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Written by Erica James

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Act of Faith

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As ever, to Edward and Samuel

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*The greatest pleasure of life is love,
The greatest treasure, contentment,
The greatest possession health,
The greatest ease is sleep,
The greatest medicine is a true friend.*

Sir William Temple

Chapter One

Today of all days, Ali Anderson wasn't in the mood for empty-headed foolishness.

'Oh, get a life you silly little man,' she muttered, switching off the car radio and bringing an end to the ramblings of the out-of-his-tree caller from Redditch – a crank who had been advocating a world economy based on a system of homespun bartering. Honestly, was there anything worse than a born-again down-shifter?

She would have liked to vent her feelings further, but the opportunity to do so eluded her as, just in time, she saw the road to Great Budworth. She slowed her speed, made a sharp turn to the right, and took the narrow lane that led to the centre of the small, neat village that, up until a year ago, had been her home. Its picture-book selection of much-photographed quaint houses had long since lost their charm for Ali, and as she passed each familiar pretty cottage, her heartbeat quickened and her throat tightened. She reluctantly thanked Mr Out-Of-His-Tree from Redditch for his momentary distraction and wished for a further miraculous diversion of thought.

But nothing could divert her now. She was on her own, about to come face to face with the tragedy that was made so cruelly poignant at this time of the year. As she switched off the engine, she asked herself the question for which she knew there was no easy reassuring answer: would she ever be able to make this journey without feeling the excruciating pain?

She left her car under the watchful gaze of a

well-nourished ginger cat loitering in the post-office window, the panes of which were festively decorated with tinsel and sprayed-on snow, and with her footsteps echoing in the deserted street, she walked, head bowed, into the wind towards the sixteenth-century sandstone church that dominated the top end of the village with its elevated position and massive crenellated tower. It was late afternoon, cold and raw, a wintry day that was cloaked in melancholy. The unforgiving December wind stung her cheeks and snatched at the Cellophane-wrapped roses in her arms. She cradled them protectively against her chest, and breathed in their fragrant scent; a scent that was powerfully redolent of this dreadful place.

There was nobody else in the churchyard. She was glad. It was better to be alone. Last time there had been an elderly man blowing his nose but pretending self-consciously that he wasn't. She followed the path, reading the weathered tombstones that were green with a seasoned patina of lichen as she moved ever nearer to her destination. Scanning the names of Great Budworth's ancient and more recently departed was meant to be a diverting tactic: it was supposed to slow her heart, stop her stomach from coiling itself into a nauseous, tight knot, keep her from reliving the horror of that night two years ago.

But it hadn't worked before and it wasn't working now.

She passed *Robert Ashworth, 1932-1990*, then *Amy Riley, 1929-1992, beloved wife of Joseph Riley*, and knew that there were only three more painful steps to take. She braced herself.

One.

Two.

Three.

And there it was.

Forever precious in our hearts, Isaac Anderson, 1995-1996, dearly loved son of Ali and Elliot Anderson.

She stood perfectly still, staring at the words, afraid to move lest she set off some uncontrollable emotion within her, but wanting more than anything to leave her flowers and run. It was two years to the day since Isaac had died and she hated to remember him this way. This wasn't her son. This wasn't the longed-for baby she had loved from the moment she had held him against her breast in the delivery room. This wasn't the tiny fair-haired Isaac whose smile had melted her heart every morning when she went into his bedroom and picked him out of his cot. This wasn't the little boy who had tottered towards her when she came home from work, and had sat on her lap while she had read him a selection of his favourite stories before they went upstairs to have a bath together, and played at being water buffalo. This wasn't the happy eighteen-month-old boy whom she'd kissed goodbye that fateful morning and had never seen alive again.

An icy gust of wind curled itself round her neck and prompted her to move. She stooped to the small grave, unwrapped the flowers and carefully arranged them. She stuffed the Cellophane into her coat pocket, removed her leather gloves and set about picking at the weeds that were invading the rectangle of space that in theory belonged to Isaac, but in reality belonged to no one. As she worked at the weeds she thought, as she so often did, how the landscape of her life had been changed by her son's death, in particular the disastrous effect it had had on her marriage.

Where there had once been absolute unity between her and Elliot, there was now a terrible division, their lives fragmented into so many badly broken pieces that there was no hope of them being mended. They had become distant and uncommunicative. From loving one another with a passion that had seemed enduring and immutable

they had quickly reached a stage where all that connected them was a wall of silent, bitter reproach. It became an insurmountable barrier that neither of them wanted to knock down. They had lived like that for a year, hiding from each other until the inevitable happened and they parted. Divorce had been her suggestion. Elliot had been against taking such a final and drastic step, but she had insisted on going through with it. She had had to. Being with Elliot seemed only to remind her of what she'd lost, and she grew to hate him for it. Divorce seemed the only way to detach herself from all the pain. But the pain hadn't lessened. Neither had the bitterness between them.

Rigid with cold, her fingers were hurting. She stopped what she was doing and stood up, and with the backs of her hands wiped the tears from her eyes. At the sound of footsteps on the path behind her she whipped round to see who it was.

It was Elliot. He was carrying a bunch of flowers and was on a level with *Robert Ashworth*. Seeing her, he paused, but then continued on and passed *Amy Riley* in one long stride. 'You okay?' was all he said.

She lowered her hands from her face and muttered, 'It's just the wind in my eyes. It's the cold.' As though to prove the point, she pulled on her gloves, hunched her shoulders and stamped her feet on the iron-hard ground.

He glanced up at the dreary leaden sky that was rapidly darkening as the afternoon drew to a cold and bitter dusk. 'It'll probably snow,' he remarked, as though they were merely strangers discussing the weather.

'You could be right,' she responded stiffly, brushing at her eyes again and hating him for being so damnably in control. She was furious that he was here, yet more furious that he had caught her crying and that he was being considerate enough to look away while she composed herself. She didn't want his consideration, not when it reminded her of the past when he'd been so good

at it: as a boss; as a lover; as a husband; and as a father. In the beginning it had been one of his attractions, at the end a torment.

She watched him bend down to place his flowers next to hers, glad at least that he was sticking to their agreement – white roses only. ‘Never red,’ she’d told him when they were preparing for Isaac’s funeral. ‘Red is too violent, too bloody, too sacrificial.’

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ she said. She turned to go.

He straightened up quickly. ‘No.’ He placed a hand on her arm. ‘Please don’t leave because of me. I’ll wait in the car while you . . .’

She looked at his hand on her coat sleeve, then at the heavy awkwardness in his face and at the darkness that was eclipsing the natural lightness of his watchful blue eyes. ‘While I what?’

‘While you do what you need to do.’

She shook her head and withdrew her arm. ‘The moment’s gone.’

‘I’m sorry, I should have timed it better.’

‘I shouldn’t let it worry you.’ She walked away.

He returned his gaze to the flowers he’d just laid on Isaac’s grave. Then, as if urged by some hidden voice, he called after her, ‘Ali, will you wait for me?’

She stopped moving but she didn’t look back at him. ‘Why?’

‘I’d like to talk to you.’

She began walking again.

‘Ali?’

‘I’ll be in my car.’

Chapter Two

With Elliot's Jaguar XK8 headlamps following behind her, Ali drove home in the dark wondering what it was he wanted to discuss.

While sitting in her car outside the post office – the ginger cat nowhere to be seen – she had had plenty of time to ponder on Elliot's request to talk to her: twenty minutes in all. When he finally emerged from the churchyard he had asked if she would have a drink with him. Looking at his pale face in the soft light cast from the glowing street-lamp behind him, she had thought that few men had ever looked more in need of a reviving snifter. But glancing at her watch and picturing the pair of them sitting miserable-faced in the empty public bar of the George and Dragon – the scene of many a happy drinking session when it had been their local – she had suggested he come back to her place.

Now she was regretting this rash act of bonhomie and not just because she couldn't recall the state of the bathroom, or the kitchen, or indeed the sitting room – had she cleared away the remains of last night's Chinese takeaway before crashing out on the sofa some time after two and sleeping the sleep of the chronically exhausted? – but because since she and Elliot had separated they had deliberately avoided the come-back-to-my-place scenario.

And with good reason.

Neither of them was equipped to treat one another with anything more cordial than coolness edged with disparagement and crabby fault-finding. It was, she

knew, their only way of coping with an impossible situation.

After she had moved out of their home in Great Budworth and had set in motion the wheels of their divorce, they had tried their best to behave in as civil a manner as they could manage. Not easy, given that they were both brimming with unresolved hurt and anger. However, by restricting their infrequent get-togethers to restaurants where it would have been unseemly to hurl abuse – or crockery – they pulled it off. For a more convincing performance, it was better if a third party was involved. Usually this was Elliot's father, Sam, who rarely objected to being caught in the occasional round of crossfire. 'White-flag time,' he would say, when she and Elliot paused for breath before reloading with fresh ammunition. 'Hold your fire.' Only once did they go too far, causing Sam to throw down his napkin and declare that he preferred his drama on the telly and would they kindly stop acting like a couple of spoilt brats. 'Now, behave yourselves, the pair of you, or I shall go home to a nice, quiet, digestibly sound plate of sausage, egg and chips.'

Indicating well in advance of the turning for Little Linton – which could be missed in the blink of an eye, and which concealed itself by merging into the environs of the sprawling neighbouring village of Holmes Chapel – Ali checked her rear-view mirror to make sure that Elliot was still following. He was and, like her, he was now indicating left.

'The boy's no fool,' she said aloud. She smiled, realising that she was relaxing . . . was beginning to be herself.

When Isaac had died she had promised herself that she would visit his grave only on the anniversary of his death. She didn't want to turn into one of those people who felt they were keeping a loved one alive by putting in a

regular show of graveside attendance. No amount of tombstone weeping was ever going to bring him back, so what was the point? Since the funeral this was the second appearance she had put in at the churchyard, and it had been no easier than the first. It had the effect of turning her into somebody, or something, that wasn't the real her. It brought out the worst in her. It made her angry, self-pitying, bitter, reproachful, but mostly desperate.

Desperate to forget.

Desperate to remember.

Just desperate.

Over breakfast that morning she had considered not visiting Isaac's grave, but how could she not go? What would Elliot and everyone else think of her? That not only in life had she failed her tiny, vulnerable son but in death too?

She indicated again, this time to the right. She checked that Elliot was still on the ball and, slowing, she turned into a narrow gap in the high hedge that lined the road. This was Mill Lane and ahead of her, about a hundred yards or so, was her new home. It was clearly visible in the night sky because it was so cleverly illuminated by a special security lighting system. Windmills weren't common in this part of the country and its seventy-foot-high, brick-built tower made an impressive sight. It no longer had any sails and its tall, looming shape, and white-painted dome-capped top, reminded Ali of a very large pepper-pot. It never failed to amuse her that she was now living in such a curio.

The nasty, unforgiving part of her, that petty bit that held tenaciously on to past grievances and kept her awake at night, hoped that Elliot was impressed. He didn't need to know that this beautifully converted windmill, set in splendid isolation, didn't belong to her, that she had only been renting it for the past month from

Owen, one of her expat clients now holed up in some God-awful place on the outskirts of Brussels.

She parked her Saab convertible in front of the small garage and, without waiting for Elliot, hurried to let herself in. If she could just make it up the first flight of stairs before his marathon-running legs sprinted after her, she'd be able to remove, or disguise, the worst of the potential squalor.

But she needn't have worried. As soon as she'd shouldered open the heavy studded door – it could be a devil at times, especially in damp weather – she saw that Lizzie, her priceless treasure inherited from Owen, had paid a call. Relieved, she knew that there wouldn't be so much as an atom of dust in the house, never mind a pair of knickers loitering with intent on the bathroom floor. The evidence that this was the case was on the oak table by the door where Lizzie had left a note. It read:

Out of Hoover bags and Sanilav. Chocolate cake in the tin by the kettle, a minute per slice in the microwave should do it, a pot of whipped cream in the fridge. Love Lizzie. P.S. Have strung up your Christmas cards like Owen used to . . . hope you approve.

'What an improbable place,' said Elliot, appearing in the doorway. 'How long have you lived here?'

'A few weeks,' she said. She slipped off her coat and hung it on the Edwardian coat-rack, which she could only just reach. It had been screwed to the wall by Owen who, like Elliot, was well over six foot. 'And most people wouldn't say improbable, they'd say amazing, interesting, wonderful. Spectacular, even. Close the door, you're letting the heat out.'

Elliot did as she said. He removed his coat and hung it on the hook next to where she'd placed hers. 'What was it used for originally?'

She caught the thin veneer of politeness that only just skimmed his words. 'Corn,' she answered, 'and please don't expect me to explain anything more detailed than that. I wouldn't know a grain bin from a hopper.' She opened a door and took him through to what was the largest room of the mill and where, once in a blue moon, she entertained. But it wasn't a room she cared for. It felt cold and formal. She put this down to the reclaimed slate floor of which Owen was so proud. Lizzie frequently described it as nothing but a bugger to clean.

Ignoring Elliot's look of interest in the thick beams that spanned the low ceiling, she led the way to the next floor via a wooden spiral staircase that creaked noisily. The first floor was Ali's favourite part of the mill and, in her opinion, the best bit of the conversion. It had been designed to provide a comfortable and homely open-plan area for cooking, eating and relaxing, and it was here, when she wasn't at work or in bed, that she spent the majority of her time. The kitchen area had been built by a friend of Owen's who was a joiner and the hand-made pitch pine units and cupboards and ornately carved shelves nestled against the dark-red-painted walls perfectly, so much so that the oddity of the curve was almost lost.

She watched Elliot duck one of the beams as he moved past her to the small-paned window above the sink. She left him to peer out into the darkness and went through to the raised sitting area where she switched on two large table lamps. Soft light bounced off the polished floor and enhanced the rufescent tones in the Oriental rug in front of the fire as well as the Venetian red of the walls. She bent down to the fire, glad once more that Lizzie had chosen today to come in. Four days' worth of accumulated ashes had been cleared away and the grate now contained a fresh supply of logs and kindling, along with a couple of fire-lighters; even the empty log basket had

been replenished from the woodpile beside the garage. When she stood up to replace the matches on the mantelpiece she noticed the Christmas cards that stretched from one brass picture light to another. If it weren't for their presence, nobody would have guessed from the look of the room that Christmas was only just round the corner.

'I'll get us a drink,' she said, when Elliot came through from the kitchen. 'Mind that step,' she added. 'It catches everybody. Glenlivet do you?'

He nodded and minded the step.

Chatty so-and-so, she thought, with her back to him as she rummaged in the booze cupboard next to the fridge. Pouring their drinks, she saw the tin by the kettle and remembered Lizzie's note. She prised off the lid and licked her lips. Lunch suddenly seemed an age away. She cut two large slices of chocolate cake, bunged them in the microwave, added a dollop of cream, loaded the plates and glasses on to a tray and took it through to the sitting area, where she found Elliot looking dangerously at home in one of the high-backed armchairs nearest the fire. It was an unnerving scene, too reminiscent of their married days.

Except, she told herself firmly, while lowering the tray on to the table in front of the sofa, if they were still married, he'd have his Gieves & Hawkes suit jacket off, his silk tie slung over the back of the chair and his shoes left just where she'd trip over them.

She pushed a plate towards him, handed him his single malt and wondered whether his silence meant that mentally he was being as rude about her as she was about him. Well, if he was, it was progress of sorts. At least they weren't verbally bashing the living daylights out of each other.

'Cheers,' she said, raising her glass and choosing to sit in the corner of the sofa that was furthest from Elliot. He

acknowledged her gesture and took a swallow of his whisky. He seemed quite happy to sit in the formidable silence, but Ali wasn't. 'So what did you want to talk about?' she asked, eager to be rid of him.

He looked uncomfortable, no longer at home, which, Ali noted, had the instant effect of ageing him. But Elliot wasn't old. Far from it. He was only forty-six and could pass for younger with his well-exercised body and light brown hair only faintly shot through with grey. But was that simply because she knew him so well? Wasn't it true that the people one knew best stayed the same age as one viewed oneself? When she looked in the mirror each morning, she didn't see a thirty-eight-year-old woman, she saw a girl of twenty-four. Funny that. Most people when asked how old they felt invariably responded with an age in their mid-twenties.

She watched him take another swallow of his Glenlivet before placing the glass with extreme care on the gold-edged coaster on the table. But still he didn't answer her. He reached for his plate of chocolate cake and began eating it. She knew that these were warning signs that, whatever it was he had to say, he was choosing his words with the utmost caution. It was the way he operated; he never blundered straight in. At work it had always been one of his greatest and most effectively employed weapons. She might not love him any more, but she sure as hell still respected his professional ability and knew as well as anyone who had ever worked with him that nothing clouded his reasoning or his judgement. He had the kind of mind that could play two simultaneous games of chess and win both.

But this wasn't a work situation and she could see that despite his best endeavours to look composed he was edgy. So what was it that he had come here to talk about?

Then it struck her.

He'd met somebody, hadn't he? That's why he was

here. Under the guise of wanting to be the one to break the news to her, he was really here to brag that he was getting married again. He probably wanted to rub her face in it. 'See,' he was saying beneath all that outward calm, 'I've moved on. I'm over Isaac. And I'm certainly over you.' The bloody cheek of him, sitting here drinking her expensive whisky and all the time he was trawling his mind to find the right words to boast that he'd been bonking some compliant underling at the office! Bloody, *bloody* cheek of him!

He looked up from his plate and fixed her with his serious blue eyes. 'This is very good. Did you make it yourself?'

'The hell I did. You know perfectly well that baking was never my forte. Now get on and tell me what it is you want to discuss.'

He narrowed his eyes, and she could see that he was figuring out if she'd rumbled him. He looked vaguely perturbed. 'What are you doing for Christmas?' he asked, lowering his gaze and concentrating on scraping up the last of his cake.

'Christmas?' she repeated, wrong-footed.

'Yes, that ritual we go through in the fourth week of December.'

The sarcasm in his voice was in danger of bringing out the crockery-throwing instinct in her. 'Thank you, Elliot, I'm well aware of when Christmas is. Divorce hasn't addled my brain, unlike somebody I could think of.' *Getting married again, hah!*

His gaze was back on her, and it was fierce. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Make of it what you will.'

He frowned. 'So *what* are you doing for Christmas?'

'I'm not sure. And I'm not sure that it's any of your business. Now, will you just get to the point and tell me what you wanted to say?'

He looked exasperated. She guessed that they were only seconds away from dispensing with the politeness forced upon them by the circumstances of the day. 'That's what I'm trying to do,' he said. His cool was definitely waning. There was even a hint of clenched teeth. 'Dad and I are going away for Christmas and . . . and, fools that we are, we wondered if you wanted to join us.'

Ali was jaw-droppingly stunned. She corralled what she could of her scattered wits and said, 'An invitation put so elegantly, I hardly know what to say.' It was true. She didn't. Nothing could have taken the wind out of her sails more succinctly. She got to her feet and went and put another log on the fire, playing for time by prodding it into place with a pair of long-handled brass tongs. An invitation to spend Christmas with her ex-husband was the last thing she'd expected to come out of the day.

She was almost touched.

Yet wholly suspicious.

Why had Elliot asked her this when he must have concluded that she would probably repeat last year's Christmas holiday and spend it with her parents down on Hayling Island? He wasn't to know that she had decided not to do that. In fact, the only people who knew that she was planning a home-alone Christmas this year were her parents. Mm . . . she thought, and suspecting that her mother had been at work, she put the tongs down on the hearth and said, 'Have my parents been in touch with you?'

'A brief letter with a Christmas card.'

She tutted. 'And Mum just happened to bring you up to date and mention that I was being a miserable killjoy and staying here on my own, is that it?'

Gone now was his edginess and fully reinstated was his customary detached calm. He crossed one of his long legs over the other. 'Something like that, yes.'

She went back to the sofa. 'And would I be right in thinking that it was Sam's idea for you to invite me to go away with you both?'

He nodded.

'It smacks of charity, Elliot, you realise that, don't you?'

He rolled his eyes heavenwards. 'And you realise that your pig-headedness deserves a damned good smacking.'

'Good, so you'll understand perfectly that it's nothing personal, it's merely my naturally cussed nature forcing me to decline the invitation – as well-meant as Sam intended it to be.'

'So if you won't be spending Christmas with your parents or us, what will you be doing?'

Was she imagining it, or was that the orchestral sound of relief just tuning up behind his words? She could almost feel sorry for him. How shocked he must have been when Sam put that little idea to him. 'I expect I shall eat and drink myself into an exquisite state of catatonic delight,' she answered. 'What will you be doing? A hotel break of candle-lit dinners and log fires interspersed with dancing the conga like last year?'

With what was perilously close to a smile on his face, he said, 'No, I'm weaning Dad off short hotel breaks. I'm taking him to Barbados.'

Ali raised an eyebrow. 'Lucky old Sam.'

'Sure you won't change your mind?'

'You know me better than that, Elliot.'