

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.