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Unexpected Blessings

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Chapter One

Evan Hughes stood in the middle of the fashion floor of Harte's department store in London's Knightsbridge. It was seven o'clock in the morning and nothing stirred. All was silent at this hour. By eight the cleaners would be moving around this vast space, and by nine a few of the dedicated sales staff would be arriving to prepare for the store doors opening at ten. Now, though, she was totally alone.

She loved this store and this floor in particular. It was her domain. And hers alone. Last week she had been made head of fashion, a very big promotion which had thrilled her.

As Evan moved slowly across the floor, making for the new haute couture fashion displays, she couldn't help thinking about the first day she had walked into Harte's. January 2001. Eight months ago now. She had been very lucky that day. Quite by chance she had met the man of her dreams and had found the job of her dreams. She had never thought her dreams would come true that day. But they had.

Pausing for a moment, Evan glanced around, her light grey-blue eyes devouring everything: the fashion displays under bright lights, the elegance of the whole floor – such an important one in this prestigious department store, considered the greatest in the world.

Harte's of Knightsbridge had been founded by one of the most famous merchant princes ever known: Emma Harte. She had been dead now for thirty years and the store was run by Emma's granddaughter, Paula O'Neill. Paula, an elegant woman in her mid-fifties, had inherited her grandmother's great skills and brilliance as a retailer, and her two daughters Tessa and Linnet were following in her footsteps. Both of them worked at the store; Tessa was in charge of the first three floors which sold cosmetics, perfumes, leisurewear, lingerie and active sports clothes. Linnet, Tessa's half-sister, was in charge of the fashion floors and also worked with Paula on public relations.

It was Linnet O'Neill who had hired Evan to be one of her assistants, and for the first few months she had helped Linnet to put together a retrospective of fashion which had been a huge success and pulled many new customers into the store.

As a reward for all of her hard work and dedication, Linnet had given her this promotion . . . and Evan was in her element.

Evan stood in front of the couture fashion displays which had been finished late last night, looking at them for a few minutes. They were great,

she decided. The display staff had done a good job with the clothes she had selected.

Turning away, she walked down the floor, making for her office. Tall, slender and dark-haired, she was good-looking, elegant. Back at her desk she glanced at the photograph of Gideon Harte . . . the man of her dreams. She had fallen in love with him, and he with her, that first day when he had bumped into her in the corridor. She had been looking for the management offices, and he had led her there, all the while firing questions at her. And it was Gideon who had told his cousin Linnet about her; Linnet had subsequently interviewed her and given her a job.

Sitting back in her chair, Evan thought about the past eight months, and all that had happened.

She had never expected to find a second family in England. Only a year ago the only family she knew were her mother and father, and her two adopted sisters who lived in Connecticut. But all that had changed because of her grandmother, Glynnis Hughes. On her deathbed her grandmother had told her to go to England to find Emma Harte, saying that Emma was the key to her future. And Evan had done exactly that, only to discover Emma was dead. But she had fallen in love with the store, and decided to get a job there.

And now here she was, working at Harte's, involved with Gideon, planning a future with him, and struggling to adapt herself to a whole new family. Because she herself was actually a Harte. It was Paula who had discovered that Evan was

another great-granddaughter of Emma Harte's, because Evan's grandmother Glynnis had given birth to a son fathered by one of Emma's sons. And that child was Evan's father.

They had welcomed her, treated her kindly, with enormous understanding, but at times things had been difficult for Evan. So many things to unravel, so much to accept, so many people to get to know. Sometimes it seemed endless to her, and problematical. She worried a lot, dwelled on all this for hours.

Most troubling of all was the knowledge she had about her father's biological father . . . facts she had been afraid to relay to him. Would her father Owen Hughes welcome the information? Would he really want to know that the man who had brought him up was not his father after all? She didn't know, and she continued to wrestle with these questions.

Evan knew she had to come to a decision. Her mother and father were coming to London in a week or so, to see her, spend time with her, and have a vacation.

Could she look her father in the eye and *not* tell him the truth? Could she keep it a secret? And should she? Nobody could advise her really. Gideon had told her to do what she thought best, and everyone else had been noncommital.

The ball was back in her court.

And then there was Robin Ainsley, her new grandfather, the man who had been her grandmother's lover during the Second World War. He had been a

pilot in the Royal Air Force, a Battle of Britain pilot, and her grandmother, Glynnis Jenkins then, had been a young woman from Wales who worked as Emma Harte's secretary, here in this very store.

She liked Robin; her feelings were even stronger than that. And she knew only too well that he longed to meet his son, Owen Hughes. But would her father want to meet this stranger – a stranger who was his real father? His mother's lover. *Oh God.*

Evan turned on her computer, and after a few moments started to work on it, but within an hour the troubling thoughts about Robin, Glynnis, and her father's imminent arrival began to intrude. Turning the computer off, she made a snap decision. She would take Linnet's advice and go to Yorkshire after all for a week's rest. And she would go to see Robin Ainsley, still needing to know about his relationship with her grandmother, and most of all to understand why Robin and Glynnis had never married.

'She was beautiful and glamorous: the most sexually potent woman I've ever known. But I realized we would be disastrous together in the long run. We would've ended up killing each other,' Robin Ainsley finished with a small sigh, and sat back in the wingchair, his eyes on Evan Hughes.

Evan was silent for a moment, digesting his words, and then she said slowly, 'Because you were so volatile together, is that what you mean?'

'Exactly. We never had a peaceful moment.'

'You weren't compatible?'

'Not in any way, except in bed. But one cannot build a lasting, lifetime relationship on sex alone.'

Evan nodded, and eyed him carefully, then confided, 'Gran was always pounding it into me that compatibility between a man and a woman was the most important thing of all. And I know for a fact that she was compatible with my grandfather, I mean Richard Hughes.'

'Please don't correct yourself, Evan,' Robin said in a quiet voice, shaking his head. 'Richard Hughes *was* your grandfather, just as he *was* your father's father. Glynnis was a wonderful young woman when I knew her, but put very simply, she wasn't suitable for me, nor I for her, not on a normal, everyday level. We were far too explosive. It was my fault as much as hers.'

'Is that why you finally broke up with her?'

'It is. At that time our dreadful quarrels were increasing, alarmingly so. Life with her was hell.'

'But she was pregnant, Robin, and you did nothing . . .' Evan's voice trailed off as she realized she might have sounded accusatory. She had not meant to place blame.

'We've already discussed this,' Robin responded patiently. 'But I shall explain one more time . . . we broke up, I started seeing Valerie Ludden. She and I were compatible, and became seriously involved. When Glynnis told me she was expecting my child, I had already made a commitment to Valerie. However, let me say this, so you truly understand. I would not have married your grandmother even if there had been no other woman in

my life. We could not have led a worthwhile life and she knew that too.'

'I'm sorry, Robin, I am being a bit of a pest, aren't I?'

'That's all right,' he responded, a faint shadow touching his mouth. 'I understand your need to know everything.'

'I wonder why Glynnis wouldn't allow you to help her financially?'

'Pride, for the most part, so *I* believe.'

'She let Emma Harte come to her rescue, though.'

'She did. My mother loved Glynnis like a daughter and she knew this, and she knew how much my mother sympathized with her. When my mother was a young girl she had been in a similar predicament, pregnant by a man who wouldn't marry her, and obviously there was a great deal of empathy there.'

'Thanks for talking about this, Robin. I really needed to know exactly what went on between you and my grandmother all those years ago.'

'Sexual passion. I was also in love with her; it just wasn't enough for a steady, stable life.' He smiled at her then, his face softening with sudden tenderness, his faded blue eyes benign, loving.

Evan smiled back at him, reached out and took hold of his long, slender hand, squeezed it in hers. The two of them were seated on the large sofa in the library at Lackland Priory, Robin's house in Yorkshire, meeting for the first time in several weeks. They were glad to be together again,

to have this chance to get to know each other better.

The old man and the young woman. Related by blood, but unknown to each other, total strangers, until recently. The grandfather. The granddaughter. Two people who had only just discovered the other's existence, who wanted to be friends, to understand each other, to find a certain kind of closeness, even the intimacy of family, if that was possible. The younger striving to comprehend the past and a disastrous long-ago relationship; the elder hoping that the past and his actions then would not damage him too badly in her eyes today, in the present.

The silence in this harmonious and peaceful room was broken by the sudden shrilling of the telephone, startling them both. Almost instantly the ringing stopped; the phone had been answered elsewhere in the house by a staff member.

A moment later the butler appeared in the doorway. 'Excuse me, sir, Dr Harvey's on the phone. He would like a word with you.'

'Thank you, Bolton,' Robin answered, and, excusing himself to Evan, he rose, striding over to the desk. Sitting down, he picked up the receiver. 'Good morning, James.'

Evan also rose and walked across to the French windows which opened onto the terrace of the ancient manor house. She stepped outside, closing the doors behind her, and took several deep breaths. The air was always clean and fresh up here in the Dales. It was a glorious morning in early August,

the sky azure blue and without cloud: a sunny, golden day filled with pristine light, just as it had been yesterday and the day before. She had grown to love this crystalline light which she had discovered was so prevalent and unique to the north of England.

Now she sat down on the stone bench and stared out across the wide green lawns that splayed out from the house and were bordered by flower beds filled with colourful perennials. Her eyes finally came to rest on the copse of trees which stood slightly away from the house, to the right of the lawns. Beyond their opulent, leafy bowers she could see the rim of the moors, a dark smudge against the pale, blue-tinted horizon. It was such a beautiful spot, this long valley in the middle of the Dales where Lackland Priory had stood for centuries. Pennistone Royal was not far away and in the past few months she had spent a lot of time in this particular area of Yorkshire which was softer and much more lush than the surrounding higher land. Up there, on the high-flung moors, it was grim and bleak for most of the year, neither pretty nor welcoming. She knew Linnet would not agree; *she* thought the soaring fells were glorious in their stark and solitary splendour.

'I love those moors the same way Emma Harte loved them,' Linnet had once explained to her. 'My great-grandmother was a child of the moors, and she could never stay away from them for very long. I'm just like her. I *yearn* for them, as she did.'

Emma Harte.

Evan turned the name over in her mind. Dead though she had been for thirty years, Emma still lived on, her spirit and her presence almost as potent as it had been when she was alive. Emma Harte was *her* great-grandmother, too, although she had not known this when she had come to England in January. Just eight months ago now; how her life had changed since then. *She* was a Harte. And had been accepted by this unique family, made to feel one of them. She was still trying to come to grips with recent developments.

Almost immediately her thoughts swung to Robin Ainsley, favourite son of the legendary Emma: her father's biological father, her biological grandfather; a man she had met only a few weeks ago, but whom she had quickly grown to like and knew she could easily come to love. There was something endearing about Robin, even vulnerable, and she wanted to nurture and protect him. At eighty he seemed so alone and lonely in old age.

Robin Ainsley had abandoned her grandmother during the Second World War, but he had had his reasons, and it *was* over half a century ago now. And if she were honest with herself, she had to admit that her grandmother had probably had a much better and certainly a more tranquil life without Robin. After all, they had been forever at each other's throats, according to him. And Gran had a loving husband in Richard Hughes, who had married her some months before her baby, Owen, was born. Richard had brought up Owen as his son. He had been a good father; no man

had ever had a better one, her father said that all the time.

Her father's face insinuated itself into her mind's eye, and she felt herself tensing. Yet again she wondered how to tell him what she had so recently found out? Owen had idolized Richard Hughes . . .

'I'm so sorry to have left you alone,' Robin murmured from the doorway, interrupting her thoughts. 'I'm afraid Dr Harvey can go on a bit at times.'

Evan jumped up and swung to face him. 'You're all right, aren't you? You're not ill?' she asked. Her voice echoed with sudden concern, and her eyes were anxious.

'I'm perfectly fine, my dear. In very good health, I do assure you. Dr Harvey was merely ringing up to confirm our dinner engagement tomorrow evening.' As he finished speaking Robin stepped onto the terrace. 'Let's stay out here for a while, enjoy Mother Nature. It's such a grand morning.'

'Yes, it is,' Evan agreed.

They sat down on the bench, and Robin went on, after a moment, 'You said earlier that you needed to talk to me about several things, but so far we've only discussed my relationship with your grandmother. What else do you have on your mind?'

'My father.'

'Ah yes, Owen. Have you told him about me? Does he know anything about . . . Emma's well-kept secret?'

'No.'

'Did you lose your nerve, Evan? Surely not. Not *you*.'

'No, not really. But I did decide it might be better to wait until he arrives in London later this month.'

'Don't you think you ought to give him an inkling about what's happened *before* he comes? About me, I mean? It would prepare him for what will no doubt be a bit of a shock.'

'It did cross my mind,' Evan responded, biting her lip, looking worried. 'But then I decided it would be smarter to tell him face to face.'

Robin frowned, stared ahead, his light-coloured eyes fixed on the distant horizon. After a moment, he began to speak slowly, thoughtfully. 'He's not going to like what he hears. It wouldn't surprise me if he were very angry. After all, some of his illusions are going to be shattered. He'll certainly be angry with me about the past.'

'And maybe he'll also be angry with his mother for not being truthful,' Evan suggested succinctly. 'Gran lied to him.'

'Oh, I don't know about that, my dear. Glynnis did the right thing. It was wiser not to tell him I was his father. Richard was married to Glynnis for some months before Owen's birth, and whilst he may not have made her pregnant, he loved that child as his own. Richard's behaviour was impeccable, and I think Glynnis did what she thought was best, you know.'

'That's true, but . . .' She let her sentence go unfinished.

'But what?'

'My father's not easy, Robin.'

A look of comprehension swept across his face and he exclaimed, 'I remember something, Evan. When Paula brought you here for the first time you told us you thought your father had come across some papers after Glynnis died.'

'I did. But he never actually said he found anything. It was just a feeling *I* had that sprang from his sudden, rather odd attitude towards the Harte family.'

'*Oh*. What kind of attitude?' Robin asked, his curiosity aroused.

'He became a bit . . . well, down on them. I guess that's the best way of describing it. He wasn't happy about my job at Harte's, and that was mystifying to me because he had agreed I should visit London to seek out Emma Harte . . . just as Gran had suggested on her deathbed.'

Robin ventured, 'I think he stumbled on a diary, or letters, or other items from long ago, which Glynnis had perhaps forgotten about.'

'That could be so,' she agreed. 'And what he found might have turned him off the Hartes. Is that what you're suggesting?'

'Yes, it is.' There was a pause. 'I wonder if it might not be wiser to let sleeping dogs lie, my dear? Why tell your father anything at all? He doesn't need to know the truth about his paternity. Perhaps it would be more prudent to let it remain the secret it's always been. Why not let him continue to think Richard Hughes was his biological father?'

'That makes sense,' Evan exclaimed, and instantly

felt as though a great weight had been lifted from her chest.

Almost as if he instinctively knew what she was feeling, Robin put his arm around her, held her close to him. '*We* know the truth, and that's all that really matters, isn't it?'

'Yes,' was all she said, and she leaned against his shoulder, closing her eyes, filled with relief.

They did not speak for a short while, lost as they were in their own thoughts. Evan was thinking about her boyfriend Gideon Harte, wondering how she would explain her sudden change of heart, yet knowing that whatever she decided to do he would back her to the hilt, would be on her side. Gideon had an understanding heart, and he was sensitive to her feelings about her father. In fact, he himself had suggested, only the other day, that maybe she would be better off not telling her father he was a Harte. She had been ambivalent; Gideon had then said he trusted her judgement and whatever she did ultimately would be all right by him.

As for Robin, his thoughts were centred on Evan Hughes. How glad he was that this young woman had come into his life. Very late in his life, that was true, but at least he had been fortunate to become aware of her existence. He had grown to know her over the past few weeks, and he liked what he had learned about her. Once before he had held her close like this, when she had comforted him, and he was glad to hold her again, to silently bond with her, and to comfort *her*.

The day she had arrived with Paula to meet him

for the first time he had feasted his rheumy old eyes on her lovely face. He had noticed that she looked like his twin, Elizabeth, when she had been twenty-seven, as Evan was now. *Evan*. His granddaughter. His only grandchild. His blood flowed through her veins, and one day, if she married and had children, it would flow in their veins . . . she ensured the continuation of his bloodline, his genes. It had always been important to him, the flowering of a family, but before the arrival of Evan this had not seemed probable.

Instantly, Jonathan sprang into his mind and a chill settled over him. He could only pray that his son would never harm Evan. Certainly Robin had made absolutely sure that Jonathan really did understand that his inheritance was intact, and not jeopardized by the advent of Evan. In fact, he had gone to extraordinary lengths to prove this to his son, taking steps that involved both their solicitors and the execution of various documents, which were binding.

On the other hand, Jonathan was unpredictable. For a long time now he had considered his only child a loose cannon and, even worse, a sociopath. There was no way of knowing what he might do. Or when.

'Are you all right?' Evan asked, feeling Robin's sudden tension.

'Yes, yes, I'm fine,' the old man answered, forcing a smile. 'But I must admit I do feel the cold even on a sunny day like this. Let's go inside, Evan. I have something I wish to show you.'

Together they walked into the library, and Robin murmured, 'Do sit down on the sofa, I won't be a moment.'

She did as he said while he hurried to the desk. Her eyes followed him. What a fine-looking man he was; tall, erect, and handsome in old age, and today he was much more robust and full of vigour. This pleased her. She had only just found him, and he was already eighty . . . the thought of losing him dismayed her.

A moment later Robin was sitting down next to her and handing her a photograph, a snapshot taken a long time ago. Staring down at it she exclaimed, 'It's of you and my grandmother. My goodness, what a gorgeous couple you were! So good-looking.'

He laughed in delight at her compliment. 'We did look wonderful together, you know, everyone remarked on that. As you can see, I'm wearing my RAF uniform and your grandmother is the height of fashion for the times, very much the glamour girl, as always. Well, anyway, it's for you, Evan.'

'Oh Robin, how lovely of you. But are you sure you want to part with it? You've had it for such a long time.'

'Who better to give it to than – *our* granddaughter. I want you to have this picture of the two of us when we were young and in love and before things had gone so horribly wrong between us.'

She nodded, touched his arm affectionately. 'I shall treasure it always.'

His blue eyes lit up and he smiled at her. 'Now,

will you take pity on an old man and stay for lunch?'

'I'd love to,' she said.

But as she walked to the dining room with Robin, Evan knew there was nothing but trouble in store. Her intuition told her that her father would be difficult, and that the situation would more than likely explode.