**Chapter One**

As Libby was carrying out the rubbish, the bag split. It was the final straw in a horrible week, during which her husband had been in a foul mood.

She was fighting to hold back the tears about the mess when she saw a stained and dirty letter among the rubbish . . . sticking out of an envelope addressed to her. It had been opened and thrown away without her even seeing it.

Her husband usually took out the rubbish, but he’d forgotten today, because he’d been too busy complaining about their four-year-old son’s untidiness. His need for perfect order and tidiness was beyond reason, an obsession that was hard to live with. And poor Ned did very well for a child.

Steven always picked up their mail from their PO Box and she wasn’t surprised that he’d opened her letter. It wasn’t the first time it had happened. But why had he thrown this one away without letting her see it? This seemed to be a new step in their deteriorating relationship. Or had he been doing that sort of thing all along?

Grimacing at the mess of coffee grounds and vegetable peelings which now decorated the letter, she took it out of the rubbish, wiped it and began to read.

*Dear Mrs Pulford*

*You appear not to have replied to our previous letter, although it was sent by registered post and was signed for by someone at your address.*

*In brief, your grandmother, Rose King, has died and left you a bequest of £20,000, plus some residual money which will come from a later sale of goods.*

*If you will be so kind as to contact us, we will explain the*

*conditions attached to your inheritance and arrange to have funds transferred to you once you have signed the agreement . . .*

Libby gasped and clapped one hand to her mouth. She hadn’t seen her grandmother since she was twelve, when her mother had remarried and moved from Lancashire to Bristol, but she had very fond memories of Grandma Rose and had hoped to see her again one day.

It was her stepfather who had kept her away from her straighttalking grandmother. He’d claimed the ‘old hag’ was teaching his stepdaughter to be cheeky and answer him back. And anyway, since Libby was adopted, Rose wasn’t really related to the child at all, so there was now no need for them to keep in touch.

There had been a few spectacular scenes, but in the end her mother had given in, as she always did, begging her daughter to let the matter drop and do nothing more to upset her stepfather.

Libby had written to Grandma Rose every year at Christmas, however, sending the letter secretly and getting the replies sent to various friends. But the replies had stopped after she got married and, when she asked, Steven had told her gently that her grandmother had died.

But that couldn’t have been true, if her grandmother had only just died. It was just another of Steven’s lies. But why had he said it? What harm could it have done for Libby to keep in touch?

She sighed. Were you fated to repeat the mistakes of your parents? Her mother’s second marriage had been unhappy – but not, she thought, as unhappy as her own. Libby had married young, desperate to escape her stepfather and enjoy a proper family life. It had been all right at first, not perfect, but mostly happy.

The turning point came when she got pregnant. Steven hadn’t planned for a child yet, so he grew angry when she suffered morning sickness and let the house get a little untidier than usual.

After Ned’s birth, things had continued to deteriorate. Steven had taken charge of her life so slowly she hadn’t understood for some time what he was doing to her. By then it was too late: she had no friends, little confidence in herself, no money of her own and a child dependent on her.

How to get away from him had been worrying Libby for some time. You couldn’t escape without money and he made sure she had none to spare.

She turned back to re-read the letter with a surge of hope, bright and shiny as a new coin. This was the answer to her problem. She could now afford to leave him.

At six o’clock Steven turned into the drive and Libby stiffened her spine. The small inheritance had given her the courage to act. Tonight she was going to tell him she wanted a divorce. She would try to do this openly first.

Steven didn’t beat her, so she wasn’t afraid of him physically, but she sometimes thought the way he treated her was worse than physical violence.

He sauntered into the kitchen from the garage, stopped to hang up his keys and then studied her face. ‘What’s wrong this time?’

So she blurted it out, couldn’t hold it in any longer, not now she was filled with hope for the future. ‘I want a divorce, Steven. I can’t go on like this.’

His face went expressionless, something he’d perfected over the years. ‘No.’

‘I mean it.’

‘I mean it, too. If you try to leave me, I’ll take Ned from you. They’ll give him to me, too, you know they will, because you don’t have any way of supporting a child and I do.’

She didn’t tell him she knew about the money. ‘I can get a job.’

‘Your skills are way out of date. You aren’t even au fait with modern technology.’

‘And whose fault is that? You won’t buy a new home computer.’

He had the gall to smile. ‘You don’t need one. You’d only play around on it.’

‘I could soon catch up with technology.’

‘Oh, and who’ll care for our dear little son while you’re working *and* studying? I, on the other hand, can easily afford to employ a nanny, and I have a history of stable employment, not to mention a very successful career.’

She tried one last time to make him see sense. ‘Steven, you know we’ve not been happy together for a while. Can’t we just call it quits and arrange an amicable divorce?’There’s no such thing. They always give far too big a share of the goods and chattels to the wife. I’m not handing my money over to you.’

‘I won’t ask for anything financially.’ She gestured to the house. ‘You can have all this. I just want Ned and my freedom.’

He moved closer, impaling her with those icy grey eyes. ‘But I don’t want *my* freedom. You’re very useful to me – most of the time, anyway – a credit to me in public, if not always satisfactory in private, and an excellent housekeeper, for all your other failings. Besides, your timing is terrible, as usual. I’m in line for another promotion and, though the company may not specify it, given the stupid rules for political correctness people have to comply with these days, it’s well known they prefer married men. Maybe we’ll think about a divorce in a year or two, once I’ve reached the top echelons . . . *if* you do as I ask in the meantime.’

He’d said that last year when she hinted at a divorce. She’d thought he meant it, because he’d moved into a separate bedroom that very night, but he’d laughed in her face after he got the promotion.

‘I mean it this time, Steven. I’m leaving you.’

There was the patter of footsteps and their son peeped into the kitchen, saw his father’s scowl and ran away again.

She pointed her finger at the retreating child. ‘See what you’ve done to him! Ned runs away from you.’

Steven flicked one hand in a carelessly dismissive gesture. ‘He’ll learn to obey me once I turn my attention to training him. He’s getting old enough to understand what I want now. Maybe I’ll start at the weekend.’

He pushed her roughly aside. ‘End of discussion. Now, get the dinner on the table. I’m hungry.’

‘Get it yourself.’ She turned to leave the kitchen, knowing it would infuriate him to be directly disobeyed. But what happened shocked her rigid.

Joss Atherton drove slowly home from the physiotherapist. Final session, thank goodness. They’d done as much as they could for him. He felt well again; better than he had for years. A crash during a car chase had put him and another police officer in hospital. The other guy had recovered fully, but Joss would always have a weakness in his left leg.

He’d been offered a desk job but couldn’t stand the thought of spending his life in an office, so had opted for compensation. He could live on it for years, but he was bored and couldn’t seem to settle on another direction in life.

He picked up the mail – one catalogue and two bills – and moved into the back room of the small terraced house he now owned outright. Ironic really. Fate had taken away with one hand and given with the other. His elderly neighbour, who had been his landlord for the past five years, ever since his divorce, had left him the little two-up two-down house when she died.

He’d rather have had her here still, because she’d been like a grandmother to him, but death was brutally final.

Just as he was making a cup of coffee, the phone rang. He picked it up and a voice he recognised instantly said, ‘Leon here.’

He was surprised that this man would call him now that he’d left the force. Leon was in charge of a government unit whose name said nothing and whose true purpose wasn’t known to most people, since it dealt with the practicalities of tidying up minor security problems. Even after working with him a couple of times, Joss had no idea what Leon’s surname was.

‘How are you feeling now, Joss?’

‘I feel great, but I’ve been left with a slight weakness in my left leg.’

‘Do you limp?’

‘No. They just don’t want me getting involved in hard physical work or sports that involve twisting and jumping. Why?’ ‘A genuine limp is rather hard to disguise.’ Joss frowned. Did this mean what he thought?

‘Would you be interested in some contract work with my unit?’

‘Very interested. What exactly did you have in mind?’

‘We never have specific ongoing roles. It’s whatever needs to be done at the time. A bit of this and that, escort duty and protection mainly. The work is only intermittent and we haven’t got a job for you at the moment, but we’ll get you down to London for a briefing soon and give you a few useful bits of

gadgetry.’

‘Great.’

 ‘I’ll be in touch soon.’

Joss beamed as he put down the phone. Who knew where this might lead? Something a damn sight more interesting than desk work, that was sure. He’d been right to take a settlement.

The following morning Libby stayed in bed, pretending to be asleep till Steven left for work. Thank goodness he had a long commute into London and had to set off at seven-thirty.

It was an effort to get out of bed and she winced as she stood upright. She suspected a cracked rib. He’d gone mad last night.

After one shocked look in the bathroom mirror, she avoided it, not wanting to see the huge bruise on her cheek and the puffy, black-rimmed eye. He’d always been able to use words to hurt, but he’d never hit her before or she would definitely have left him by now.

When she peeped into her son’s bedroom, Ned was pretending to be asleep, his cheeks tear-stained, as if he’d rubbed them with dirty hands. His teddy was clasped tightly in one arm, as always. Boo-Bear was his constant companion.

Last night’s quarrel had upset him and when Libby screamed involuntarily in pain, he’d tried to intervene, only to be shoved violently out of the way by his father.

‘Daddy’s gone to work. We can get up now,’ she said softly and watched her son open his beautiful blue eyes.

Why had Steven beaten her last night? She’d been prepared for verbal tirades, for more restrictions on her comings and goings, but not this. All she could think was that something had upset him badly at work. Maybe . . . maybe he wasn’t really in line for the next promotion. Or maybe a valuable account had gone to someone else. Who knew? He rarely told her any details of his working life.

But he was wrong about one thing: if she left him, she would have some money to start her off now, thanks to her grandmother. So surely the courts would look on her favourably when it came to custody?

This year Steven had installed a program on the elderly computer, which made sure she had only limited Internet and email access, and that he saw everything she wrote or viewed. It was a program for controlling children’s use of computers.

‘It’s that or nothing,’ he’d said when she protested.

Well, never mind looking backwards. She had to look forward now and leave here before the bruises faded and her ribs healed. She needed evidence against him and he’d certainly provided it. She’d have to see a doctor and get some photographs taken, however much she hated the thought of that.

In spite of the pain in her ribs, she smiled as cuddled her son. *You made a bad mistake last night, Steven Pulford. You won’t get custody of Ned now. And I will ask for my share of the house and family goods after all. I deserve it.*

From across the road, Mary Colby kept an eye on the house opposite. She hadn’t seen any signs of movement this morning so far, not even after Mr Pulford left. She was worried about the young woman who lived there after the sheer violence of the quarrel the previous night.

The Pulfords had quarrelled before – often – but not like that. They must have forgotten to close the windows and the sound of Libby screaming had carried clearly in the still night air. The poor young woman didn’t usually scream. Had he started thumping her?

She’d wondered whether to call the police, but the sounds had stopped abruptly, so she hadn’t.

When the quarrel began, her husband had scowled and retreated to the conservatory at the rear, from where he couldn’t hear the noise. He’d told her to stay out of it, but Mary couldn’t do that any longer. Not after what had happened to their daughter.

In the end she went out and crossed the street, needing to make sure Libby was all right this morning. When the door opened, she was shocked at the sight of the bruises on the younger woman’s face. ‘Oh, my dear! What has he done to you now?’

‘Stephen hit me, as you can see.’

‘I couldn’t help overhearing the quarrel last night. Is there anything at all I can do to help?’

‘I’m all right, thank you, Mrs Colby.’

‘You’re not all right, Libby, and you haven’t been for quite a while. I can’t help noticing things, and I really would like to help you. Why don’t you come across and have a cup of tea with me? We could . . . talk.’

 ‘I’m leaving him today, so I can’t spare the time, but thank you for offering. I shall miss you.’

‘I’m glad you’re leaving him. Best thing you can do. Excuse me asking, but do you have enough money?’

‘I’m going to pawn something to pay for the petrol.’ She looked down at her hand. ‘My wedding ring, perhaps. But I will have some money once I’ve claimed an inheritance. It couldn’t have come at a better time. I just have to get up to Rochdale to do that. Look, why don’t you come in for a moment? There is one thing you can do for me.’

‘Anything.’

Libby picked up the letter and gave it to Mary. ‘Read this first. Steven threw it away without telling me.’

Mary scanned the letter, surprised. ‘Why would he not tell you about a bequest that large?’

‘Because he wants to keep me dependent on him.’

Libby took the letter back. There was a phone number on it and an email address. She didn’t dare email because Steven would find out what she’d said. She couldn’t phone from home, either, because Steven had arranged for the phone only to be used for local calls, but perhaps . . .

‘Would you let me phone the lawyer from your house, please? Or on your mobile? I can’t phone long-distance, as you know, and anyway, I don’t want my husband to know where I’m going. He won’t know that I’ve seen this letter.’

‘Of course you can use our phone. Use our landline. Our mobile phone’s playing up a bit. Come across and do it now.’

‘Ned’s just finishing his breakfast. I’ll have to bring him with me.’

‘Why don’t you go across to my house and phone? It’s in the hall and my husband’s out, so you won’t be interrupted. I can keep an eye on Ned for you. And Libby . . . it doesn’t matter that it’s long distance or how many minutes you talk.’

As she went into Mary’s house, Libby again caught sight of her face in the mirror and her anger burned even higher. She’d never give Steven the chance to do that again.

She was on the phone for ten minutes and when she put it down, she swallowed hard. Here was her chance – if she dared to go through with it.

No, why was she thinking like that? Of course she’d dare do it.

When she got back, she told Mary about her call. ‘I managed to contact the lawyer. I’m going to see him before I do anything else. He’ll give me some money.’

‘That’s good.’ Her neighbour glanced at her face, hesitated, then said, ‘Look . . . tell me to mind my own business if you want, but would you like me to take some photos of the injuries? In case you need evidence.’

‘You’d do that?’

‘I don’t tell many people this, but my daughter nearly died as a result of a physically abusive relationship. I learned a lot about the things a woman needs to do to prove her case. And I’d be a good person to do this for you, because I overheard the quarrel and the screams, and I’ve heard quarrels before. I’m quite prepared to stand up and say that in court.’

Libby hugged Mary. ‘Thank you. You’ve been a wonderful neighbour. Where is your daughter now? She doesn’t visit you.’

‘She’s overseas. It’s safer. Her ex is out of jail now, released early for good conduct. Ha! He doesn’t know the meaning of the word. Tess and I Skype one another regularly, and Don and I are going to Australia to see her next year. She’s met a lovely man and has married again.’

‘I’m glad for her.’

‘I’m not just doing it because of Tess, but for your own sake as well, Libby. I help out at the local women’s refuge and I hear a lot of stories. Now, I’ll fetch my camera and in the meantime, you start packing. Presumably you’re driving?’

‘Yes. At least the car still belongs to me.’

‘It’s rather old.’

‘It runs better than you might expect.’

‘Never mind pawning your ring; let me lend you some money. You need to get on the road quickly.’

Libby hesitated. ‘Thank you. Just enough to buy petrol. Forty pounds, maybe.’

‘You’ll need more than that. No, I insist.’

‘All right. Thank you. It’ll be a loan, though. I should be able to pay you back quite quickly once I get Grandma Rose’s money.’

When Mary came back with her purse, Libby had dumped a pile of things she wanted to take on the kitchen table, including her albums of family photographs. She accepted the contents of Mary’s purse, several notes and even the coins, then hugged her neighbour. ‘Thank you.’

‘I wish it were more. And now we need to take those photos.’

Shame filled Libby. ‘Maybe we don’t need to bother now that

I have the inheritance.’

‘And maybe we do need to bother. It will only take five minutes.’

Libby felt humiliated to have to display the marks on her body, was glad when she could put her clothes on again. Mary didn’t comment, just asked her to move as necessary and took several photos.

‘Shall I bath Ned for you while you pack?’

‘Would you? You’re an angel.’

She saw them into the bathroom, got out the suitcases and began packing their clothes at top speed. ‘Libby, could you come here a minute?’ She went into the bathroom.

Mary pointed to Ned’s leg. ‘Did you know about this?’

There was a huge bruise on his thigh – no, two bruises. Libby stared at them in horror, shaking her head. She knelt by the bath.

‘How did you hurt yourself, darling?’

‘Daddy kicked me last night.’

Those twin bruises on Ned’s leg, shockingly blue against his tender child’s skin, stiffened Libby’s resolve as nothing else could have done. ‘We shall need a photo of that, too, Mary.’

‘I’ll go and get my camera from downstairs.’

She took the photo, then said briskly, ‘Get on with your packing. I’ll finish bathing Ned.’

‘I’ll put some clothes on the bed.’

When Mary came down with a sweet-smelling little boy, she hugged Libby. ‘I’ll get out of your hair now. Keep in touch. You know my email address and phone number. I’ll email you copies of the photos when you get online again.’

‘I can’t thank you enough.’

‘Get yourself and the child free of him. That’ll be thanks enough.’

Ned followed Libby round while she finished packed, silent but clinging.

Everything seemed very unreal. Was she really going to escape from Steven at last? What would he do about that? She didn’t let herself think about it. One thing at a time.

First, she had to get away and claim her inheritance.

As for the conditions attached to that, which the lawyer had summarised when she spoke to him, they suited her perfectly.

Libby left twenty minutes later, her car piled high with possessions thrown in anyhow.

She hadn’t eaten because she couldn’t face food, but she’d drunk two cups of strong coffee and that gave her plenty of energy as she wound through the country lanes till she got on to the M5 motorway.

No matter how she sat, though, her chest hurt. A cracked rib, she supposed. She tried to ignore it, telling herself: *This too shall pass.*

For Ned’s sake, she stopped every hour and a half at a motorway services, buying some painkillers for herself the first time. She used the facilities and let him run about a little before they got into the car again.

*I’m heading north*, she told herself each time she set off again, *heading home to Lancashire*. The mere thought of that lifted her spirits. She’d been born there and spent the happiest years of her life there.

She wished she could have seen Grandma Rose again. If she’d known Rose was still alive, she’d have got in touch once she was away from her stepfather. Walter was living in London now and she hoped she’d never see him again as long as she lived.

Of all the cruel things Steven had done, telling her that Grandma Rose was dead was one of his most unkind tricks. But this inheritance surely proved that her grandmother didn’t blame her for their estrangement. That thought was a comfort.

Unless something went wrong, Libby would arrive in Rochdale by about four o’clock and be able to visit the lawyer to find out the details of where the house was because Rose had moved a few years ago. She’d have to live there for six months in order to gain her inheritance. She’d have a living allowance during that time, more than adequate, and best of all she’d have peace and quiet.

Libby didn’t intend to tell Steven where she was and she hoped

he’d give her up as a bad job. She didn’t have much confidence in that happening, but you had to hope for the best, didn’t you?

Her husband would contact the lawyer, she was sure, but he wouldn’t know exactly where she was living, so maybe she had a chance of staying hidden there for the six months stipulated in the will.

Maybe.

Steven could be very determined when he wanted something and, with the Internet, it was much harder to stay hidden these days.

But, if necessary, she would go to the police for help. Or to a women’s refuge.

She glanced at her watch. Steven didn’t get home from work until six, often later, so he wouldn’t know yet that she’d left. She and Ned were perfectly safe for the moment, and that felt so good.

She wished she could be a fly on the wall when Steven realised what had happened. She hadn’t even left a note, just a house in chaos from her hasty packing.

He would hate that.