

Chapter 1

The tiny cottage I shared with my mum was a mere fifteen-minute walk from Wickham Hall, along a narrow side street at the far end of the village. But this afternoon it felt like the longest journey I'd ever made, every step taking me nearer to the truth about my father but further from Wickham Hall and further still from Ben and his mischievous brown eyes and cheeky smile.

I still felt wobbly from my fainting spell earlier and wondered briefly whether the sun was making me a bit delirious but as I walked through Wickham village I forced myself to concentrate on the facts.

I'd asked Mum about that bracelet recently and she'd said it had been given to her as a present just before she'd had me. I was born in April 1985. Who would have given my mother, a seventeen-year-old girl, a diamond and pearl bracelet if not a wealthy lord?

I walked along Wickham high street playing genetic snap with His Lordship. Brown eyes: snap; fair hair: snap, OK his was silver, but it *had* been blond: I'd seen photographs ... And now that I thought about it, I even bore a slight resemblance to his daughter Zara.

And Benedict. I rubbed the palm of my hand over my forehead. For a moment back there in the sunken gardens, I thought we might have been right at the start of something special. Especially when he'd said that thing about me bringing out the best in him. My imagination had run riot, fantasizing that his family might welcome me into their home like a daughter ... but not that I would actually *be* another daughter. Oh God. I paused momentarily and leaned against a red post box as a wave of nausea took hold.

Whatever happened next, I resolved, turning into Mill Lane, I had no intention of causing trouble for the Fortescue family. If my worst fears were realized, I'd resign from my job at Wickham Hall and disappear – simply start again, setting all dangerous feelings for Ben aside. Eventually, I suppose, I'd forget how he had exploded unexpectedly into my life, bringing fun, chaos, noise and his irresistible charm with him. And perhaps I'd forget how adorable he'd looked when he'd asked me to have dinner with him.

Perhaps.

I sighed, a long shuddering sigh.

I sped up as much as I could as Weaver's Cottage came into view. I'd gone past the tearful stage but my legs had turned to jelly, my head was spinning and my stomach was leaden with sorrow.

I had abandoned my handbag up at the Wickham Hall festival office. I had my phone, but no purse, and no door key. But I was beyond caring about my possessions and I knew I could let myself into the cottage: we always kept a spare key hidden in the garden. I lifted a geranium-filled terracotta pot to reveal it, unlocked the door and almost collapsed with relief as I stepped into the cool, cramped hallway.

Stopping briefly in the kitchen to pour myself a glass of water, I stumbled up the stairs to my mum's room and sat at her dressing table, my stomach quivering as I stared at Mum's jewellery box.

I lifted the lid, removed the satin-lined inner tray and let out the breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

There it was, right at the bottom: the pearl bracelet with its S-shaped diamond clasp.

I picked it up, coiled it into the palm of my hand and closed my fingers around it.

Lord Fortescue had bought at least three bracelets like this: one for Lady Fortescue, one for his mother and another for his aunt. Was it possible he'd bought a fourth for the seventeen-year-old Lucy Swift?

Only Mum could tell me the truth and she wouldn't be home until the festival closed at the end of the day.

A wave of tiredness washed over me, every inch of my skin felt raw and despite the heat of the afternoon I shuddered feverishly. I picked up my glass and dragged myself into my own bedroom.

Sometimes, I thought, as sleep began to steal my consciousness, life deals us a blow so cruel that we are convinced the bruises will never fade ...

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to banish the puzzled look on Ben's face as I'd run from the sunken gardens and out of his sight.

[line #]

The sound of a key rattling in the wooden front door jolted me from sleep. My bedroom was bathed in a golden evening light and the edge of my curtains fluttered in a gentle breeze through the open window. I was still clutching the bracelet and when I looked at my palm it was pitted with the shape of each pearl. I didn't have the energy to call out, so I listened instead, waiting for Mum to find me. She potted around downstairs for a few minutes, opening the doors into the back garden, and then I heard her coming up the stairs humming merrily to herself.

My heart thumped with tension as she reached the landing.

'Mum?' I called.

'Holly! You frightened me to death!' she said, poking her head around my bedroom door. 'I thought you'd be ... Good gracious, love, what happened to you?'

She crossed the room, sat on my bed and pressed a hand to my forehead. 'You're very hot. How long have you been lying here like this?'

I shrugged weakly.

Mum held out my glass of water and I raised myself up enough to drink. She bustled out of the room and returned with some headache tablets.

'I've been expecting something like this to happen ever since you started working at the hall.' She sighed, popping two tablets out of the foil wrapper and putting them in my hand.

'You did?' I rasped, blinking at her. My heart ached, wishing we'd had this conversation twenty-four hours ago, before Ben and I had ...

'You work too hard,' she scolded, shaking her head. She sat back down on my bed and stroked the hair back off my forehead. 'Darling, I know you're a perfectionist, but working so hard isn't good for the soul. What ...?'

Her voice faded as I unfurled my fingers and dropped the pearl bracelet into her lap.

'Where did you get this, Mum? Tell me the story. And please, I need the truth.'

Mum held the pearls up to her cheek and her shoulders slumped as she looked at me.

'I should never have kept it.'

I held my breath and stared at her as she squirmed beside me. 'Then why did you?'

'It was the only thing I had left of him, I—'

'Who?' My mouth dried and I took another sip of water. 'Mum, I know this is hard for you, but you don't understand. I need to know. Tonight, before ...' I shook my head and swallowed. *Before I make any more mistakes with a man who may be my half-brother.*

She pressed her hands to her cheeks and groaned. 'I've been dreading this coming out.'

'Who gave this to you?' I repeated, peeling her hands from her face.

Her blue eyes looked haunted and my heart went out to her. I held her hands gently in mine and waited.

'The truth is that I found it in the bushes at the edge of the sunken garden at Wickham Hall. The diamond fastening glinted through the undergrowth and caught my eye.'

'You *found* it?' My eyes locked onto hers. 'So it wasn't a gift?'

She shook her head. 'Holly, I was seventeen and I had never seen such a beautiful bracelet. Pearls were really in fashion at the time. But even then I knew that this was the real thing, not like the cheap stuff we were all wearing at school. I knew I should hand it in but Antonio said—'

'Antonio?' I sat up quickly and then instantly regretted it as a wave of dizziness blurred my vision.

'Yes.' She nodded, cheeks pink. She smoothed the skirt of her dress and cleared her throat. 'Antonio was my first love. Your father.'

I gazed at her. In twenty-nine years I had never heard the name Antonio. Was this a rapidly concocted story to disguise the truth? I so hoped not.

'Mum,' I took a deep breath, willing myself voice to stay steady, 'Lord Fortescue bought bracelets like this for his wife, his mother and his aunt. Are you sure he didn't buy one for you, too?'

She frowned. 'Darling, I think you might have had a little too much sun. Why on earth would he do that?'

'Because ...' I shook my head, my thoughts spinning and colliding as I tried to get the facts straight. My mind whooshed backwards to the conversation I'd had with Esme. What if this is why Mum had never wanted to move away from the shadows of Wickham Hall?

I looked at my mum's pretty face, creased with confusion.

What reason would she have to lie after all these years?