

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 bused?'

'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.