgrown edge of what used to be a lawn.

“Will you be giving me the tour? You don’t seem to have much on.” His raised eyebrow was that bit too cocky.

“I don’t even live here.”

“You just use the place for naked sunbathing?”

He was standing too close for comfort, smelling all clean and soapy, despite the heat. He was far too sexy for a Monday morning, being so tall and needing a shave.

“I wasn’t naked.”

“I could help you with that.”

He shouldn't be allowed to grin like that, all snug navy T-shirt and startling blue eyes, blatantly checking her out. Was she kidding? She couldn't be flattered by cheesy lines like that. So why was she sliding her feet into flip-flops when she ought to be giving him his marching orders?

She followed him to the gate in the corner between the house and the outbuildings. The one with rusty hinges that creaked like a prop from a horror movie. He opened it and closed it again with a flourish. The embarrassing din set her teeth on edge.

"I didn't hear you come in," she insisted.

"If you say so."

His knowing grin annoyed her but he'd already turned his attention to the kitchen garden. Apart from tomatoes and strawberries in terracotta pots, it was a mess of brambles and the tiniest patch of herbs.

He frowned, hands on hips in judgement. "Seems a waste. Wouldn't take much effort to plant it out properly."

"Joanie was the gardener, Dixie's mother. Since she died, nobody's had the time or inclination to keep it up."

Odd that she felt the need apologise. It wasn't even her house. But she couldn't help being disappointed on Joanie's behalf.

"What have you been hired to do?"

"A few days labouring and general tidying up. I'm lucky to get that. Beats being holed up in a kitchen in this heat. Think he felt sorry for me, when I knocked on the door. So, what do you want to show me next?"

Was he always so suggestive? He had her blushing again. And flouncing back along the old brick path, to the long grass where he'd caught her sunbathing. The cottage flowers in the borders were mostly finished now, their crisp heads bent and forlorn in the sunshine. Tall hedges as thick as walls, gave it the air of a secret garden. Or maybe she had secrets on the brain.

She led him through a gap in the hedge which wasn't apparent unless you knew about it. "This was always a wild garden. It's fabulous when the spring bulbs are out and then in November there'll be a bonfire party. Jacket potatoes and home made soup, you know the kind of thing?"

"Do real people have parties like that?" Danny laughed as he examined a tangled escallonia. "All I remember is the stench of old tyres and cheap bangers. You didn't tell me your name?"

"Grace Cavendish."

"Pretty!"

Did he mean her or the flowers? His glance swept over her as he tugged a branch, scattering scarlet petals over the grass. He let it spring back, oblivious to the effect he was having on her. She was glad of her sunglasses to hide behind as he hooked his thumbs in his belt loops, exposing an inch of caramel skin. It was no excuse that he looked familiar. She was meant to be a grown-up. She'd have to get a grip.

"Have I seen you around the village?" she asked.

"Maybe. I'm down here most summers, keeping an eye on my old gran. I take whatever work I can get. Maybe I'll get lucky here and stretch it to a week. Will you be around to look after me?"

"Do you flirt with all your customers?"

"Technically, you're not the customer. And who wouldn't flirt with a naked blonde?"

"Technically, I wasn't naked."

"You're quibbling over details." He smiled that killer smile and pushed his wild black hair off his face. "It's a cool garden. I'd love to design it better so all the zones lead into each other more logically."

"You're into garden design?"

"I wish!" He didn't disguise the wistful tone. "But in the meantime, cutting and tidying will have to do. What's next on the menu? I can see you're dying to lead me up the garden path."

He stood to one side to let her pass. Ridiculous to be so flustered by his banter. She should get rid of him now he'd checked out the job. But she couldn't keep her eyes off him and she was keen to show off more of the house she adored.

"There's a beach but the slope's a bit tricky in flip-flops. You'll need to go first."

"Maybe I should've said down the garden path," he quipped as they set off beneath the vermilion berries of the rowan trees that gave the house its name.

As he trampled the dense ivy and ferns with his boots, the view of his taut thighs was more than tempting. She bet he'd have long sinuous muscles, like a dancer. Clearly she was losing the plot.

The grass became sparse and sprinkled with sand, the air salty with the hiss of the sea. Danny stopped suddenly, in the lee of a sand dune, dotted with purple thistles.

"A private beach? Are you fucking kidding me?"

“It’s not private, as in legally owned by the family.”

“You wouldn’t say that’s splitting hairs?”

A tumble of rocks lay in front of them, then the endless expanse of the sea. Danny weighed a pebble in his hand and tossed it towards the gentle waves.

“It’s the coolest thing ever. Not great for surfing, maybe. But for swimming, wow!”

“It’s the Atlantic. It’s freezing! And the current can be challenging when it rains.”

He hurled another stone at the water. It bounced off the surface with hardly a splash. “I bet you’re the gym-bunny type, all heated pool and zero riff-raff.”

It was none of his business, if she had membership to a place like that. “You’re implying I’m not up to swimming in the sea?”

“I’m game, if you are?” He shucked up his T-shirt. His stomach was tanned and toned.

“Please tell me you’re joking!”

He laughed, glancing at his watch. “I have to be somewhere now but you can take me on tomorrow. Tell your mate I’ll be here first thing.”

She’d known him less than an hour yet she was tingling at the thought of stripping down to a bikini again. But obviously, he wasn’t as tempted as he’d made out. He was already heading back to the house and she had to scramble to keep up with him.

“It’s a great house,” he said as the weathered stone came back into view. “I’ll look forward to getting my hands on the garden.”

“I’ve always adored coming here. It’s been in the family for generations.”

“Imagine inheriting a place like this. Most people would do anything to hang onto it. Makes you wonder why they’re selling up.”