

Melanie Hudson

The
WEDDING CAKE
TREE

Sometimes, the one you love the most,
is the one you know the least ...



The Wedding Cake Tree

Melanie Hudson

Extract –First two chapters

*Finalist in The People's Novelist competition aired on
The Alan Titchmarsh Show on ITV1 in 2011*



Where heroes are like chocolate – irresistible!

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Part One

Devon, England

22 May

Chapter One

My mother died unexpectedly on the day when the last lingering rose of autumn lost its bloom. The letter I received from her solicitor shortly after the funeral remained in my work satchel for several months, and I would retrieve it, now and again, simply to confirm the unusual details in my mind.

The signatory on the letter, Mr Grimes, requested I make it my utmost priority to visit him at his office – situated on Barnstaple High Street – at ten o'clock in the morning on the 22nd of May the following year. Mum had requested that six months should lapse between her funeral and the reading of the will. Although I found the delay to be a peculiar request, I realised she had done me a favour. I had a stepfather, but no siblings and no extended family, and the thought of spending hours in Mum's study, trawling through her filing system in an attempt to terminate a lifetime of administration, filled me with dread. Content to postpone the inevitable, I returned to London after the funeral, rested my head on the shoulder of my old friend Paul, and threw myself back into my work.

Spring came around relatively quickly and I was glad when the 22nd of May arrived. I could once again retrieve the tatty letter from the bottom of my satchel and begin to plan my future.

I entered the solicitor's office exactly as a mahogany wall clock chimed ten. The room had a musty smell and the dust in the air was clearly visible as it filtered through dank vertical blinds. Grimes, dressed in a finely tailored pinstripe suit, finished with a striking yellow bow tie, was kneeling on his haunches beside a desk. He was feeding a lettuce leaf to a tortoise whose makeshift home was a cardboard box that had once contained Spanish oranges. If pushed I would have guessed he was the wrong side of forty, but the right side of a funeral policy, and he had the face of a sailor – tanned by the wind, taut and dry.

He took the tortoise from the box and placed it on the threadbare carpet beside him, then stood, and turned to offer me a broad, welcoming smile. At a speed and style perfectly in harmony with the reptile, Grimes crossed the room and shook my hand.

'A pleasure to finally meet you,' he said, heartily. 'You don't mind if Terry hangs around for the meeting?'

I glanced around.

'Terry?'

Grimes looked towards the tortoise, his expression full of affectionate pride. Terry looked up and I could have sworn I saw the creature wink.

'My trusty tortoise! You'll see that Terry is particularly useful in meetings'—Grimes leaned towards me with a knowing nod—'few are wiser than tortoises – except perhaps leatherback turtles – but they're not so easy to keep in a small office. Don't you agree, Miss Buchanan?'

I waited for him to laugh, but he didn't. 'Er, yes ...?'

Grimes returned to take a seat behind the desk, which is when I noticed he wasn't wearing socks or shoes. I also noticed he had only four toes to share between two feet. Trying not to stare, while feeling as though I had somehow stepped into a surreal dream, I took his cue to take a seat across the desk from him, put my satchel on the floor beside my chair (being careful to avoid the tortoise) and we got down to business.

Grimes took a buff file out of the drawer and placed it on the desk in front of him. Assuming the manner of a man about to discuss serious business, he perched his elbows on the desk, crossed his hands, placed them under his chin, and sat in a moment of silence while he gathered his thoughts. Responding in kind, I sat up straight in the chair and waited for him to begin.

'A few formalities to get out of the way first,' he said, looking up with a smile.

'Just to confirm, you are Grace Buchanan of'—he looked to his notes to confirm the details—'57a Gloucester Court, Twickenham?'

Another smile.

'Yes, I am.'

'You'll remember I asked you to bring your passport as proof of ID. I take it you have it with you?

'Yes'—I reached for my bag—'Do you want it now?'

'No, no,' he said with a wave of his hand, 'I'll take a copy later.' He opened the file. 'I'm going to explain to you the instructions regarding the last will and testament of Mrs Frances Heywood of St Christopher's Cottage, Exmoor, Devon. You will note,' he continued, 'that I said the instructions *regarding* the will – rather than reading you the will directly.'

I gazed at him confused and – trying to hide the frustration in my voice – said, 'My mother's name was Rosamund Buchanan, Mr Grimes, *not* Frances Heywood.'

'Buchanan. Ah, I thought there may be some discrepancy here and wondered how much you knew ...'

He picked up a pen and swivelled it around with his fingers.

'Your mother changed her name some years ago when she moved to Devon. The reason for this will become clear to you later, Grace, but she did not go through the usual legal proceedings to change her name. So, for the purposes of her will, her legal name is Frances Heywood.'

I tried to interrupt but he held up a hand to stop me.

'I'm going to fire a large quantity of information your way and I suspect it will come as a shock. I suggest you let me put all of the information I have forward, and then there will be time for questions later.'

Surprised by his sudden firmness of manner I let him continue. If the discovery of my mother's real name was a revelation, it was nothing compared to what I was about to hear.

'First of all, I should state that you are the sole beneficiary of your mother's estate.'

That was no surprise.

'Secondly, I have a letter for you from your mother.'

That *was* a surprise.

He glanced at the file.

'I'm afraid I cannot inform you of the details of your mother's will at present because she left quite clear instructions regarding the actions you must carry out if you are to meet the conditions of the will and, thereafter, inherit the estate. I also cannot disclose exact details of the estate: that will be revealed to you at ... well, at the end.'

Too dumbfounded to respond, I let him continue with his instructions.

'She left for you a detailed list of actions,' he said, placing the word *actions* in imaginary quotation marks with his index fingers, 'that you must carry out, and provide *proof* you have carried out, in order to satisfy the qualification requirements to eventually inherit.'

'Mr Grimes,' I interjected forcefully, 'I appreciate you're doing your job, but please can you tell me, in basic English, what on earth you're talking about? What do you mean, *eventually* inherit?'

He removed his glasses. Despite his precise manner I could see by the way his eyebrows furrowed and the way in which he rubbed his fingers along his forehead that he was finding the meeting stressful.

'Your mother was quite a special lady ...'

He paused – presumably waiting for me to agree with him – but I said nothing, so he continued.

'I visited her at the cottage not long after she discovered her illness was terminal.'

I felt my eyes moisten; the word *terminal* was a harsh reminder that she was dead.

'She explained to me that she wanted you to learn a little more about her as a person, the person she was prior to your birth that is, before you can take your inheritance. I'm not sure how much you know about your mother's life?'

He said the last more as a question than a statement, but again I said nothing.

'She discovered she was pregnant with you just after she turned thirty and decided it would be for

the best if she had a complete change of lifestyle. She decided to base herself in Devon, set up at St Christopher's, and you know the rest from that point on. Towards the end of her life, she began to consider the fact that she had given you little information, if any, regarding any extended family you may have, or any clue at all regarding her previous career—'

Grimes came to an unexpected halt in his dialogue. He bent down to his left side, picked up the tortoise and placed it on the desk so that the head of the tortoise was facing me. It was at that precise moment I realised the adage that pets and owners share facial characteristics was absolutely true. He took a lettuce leaf from his top drawer and handed it to me, smiling. Thinking it unlikely to be a snack for my own consumption, I fed it to the tortoise.

'She realised that her professional life, the life she led before you were conceived,' he continued, settling back into his chair, 'was an enormous part of who she was. I suppose she felt your image of her was incomplete. She wanted to fill in all the gaps in your understanding. For that to happen she wanted you to go on a journey to places that held special significance in her life, and that is what you must do, Grace, if you wish to inherit her estate. There are only five destinations,' he added, as if this was a bonus, 'and you will read a letter from her at each location. She will explain to you, through the course of the letters, all she feels you need to know. Oh, and she wanted you to scatter a little of her ashes at each destination. Does that make it any clearer?'

My face must have held an expression of complete shock. I raised myself up, leaned forwards across the desk and met Terry's fixed, determined glare, which was surprisingly disconcerting.

'Are you telling me that my mother actually wanted me to skip about the country and scatter her ashes in order to qualify for my own inheritance?'

'Yes, that is exactly what I'm saying ... you'll be setting off today in fact.'

What!

'Today? How long for?'

'Ten days.' Grimes' voice remained irritatingly monotone.

'*Ten days?*' I jumped to my feet, exasperated. Once again, the tortoise stopped eating and glowered at me. I lowered myself back into the chair. 'But that's absolutely ludicrous,' I said in a quieter voice, not wanting to offend the animal further. 'I can't possibly drop everything with no notice. Mum must have been insane – *you* must be insane!'

Grimes remained calm.

'No, she was of sound mind, if not body, and I can testify to that. Again, she simply wanted to put you in the picture regarding the life she led prior to your birth.'

Simply?

'Mr Grimes, you're making it sound as though I didn't know my own mother; although, to be fair, it seems I didn't even know her name. What I do know is, she gave me a very special childhood, in a very special place, and I don't see why I need to know any more information. Children don't need to know every little detail about their parents, I'm not sure I even *want* to know. Okay, so she changed her name, big deal. She already told me all I needed to know years ago, that she originated from Yorkshire, farmers I think, it had been a happy childhood, but like me, she was an only child. She lost her parents when she was in her early thirties. Yes, I queried the whereabouts of my father, but she hadn't wanted to discuss it and I didn't delve. I don't want to delve Mr Grimes. I just want to keep the memories I have and leave it at that. I don't understand why Mum is passing all this on to me now. Why on earth did she wait until she was bloody well dead to start digging up the past? If all this information is so damn important, why didn't she tell me to my face? This is completely out of character for her.'

My voice began to break towards the end of my speech. He waited for me to continue and I tried to regain my calm.

'Look, no offence,' I said, lifting the tortoise and turning it away from the edge of the desk like a clockwork toy, 'but I'm going to have to seek separate legal advice. There is absolutely no way I'm

going to be a part of this folly. I haven't the time to go. I just want to inherit my mother's cottage – it's all I've ever wanted,' I added quietly. 'Maybe her illness altered her towards the end, I'm sure she meant ...' He interrupted me by holding up his hand and opening the file that lay previously untouched in front of him. He removed a small pile of cream A4 envelopes that were bound together by a red ribbon.

'Please try to understand; I am simply passing on to you your own mother's wishes.' He handed me the envelope from the top of the pile, but asked me to wait for a second before opening it.

'Rosamund mentioned you're a photographer?' he said, leaning back into his chair.

'Yes,' I said vaguely, fingering the letter. I wasn't sure how I felt about a letter from a dead person, even Mum.

'You photograph celebrities, film stars and so on? Must be very exciting.'

I looked up.

'No, not really.' I knew where he was going with this.

'I think your mother felt your artistic talents were somewhat wasted on that kind of photography. I understand you were trained in the opera at the London Academy of Music?'

'Briefly, yes.'

He sighed, defeated.

'Look, I'll leave you to read the letter and you will, no doubt, see what I'm trying, albeit fairly badly, to say.'

He stood, took the tortoise and placed it back in its pen, then returned to touch my arm in a kind gesture.

'I'll make you a coffee.'

Chapter Two

Hello Grace, my love.

I have started this letter several times but keep crossing things out. I decide to write something else, but then the page is a mess and now there is a significant pile of scrunched up paper by the bin. So this time, I'm just going to keep on writing – if only for the sake of a small Scottish forest.

First of all, please don't read this letter as a missive from the grave. Yes, the fact that you are reading it means that I'm dead and gone, but right now, as I'm writing, I'm sitting in the garden room. It's July. The garden looks beautiful, Grace. The 'Bishop' is such a good doer this year but I do fear for rosa 'Alan Titchmarsh', I'm afraid he's lost his bloom, but hopefully you will see him make a remarkable comeback next spring. Anyway, perhaps you could see it as a long distance phone call, but with quite a long pause between what is said and when it is heard.

I know you will be upset that I didn't tell you the whole truth about my illness. When I told you about the cancer several months ago I kept the details deliberately vague and fairly positive. What I didn't tell you was the cancer was diagnosed late (you know I don't like to go to the doctors) and it is aggressive. The chemotherapy and radiotherapy has achieved very little. Last month, I was given the news that there is nothing more to be done: it's bloody horrible. I cry, then I'm angry and frightened, and then I'm melancholic. I was always going to have to bugger off eventually, but I confess another ten years would have done me fine. It would have been nice, at least, to see the wedding cake tree put on another layer.

I didn't have the heart to tell you the severity of the prognosis for several reasons: firstly, I didn't want to believe it myself, and decided to fill my head with positive thoughts (no bad thing), but I was blocking out the reality of what I knew in my heart would be the eventual outcome. Secondly, if I told you my time left was limited, then you would have rushed up the motorway like a mad woman every week and I simply haven't wanted to burden you with the stress of it all. I'm desperate to see you, of course, but what if you had a car accident because you were overly tired? Also, you have your own life to live, and you need to live it; every single day is precious.

And so, as difficult as it is, I've decided to let the next few months run their course. I'm not expected to make it as far through the year as Christmas and I'm hoping that, on the odd occasion you pop home during the coming months, I can pass myself off as having a bad day. If you turn up unannounced and guess the truth, or if you decide to visit during the final weeks, then my plan will have been scuppered.

It all boils down to the fact that I will not put you through the horror of watching me die. We have a lifetime of wonderful memories and that is what I want you to hold on to. I suppose I feel any time spent with you in the future would be tinged with unbearable sorrow. Saying goodbye each time would be soul-destroying – not knowing if it was to be the last. And so I shall simply disappear from your life, and I hope I will have saved you from several agonising months of unnecessary grief; when you have a child of your own, perhaps you will understand.

Right. Enough self-indulgence. Down to business. Unless Grimes has cocked up my instructions you will have heard by now that my name is really Frances Heywood. You will find out later why I had to change it. That brings me to another point Grace: don't try to jump ahead of yourself with the information passed to you over the next ten days or so – relax and try to enjoy it. Anyhow, continue through your life thinking of me as Rosamund; it's lovely to choose your own name, especially when you name yourself after your favourite flower ... 'rosa mundi'.

By now you must be wondering what on earth I am blithering on about and getting pretty cross. Well, I want you to go on a little trip – see it as a holiday. In fact, here is an idea, see it as the holiday I hinted we take earlier this year but you were too busy with work to go.

There's so much about my life you are not aware of and I realise there is a great deal I want you to know ... in fact, need you to know. I always thought there would be time to tell you – eventually – in the right way. Well, life has conspired against me, so I have concocted a plan that allows me to tell you all the things I want you to know, and show you all the places I want you to see, without actually being there with you. I also want you to scatter me as you go. I have fallen in love with the notion of having a little piece of me scattered in every place that has been significant in my life. I hope if I reveal my previous life to you in stages – if you walk in my footsteps, so to speak – then you might understand why I made some of the decisions I made, and why I kept you in the dark regarding my life before you were born.

Anyway, I'm afraid I must insist that you take the next ten days off work. Being freelance, this shouldn't be a problem. Don't come up with some excuse about a 'tip off' or a celebrity wedding. I'm sorry to have added the caveat that the will cannot be finalised until you have carried out my wishes. It is blackmail of sorts I know, but I only do this as I'm certain it's the right thing for you to do now – more certain than I have been of anything. I could have called you back to Devon, sat you down at the kitchen table, and told you everything, but my mind is made up that this is the best course of action – for everyone.

I'm going to take you to places that will set your heart on fire, and hopefully rekindle your creative ardour in the process. You travel the world photographing famous people, living their peculiar lives with them, but what of your own life? I have worried for some time now that you are no longer seeing the beauty around you in this wonderful country of ours – if you took beautiful photos it would be different, but you don't. I ought to mention that you won't be travelling alone, that would be dreadful. To that end, I've asked a good friend of mine – Alasdair – to go with you. He's a Royal Marine and completely dependable. I should also add that I've been worried about him for some time, as I believe him to be on the brink of exhaustion. Put it this way, he needs a holiday more than you can possibly imagine, so please don't fob him off. I know you hate company to be forced on you but just this once, go with it. Oh, one last thing, while on your travels I wonder if you might placate me and perhaps rethink sharing your beautiful voice in some capacity. You have a wonderful gift, try not to waste it, love. Grimes will fill in the rest of the details. Be excited! I wish I was setting off on an adventure at thirty-one.

Well, where did the time go? Robin keeps staring at me from the bird table through the open window. I think he wants me to dig up some worms just as I have always done. It has just this second struck me as I gaze out into the garden that I will die in the autumn or winter; it would have broken my heart to have gone in the spring, just as new life begins once more. That's why I want you to scatter me in May, when I can be part of the newness of it all, one more time.

*All my love,
Mum
X*

I read the letter once more, and traced my fingers over the words 'Hello Grace' just as the first teardrop landed onto the paper. There was no doubting it was written in Mum's precise hand, and who else could nag so successfully from the grave?

In silent reverie I sat nursing the coffee – lukewarm by then – that Grimes had given me. Before reading the letter, I had been determined to storm out of the office, hire another solicitor, and contest the will. But, reading her words made me believe she was there again, albeit for a fleeting second. Typical Mum; even in death she couldn't resist nagging.

Grimes reappeared and sat down at the desk. No doubt realising I needed to be rescued from my sorrowful inner monologue, he passed me a box of tissues and I managed to dab the rim of my lashes to stem the flow.

'So, Grace,' he said, 'what comes next is up to you. You know where you stand regarding the will and your mother's request. What are you going to do?'

Despite the clarity of the letter, I was unsure whether or not I should adhere to Mum's request. Did I really want to discover new things about her? Although I wanted to inherit my childhood home, I didn't particularly care about any money. But there was the matter of the ashes. No matter what, I couldn't refuse that request. It was her trump card, and I had to smile at the image of Mum as she thought up that little ruse. She was right about the tip-off though, I did have a lucrative shoot arranged for the following day.

I gazed around the tatty, ramshackle room, looked down at Terry (who seemed to shrug, as if to say, 'What have you got to lose?') and sighed.

'Give me your instructions, Mr Grimes. It looks like I'm going on a journey.'

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