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BRENDA JOYCE



House of Dreams

A Novel

BRENDA
JOYCE

*H*OUSE
OF
DREAMS

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*This book is dedicated to
Jennifer Enderlin and Cheryl Nesbit,
two of my best friends,
without whom it would not have been possible.
Much love and appreciation!*

PART ONE

THE SECRET

ONE

BELFORD HOUSE, EAST SUSSEX—THE PRESENT

Just where the hell was her sister?

Cass had spent most of her life in her sister's shadow—Tracey was one of the most beautiful and glamorous women Cass knew—and unfortunately, she had a tendency to run late. Cass was a wreck. Surely today, of all days, Tracey could be on time. Just this once.

In another two hours the house would be filled with Tracey's guests. With Forbes 400 types, their fashion-plate wives, the odd Silicon Valley millionaire, celebrities, dignitaries, the press, two Japanese bankers, a couple of rock stars, an Israeli shipping tycoon, an ambassador, and a sprinkling of dukes, duchesses, and earls. The very thought caused Cass's heart to lurch unpleasantly.

But mostly, Tracey should be on time because she hadn't seen her own daughter in three months even if they did speak on the phone.

Cass stood nervously by the window, staring past the crisply white shell drive and across the green rolling hills of the East Sussex countryside. She was perspiring. Dairy cows dotted the fields spanning the distance between the house and the small village of Belford, which she could just make out as a jumble of pale stone rooftops. The day was gray, the threat of rain imminent, reducing visibility. Even so, she could see the nearest town—Romney, famous for its tourist attraction, an intact castle dating back five full centuries—as it sat on one of the surrounding hills. Cass could also see a thin strip of highway meandering through the countryside. No car was in sight.

"Where's Mother? Why isn't she here yet?" A small voice asked.

Cass's stomach was in knots as she turned to face her seven-year-old niece. "Your mom will be here at any moment, I'm sure of it," she lied. And she thought, *Please, Trace. For Alyssa, for me, just get here!*

Alyssa sat on her pristine pink and white bed, against numerous fluffy pillows, all beautifully embroidered and mostly pink, white, and red like the bedroom, wearing her newest clothes—a short, pale blue dress from Harrods, navy blue stockings, and chunky black suede shoes. Her raven black hair was pulled back with a tortoiseshell barrette, and her face was scrubbed and glowing. She was so pretty, but nothing like her mother—not in any way. "She was supposed to arrive an hour ago," Alyssa said glumly. "What if she doesn't come?"

Cass started and rushed to her niece, who had just verbalized Cass's own worst fears. "She is coming, sweetie. You can bet on that. This is Tracey's black-tie supper, even if Aunt Catherine is hosting the event. You know that. She *has* to show up."

Alyssa nodded, but did not seem convinced.

Cass knew that her younger sister was wild and irresponsible, but she wasn't that wild, or that irresponsible. The evening affair was on account of Tracey's new job with Sotheby's in London. The moment Tracey had asked Catherine if she could hold an event in order to display a very rare necklace to three dozen potential buyers—the crème de la crème of international society—Catherine had agreed. Their aunt rarely refused either one of her nieces. Cass's temples began to throb dully. Tracey would show up—wouldn't she?

Cass could not imagine helping Aunt Catherine to host this event. She was not a jet-setter like her sister. She did not frequent five-star hotels, fly first class, juggle playboys and polo players, or even own more than a single evening gown. She did not go to the weddings of supermodels. Cass's last boyfriend had been a journalist, not a rock star.

"Some people just can't help being late," Cass finally said, forcing a lightness into her tone that she did not feel. "It's a terrible habit," she added. And that much was true. Cass knew that Tracey did not mean to keep people waiting. It just happened. It was less about self-absorption than it was about disorganization and time management. No one lived life the way her sister did.

Still, Cass had been filled with a growing sense of dread all that day. The evening—or her sister's visit—was going to be a disaster. Cass had never felt more certain of anything, even if she could not pinpoint why.

Cass just hoped the premonition of disaster didn't have to do with her filling in for Tracey.

"She's so busy now with her new job," Alyssa said, her dark eyes lowered, her thick black lashes fanning out on her alabaster cheeks. She was the spitting image of her rock-star father, Rick Tennant, who was currently on a world tour and somewhere in the Far East.

Cass hoped that was so. Sotheby's seemed like the perfect job for her sister—she could mingle with the rich and famous, while her employers benefited from her celebrity status and her celebrity associations. Since her marriage, and even more so since her divorce, Tracey had been a fixture on the society pages of most major magazines.

Tracey's marriage to Rick had been over in less than three years. Cass regretted, for Alyssa's sake, that it hadn't lasted. But Alyssa was the best thing that had ever happened to her, and she loved her as if she were her own daughter. In fact, sometimes she forgot that if Tracey wanted to, she could saunter into their lives and whisk Alyssa away without even an explanation. Which, of course, Cass prayed she would never do.

"I hear a car," Alyssa cried, leaping up, her entire face brightening.

Cass was flooded with relief. Alyssa ran to the window, her black hair swinging like a cape behind her, while Cass hugged herself, sighing, because she would not have to play hostess and Alyssa would see her mother after what had become an interminable separation—from a little girl's point of view.

"It's not her," Alyssa said, her tone flat.

Cass stood, her heart sinking, eyes wide. "What?" Where was Tracey!

Alyssa seemed on the verge of tears. Cass took one look at her pinched white face and she reached for her hand. "She's running late. Should we take a walk? It might help pass the time," Cass said.

"I'd rather wait here. I don't want to miss her," Alyssa said with a stubborn tilt to her chin.

Before Cass could suggest another diversion, there was a soft knock on the door and Aunt Catherine appeared, holding a silver tray in her hands. Her gaze instantly connected with Cass's, before she entered the room and smiled at Alyssa. "Scones and tea, my dear. You must be famished, Alyssa. You haven't had a bite to eat all day."

Alyssa folded her arms tightly across her chest. "Why does she have to be so late? Doesn't she miss me, too?"

Catherine slowly set the tray down on the Chippendale table in front of another set of windows, one graced by two pink velvet chairs.

Although seventy, Cass's aunt was a tall, statuesque woman who looked no older than fifty. Her reddish hair was shoulder length and worn in a chignon, and she remained extremely handsome, a perpetual light in her blue eyes. Even clad simply in gray trousers, a white blouse, and a darker cardigan, she had the carriage of a very noble, self-assured, and self-sufficient woman. Cass admired her greatly, for her character, her generosity, and the many good deeds she had dedicated her life to. "Of course she does. Our guests will be arriving at seven, and knowing your mother, who needs a good hour or two to dress for this kind of event, she will have to arrive at any moment," Catherine said, smiling.

Alyssa wandered over to the table and stared at the scones. She had been so excited that morning she had gotten sick after breakfast, and Cass had let her stay home from the exclusive all-girls school she attended.

Cass went to her. "Of course she misses you, sweetie. She's your mother. No one is more special to her, believe me. But working for Sotheby's can't be easy; they send her all over the world. I think she was in Madrid just a few days ago. Your mom is probably very tired, sweetie—and really nervous about tonight."

Alyssa looked her right in the eye. "She was in *Vogue* again. With a new man. Does she have another boyfriend?"

Cass blinked. She'd obviously missed that last issue. Actually, she avoided the kinds of magazines and rags her sister usually appeared in. Cass wasn't jealous. It was just oddly hurtful to see her sister on those pages so often, surrounded by household names, looking so perfect. "I don't know," Cass said after a pause, truthfully. Tracey hadn't mentioned a new lover to Cass.

Catherine rubbed her thin back. "Do not fret, dear. Your mother will be here at any moment, and then you can ask her yourself about any new man that might be in her life."

Alyssa bit her lip, looking perilously close to tears.

Catherine said, brightly, "I think everyone in this room is exhausted. I do mean, we have had staff preparing for this evening for two days, not to mention the security from Sotheby's to make sure that ruby necklace is not stolen by some cat thief—those men swarming all over the grounds! Let's take some tea. We'll all feel better, and by the time we're done, I have not a doubt Tracey will be sailing through that doorway."

Alyssa nodded, lips pursed, sitting down in one of the pink velvet chairs, swinging her chunky platform shoes back and forth. As she

reached for a scone, Catherine pouring the tea, Cass said, "I'm going to go downstairs and take a breath of air, if you two don't mind."

"I think you should take a long hot soak, Cassandra, and spend some time primping before the mirror for this evening's affair," Catherine said gently.

Cass caught the briefest glimpse of her own reflection in the mirror as she started and turned back to face her aunt. She was wearing not one stitch of makeup, and the Barnard sweatshirt she'd thrown on that morning was as old and faded as her jeans. Her honey blond hair was shoulder length and pulled into a ponytail. Like her aunt, she had strong, even features and good skin. Unlike her aunt, she did not turn heads.

And she knew exactly what her aunt meant—she should take extra care to dress up because one never knew whom one might meet.

"*Moi?* Primp? Would you care to define that for me?" Cass had to smile.

Alyssa even giggled. "I'll help Aunt Cass get dressed," she said. "She can use my lipstick. It would look great on you, Aunt Cass."

Before Cass could accept or decline, Catherine said, "You are far too young to own, much less wear, lipstick, Alyssa." Her tone was stern.

"Actually," Cass cut in, "I thought I'd go over the notes I made last night. I was so tired I feel asleep at my desk, and I want to make sure I can decipher my scrawl."

Catherine just looked at her, her expression a mixture of resignation, reproval, and respect.

Cass fled the room before they could get into an argument about Cass's single-minded focus on her career as the author of historical novels—she'd had four works published in the past six years—and her consequent, serious lack of a personal life—or even the mere pursuit of one.

Cass hurried downstairs in her rubber-soled loafers. They had been over the old tired argument a dozen times—she should get out more, date more, she should be married, she should have her own kids. Catherine just didn't understand. Taking care of Alyssa and her work was just about all she could handle. There was only so much time in every day.

A housemaid smiled at her as she hurried past, down a dim hall with stone floors, her mind torn between thoughts of Tracey's arrival and her departure, the desire to protect Alyssa from all of life's disappointments, both large and small, and her own inner voice, which agreed

with her aunt entirely. Five years ago, when she had packed up her life and moved with Alyssa from her small apartment in New York City to Belford House, she'd given up her pursuit of a personal life and hadn't dwelled much on it since. There had been no choice to make. Alyssa had needed her from the day she was born, and the moment Tracey and Rick had decided to divorce, it had been clear to Cass that if she didn't raise the small child, no one else would. She hadn't had the means to be a single mother, and moving in with her aunt had been the perfect solution. There were no regrets.

Cass stepped through a pair of doors that opened on one side of her aunt's flower gardens, the driveway to her left and just within the range of her peripheral vision. She swung her head around and hesitated, noticing a black Citroen in the driveway. Her sister drove an Aston Martin. Or rather, her driver did. Tracey had made out very handsomely in her divorce settlement.

It was too early for any guests to have arrived, and just as Cass was pondering that notion, she realized that someone was standing in the gardens on her right, his back to her. For one moment she wondered if he was one of the security men from Sotheby's. He was tall, dark haired, and well dressed in tan trousers and a black sport jacket. The tan trousers gave him away as something other than security, because the security men wore all black. Cass approached, clearing her throat, about to ask him if he needed help—or was even in the right place.

He turned.

Cass felt a flash of recognition even before his eyes met hers. She stumbled, for one instant lost in confusion.

Just what in God's name was Antonio de la Barca doing in her aunt's flower gardens? She did not know him personally, but he was the kind of man a woman would never forget, not having met him even once. Not that they had actually, really met. He was a professor of medieval studies, of international renown, tenured in Madrid, and Cass had attended a lecture series that he had given at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City seven years ago. She recalled the series so well: *Medieval Myth, Fact or Fantasy, a Mirror to Our World*. She had been researching her third novel at the time, and his course had been just after Alyssa's birth but before her sister's quickie divorce.

"Señora, I see I have startled you. Please, forgive me," he said, his smile slight. He had an intriguing Latin accent.

Cass tried to recover her composure. "I wasn't expecting anyone to be out here," she managed, her heart racing madly. This was absurd.

Why was she so surprised to see him? Obviously he must be there to attend the dinner party. It was now clicking in her brain that the necklace that was the highlight of Sotheby's next auction was a period piece, dating back to the sixteenth century. Article after article had been written about the stunning find. Perhaps he had even appraised its historical value.

"A servant assured me that I could take a walk in the gardens without disturbing anyone, but I see I have disturbed you. Again, my sincerest apologies." He was wearing tortoiseshell eyeglasses, which hardly detracted from his strong, attractive Spanish features. His gaze was at once assured and questioning.

Cass knew she was blushing. He did not seem to remember her, but of course, he would not. Even if she had asked dozens of questions after each and every lecture. Her gaze slid to his hands, but they were tucked in the pockets of his trousers. He'd worn a wedding ring seven years ago, and the gossip among all of the women attending the lectures had run rampant, because supposedly his wife had simply disappeared without a trace the year before. Cass recalled the ceaseless speculation—was it even true? Had she run away? Or had some unspeakable horror befallen her? Of course, no one had had any answers. But it had certainly made him even more of a romantic figure in the eyes of the women attending the lecture series. Just about every woman there had been madly in love with him.

Cass included.

"I'm being a terrible hostess," Cass finally said, finding her tongue. "You must be here for the evening's dinner party. My aunt is Catherine Belford. I'm Cassandra de Warenne."

For one moment he studied her, not accepting her hand. Cass wondered if she had said something wrong, and then the moment passed—her hand was in his grip, which was firm and cool, and he bowed ever so slightly. "You're American?" he asked with some surprise.

Her accent was a giveaway. "My mother was American, and actually I was born in the States, but when she died, my aunt took us in. I was eleven at the time. I've spent so much time here, I consider myself at least half British." Cass knew she was speaking in a nervous rush.

He removed his eyeglasses, tucking them into the interior breast pocket of his impeccably tailored navy blue sport jacket. "You went to Barnard?"

Cass suddenly realized, with no small amount of horror, how she was dressed. Unfortunately, she could feel her color increase. "Yes. I

graduated ten years ago," she said. "I took a year off, then went back for my master's."

"I've lectured several times at Columbia," he said with a smile. "I know both colleges well. They are fine schools."

Cass shoved her hands, which were damp, into the pockets of her jeans. Did she sound like an idiot? Or a blushing schoolgirl? "Actually, I attended your lecture series at the Met a few years ago."

He just looked at her, his expression difficult to read.

Cass felt like taking back her words. Should she have admitted that she remembered him? "You *are* Antonio de la Barca?"

"Forgive me again." He raked a hand through his jet black hair, hair that was even darker than Alyssa's. "I do not know what is wrong with me today." He shook his head, as if to clear it. Then he stared. "Yes, I did give that lecture, seven years ago." Something crossed his face, an expression Cass found difficult to read. "A great institution," he murmured, and he turned slightly, staring toward the rolling hills and Romney Castle. Cass realized it was drizzling.

She ignored it. She also ignored the slight twinge she felt because he didn't remember her at all. "It was a wonderful lecture, Señor de la Barca. I enjoyed it immensely."

He faced her, their eyes meeting. "Are you a historian?"

She hesitated, debating telling him the truth. "I majored in European history at college," she said. "My master's is in British history. And now I write historical novels." She kept her hand in her pockets.

His eyes flickered. "How interesting," he said, and there was nothing patronizing in his tone. "I would love a list of the titles you have published."

"I'd be happy to give one to you before you leave," Cass said, wondering if he would really read one of her books, then worrying about any inaccuracies he might find. "Are you here to see the necklace?"

He nodded, eyes brightening. "A sixteenth-century piece? The way it has been described, it would be worth a king's ransom—and would have belonged to someone exemplary. If the piece is authentic, which clearly it must be, as Sotheby's does not make such grievous errors, then I am more interested in discovering who might have originally owned it than anything else." He smiled at her.

"It's stunning," Cass said eagerly. "Of course, I've only seen the photos. Those rubies are cut so slightly and so primitively that the average person would assume them to be glass. I can't wait to actually see the piece tonight."

He was nodding. "Rubies were very rare in the sixteenth century," he said, his gaze directly on her again. "Only the most wealthy and powerful possessed rubies. This necklace might have belonged to a queen or a princess. That the Hepplewhites discovered it in their possession is rather amazing."

"Can you imagine if Lady Hepplewhite had thrown it out as she first thought of doing, assuming it to be a costume piece?"

He was smiling, shaking his head. Cass was smiling, too.

"I'm writing a novel set during Bloody Mary's reign," she said impulsively. "It was a fascinating period in time, and Mary has been so stereotyped and so gravely misunderstood."

Both of his dark brows lifted. He stared. "Really."

Cass bit her lip. "I can't help it. My imagination runs away with me. That necklace could have been a careless gift handed down by Mary to one of her favorites. She was very loyal and generous to those in her household."

"Yes, it could have been." Their gazes locked. "Or it could have been a gift from her father to just about anyone—one of his wives, one of his daughters—or perhaps his son Edward passed it along in a similar manner."

"It would be very interesting to trace the lineage of the necklace," Cass mused.

"Very interesting," Antonio de la Barca agreed, his gaze still focused entirely on her.

There was something in his tone that made Cass tense. She could not look away, and now she remembered talking to him after a lecture and being as mesmerized by the brilliance in his hazel eyes. The brilliance and the intensity.

She had to take a step backward, away from him. Even if he was a widower, he was way out of her league. Besides, she had learned her lesson years ago. Eight years ago, to be exact—just before Alyssa was born. When you fell in love, all good judgment flew out the window, and the result was tragic. Having had her heart broken once and forever was enough. The man who broke it was a college love affair—but it had apparently been more important to her than it had to him. She knew she had moved past the heartbreak. She just never wanted to go there again. "It's raining," she said, to break the moment, which had somehow seemed far too intimate and even awkward.

He glanced up at the sky, smiled slightly, as the skies opened up and it began to pour. "Indeed it is," he said.

"C'mon," Cass said, turning to lead him inside.

But he was shrugging off his designer sport jacket and draping it over her sweatshirt-clad shoulders. Cass did not have time to gape. Talking her elbow very firmly, he hurried her back inside.

Once out of the rain, Cass handed him his nearly soaking jacket. "I hope you haven't ruined that."

"It hardly matters," he replied.

Cass hesitated, aware of the darkening shadows of the late afternoon, and as suddenly aware of the fact that this particular guest was several hours early. What was she to do with him?

Clearly her thoughts were written all over her face, because he said, "I am meeting Señora Tennant here, but apparently she is somewhat late."

Cass stiffened. *He's meeting Tracey here?* "Tracey is my sister."

He started. "She never mentioned that she had a sister. I was assuming you to be her cousin."

How did de la Barca know her sister? "No, we're sisters, even if we look nothing alike," she said slowly. A new sense of dread, very different from the one that had been haunting her all day, was filling her.

Why was he meeting Tracey? Before Cass could even begin to sort out what was happening, Alyssa came pounding down the stairs, crying out in excitement that her mother had finally arrived.

And the front door swung open behind them. Cass heard it just as she felt a gust of cold, wet air, but she was looking at his hands now, which were hanging by his sides. He was wearing a very bold ring with a bloodred stone on his right hand, but the slender wedding band she had seen seven years ago was gone. Well. He had not remarried. And that explained everything, she thought grimly. His involvement with Tracey had nothing to do with the sixteenth-century necklace. Cass knew it the way she knew she would have an awful time that evening.

"Hello, everyone!" Tracey cried from behind Cass.

A huge weight settled on Cass's shoulders, and she turned.

Tracey stood in the doorway in a pair of beautifully tailored white pants, an exquisitely cut short grayish white jacket with Chanel buttons, and a pair of high-heeled white boots. Her long, pale blond hair was loose, the dampness causing it to curl about her face and shoulders. She looked as if she had just stepped off a catwalk, or out of the pages of *Vogue*. Which, considering Alyssa's earlier comments, apparently she had.

Tracey was classically attractive. Her features were perfectly even, her

eyes blue, her skin unblemished. She was one of those women who looked as good without makeup as they did with it. And while there might be more beautiful women in the same room with her, Tracey was always the most striking. She was the one who turned heads. Because she was model-thin and close to six feet tall. She also lived in drop-dead designer clothes. No one made an entrance like her sister did, Cass thought sourly. She realized she was hugging herself.

"Cass, how are you?" Tracey smiled, apparently not having noticed Alyssa, who stood on the lowest level of the stairs, clinging to the banister. She hugged Cass hard, but Cass hardly noticed. How the hell had her sister and de la Barca met? How?

Tracey's gaze became questioning. "Cass?"

"Hiya, sis." Cass managed a smile.

Tracey beamed at her, then turned to face Antonio de la Barca. The smile she sent him told Cass all she needed to know. They were lovers. This was nothing new—so why was she surprised? Dismayed?

"I see that the two of you have met," she said happily. "Don't tell me you're already dressed for supper?" she teased.

"Ha ha," Cass said, watching Tracey kiss Antonio on the cheek. At least she was spared the real thing. How *had* they met? *When* had they become lovers? And why, Goddamn it, did she care? Tracey changed men the way she changed her wardrobe—which was seasonally, at least. Cass was used to it—she expected no less.

Although if she were brutally honest with herself, she could admit how nice it would be to have an endless stream of boyfriends.

But she wasn't Tracey. She just couldn't settle for good looks and good times.

Tracey pulled on her ponytail. "Why are you so grumpy? I was only kidding, sis. In fact"—her smile widened—"I brought everyone presents!"

Cass stepped back a bit. "How have you been? You look great, Trace. I guess Sotheby's agrees with you."

Tracey beamed, which only made her lovelier. "A lot of things are agreeing with me lately," she said, her gaze locking on de la Barca. She stopped, spotting Alyssa with her nose between the bars of the iron banister. "Darling, come here!" Tracey cried.

Alyssa slowly stood, her face as red as a beet. "Hello, Mother," she said, her brown eyes wide and riveted upon Tracey's snow white figure.

Tracey pounced on her, embracing her once, hard. Cass watched. She watched Alyssa's body remain straight and hard and tight, and she