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Written by Erica James

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Paradise House

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To Edward and Samuel, with love and respect

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PART I

Chapter One

When Genevieve Baxter was eleven years old, her family played a trick on her father; they organised a surprise fortieth birthday party for him. Nineteen years later, Genevieve and her sisters were planning to surprise him again.

The plan, once they'd given him his cards and presents after breakfast, was to make him think that they were all far too busy to spend the day with him (or be up to anything behind his back) and to hint that perhaps he ought to take himself off for a long walk. To underline this, Genevieve had told him that she had a thrilling day of ironing and bookkeeping ahead, Polly had said that she had lessons to teach in St David's, and Nattie had kicked up a fuss that she would have to put in an appearance at the wine bar where, reputedly, she worked. This was perhaps the least convincing fib as Nattie rarely worked if she could help it. She claimed a job wasn't compatible with being a single mother. Truth was, despite being all of twenty-eight, she still believed that money grew on trees. The rest of the family lived in hope that one day Lily-Rose, a sweet-natured four-year-old, would teach her mother the ways of the world. No one else had managed to.

Genevieve carried her tea and toast to her favourite spot in the garden (the private area, away from their guests) and thought of the one person who might give the game away: Granny Baxter, Daddy Dean's mother. The name Daddy Dean had been Gran's invention. She had

started calling him this when Genevieve was born. The name had stuck and his daughters had subsequently followed their grandmother's example, as had Lily-Rose. Gran had always been a one-off, but these days she alternated between blithe confusion and sparkling lucidity, which made her as unpredictable as the weather.

Yesterday had been a typical example of the fickleness of the Pembrokeshire weather, an area known for having its own climate. The morning had started out pleasantly enough but by the afternoon the wind had gusted in from the Atlantic and rattled the windows of Paradise House. Driving rain had sent all but the hardiest of coastal walkers fleeing for cover – straight into the teashops of Angel Sands and the only public house, the Salvation Arms. This morning, though, the wind and rain had passed and a golden sun shone in a sky of misty apricot: it was a beautiful May morning.

At eight o'clock, in an hour's time, Genevieve would be cooking and serving breakfast. Three couples and a single man were staying with them – all first-timers, which was unusual; a lot of their bed and breakfast guests had been coming for years.

Before moving to Angel Sands, Genevieve and her family had been regular visitors to this part of Pembrokeshire, spending every summer holiday in a cottage a mile out of the village. It had become a second home to them, somewhere Genevieve longed to be the moment she was back at school for the start of the autumn term. But there again, whenever she was at school she longed to be anywhere else. Then their father had decided to sell their home, Brook House Farm, a 450-acre dairy farm that had belonged to his father and his father before him. Genevieve knew that he had never forgiven himself for this bold step. 'It's a new beginning,' he'd told the family, when he finally accepted an offer that was too good to turn down from the builder who had pestered him to sell

up for more than three years. It was an offer that would give them financial security.

The New Beginning had been Mum's idea. Serena Baxter had never really taken to the role of farmer's wife. 'Whoever came up with the design for a cow deserves to be one,' she used to say. 'Anyone with an ounce of sense can see those legs at the back aren't made right. That's why they walk in that peculiarly stiff way.'

Genevieve's parents had met at a church barn dance. It had been love at first sight when Serena had tripped over a bale of hay and fallen into the arms of an anxious-looking man five years older than her. The spirited youngest daughter of the local vicar was an unlikely match for the stolid only son of a farmer, but they were wed within the year and settled into married life without a backward glance.

The years passed. Genevieve arrived, her sisters following shortly after, and their father took on the running of Brook House Farm, his own parents deciding it was time to take it easy. He threw himself into updating the milking parlour for greater efficiency and acquiring extra land from neighbouring farms to grow more of his own animal feed, while Serena began to dream of another life – a life that didn't include five o'clock milking or smelly overalls that needed washing every day. She imagined an idyll by the sea, a picturesque guest house with breeze-filled bedrooms decorated in pastel shades, with borders of stencilled flowers; bowls of pot-pourri placed on polished antique furniture that she and Daddy Dean had lovingly restored together; scented bags of lavender tucked under guests' pillows; linen as white and fresh as snow. And because their father was crazy about Serena, her dream became his.

The day they heard that a sizeable property with ten bedrooms in Angel Sands had come onto the market, he made an offer for it. They knew exactly which house it

was, didn't need to view it to know that it was just what they wanted. Paradise House, with its whitewashed walls and pantiled roof, was well known to anyone who had ever visited Angel Sands – it even featured on local postcards. It stood imposingly alone on the hillside with magnificent views of the pretty bay and out to sea. The previous owners had let the Edwardian house go. Water poured in through missing roof tiles, broken windows were boarded up and gutters hanging off, and the lantern roof of the original conservatory leaked like a sieve. It was going for a song, and was just the opportunity her parents needed. Although more than ten years had passed, Genevieve could still recall the family's excitement the day they moved in. She suspected the removal men could remember it, too. The drive to the house was too steep and narrow for the large van to negotiate and the men had nearly killed themselves lugging furniture up to the house in the sweltering heat of an August afternoon.

And so The Dream became reality and they all lived happily ever after.

Except it didn't quite work out that way.

Selling Brook House Farm had been the hardest thing their father had ever done, and his conscience told him he'd sold out. Not that he said as much – he was a man of few words and rarely expressed himself – but as the years went by and Serena eventually guessed what was on his mind, she too fell victim to a guilty conscience, for hadn't she been the one to instigate the change in their lives? Yet instead of sitting down to discuss it – talking things through wasn't a Baxter trait, as Genevieve knew better than anyone – Serena turned the problem into an even bigger drama by running away from it. Literally.

'We need some time apart,' she told their father, as the taxi waited at the front door to take her to the station. 'I still love you, but I can't bear to see what I've done to

you. Forgive me, please, and let me go.'

Unbelievably, he did just that, and Serena went to stay with her sister in Lincoln. 'I had to do as she said,' he told Genevieve and her sisters. 'She'll be home soon. When she's ready. I know she will.' This apparent benign acceptance of the situation was so typical of their father. Many times Genevieve had seen him wrong-footed by the complexities of life, but rarely had she witnessed him lose his temper or act impetuously. He was a stoic to the last. Genevieve was frequently maddened and frustrated by his behaviour, but she was too much like him to hope that he would ever change. Neither could cope well with confrontation.

Serena had been gone six months now and he was still patiently waiting for her to come home. Initially she phoned every other week and chatted about nothing in particular, but the calls petered out and were replaced by letters. At the end of March, Genevieve and her sisters, plus little Lily-Rose, went to see Serena in secret, to try to persuade her to come back. Lily-Rose was their trump card, or so they thought. But no. Serena had Plans.

An old school friend, living in New Zealand, had invited her to stay. The so-called friend ran a winery in Hawkes Bay and was, of all things . . . a *man!* She swore blind that there was nothing to read into the situation, but Genevieve and her sisters had been so appalled that they left early, Nattie driving like a lunatic and swearing she would never speak to their mother again. To leave their father temporarily to go off and find herself was excusable, but to travel to the other side of the world and take up with some New World man was unthinkable! Until then, they had been patient and believed that their mother was just going through another of her phases. Like the time she had insisted there was no need for them to wash their hair, that once their scalps were allowed to behave as nature had intended their hair would adapt

and acquire a healthy sheen. The phase came to an abrupt end when Polly caught nits from the girl she sat next to on the school bus; consequently every known chemical was vigorously applied to their heads.

They never told their father about the visit, nor said anything when Serena wrote to him with the news that she was going to New Zealand to visit a friend. They pretended it was the first they'd heard of it and, by way of distraction, Genevieve suggested that he threw himself into getting Paradise House into better shape. Things had been allowed to slip – the bags of lavender had certainly lost their scent – and some of the comments in the Visitor's Book were less than kind.

Another father in another family might have been able to rely upon his grown-up children for practical help, but sadly this was not to be. Polly, the baby of the family and the only one still living at home, was undeniably the cleverest and the prettiest, but she was dreamily vague and languid. She went in for what Genevieve called a 'vintage' look, wearing long Forties style flowery dresses she picked up from charity shops or jumble sales, and it wasn't unheard of for her to be seen leaving the house in shoes that didn't match. She was a brilliant musician, though. She could play the flute, violin and piano, and could have played in any number of orchestras if she'd put her mind to it, but she opted to work as a peripatetic music teacher. She loved her subject and she loved children, probably because, though twenty-six, she still possessed a wide-eyed innocence and an endearing ability to think well of others. The boys she taught, big or small, were always having crushes on her.

But her practical skills rated a big zero. Only the other day Genevieve had asked her to keep an eye on the bacon while she went to take another breakfast order: when Genevieve returned from the dining room, smoke was billowing from the grill. Glancing up from the book she

was reading – *Charlotte's Web* – she had looked at Genevieve with an expression of mild curiosity, as if wondering why her sister was throwing open the back door and hurling the smoking grill pan through it. She was exasperating, but Genevieve knew it was pointless getting angry with Polly, she meant no harm. You just had to grit your teeth and accept that she inhabited a different world from the one in which everyone else lived.

As for Nattie, well, it was difficult to know where to start. She was the middle sister and lived in Tenby in a grotty bedsit in a house of giro-claiming slackers. There was a tenuous boyfriend on the scene, but he wasn't Lily-Rose's father. Which was just as well because he was totally unsuitable, a feckless beach bum who spent his every waking moment riding the breaking waves at nearby Manorbier, thinking he could surf his way through life with nothing more to his name than a pair of baggy shorts and flip-flops.

If Nattie excelled at picking appalling boyfriends, she also excelled at being rebellious and stubborn. As a child she had driven their parents mad with her constant tantrums – nobody, even now, could slam a door quite like Nattie. She was a loving mother to Lily-Rose, but perhaps wasn't as consistent as she ought to be. She thought nothing of arriving at Paradise House and expecting someone to take care of Lily-Rose while she went off on some crusade or other. Life for Nattie was one long fight against those who would abuse or exploit others. It never occurred to her that she did her own share of exploiting. No one at Paradise House rebuked her for her lack of consideration, for luckily they enjoyed looking after Lily-Rose. Blue-eyed and strikingly blonde with corkscrew curls, Lily was adorable and a delight to have around.

It was partly because her sisters were so impractical that Genevieve had, over the Easter break, made the

decision to come home to Paradise House during her mother's absence. She'd held off from doing so, knowing that like her mother she was running away, but it would only be for a while, until life had steadied for her and she knew what she wanted to do next. It wasn't just Paradise House that needed a firm hand to steer its course; she did too.

Top of Genevieve's list of Things To Be Done at Paradise House had been to advertise for a cleaner – the last woman had left shortly before Serena departed and no one had thought to replace her. But finding a replacement hadn't been straightforward. The only applicants were drifters, male and female, wanting to fund their surfing habits – did she have any idea how expensive decent boards and wet suits were? Well, yes actually, she did; Nattie's boyfriend constantly bored them all to death on the subject.

She advertised again. The only candidate to come forward this time was Donna Morgan, a cousin of Debs who ran Debonhair, the local hair salon. Donna had recently moved from Caerphilly to Angel Sands to escape her bully of an ex husband. She was in her mid-fifties with a touch of the Bonnie Tyler about her – lots of backcombed dyed blonde hair, husky voice, faded denim and high heels, and a heavy hand when it came to eye makeup. Donna worked part-time behind the bar at the Salvation Arms and had already made a name for herself on karaoke night with her rendition of 'Lost in France'. She had only been in Angel Sands for three weeks, but was already a fixture.

Genevieve had offered her the job but couldn't deny how uneasy she felt. Had it been her imagination, or had Donna looked at her father with more than passing friendliness when they had discussed the work involved? Since Serena had gone and tongues had begun to wag, there had been a surprising number of female callers at

Paradise House. They came bearing offers of help – did her father want his ironing done? Or maybe a casserole or two cooked? It would be no trouble. It was difficult for Genevieve to view Daddy Dean as a sexual being, but there was clearly something about him that was drawing attention from the widowed and divorced. Gran said it was a biological fact that once a single woman got a whiff of a helpless and bewildered man, there was no stopping her. 'Heaven help him, but they'll keep banging on that door until Serena comes home.'

Helpless and bewildered described her father perfectly. Like so many men who have lost their partner, he'd suddenly become inept at the simplest tasks. Just finding his socks and underpants required all his attention.

But any female attention lavished on him was in vain and invariably had him running in the opposite direction, usually to his workshop in the garden. If things got really bad, he shimmied up a conveniently placed ladder and hid on the roof, claiming the lead flashing or a broken tile needed fixing. Essentially he was a shy man who hated to be the focus of attention, but he was also a man who loved his wife as much as the day she'd tripped and fallen into his arms more than thirty years ago. Genevieve knew he had built an exclusion zone around himself so he could go on living in the hope that Serena would simply turn up one day and say, 'Surprise! I'm back!' If Genevieve was honest, she thought this was exactly what her annoyingly, capriciously inconsiderate mother would do. It would be typical of Mum, to behave as though there were no consequences to her actions.

Her tea and toast finished, Genevieve walked back up to the house. She had seven breakfasts to cook, a birthday cake to ice and a surprise party to arrange. Donna would also be arriving for her first day at Paradise

House, which meant her father would make himself conveniently scarce and perhaps go for that long walk she had suggested.

Chapter Two

Genevieve rang Granny Baxter's doorbell. Waited. Then rang it several more times. Not because her grandmother was hard of hearing, but because the television would be on and the volume turned up. Ten minutes to three wasn't the best time to come – Dick Van Dyke would be in the final stages of uncovering the guilty party in *Diagnosis Murder*. Gran was an avid follower of daytime telly. She was no slouch when it came to late-night viewing either. At eighty-two years old, she was embarrassingly up to date with all the latest trends. She drew the line at Graham Norton though, saying he was too saucy by half.

There had never been any question of leaving Gran behind in Cheshire when the family moved to Angel Sands. But she had surprised everyone by insisting that she didn't want to live with them at Paradise House. 'I want my own little place,' she'd said, 'like I have here.' For years Gran (and Grandad before he'd died) had lived in a specially built bungalow on the farm: she had kept herself to herself and expected others to do the same. As luck would have it, a month after they'd moved into Paradise House a cottage had become available. Perfectly situated in the main street of the village, it was fifty yards from the nearest shops and, in Gran's own words, within shouting distance of the rest of the Baxters up on the hill. It meant she still had her independence, but help would be on hand should she need it.

Genevieve had a key to let herself in at Angel Cottage,

but she had promised her grandmother to use it only in an emergency. 'And what constitutes an emergency?' the old lady had demanded.

'Knowing what a telly addict you are, Gran, losing the remote control for the TV.'

At last the duck-egg blue door was opened. 'I knew all along who the murderer was,' Gran said. 'It was that smart piece of work with the shoulder pads. She had spurned lover stamped all over her face. You'd think they'd make it harder, wouldn't you?'

Genevieve followed her through to the sitting room. It was low-ceilinged and appeared even smaller than it was due to the quantity of furniture and ornaments squeezed into it. Hundreds of framed photographs adorned every surface – faded ones of long-dead relatives; any number of her father growing up; myriad ones of Genevieve and her sisters doing the same and, of course, snaps of Lily-Rose repeating the process. In pride of place on the television was a black and white picture of Gran and Grandad on their wedding day, the pair of them staring poker-faced into the camera. But for all the clutter in the room, it was spotless. Gran, an early riser, was usually dusting, polishing and running her ancient Ewbank over the carpets before most people were up. Invariably she was snoozing in the armchair by nine but was awake in time for elevenses and then *Bargain Hunt.*

In the last year Dad had banned her from washing the windows and the outside paintwork. But after a neighbour told him she had spotted her polishing the windows with a ball of scrunched up newspaper, he confiscated the small pair of stepladders she kept in the under-stairs cupboard. Outraged, she'd said, 'Daddy Dean, I'll thank you to keep your nose out of my affairs!'

'I will when I can trust you to do as you're told,' he'd said quietly but firmly. He rarely raised his voice.

'You always were a cussed little boy, Dean Baxter!'

From then on, Dad had cleaned Gran's windows. Of course, they never shone as brightly as when Gran did them.

'I was about to make myself a snack,' Gran said to Genevieve. 'Do you want anything?'

'No thanks. You haven't forgotten the party, have you? There'll be plenty to eat then.'

Her grandmother clicked her tongue. 'Of course I haven't forgotten!' She moved a cushion on the sofa and revealed a carefully wrapped present. 'I hid it there in case your father popped in.' She repositioned the cushion and said, 'If we're going to be drinking this afternoon, we ought to line our stomachs. I'll make us a quick sandwich.'

'Really, it's okay. I don't need anything.'

The tiny kitchen was just as cluttered as the sitting room. Genevieve's hands always itched to tidy it. The ironing board was out and the iron was hissing gently, sending little puffs of steam into the air. Goodness knows how long it had been left there.

'Shall I put this away for you, Gran?'

'Better still, finish those odds and ends for me.' With a flash of steel that made Genevieve step back, Gran used the bread knife to point to a pile of undergarments and dishcloths. Granny Baxter was famous for ironing absolutely everything. 'The day she stops ironing her knickers, we'll know it's time to worry,' Nattie often said.

While Gran hacked at the wholemeal loaf, Genevieve pushed the nose of the iron into places other irons dare not go. She was conscious that if she didn't keep an eye on the time, and the reason she was here – to fetch Gran and take her up to Paradise House – her father's party would never happen. Being with Granny Baxter wasn't dissimilar to being sucked into a black hole.

The sandwich made (Genevieve having taken a surreptitious glance at the best-before date on the pot of

crab paste), Gran sat at the postage-stamp-sized table the other side of the ironing board. 'So how are you, Genevieve?'

Genevieve had wondered how long it would be before Gran seized her opportunity. She kept her eyes on the iron. 'I'm fine,' she said.

'Sleeping?'

'Better.'

'Still taking the pills?'

'No.'

'That's good. Any more nightmares?'

'A few.'

'Eating properly?'

'Of course.'

'Mm . . . '

Seconds passed.

'You should talk about it more, Genevieve. Bottling's for fruit, not people.'

Obviously Gran was in one of her more lucid frames of mind. 'Coming from a Baxter, that's nothing short of pioneering stuff,' Genevieve said.

'We should learn from our mistakes. It's time you and your parents did the same. You're not depressed, are you?'

'No. I told you, I'm fine.'

Gran went to change for the party, her sandwich scarcely touched. Genevieve knew the last fifteen minutes had been nothing but a ruse to ensure some time alone. Listening to her grandmother moving about upstairs, Genevieve tidied the kitchen, or tidied what she could without incurring Gran's fury at being interfered with. She put the loaf back in the bread bin, butter in the fridge, knife, plate and empty paste pot in the sink. She knew better than to throw it away. Glass bottles of any size were always washed and stored in the pantry, ready for jam-making, pickling and bottling.

The interrogation hadn't been as bad as it could have been. Considering her grandmother's nickname of Gestapo Gran, she had let Genevieve off lightly. She was right, though; Genevieve *should* talk about it more. But each time she did, she ended up reliving the experience and for days afterwards felt anxious and unable to sleep at night. She had been told that she would have to be patient with herself, that it would be two steps forward and one back.

Telling herself that today wasn't a day for taking a step backwards – there was her father's party to enjoy – she pushed the memories away and put the iron on the window sill to cool. She went through to the sitting room to wait for Gran.

The local paper was on the coffee table. She picked it up and read the lead story slowly. It wasn't until she was twelve that she had been diagnosed as dyslexic. Up until then, while she'd been at primary school, she had learned to keep quiet during lessons, to blend into the background and hope the teacher wouldn't ask her to read anything out – by this time she'd realised that she couldn't read as fast as everyone else. By the age of twelve it was getting harder to cover up her embarrassment at never being able to copy correctly from the blackboard. Embarrassment then turned to shame as she was classed as a 'slow learner'. Finally, an English teacher, long exasperated with the muddled mess of her homework, suggested to her parents that Genevieve be professionally tested for dyslexia. Tests showed that while the language part of her brain didn't work properly, her IQ was surprisingly high. This, Genevieve and her parents were told, explained why she'd managed to cover her tracks so successfully. If her coping strategies had been less effective, the disorder might have been picked up sooner.

No matter how sympathetically she and her disorder were treated from then on, the harm had been done: the

label of 'lazy and thick' had been applied to her for so many years, subconsciously it would never leave her. Even now, at the age of thirty, she felt the need to prove she wasn't stupid.

One of her biggest regrets was that when she was seventeen, due to what became known as That Time When She Wasn't Well, she'd dropped out of school and taken a variety of jobs – cinema usherette, shop assistant, even a stint as a kennel maid. Then from nowhere she got the idea to become a cook, and found a part-time job in a restaurant as little more than a skivvy – washing, chopping and stirring. Before long, by attending the local technical college twice a week, she proved herself both competent and quick to learn. But just as things seemed to be coming together for her, her father sold the farm in Cheshire and they moved down to Pembrokeshire. For the next nine months she helped her parents run Paradise House, but inevitably she soon felt the need to widen her horizons. She applied for a post at a hotel in Cardiff, where Nattie was doing a Media Arts degree at the university. The two of them shared a poky one-bedroomed flat.

It was a disaster. Genevieve would stagger home from a twelve-hour day on her feet in a sweltering understaffed kitchen, while Nattie, not long out of bed, would be in party mode. Genevieve seldom had the energy to do more than collapse exhausted on the sofa. She lasted ten months working in the kitchen from hell, putting up with ridiculous hours and a foul-mouthed, hard-drinking chef who knew less than she did, before she decided enough was enough. She found another job in an upmarket restaurant specialising in overpriced nouvelle cuisine, but soon realised she was out of the frying pan and into the fire. Her new boss was an arrogant Gallic chef from Marseille. He had a fiery temper – euphemistically referred to as an artistic temperament – and clammy,

groping hands. She gave in her notice after three months. When the owner of the restaurant, the groping Gallic's wife, asked her why she was leaving, Genevieve told her. 'Because your sleazy husband can't keep his hands to himself. If I had the energy, I'd have him for sexual harassment. Oh, and you might like to check the cold store; I locked him in there five minutes ago.' That had been Nattie's inspired idea.

She walked out of the restaurant, head held high, in search of a change of direction. She was only twenty-two, but felt more like ninety-two. Trainee chefs, she had come to realise, were treated as little more than cannon fodder, to be used and abused by egotistical maniacs in a male-dominated environment. It wasn't for her.

A spate of jobs followed, as diverse as the ones she'd tried on leaving school. Then clever old Gran came up with a novel career move for her. 'Why don't you keep house for some la-di-da family? I bet there's plenty of folk willing to pay through the nose for someone who can cook as well as you do and keep them organised.'

As daft as it sounded, Genevieve pursued the suggestion and found to her astonishment that there was quite a market for housekeepers – and not the scary fictional ones dressed in black with keys hanging from a belt! So long as she was prepared to be flexible and take anything on, plenty of opportunities were on offer.

Having been bitten before, she started as she meant to go on and chose her employers with care: no more egotistical maniacs, and no potential gropers. The work was varied and not badly paid. It also came with live-in accommodation and occasionally the opportunity to travel, when the families took her on holiday with them, claiming it wouldn't be the same without her. The only downside was that she had so little time off, it was difficult to make friends outside the family. And sometimes she grew too fond of the people she worked for, and they

of her, so when the time came to move on, the wrench was hard.

The sweetest of all the people she'd worked for had been George and Cecily Randolph, an elderly couple who had treated her more as a granddaughter than an employee. But just thinking of them brought on a stab of pain, and she was glad to hear Gran coming down the stairs singing 'Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory'.

Good old Gran. She could always be relied upon to chase away a maudlin thought.