

Sequins & Snowflakes



Christmas at the Little Wedding Shop



Jane Linfoot

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‘A pure delight...fabulous, fun and unforgettable’ – Debbie Johnson, bestselling author of *Summer at the Comfort Food Cafe* The snow is falling around Brides by the Sea, Cornwall’s cutest little wedding shop, and wedding dress designer Seraphina East is in her cosy studio designing exquisite dresses to make even the most demanding bride’s dreams come true. Unless the bride is her big sister Alice of course. Saying that the two sisters don’t always see eye to eye is an understatement. Alice hasn’t even asked Sera to design her wedding dress. But when an absent groom and ill-fitting dress threaten to ruin Alice’s happiness let alone her big day, Sera’s determined to give her sister the winter wedding of her dreams – even if that means keeping not one but two irresistibly gorgeous best men under control... Is Sera going to end up being the maid of dishonour... Or will repairing her frozen relationship with Alice be the icing on the wedding cake? There’s sequins, snowflakes, and plenty of romance in this gorgeous love story. The perfect romance to curl up by the fire with this Christmas! Perfect for fans of Carole Matthews and Milly Johnson. What readers are saying about Jane Linfoot: ‘Just like the perfect wedding cake... beautifully crafted and wrapped in romance’ Heidi Swain, bestselling author of *The Cherry Tree Café* ‘I felt I was wrapped up in a Christmas dream’ Emma, Shaz’s Book Blog ‘I loved everything about this story... I love Jane Linfoot’s writing and I am whole heartedly enjoying this Wedding Shop by the Sea series’ Rachel’s Random Reads ‘Captured the true Christmas spirit... I read her story with a smile on my face’ With Love for Books ‘The perfect feel good winter warmer of a read’ Kraftireader ‘A fun and light hearted read... made me want to get married all over again!’ By the Letter Book Reviews

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JANE LINFOOT



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PRAISE FOR JANE LINFOOT

‘Jane Linfoot has got out the mixing bowl and whipped up a truly gorgeous story... A deliciously scrumptious treat’

Rebecca Pugh, bestselling author of *Return to Bluebell Hill*

‘Just like the perfect wedding cake, Cupcakes and Confetti is beautifully crafted and wrapped in romance’

Heidi Swain, bestselling author of *The Cherry Tree Café*

‘A pure delight... fabulous, fun and unforgettable’

Debbie Johnson, bestselling author of *The Birthday That Changed Everything*

‘Simply stunning’

A Spoonful of Happy Endings

‘Gorgeous book with characters full of heart, and an impassioned story to make you smile’

Reviewed the Book

‘This author packs a punch’

My Little Book Blog

‘Loved this book. The main characters are vividly drawn... the writing is fast and feisty’

Contemporary Romance Reviews

‘With every book I read I fall more in love’

Booky Ramblings

Dedication

For Anna and Jamie, Indi and Richard, Max and Caroline, M and Phil xx

Women are like tea bags. You never know how strong they are until they get into hot water.

Eleanor Roosevelt

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1

Friday, 16th December

Brides by the Sea: Crossed hearts and mermaid tails

‘Leave the *Closed* sign up for now, Sera.’

Jess, my boss and mentor, is thinking ahead as usual, talking to me over her shoulder, as I wait for her to unlock the door to Brides by the Sea, the most popular wedding shop in all of Cornwall and where I’m lucky enough to work. Even though I pass them every day, the trails of frosted ivy and those cascades of tulle in the Christmas window displays still send shivers down my spine which are nothing to do with the icy blast of the December wind that’s howling across St Aidan Bay. I know most brides choose to get married in summer, but when I see the whirl of hanging snowflakes and the sparkle of sequins against the snowy lace dresses, I completely understand why my sister, Alice, fell in love with the idea of getting married at Christmas. In less than a week’s time, a hundred and fifty guests will be descending on a Cornish country house for her four-day-long wedding celebration. Yes, it’s as epic and ambitious as it sounds. Only a power house like Alice would ever try to pull it off. As for whether she’ll succeed... Well, watch this space.

Coming back down to earth this morning, beyond the suspended silver baubles flashing with the reflections of a thousand fairy lights of the window displays, the remnants of last night’s staff Christmas-drinks party are waiting for us inside the shop. As the warm air of the entrance hall wraps around us, I peer through into The White Room, where we were partying last night, then pull back sharply.

‘Jeez, it looks as if a giant party popper exploded in there.’ The low whistle I let out is to hide my horror at the mess. From the number of glasses, you’d have thought we’d invited the whole town, not just a few close friends from the business.

As I stoop to ease a cashew nut out of the gap in the floorboards and flick on the lights on the giant Christmas tree in the hall, my head throbs. There’s a tinkle of dangling sleigh bells as I nudge the branches on my way back up, and set the white painted pine cones spinning on their ribbons.

I pick up a tumbler and shudder at the dying raspberries in the bottom. In the cold light of morning, I can’t believe we got so carried away by Christmas that we flouted Jess’s ‘clear drinks only in the wedding shop’ rule and went for red punch. Or worse, that we were rash enough to float exotic fruits in the Ruby Duchess cocktails next to so many precious and beautiful white dresses.

‘We had a lot to celebrate, Sera, we’ve had a fantastic year.’ Jess is looking surprisingly upbeat for someone who was at the after-party until four, and has come in to find her main bridal room trashed. It’s possible she might still be drunk. She’s also building up to a purr, so even though she said it all last night ten times at least, it’s obvious what’s coming next. ‘All thanks to you and your wonderful Seraphina East dresses.’ Truly, someone needs to move her on from this loop to save me all the blushes. However hard I try, she doesn’t take any notice.

In case you’re wondering, I’m Sera, short for Seraphina, and I design a lot of the wedding dresses Jess sells in the shop. And if you don’t already know, Brides by the Sea is four floors of bridal gorgeousness, in the seaside town of Saint Aidan. No prizes for guessing it’s almost on the beach, which is where I wandered in from, with my scrap book of dress designs eight years ago. And I’ve been here ever since. Jess, the owner, began by doing wedding flowers in one tiny room, and built her way up to what is here today – a Bridal Emporium containing everything you could need for a wedding. And brides flock here from Devon, Cornwall, and the world beyond.

And what Jess is talking about here is me getting the chance to design a celebrity wedding dress earlier this year. Which obviously was great for the shop, and is why my designs now have a dedicated

room of their own, and why my name is painted on every shop window. But given I hate the attention being on me, it's also meant I've spent the last few months trying to hide in corners.

'Weddings taking off at Daisy Hill Farm brought us a lot of business too,' I say. I'm trying to shift the glory off myself here, because last year Poppy, the wedding-cake maker who lived upstairs and worked at the shop, became a wedding organiser at a local farm. So if we've had a brilliant year, it's down to her too.

'It was so nice to see Poppy again,' I muse. However awesome the party, my high point last night was Poppy coming home after a couple of months in London, and looking so happy to be back. Come to think of it, I could murder a giant piece of Poppy's carrot cake right now.

'I'm so pleased Poppy's come to her senses and grabbed Rafe at last,' Jess says. 'We could all do with a farmer like him, he's completely yummy.'

Jess is talking about very own Brides by the Sea in-house romance, which was finally sealed yesterday evening. After a whole year, Poppy is finally going out with Rafe, her boss from the farm.

Jess begins to unwind her silk scarf. 'I haven't booked any brides in for this morning, because we've got so much work to do here.' She's not joking about that. And given most days she's meticulous enough to have us wiping away the rings on the coasters every time someone lifts a prosecco glass, we need to get cracking.

'Great, shall I collect glasses and you do surfaces?' I rub my hands together to show that despite my headache, I'm ready to get stuck in.

Jess sends me one of the despairing looks she saves for when I'm being dense. 'We aren't here to clear up, Sera.'

'We're not?' This is news to me.

There's more purring going on. 'Two tame and *very* sweet bar boys from Jagers will be arriving any minute to look after that.' So that explains that purr. Jagers Cocktail Bar is Jess's favourite hang out in town. Even though the clientele are half her age, when it comes to downing cocktails, Jess can drink most of them under the purple plastic designer tables, no problem. And given she spends so much time there, she's great friends with the staff.

'So what are *we* doing?' If Jess doesn't have cleaning plans for me, I'll head upstairs to my studio. Not that I've told her, but I'm very behind with my dress designs for next season's collection.

Jess sends me another despairing look. 'Sera, please tell me you haven't forgotten. We're sorting out your bridesmaid's dress. Obviously.'

'Oh shit.' My groan is long and heartfelt as I hitch up my shorts.

I *design* dresses, I don't wear them. Ever. And I know I have to make an exception for my sister's Christmas Eve wedding, but thus far I've been in denial. Although the bridesmaid's dress arrived weeks ago, despite Jess's best efforts, I've dodged trying it on. Although, as I think about Alice, I let out a shriek. 'Oh shit, Alice wants a Skype call, I need to set up my laptop. Like now...'

If someone said ditsy, I'd have to hold my hands up to that one. I'm the dreamy person, with the attention span of a gnat. The one who's so easily distracted that when I dunk a biscuit, it invariably falls in my tea. Let's face it, I'm creative. Coordination and organisation aren't in my mindset. Which is why Jess is so great for me to work with. She keeps me on track.

'Set up your Skype in your room, Sera, I'll get your dress from the store. That sister of yours can wait five minutes while you try it on.'

Jess deals in orders, not suggestions. She might be bossy, but I forgive her every time. In the last eight years, it's her hard business head and her drive that have taken me from a student with a sketch book to a designer with a studio and a dedicated room in her shop. Plus an annual collection, and more couture clients than I can handle. If it hadn't been for Jess, I would still be lazing on my beach towel, drawing and dreaming. And Jess has supported me all the way, financially too, which is unthinkable generous and why I don't mind her railroading me sometimes.

I mean who – except Jess – would have imagined that five minutes later, instead of washing up I'd be emerging from the fitting room in a dress...

'It's very pink.' As I gaze down at myself, a croak is the most I can manage. Imagine an explosion in a glitter factory colliding with an avalanche and you'll still only be halfway there. Although that might be the least of my problems, given the skirt is fluffing out to the size of a small tree. And right now I have to forget I'd ever hoped for cloud grey tulle, with tiny silver flecks.

'I'd say it's oyster rather than rose.' Jess's voice is breathy. 'And it's exquisite, just look at these seed pearls... did you ever see sequins so tiny?'

Don't worry about the hyperventilating. Jess can't help getting excited over anything with lace and sparkles. That's why she's got such a great wedding shop. At least she's temporarily suspended her disapproval of all things Alice, though.

Alice, importing her entire wedding from London to Rose Hill Manor, the Cornwall country house, where she's getting married, got the 'thumbs down' from Jess. Big time. Alice has somehow blagged *the* most spectacular wedding venue from a friend of Dan, her fiancé. But Alice not shopping at Brides by the Sea for her bridesmaids caused a tidal wave of discontent from Jess. As for Alice choosing a wedding dress from another designer when she could have chosen me, in Jess's eyes that's SO awful, we haven't even got onto talking about it yet.

'Forget about their size, did you ever see so many sequins in one place at one time?' I ask. No way can I be as enthusiastic as Jess when I'm the one wearing them all.

Don't worry, *I'm* completely cool with Alice shopping elsewhere. A bride has to find the perfect dress, and Alice and I have always been very different. Where I'm boho and scruffy, she's super-stylish and uber-smart. We live in entirely different worlds, our tastes don't coincide. So my dresses wouldn't be her thing at all. As for how we're going to get on when we're thrown together for the wedding... that's another instance of 'watch this space'.

I try a tentative swish with the skirt. 'Maybe maximalist bridesmaids will set off Alice's minimalist dress.' The sketch she showed me was so severe and pared back, it only had two lines. I'm guessing it's some kind of haute couture silk column. 'She's definitely embracing the "Snow Queen" theme.'

Alice's favourite book when we were kids was *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. She starred in the Christmas production at school when she was ten and I was eight. Whereas I was a snowflake, and I fluffed my entrance, I'm not sure Alice ever forgot her triumph as Queen Susan. But Alice going for a full-blown Narnia wedding still came as a shock. Somehow I hadn't pegged my ambitious, order-obsessed, high-flying sister as nostalgic.

'If she's hoping for snow she'll be disappointed.' Jess is smoothing out my skirts now. 'This is Cornwall not Krakow. Someone should have told her – the climate's oceanic.' Jess drops onto her hands and knees, and begins to work her way around, giving the hem gentle tugs as she goes.

'Okay, stand still, I'll see how the length is. And while we're here, you can tell me how your collection designs are coming along.'

The question floats upwards through waves of tulle, but it still makes me stiffen so hard that my spine goes ramrod straight. Jess is talking about my ideas for my next collection of dresses.

'Alright... I s'pose...' I try to make the lie sound nonchalant and laid-back.

'Hadn't you hoped to be finished by this weekend?' Jess is slipping the questions between tweaks, but, believe me, there's nothing casual about them. This is the interrogation I've been dodging for more weeks than the dress.

We both know that I usually get all my design sketches consolidated easily, in two short weeks while I laze on some exotic beach in the cheap off-peak time before Christmas. And we both know, with Alice's wedding coming up, I'm here, not there. And somehow Cornwall in winter isn't doing it for me like Bali does. I'd promised myself and Jess I'd work my butt off, and whatever happened I'd have everything sorted by this weekend. But somehow it hasn't worked out like that. I'm a beachy

girl, and that's where I do my best work. The designs flow much more easily when I'm flat out on the sand. Add in the crippling worry that I'm never going to be good enough again after designing for a celebrity, and I haven't been able to draw a thing. Between us, I feel about as creative as a turnip. I've got no designs finalised at all, but even worse, I haven't any ideas either. So where there should be a complete collection of worked-up designs, instead there's an empty sketch book. Sometime in the next week I've got a hell of a lot of work to do.

'Realistically, nothing gets going again until after Christmas.' I'm bluffing here. 'I decided it's way more sensible to give myself a New Year deadline.' I'm staring in the mirror over Jess's head, exchanging OMG glances with myself. Praying that the word 'sensible' will be the one Jess hones in on.

'I see...' Jess says, sounding like she really doesn't.

I'm dragging in a breath so huge it almost makes my eyes pop, waiting to see if I've got away with this when there's a loud squawk at floor level.

'Sera, what the hell have you got on your feet under here?'

Shit. I've been rumbled. Which is really bad luck, considering exactly how many layers of dress there are between Jess and my...

'Biker boots?' Jess's voice rises to a scream that makes my hangover head reverberate horribly. 'You have to be joking me. Where are the white bridesmaid's boots Alice sent you, Sera?'

My feet in those pointy toes? It's not happening. But I might as well come clean. 'The kitten heels are upstairs in the studio.' Buried under a week's worth of completely useless sketches. Along with the white fur jacket and the wedding manual she also sent. 'They *totally* kill my feet.' I can tell excuses are falling flat. 'The heels on these are pretty much the same height.'

Jess is staring up at me, her arm like a signpost, finger pointing at the door. 'Go.'

'Fine,' I say, with a sniff.

'And come back wearing the proper boots.' Her shouting softens. 'You'll have to break them in some time. You might as well start now.'

I look down at the skirt the width of the bay and know there's no way I'll make it up the narrow stairs to the studio in the dress. There's only one thing for it. I squirm, undo the zip, let the dress fall to the floor. As I leap across the bunched-up acres of skirt, being careful not to trample it with my biker boots, there's another howl from Jess.

'Sera, I don't believe it! You've got all your clothes on under there!'

'And?' I stare down at my leopard-print leggings, shorts and shirt. 'Good thing too, now I've had to strip off.' Honestly, it's December, there's no point being colder than I have to be. And if the dress is the size of a snowstorm, no one's going to notice a bit of underwear. Besides, Jess is the original inventor of the mantra, '*No one's looking at the bridesmaids*'. So I sense she's being a) a bit of a stickler and b) slightly hypocritical here.

Five minutes later, when we resume, I'm wearing the kitten heels – yes, they're agony, in case you're wondering – and I've compromised hugely by taking off my shorts. And Jess has gone in to attack the hem with her pins. My toes feeling like they're dropping off is a small price to pay when the heat's off my designs. Or the lack of them. Which Jess appears to have completely forgotten about now.

'You're lucky Alice hasn't got you in six-inch stilettos,' Jess says.

I don't bother to tell her that's really not Alice's look. Instead I lock my knees, settle down to listen to the gentle sound of guys washing up two rooms away, as I stare out of the window. Although, with the explosion of Christmas sparkle on the glass, it's hard to make out exactly what's going on in the world beyond, other than a solitary figure pausing to look at the displays.

'Jess...' One of the helpers has stopped clattering glasses and is calling through. 'There's someone at the shop door, wanting to come in.'

'Take a break, Sera, I won't be long.'

In a second Jess pushes herself up, shoves her feet back into her loafers and marches out into the hallway. Although the shop is technically closed, so long as Jess is in the building, there is the potential for trade. She's never one to let the opportunity of a sale slip by. Sure enough, next thing, I hear her opening the shop door.

'Come in... it's horribly cold outside... definitely no snow though... yes, we're closed, but we always make exceptions...do tell me, what can I do to help?'

Call me cynical, but from the welcome, I already know it's a guy. Thirty to forty, to judge by Jess's pitch. A smile spreads across my face, because the supercharge of charm tells me he's probably good looking too. And just because I'm nosey, and amused, and a little bit bored, I tilt my head to hear better.

'Yeah, I'm sorry to bother you...' Male, with a nudge of Scottish in the accent. And the kind of chocolate-fudge undertones that make you shiver. 'But there's something I spotted in the window...'

My back goes rigid. You know that thing when you instantly know a voice? Even though it's from years ago, this particular voice is indelibly logged, deep in my unconscious brain. Five tiny words, from twenty feet away, and my heart is hammering so hard that the sequins on my bodice are jolting.

Shit.

You spend years furtively looking round corners, in case a particular person might be there. Even though you know there isn't a snowball's chance in hell of them being around. And then you go so long without it happening that eventually you relax. Get lazy. You forget to look out. There are even days you forget they ever existed. And then...BANG! They're there.

The last person in the world I want to see.

I'll spare you the worst details. Enough to say, his name was Johnny, it was back in uni days, and my humiliation was complete. End of.

Shrinking back against the line of hanging dresses, I try to make myself invisible as I creep forwards to hear better. I'm literally turning my ears inside out, but as the voices move through into The White Room the volume fades. Which is extremely annoying, because they seem to be chatting for ages. And whatever I said about this being the last person in the world I want to see, part of me is aching to catch a glimpse. Just the teensiest peep to see if I'm right. And despite my sensible head screaming 'no, no, no' it's as if my bad-girl feet have a will of their own.

Before I know it, I'm through in the hallway. My bridesmaid's dress might be expansive, but desperate times and all that... A second later, I'm swirling the skirt, winding tulle around my legs, like I'm folding an umbrella. Hauling it into some kind of diagonal surrender. By the end my ankles are clamped so tight under the twists of fabric, I have to jump to move. But the good news is I'm slender enough to squeeze in beside the Christmas tree and duck behind the mannequin that's dressed in an Alexandra Pettigrew *Sophiadress*. And despite the occasional soft jingle from the sleigh bell Christmas deccies I disturbed, I'm enjoying an unrivalled, yet concealed, view of the shop door. What's more, I'm pretty certain so long as I don't move I won't be spotted.

'Cross my heart, promise I'll literally only look for a nanosecond.' I whisper to myself, making ridiculous bargains with whatever fates hurled Johnny across my path. I mean St Aidan is on the edge of Cornwall. No one comes here by accident.

So long as I remember not to breathe, and not to let my heart bang too loudly, that's everything covered. Which is damn good timing, because the next thing I know, there's the clatter of loafers on floor boards and they're back.

'Well thanks for the bears.' That throaty lilt sailing over Jess's shoulder has to be Johnny's.

Even thinking his name makes me cringe. But bears? Everyone wants to buy the knitted bear wedding couple from the White Room window because they're unbelievably cute and dinky. But no one's allowed to because they're our Brides by the Sea shop mascots. They've been here as long as we've been open.

‘My pleasure.’ Jess’s triple-volume croon says it all.

We all know Jess would sell her grandmother given half a chance, but surely not those particular six-inch-high, knitted bears?

Suddenly there’s no need to move because Jess takes one step sideways and leaves me a clear view. There’s that feeling where your whole stomach drops so fast you feel it’s left your body. And then it’s like there’s water rushing through your ears, and a whole flock of seagulls just got loose in your chest.

It’s him.

Except older. And thinner. And ten years more worn. But still the same hollow cheekbones, still flipping that same piece of hair back off his forehead. For a second I think I’m going to die. But then Jess begins to talk again.

She’s got her hand on his arm as she reaches for the door handle. ‘So enjoy the wedding... and Christmas... and good luck with your best-man’s speech...’

Wedding? He’s here for a *wedding*? I gulp so hard at that I almost inhale the veil that’s dangling next to my cheek. As the shock of the word makes me lurch, there’s the softest tinkle of a bell. And even though it’s the tiniest sound, two heads whip round towards the tree. And just as my eyes lock with Johnny’s dark brown ones, and I see his eyebrows shoot up in surprise, Jess lets out a squawk.

‘Sera? What *are* you doing behind the *Christmas tree*?’

Just what I didn’t need. But I can still bluff it. My brain’s racing so fast it’s already reached the excuses pile. Nuts between floor boards. Loose mice. Lost bears. I’m wavering, weighing up the long-term pitfalls of each answer. I’ve pretty much decided to go with the pistachio, and I’m *this* close to getting away with it when one kitten heel gets jammed in a knot hole in the floorboards. Had my feet been free to move, I might very well have got away with it. Working with the tourniquet of my twisted skirt, I don’t stand a chance. Balance? I’ve completely lost it.

What begins as a tiny wobble, expands to a series of lurches. I’m aware I’m somehow in free fall, and from the hideously loud jangling beside me, I’m guessing I’m taking the Christmas tree with me. Before I know it, I’m in a nose dive, and the floor’s rushing towards me.

‘Waaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh...’ My scream has to be huge, because I can’t hear the sleigh bells any more.

In a last-minute effort to avoid a face plant, I hurl myself over onto my back. As the sequins on my dress splinter across the floorboards, and the tree comes crashing down, the face I’m looking up into is Johnny’s. On the up side, the thump of the impact has apparently culled the entire seagull flock. And even though my breathing has turned to gasps, there still isn’t enough force in my chest to make words.

Johnny’s pushing the tree back to the vertical with one hand, still holding his bag of bears in the other. Which pretty much sums up my life. The guy catches the tree, while I end up on the floor. Sprawled horizontal is never the best look, even if my legs are wrapped up like a mermaid’s tail. Especially when my beachy blonde hair and freckles look so bad with the colour of the dress. That’s why I concentrate on my career, every time.

And for once, that cool sardonic smile of Johnny’s is bursting into a laugh.

‘Seraphina East. All in pink.’ He rubs the back of his free hand across his forehead as he looks down at me. ‘I knew there could only be one of you in the world. We must stop meeting like this.’

And then he’s stooping, grasping my hand, and before I know it, a waft of delicious man scent whooshes past my nose, and he’s whisked me back onto my feet. What’s more, as I drag a stray pine cone out of my hair, my dress is unravelling as if it’s alive. In the time it takes to blink, I’m back to the shape of one of those doll birthday cakes, with a Barbie body, and a sponge made in a pudding basin. Except in my case, it’s without the boobs.

‘You see... he said “pink” too.’ I’m sticking my chin out at Jess. ‘And what about the bloody bears? Who said you could sell them?’

It's not often that Jess is lost for words, but for some reason it must be catching, because she's opening her mouth and closing it again, and no sound's coming out. And we're all standing staring at each other when there's a warbling noise from The Seraphina East Room.

Johnny's the first to react. He raises his eyebrows. 'Anyone expecting a Skype call?'

Fate works in mysterious ways. Johnny disappearing at the speed of light? Or me? Either is good.

'That one's mine.' I hurl myself towards the sanctuary of The Seraphina East Room.

Johnny's voice echoes after me. 'Sorry to have disturbed your Friday. I'll let you get on, then.' So like him to want the last word. Although that's not exactly true. The last time I contacted him he didn't get back to me. At all.

A second later I'm in front of the laptop, staring at an empty chair on the screen, wondering where the heck my Bridezilla sister has got to.

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Friday, 16th December Brides by the Sea: Red carpets and wild ideas

‘So is Alice online yet? I’m dying to see her.’

As Jess swoops in next to me on the chaise lounge, she almost knocks my laptop off my knee. With any luck, Alice will move her on from Johnny. Although I’m aching to find out if he mentioned where the wedding was he was going to. Not that he can possibly have any link to Alice’s wedding. Can he?

‘Alice will be along any second.’ I’m whispering to Jess in case Alice comes back on screen. ‘She’s in Brussels, with an army of builders.’ As planned, the ‘b’ words have Jess leaning in even more intently.

In case you’re wondering, Alice works in international interiors. We’re currently waiting for her to attend to urgent site business, which probably means she’s bringing her make-up up to speed before she comes on screen properly.

As Alice’s figure sweeps past the webcam, Jess’s voice shoots high with surprise. ‘Oh, she’s dark. And beautifully groomed. So you’re not alike at all, then?’

Despite the insult, I can’t help laughing, because it’s true. Alice rocks the ‘Audrey Hepburn, poised for the red carpet’ look. Whereas I’m more ‘Courtney Love, the morning after’.

‘Great, I’m here now...’ As Alice slides into view again, she’s got her professional voice on, although it’s less snippy than usual.

‘And she’s *so* glossy.’ Given Jess is murmuring at my elbow, I take it she’s set on joining in and making this a conference call.

As for the gloss, it’s the expensive sort, not the flashy kind. The prefix high-end applies to every item in Alice’s life. But despite ten minutes spent applying concealer, she’s still got tired-shadows under her eyes.

‘I’ve been trying to get you for *hours*, Sera...’ She’s exaggerating. Obviously. It’s barely eleven and I’ve been next to my laptop for ages.

But whatever, the tension between us is already crackling. And I’ve no idea why exactly. When we were kids she was the kind of older sister who bossed me about without mercy, but she always stuck up for me when the going got tough. Since we left home, we respect each other’s views and lifestyle choices. Although they’re not the ones we’d choose for ourselves, we care about each other from a safe distance. And like so many other siblings, when we get together, we revert to type.

As for the Skype call, if I know Alice this is my reminder to pick her up when she flies in tomorrow. So I’m getting in first.

‘Don’t worry Alice, I’ve set my alarm for six, I’ll be in Exeter when you land... promise...’

There’s a pause, as she rolls her eyes, not believing a word.

‘That’s why I’ve rung...’ Her second hesitation is long enough for her forehead to pucker under her fringe. ‘Actually I’m not going to be able to come tomorrow after all.’

‘But why not?’ My voice is shrill with shock. Alice never breaks appointments. And what about her wedding? There has to be shedloads of work left to do for that.

‘I’m overseeing a polished-concrete installation, and the frigging mix hasn’t set.’

It’s a rarefied world she lives in. Only Alice would polish concrete. And she doesn’t usually swear either.

‘I see,’ I say, even though I don’t at all. ‘Isn’t it all a bit last minute?’

Her cheeks blow out. 'It's a rush job for a diplomat. I pulled it in to help pay for all the wedding extras.' The heartfelt groan she lets out is very unlike her. 'I *so* want all our guests to have a white Christmas they'll remember forever.'

There you go. I knew she was counting on snow. And with expectations like that, she's setting herself up for a fall. I try to let her down gently. 'I'm not completely sure it will be white.' In fact I'm a hundred percent sure it won't be.

'It simply has to snow, Sera.' She's wringing her hands, and her wail is so loud my laptop vibrates. 'What's the point in getting married at Christmas otherwise?'

Between us, a lot of people get married in December because it's cheaper. Not that I'm cynical, but Alice getting married in Cornwall has more to do with the fabulous venue they've got their hands on, than the location itself.

'The sparkle will be seriously special with all your gorgeous touches,' I say, feeling weird that I'm suddenly trying to sell this to her. 'And the log fires.' I'm trying my hardest to reassure her here. 'And it'll be great getting everyone together.'

'Thanks for reminding me,' she says, calmer now. Although she can't be completely herself, because she doesn't usually go overboard with the gratitude. 'And I promise I'll be with you as soon as I can. But until I get there, *please* can you look after things for me? Be my stand-in project manager on the ground?'

I'm blinking, screwing up my face. 'What... me...?' She can't be serious.

It's no secret the rest of my family are all hugely brainy and successful. But where Alice surpassed all expectations, I'm the big let-down. From full-on public humiliation when I had to re-take GCSE maths, to going off to college to do fashion, I've been the family embarrassment my entire life. We both know I struggle to manage my own tiny life. Not to mention the designs I should be doing. Adding in more is asking for trouble.

'Don't worry, the earliest jobs are mainly humping stuff around,' she says, making me wonder why I'm needed at all. 'Dan's besties will be providing the muscle, but you'll oversee.' Her face lights up with a new thought. 'You can be navigator. You're the perfect person to guide them around. Go with them. Keep an eye on what they're doing.' Her nod is horribly decided.

'Navigator?' I mouth back at her, my voice a squeak. Alice really has no idea. I barely know my way round St Aidan, let alone anywhere else. I go from the shop, to the bakery, to the cottage, to the beach. And back again via the corner shop or café. I've barely done a thousand miles in gran's car in the three years since she died. The airport was going to be a *major* challenge. Then I have my own brainwave. 'There has to be someone better than me?'

We're family and we'll always have that tie. But the last few years you couldn't say we've been close. Although my parents appreciated me coming down to Cornwall to keep an eye on my gran when I gave up my gap-year travel, I'm not sure Alice approved. After that there was always a distance between us. And it was about more than the miles between here and London. Gran and I liked to think of ourselves as the Cornish free-spirit family outpost. And when Gran died two years ago, everyone in London was happy to let me stay on in her cottage by the harbour. But Alice has never been interested in my life down here.

'Actually I've thought about this very carefully.' She's tapping her pen on her front tooth. 'You're my sister, you're genetically programmed to stand up for me. I won't get better than that.'

'Really.' I can't hold back my ironic smile. It's so like Alice to analyse her problem so clinically.

She looks vaguely hurt. 'Truly, Sera, you're the only person I can truly trust for this. Deep down, you're the one who knows me best, you instinctively know the choices I'd make. Which makes you the perfect person to make them for me, until I arrive. And to back me up when I get there too. *Pleeeeee* say you will. There's *so* much to do.'

If I'm blinking at her, it's because she sounds so desperate. She's strong, she never begs.

As she comes towards the screen her voice drops to a whisper. 'I had no idea I'd find it this tough, it's all turning out to be a total nightmare. As for Dan and his friends, if I'm not there to control them, anything could happen. You're the only one who'll understand what I'd mind about. You're the one who'll care enough to fight my corner... head them off... sort them out... stamp on their wilder ideas. You know what guys can be like? Sometimes I get the feeling they don't give a damn at all...'

Actually I don't have the first idea about guys, given I'm singleton of the decade. But I am familiar with Alice's mindset. I know she's meticulous about every detail, and maddeningly uncompromising. And I can see how uptight she is. What's more, she's right. I completely understand where she's coming from, even if I don't always get it. The only problem is, I'm a complete wimp. I've never fought anyone in my life. I've never had to. Because Alice always did the fighting for me.

Looking back on our childhood we didn't have a bad time. It's just our parents were busy with other things. But Alice was the kind of big sister who looked out for me every step of the way. I can still hear her bawling at the kids who made fun of me because my corkscrew curls were almost white. And when my wedding Barbie's head dropped off, Alice toasted marsh mallows over a candle to make me smile again. Then my first week at senior school when I got to the top of the wall bars and froze, she ran out of her chemistry lesson to talk me down. I know I took her for granted back then, but looking back, she was the person who made every day okay for me. This is my first chance ever to pay her back. I owe it to her to step up here.

Alice smooths her fingers across her cheekbones, then drags her bob behind her ears. 'If it's easier, think of yourself as head bridesmaid.'

'Oh my.' Worse and worse. When I signed up for bridesmaid duties it was to look awful in a dress for twelve hours, while carrying a posy. And smile for the photographer, so long as he wasn't arsey. Something tells me if I agree to this, I'm about to add in a whole lot more.

'Every detail's covered. It's just a matter of making it all happen. It's all in the *Wedding Handbook* – you've got that haven't you?'

'Of course.' Despite myself, I'm grinning. It's under the waste-paper mountain in the studio. I opened it at a random page, saw a sentence about the bridal party not sleeping together, and slammed it shut again. But given how fat it is, I suspect Alice has every item nailed. Apart from her late arrival, obviously. And the groom's friends who won't do as they're told.

'Stop worrying, you'll be awesome. You might even enjoy it.' She's suddenly sounding a whole lot better. 'Dan's best man's got your number, he'll pick you up in the morning. He said "ten at the Surf Shack". Does that mean anything to you?'

'Yes.' It's my local caf, but I'm hyperventilating too hard to say.

That's the thing about Alice. She isn't exactly a Bridezilla, because she never makes a fuss, she simply powers through. And if I've got to step in to keep her plans on track, even if it's only for a couple of days, it's a huge responsibility. What happens if I break the wedding?

'There you go. Knowing the Surf Shack, that's a great start.' Alice's air punch is so unlike her it leaves me blinking as her fist rushes towards the screen. 'We're Team Bride, Sera. We'll do this together.'

Which kind of sounds like a bit of a contradiction, given she's not going to be here.

'Any other queries, ring me, okay?'

Did I actually agree to do this? There's a thousand questions I should be asking, but my mind's gone blank. As for who the best man is, I want to weave that in too, but Alice has started again.

'Thanks so much, Sera, I'll catch you very soon, I promise. And good luck.' Then the screen goes blank. And she's gone.

'What a morning.' First Johnny, then this. I'm stomping around in my kitten heels, pink-sequined tulle flapping against my legs. Right now I'm thinking of heading for the beach, and running. And not stopping until I reach Scotland. Or maybe Wales?

‘What am I going to do, Jess? I mean *you* know me, it’ll be a disaster.’

Jess is still on the chaise longue, with wiggles in her forehead I haven’t seen before. ‘I know I “baby” you at times, Sera. But it’s time you took more responsibility.’ She narrows her eyes. ‘Read Alice’s *Wedding Book* carefully. Then go and smash it. And Dan’s friends will be helping too.’ That thought smoothes out the lines on her brow. ‘Weddings are romantic times. Throw in Christmas, and who knows what will happen.’

Hang on. Whatever happened to our Brides by the Sea singles solidarity? Jess came to it because of a disgusting divorce, which makes it all the more surprising that she managed to rubbish our whole ethos in one tiny sentence there.

‘Forget Christmas and cupid dust, Jess, I’m not on the market.’ I grit my teeth. ‘In any case, it clearly says in the manual “no hook-ups in the bridal party”.’ Go Alice. Sometimes she really does think she can control the world.

‘Really?’ Jess looks gobsmacked.

If there’s one teensy bit of silver lining in this very black wedding cloud, it’s that I’m off the coupledom hook here.

As my pointy boots finally get the better of me, I sink down into one of the Louis Quatorze chairs that are meant for mums of our brides. The last time I collapsed into one of these chairs was when I found out Josie Redman wanted me to design her wedding dress. That pushed me a thousand miles out of my comfort zone, but it was *nothing* compared to this.

Jess beams. ‘I’ve got a feeling this might be the making of you, Sera. Remember our mantra? “Feel the fear and do it anyway”.’

I think she might have said that last time too. But last time, there was gin, which frankly I could do with now. And so long as I kept my nerve, last time I only had to do my job and design a fabulous dress. And if I’d messed up, there were a hundred people waiting to take my place. So that was easy in comparison.

This time failure is not an option, and I don’t have the first clue what I’m doing. And this is Alice’s wedding at stake. That’s not just any wedding. This will have to be the most perfect wedding, in the world. Ever. Delivered *exactly* as Alice ordered it.

I scrunch up my face and try to find a thought to get me through. It’s a few short days. It’ll be over before I know it. And a few days never changed anyone, did they?

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Friday, 16th December

In the studio at Brides by the Sea: After dark

A lot later that evening, hours after everyone else left, I'm up in the studio. Perching on a stool, in a pool of light, at the high cutting table. Sorting through swatches of lace, fingering pieces of silk. Staring out of the blackness of the windows, to see the distant lights of boats on the sea. Starting a drawing, then tossing it aside and beginning another. Even if I'm making no progress at all on the designs, at least I feel like I'm putting the time in.

I love my long workshop, three floors above the mews, with its stacks of magazines and the inspiration clippings pinned to a huge board. After the snowy neatness of the shop, the studio is a complete contrast, with its creative chaos of dressmakers' mannequins, ironing boards and giant scissors. Up here the tulle and silk are on rolls, and the rails are full of fragments of dresses. Bodices with ragged edges, half-finished petticoats.

Each of the beautiful dresses hanging in the shop downstairs began as a sketch. Those few first lines on paper capture the whole essence. You can't imagine the work that goes in to get from one to the other. But without those first sketches there's no guide to create the pattern. And without the pattern, the dress can't come to life.

I can't blame it all on Johnny. It wasn't as if the work was going well before he turned up. But since he did, somehow my brain can't get beyond those words.

'Wedding... Christmas... best man...'

I can't stop thinking how awful it'll be if he turns up at Alice's wedding. *And how gutted I'll be if he doesn't.*

But right now I have to forget that Johnny is in Cornwall. I have to block out that on a windy day we might almost be breathing the same air. And I've got to come up with some startling new sketch designs. Because if I don't, instead of bursting with an astonishing new collection, next Autumn the Seraphina East rails are going to be empty.

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Saturday, 17th December
At The Surf Shack Café: Dark
chocolate chips and flashing decorations

Hi Sera, Alice's best man here, heading for the Surf Shack Cafe at 10. See you there :)

Texting? In St Aidan? I hope this best man – whoever he is – knows he's damned lucky that message arrived. Signal here is patchy. To be honest, in most parts smoke signals would be more reliable than a mobile.

Unless they're Cornwall devotees, most Londoners don't have a clue what it's like down here. When they arrive for the wedding, Alice's friends are going to have their eyes opened, big time. It's like the rest of the world used to be, in the days before technology. Locals scratch their heads over Wi-Fi, and give you blank looks if you mention broadband. Why would you want those when you can phone each other on the landline? Or – shock horror – talk, face to face. For me that's why I like it here. As for where Best Man has chosen to meet up, I couldn't have chosen better myself.

'So here we go.' I pull a face at Poppy, as we pick our way between the empty tables on the terrace deck of the Surf Shack Café. Poppy's the cake baker from the shop, who just came back from London, and one of my closest friends.

'You'll be fine, so long as you remember to breathe,' she says, making a good point.

Now I think about it, the last time I drew a breath was when we started walking along the sea front. When Poppy dropped in to pick up some baking trays from her attic kitchen, Jess muscled in, and sent her along with me, supposedly to make sure I don't chicken out and leg it down the beach. But this way Jess also gets a full report immediately Poppy gets back to the shop.

Unlike many of the beachside cafés which bear no resemblance to their names, the Surf Shack cabin is as rickety and weathered as it sounds, which is why everyone likes it. Add in excellent coffee, delectable cocoa and the fattest sandwiches on the bay, and you'll see why it's such a winner. What's more, it appears to have been knocked together from a thousand random bits of wood. Sometime most days, winter and summer, this is where I hang out. And while Poppy's been in London this is also where most of my calorie intake has come from.

On the dot of nine-thirty I shoot her a final grimace and brace myself. As we push through the swing door into the café, we're hit by a rush of warm air and the scent of fresh coffee. The owner, Brin, is grinning at me from behind a spikey electric-blue Christmas tree, perched on the counter.

'Mornin' Sera. Nice to see you back, Poppy,' he says, as he rubs his hands on his striped apron. 'Frothy hot chocolate, XXL, with dark chocolate sprinkles and a swirl of salted caramel?'

'Please.' I glance up at the glittery festive garlands that are criss-crossing the ceiling. That's my usual winter order. It takes at least twenty minutes to do justice to a Surf Shack hot chocolate, so the timing should be perfect. The mugs they come in are bucket-size, and the toppings aren't so much sprinkled on as added by the shovelful. 'What about you, Poppy?'

She wrinkles her nose as she studies the list on the chalk board.

'Hot chocolate... super-sized please... with whipped cream... and marshmallows... and white chocolate chips... and a double chocolate muffin please.' She gives a guilty grin. 'Rafe cooked me breakfast, but that was hours ago. And I've so missed the Surf Shack.'

'Have these on the house today, ladies, seeing as it's Christmas.'

I blow Brin an air kiss as we wander off to choose a table.

Poppy nods towards a table with its own mini Christmas tree, complete with flashing lights, then steers me towards a chair. 'This one's good, if you sit there it gives you a clear view of the door.' She tilts her head towards Brin. 'You still haven't been on that date he's always asking for?'

I laugh. 'You remember my gran always said it's better not to have a guy at all, than to be with the wrong one.' I guess she repeated it so often it stuck fast in my head. 'Anyway, I'm too busy, guys aren't worth the trouble.' I say, as I slip my wool jacket over the back of a chair and unwind my scarf.

By the time Brin comes over with our order, Poppy's ready to dive straight in. As she begins to demolish her muffin, even though it's still long before ten, I have half an eye on my hot chocolate, half on the door, with its outline of multi-coloured chaser fairy lights. I'm more or less ignoring the boarding guys who walk in. Not pre-judging, but I'm guessing any friend of Dan's who's made it past Alice's eagle eye to be best man will stick out a mile as a smart London type. Especially given she's hanging out with diplomats these days.

And why did I think I'd be able to drink even a sip of hot chocolate, when there's a million-to-one chance Johnny might walk in the door any second? In a weird twist of fate, could he really be Dan's best man?

Poppy studies me as I sit, not touching my drink.

'I can see you with a surfer.' She scrapes a fingerful of cream from the top of her hot chocolate and sucks on it. 'I reckon a hunky, beachy, free-spirit type would suit you.'

'Just because you've finally given in to Rafe.' I laugh. 'For the record, I'm definitely not looking for a guy of *any* type.' And just to clear it up, I don't surf or swim either. My beach appreciation is definitely limited to the shore. 'But anyway, I'm hardly going to pull anyone in a suit, am I?' I gesture to my messy bun and general laid-back appearance.

'Who knows? Opposites attract.' Poppy teases. 'Some smart city barrister might have a thing for ripped denim shorts.' She leans in towards me. 'Actually, don't look now, but I think I just spotted your perfect soulmate. You know that thing where you're supposed to choose a partner who looks just like you. He's over by the coffee machines.'

'You don't say.' I'm not even going to bother to look. Sometimes Poppy is so unknowingly ridiculous she's hilarious.

'He's well fit. Pretty ripped under that baggy top of his, too.' She's not holding back on the details. 'All sun-bleached blonde hair, just like you. Stubble – not like you, but whatever, his denim's as threadbare as yours. You definitely look like you'd share an essence.'

If Poppy's talking about essences, it's time to stop her. 'Bollocks!' I say, meaning to hiss but it comes out a lot louder than it should. The momentary lull in the café's buzz gives me enough time to go crimson to my ear lobes.

Poppy leans in again. 'I'm right, he's totally checking you out now.'

This is why I avoid nights out in bars.

'Properly.' She takes another triumphant slurp of whipped cream.

I laugh at her. 'I just shouted "bollocks" at the top of my voice. *Everyone's* looking at me. Obviously.' But I might as well prove her wrong. Out of all the thousands of surfers who've wandered through St Aidan in the last ten years, I have clicked with zero this far. Enough said. I might as well do the job properly and make my point. I give it a second, pray this won't be the moment that Best Man chooses to walk through the door, and sneak the fastest-possible glance over my shoulder.

I only mean it to be a nano-second. But when I flick around and take in the ragged blonde hair and the sloppy sweater, something holds my gaze. And I can't turn away. I'm smiling at scuffed suede boots that could almost belong to me. One minute I'm running my gaze up over that stubble, the next there's a flash of blue green and our eyes have locked. When his delightfully lived-in face breaks into a grin and the skin at the corners of his eyes crinkles, my tummy flips. Nothing so huge that it officially leaves the building. But enough to throw me right off.

Shit. I force myself to wrestle my gaze away. As soon as Best Man shows up I'll be out of here, and I'll never have to look at this 'soulmate' guy again.

'See what I mean?' Poppy's laughing. 'So what's the verdict?'

I make sure my shrug is spectacularly diffident and make a big thing of trying to stir my hot chocolate. Then I clear my throat and swallow madly, because somehow all my saliva has disappeared. 'Nothing special,' I croak, desperately playing for time. 'Although you've got a point about his jeans. They could make great summer cut-offs.'

'Oh my God...'

At first I assume Poppy's perfect 'O'-shaped mouth is because she's so shocked and disgusted I've rejected my perfect match.

'Oh my God...oh my God...' The third time she says it and her voice is mounting to a shriek, it has to be something else. 'Oh my God, you might be in here...'

'What...?'

'Don't look now,' she says, completely unnecessarily, 'but he's... COMING OVER.' She mouths those last two words silently. Which frankly is a bit stupid seeing as the whole café's been scrutinising us since she screamed OMG.

I can tell he's arriving way before I see him. First there's Poppy's completely uncool flapping of her fingers in front of her face. Although strictly, with my puce chops, I'm the one who should be doing the hand-fanning. And second, there's the way she's puffed out her cheeks so far she looks like a football about to pop. And bear in mind surf hunk is getting the full benefit of this as he comes towards us. Which I assume he has, because there's suddenly the most fabulous scent of hunky male. Definitely not salty skin and seaweed, with an undertow of testosterone, which, let's face it, is what most guys smell of here when they drag themselves up the beach. More, expensive cologne, crashing into a motorcycle engine, in a cedar forest.

I draw in a long breath as he circles the table and swaggers to a halt. After waiting a couple of seconds – I'm guessing to maximise the swoon effect – he seeks out my gaze with a disarming grin. As his broad hand extends towards me, I grit my teeth, and will my heart to stop galloping.

'Hi, it's Sera isn't it? I'm Quinn,' he says, his low voice resonating as he hesitates. 'Quinn Penryn...?' The questioning tone of his introduction makes him sound even more super-confident than he obviously is. It's as if he's so famous he thinks I should know him, and believe me I don't.

Random guys hurling themselves at me is the last thing I want. And I'm not about to bend my rules now. Not for anyone, no matter how much I covet their jeans. The faster I stop this, the better for everyone. What's more, I'm horribly aware that the whole café is watching us like we're some kind of floor show. There's no time to lose, so I launch.

'Sorry,' I say, throwing in the most distant, yet benign and unsexy, smile I can muster. 'I'm going to cut you short here, Quinn. Because I'm *really not interested*.' I'm actually feeling bloody empowered here. Not to mention proud of myself, for the small detail of slipping in his name too. 'It'll save us both a lot of time and trouble if I'm honest here,' I add, by way of explanation. Because although I want to sound decided, I don't want to come across as a complete bitch. Especially as we've got an audience.

The way his eyebrows shoot up, I'm guessing he's not used to getting the knock back. Which is very probably the case, because close up, he's even more delectable than he was from across The Shack. But something about his surprise supercharges my new-found confidence. I'm on a roll here.

'Pickups by strangers really aren't my thing,' I say, and fix my smile, determined to hold it until he's backed off. 'So, thanks, but no thanks.'

I look back at my hot chocolate, give it another stir. And wait for him to go. How much more of a dismissal does Quinn Pen-whatever he's called expect? He's still here, because when I look down I can see those distressed boots of his. Which is the exact point I remember that eternal question we were obsessed with at school. That thing about the relationship between a guy's shoe size and something else significant. Which, embarrassingly, is exactly what I'm staring at, at table level beyond

my hot chocolate. If schoolgirl legend is true, and there is a link between the two, his feet are going to be size twelves. At least.

Screwing up my eyes to block out the view, I will Quinn to leave. To make it clear that I've moved on with my life, and I expect him to do the same, I take a massive gulp of hot chocolate. As my cup clatters back down, Poppy begins to flap again. From the way her eyes are popping like saucers, I'm guessing she's trying to tell me something hugely important. But I'm not getting it. As she draws her forefinger under her nose, my frown deepens. If this dammed Quinn wasn't still hanging around, Poppy and I would probably have collapsed in a heap of giggles by now.

Finally I give in. 'What?' I hiss at Poppy across the table.

There's a low growl, which seems to be coming from Quinn. As I turn my face towards his, I see he's biting his lip and holding in his laughter.

'Don't worry, Sera.' Quinn says, completely misreading my feelings. 'We've all been there. Chocolate moustache alert!'

He swoops, napkin in hand. Before I know it, he's right in my personal space, dabbing at my upper lip. By the time I've formed my squawk of protest, he's backed away again.

'All done.' He's scrunching up the serviette and rubbing his hands on his thighs. 'Drink up, then, and I guess we're good to go.'

I tilt my head and my voice rises in disbelief. 'Go where exactly?' Surely I couldn't have been clearer?

'I know you were sounding reluctant before, but we *do* have a date.' He slides out his phone, with a twitch of those lips of his. 'Ten at the Surf Shack? Alice and Dan's wedding? Ring any bells?' He wrinkles his forehead.

Triple shit. There are times when you want a tidal wave to rush in from the sea and whoosh you away. And this has to be one of them. I'm frantically clutching my cardigan sleeves, winding my foot around my leg under the chair, as I try to hang in here. Surely this can't be? Or can it? 'Right, so you're...' This is so embarrassing, and what's more, if I try to apologise that will only make it worse.

'I'm Quinn Penryn, Dan's right-hand guy.' He butts in, but the words come out slowly, one syllable at a time, as if he's explaining to a child. He's still smiling, but this time there's less sparkle and more relief. 'Great to have cleared that up. Good to meet you... at last... Sera.' There's the smallest ironic twinkle in his eye as he holds out his hand. 'I must say, you're very different from your sister.'

I'm not going to show how happy I am he's noticed. I shrug. 'What is there to say, she's in Brussels, I'm here.'

'And cutting too. This kitten has claws.' There's a glint in his eyes as he lets out a laugh.

Whatever. That wasn't what I meant. But I can't help being pleased I've surprised him.

He leans towards me. 'This is going to be a lot more fun than I'd thought.'

As his palm finally hits mine I throw myself into the handshake. But even as I'm grasping and shaking Quinn's hand for all I'm worth, my brain's jumped somewhere else entirely. *So what the hell happened to Johnny, then?* That thousand-to-one outside chance. The one that had me awake all night, rigid, in case it should happen. The reason I've had butterflies dancing in my stomach since the moment Jess closed the shop door after him yesterday. I completely refuse to believe that my stomach feeling like a wrinkled pancake now is down to disappointment that I'm not going to get to see him. That he was on his way to another wedding entirely.

Quinn's voice pulls me back to reality. 'These wedding plans are epic. We're going to have such a blast...'

'Sure,' I say. Not that I've ever thought of Alice's marriage quite like that before.

As I get to my feet and drag on my coat, out of the corner of my eye I catch Poppy's manic double thumbs-up signs beyond the flashing fairy lights of the table decoration. And it's not just because she's going to snaffle the hot chocolate I'm leaving behind. If I'm doing mental eye rolls it's because I can just imagine how this is going to get reported back to Jess. Essence and all.

As for me, I've no idea what's coming. But that one enthusiastic burst from Quinn just put the next week in a whole new light.

5

Saturday, 17th December

The sea front in St Aidan: Pretenders and parking tickets

‘So my wheels are right outside...’

At a guess, if Quinn’s chilled-out surfie style transfers to his transport, we’ll be trundling around in a clapped-out camper. Not that I’m a car snob – I can’t be, when I drive my gran’s cast-off mini, as rarely as I do. But whereas those characterful vans are fabulous fun in summer, their heaters are non-existent. Given it’s December, I’m preparing to freeze my butt off.

‘We’re over there, where the sand ends.’ As we cross the deck Quinn’s arm casually flops round my shoulder, steering me left. He’s come in so close behind me now, he’s bumping on my satchel.

‘It’s all double yellows, there’s a strict “no parking” policy, the wardens are like Rottweilers.’ I say, shivering as a gust of wind blows my coat open. He’s obviously got confused somewhere. But I might as well give him the benefit of my inside information, seeing as that’s what I’m here for. ‘Driving isn’t my strongest point, but people definitely aren’t allowed to park along here.’

‘I’m not “people”, Sera.’ He sounds indignant, as we clatter down the steps from the terrace to the seafront. ‘My policy is “park where I please”. I live dangerously, risk the wardens every time.’ As he pulls his keys from his pocket, he tosses them high and snatches them out of the air.

I blink as I hear a beeping and scan the empty seafront for a van. It’s only when the headlights flip up and flash, I notice a sleek, low car tucked in around the side of the Surf Shack. I try to make my eyes less wide and attempt to keep the surfie vibe going. ‘Your wheels?’ This serious bit of metallic London bling looks lost and out of place, up to its hubs in a sand dune.

‘Yep.’ He flings open both the doors and rips a plastic bag off the windscreen with a snort. ‘Complete with complementary parking ticket.’

‘What did I tell you?’ As I poke my head into the car, I’m met by the scent of leather with a heavy overtone of seaweed.

He dips into the car and grabs a damp wetsuit and towel from the front seat. ‘I’ll just put these in the back.’

I can’t hide my surprise. ‘You’ve been swimming?’ And there was I, writing him off as a pretender the minute I clapped eyes on the car.

‘I had a quick dip before we met up.’ He slams the boot and rubs his hand through his hair. ‘One life, live it and all that. It was damned cold, but it woke me up.’ Another of those understated shrugs, and the next minute he leaps into the driving seat.

When I attempt to do the same on my side of the car, I discover squeezing into the low, narrow seat isn’t as easy as he makes it look. Getting my legs into the foot well is about as easy as fitting a baby giraffe into a crisp packet. On the plus side, I’m guessing there’ll be a heater.

Quinn leans across me, flips open the glove box, and stuffs the crumpled-up parking ticket on top of a heap of others. ‘Into the filing cabinet. They’ll keep my PA busy in the lull after Christmas.’ He lets out a long sigh. ‘As for parking wardens, whatever happened to hanging loose in Cornwall?’ But the grin he sends me as he slams the glove box shut is entirely unrepentant.

I open my mouth, intending to expand on the perennial problem of narrow streets, tourist crowds and selfish parkers. But the engine roars, and the next thing, the wheels are spinning up a sandstorm. As we scream along the seafront at what feels like a hundred miles an hour, but may only be ninety-nine, I’m gripping the arm rests so hard my fingers hurt.

‘Mark Ronson okay for you?’ Quinn says, as he leans forward and flicks on the stereo. ‘We hang out sometimes, these are some of his unreleased tracks.’

Oh my. Is this guy is for real?

‘Great.’ I force out a smile and decide it’s not cool to ask if he means ‘the’ Mark Ronson. I’ve a feeling I should be reacting more to what sounds like plain old bass guitar with a drum backing. ‘Anything’s good for me.’ So long as it’s not “go faster” music. We’re going fast enough as it is.

By the time we hit the road out of St Aidan, I’m a) thanking my lucky stars the windows are tinted so no one will have recognised me in the car that broke the sound barrier going up the high street, and b) fully understanding the term white-knuckle ride.

As we zoom into open country, the winter landscape is passing so fast it’s little more than a grey blur, so I decide to look inside the car instead. Now I’m close enough to examine the stitches, Quinn’s sweater seems less surfer, more designer. As he rests his forearms on the steering wheel, he eases up a sleeve, and I let out a gasp. Tattoos? On Alice’s best man? Surely not?

I shuffle in my seat and end up resting my chin on my propped-up satchel. ‘So where exactly do you work into this wedding picture then? How do you know the happy couple?’ From where I’m sitting he seems an unlikely fit for one of Alice’s friends, for every possible reason.

‘Dan and I have an app-development company we started at uni.’ As he eases up his other sleeve the colours on his skin are dazzling. ‘Dan does the geeky code stuff, I’m the creative one with the street cred and persuasive powers.’ His sideways glance twinkles with a dash of self-mockery. And a bucketful of self-assurance. ‘I’m a no-brainer choice for best man.’

‘I see.’ It’s amazing how strangers can give you an immediate insight into what your soon-to-be family gets up to.

‘And I’m the one with the contacts too,’ he goes on, as he drags the car round a left-hand bend on two wheels. ‘Like, I arranged to borrow the wedding venue from my uncle.’ He’s definitely not bragging about it either. From his dismissive shrug he might be talking about blagging a box of chocolates for a raffle prize. ‘We all used to holiday down here at Rose Hill Manor as kids, so we know people in Rose Hill village. It’s the most magical place. My uncle mostly lives in London, and goes to Klosters for Christmas, so we had the perfect “in”.’

Due to Quinn sorting the venue, I’ve already forgiven him for the last corner. What’s more I’m beginning to see why Alice might be overlooking his shortcomings too.

I start breathing again now we’re back on four wheels. ‘So you know the area then?’ Which kind of rubbishes the argument that I’m here for my local expertise.

He grins and taps his fingers on the steering wheel. ‘Enough to know where to swim and not get caught out by the tides.’

How cool a reply is that?

‘And you thought that was why you were needed?’ He raises an eyebrow and stares at me for so long I think we might crash.

I take a while to find the best way of answering. ‘That’s what Alice... kind of implied.’

His voice drops. ‘Well she would... wouldn’t she?’ He rubs his forehead and shakes his head. ‘Actually, way better than that, tell me about you. So far all I know is you live here and you’re a painter.’

So that about sums it up. Mostly I’d have let the misinformation go and left it at that. But something about his ragged left cuff makes me comfortable enough to put him right.

‘My *gran* was the painter. She used the same colour pallet as the tats on your wrist.’

That has him nodding. ‘So what about you?’

I say it quickly, hoping we can move on. ‘I design wedding dresses.’

His eyes open wider and he’s bouncing with enthusiasm. ‘Great, so you designed Alice’s then?’

I don’t hold back putting him right on that. ‘Definitely not.’

‘Ouch...’

That one word tells me he completely understands.

‘As you said before, Alice and I are very different people. My dresses wouldn’t suit her at all. I’m a bit dreamy, whereas she’s...’ I hesitate, wanting to be fair.

‘Uptight and dictatorial? Controlling and completely un-chilled?’

I wince. Quinn filling in the gap sounds a lot harsher than me thinking it.

He laughs. 'Don't worry, we don't have to pretend, we both know her. And mostly we forgive her.' He leans across and taps my bag. 'I'm guessing that's where you're hiding Alice's *Book of Wedding Law*?' He gives a conspiratorial nod towards the back of the car. 'Mine's in the boot.'

'You got one too?' I ask, fumbling with the buckles on my bag.

'I did,' he says, amusement lilting around his lips.

Somehow I've been so blown away by Quinn, I completely forgot to check the small print for today. I look at my watch. 'So did you read what we're supposed to be doing now? Ten-thirty, Saturday, what job did the itinerary say?'

His face cracks into a smile. 'Much as I love Alice, there's more than one way to skin a cat.'

'Sorry?' I have no idea what he's driving at.

'You have two hundred pages of detailed instructions in your bag. But given the person who wrote them isn't here we don't have to follow them to the letter.' He slaps the steering wheel triumphantly.

'Isn't that all the more reason we should stick to them?' I'm starting to see why I'm here.

A low laugh comes from Quinn's throat. 'You're more like your sister than you like to think, Sera. From where I stand, what you're clinging onto in that bag of yours is a whole load of suggestions. And it's our job, as creative directors, to implement these to the best of our ability. But we'll do that so much better if we do it in our own way.'

Actually I think he might have lost me a mile out of St Aidan. 'There's a difference?'

'Of course there's a difference.' He's almost shouting now. 'I'm a free spirit, I'm categorically incapable of obeying orders. But I'm damned amazing at making things happen. What you're holding is a blueprint, but we're not going to be enslaved. We're going to wing it.'

'Oh shit.' I sigh. All Alice's hard work and I can see it imploding in front of my eyes. What's more, I'm kicking myself for not reading every single page of the wedding manual. Three times. At least. By only skimming the first two pages, I've really let Alice down. Because without the facts, I have no idea how far off course Quinn is taking us.

'Let's face it, we'd have no fun at all doing it Alice's way,' he says. 'These days she sucks the joy out of everything.'

I hate hearing him talk about Alice like this. But he might have a point. She used to like to steer, but lately she's become horribly rigid. But only because her wedding's so important. 'But at least we could *try* it Alice's way?' I reason. 'And go *off-piste* if it doesn't work?'

Quinn gives a loud sigh. 'So currently, in the world according to Alice, we should be picking up snow machines in Truro. Whereas as I see it, it's way more important to let you see the venue first. That way you'll get a real handle on the event.'

I wince at the jargon. 'Snow machines? What are they for?'

'Sera, please tell me you didn't just ask that.'

I know Alice wants a white wedding in every way. I screw up my face and my courage, and hazard a guess. 'You mean they are *literally* what it says on the tin?' Don't blame me. I spend a lot of time in my own little design world, either on the beach or in the studio. Sometimes I miss out on crucial cultural developments. Somehow I've missed out that snow machines even exist.

'You put water in, fire them up and end up with a snow storm. Of sorts. They can be a bit hit and miss. You only have to read the reviews on Trip Advisor to know they disappoint more often than they thrill. Which is why I suspect she's ordered so many.'

I think I get what he means. 'So if it really starts to snow, we get to skip a whole trip to Truro.' I'm hoping to show I've got the idea and I'm willing to give it a go, at least in part.

'It won't,' he says, making no sense at all.

'Won't what?'

‘It’s not going to snow.’ He sounds definite on that, as he jumps on the brakes and makes a sharp left-hand turn off the lane we’re racing along. ‘So we will need those machines, but they’re not top of our list.’

As we accelerate out of the turn, the cluster of buildings coming into view on the hill ahead is comfortingly familiar. ‘But this is Daisy Hill Farm. Where the wedding guests are staying.’

‘Got it in one.’ He gives a low laugh. ‘See, you know your way around better than you think.’

I’m trying to keep up and failing. ‘But I thought we were going to the venue?’

‘I’m staying in the cosiest little holiday cottage at the farm, and there’s a fridge full of food.’ There’s that unrepentant grin again. ‘So unless you want to spend all day sitting next to someone who smells like the beach, I reckon our first priority is a shower and breakfast.’

‘Brill.’ I say, because I’m really regretting not finishing my hot chocolate earlier. What’s more my tummy is growling at the mention of breakfast. But all the same, my alarm bells are ringing.

Something tells me I’m going to have to up my game here. And fast. I’m going to have to pull out all the stops to keep Quinn in hand. Or Alice’s wedding will be careering off the rails quicker than I can say ‘fried eggs’.

6

Saturday, 17th December
In Quinn's cottage at Daisy Hill Farm:
Scrambled eggs and second glances

'Come on in...' The warmth hits us the moment Quinn pushes open the pale grey door of the cottage. He leads the way into a wide open-plan living room with exposed beams and whitewashed stone walls. 'This is home... at least it is until we move up to the manor house for the wedding.'

Quinn wasn't joking when he said the cottage is cosy. Daisy Hill Farm is the most amazing summer wedding venue, owned by Rafe Barker, who is the guy Poppy has finally got together with. I came up to the farm a couple of times last year with Jess and Poppy, but I haven't been in the holiday cottages before. The converted outbuildings, clustered around a courtyard could literally have come off a picture postcard. And they're the ideal accommodation for the guests who won't fit into the manor.

When he kicks off his boots by the door, Quinn's feet are bare, with traces of sand between his toes. 'Help yourself to a hot drink,' he says, nodding towards the kitchen area. After pushing on some flip flops, he strides across to a wood burner in a huge rustic fireplace, throws on a couple of logs, and rattles the fire back to life. 'I'll grab a quick shower and then I'll cook. Farm eggs, scrambled, with local sausages and cherry tomatoes okay?'

By the time I swallow my drool enough to reply, he's already disappeared to the bathroom.

Sipping hot chocolate, toasting my toes in front of a roaring fire, when we should be out collecting snow machines? As I look at it, I'm re-grouping. And making up for my previous slacking. And this time, curled up on a velvet sofa with lots of squishy cushions, and Alice's *Wedding Book* resting heavy on my knees, I'm reading with a new urgency. And what's more, I'm making sure every word of it is logged in my brain. So much for fast showers. I've actually got as far as page ten, when there's a knock on the outside door. As there's still no sign of Quinn, I go to answer it, and find Immie, the holiday-cottage manager, on the doorstep. Immie has known Poppy since they were toddlers. I've met her at the shop over the years and seen a lot more of her lately, with Alice's wedding coming up. After a flying visit to see the venue, Alice has organised most things remotely, occasionally using me as go-between. So no one at the farm has actually met her in person yet.

'I saw you and Quinn arrive, so I thought I'd pop over,' Immie says, as I step back to let her in from the cold. 'Alice rang to tell me you're in charge for now, Sera. I've brought you a key for the office, so you can help yourself to all the cottage keys when you need them.' She runs her fingers through the short spikes of her hair, dropping her voice as she comes in closer. 'Between us, I'd rather not trust Quinn with it. I've known him a long time and I know he drives a flash car and he's meant to be a squillionaire, but he's also a bit "hello clouds, hello sky" when it comes to other people's stuff. Always has been.'

Once I've got over the shock of my 'in charge' label, I can't help smiling. Usually I'm the one who loses things. If they're trusting me over Quinn, he *must* be a disaster.

As for access to the holiday lets, in the last twenty minutes I've discovered that Alice, bless her perfectionist heart, has a welcome pack waiting for every holiday cottage, with enough Christmas decorations to fit out Oxford Street. Which all need collecting and installing. No pressure there, then. I can see I'm not going to get to bed between now and the wedding.

As Immie's Barbour gapes open, I notice she's clutching a familiar fat file to mine. 'You got one too?' I ask.

‘Yes, Alice made this booking years ago, she’s covered every aspect. In spades.’ Immie gives the file a doubtful tap. ‘Although Alice has to realise, the best-laid plans can go tits up.’ From the snort she gives, Immie’s viewing the file as fiction rather than fact. ‘The good thing with weddings is it’s all between friends. Everyone pitches in and no one minds.’

The phrase ‘tits up’ makes my eyes go wide. As for ‘not minding’, that doesn’t sound like Alice. The slightest deviation from the plan, we’ll all be for the high jump. I hug my shoulders as a shudder ripples through me.

Immie laughs. ‘There’s no need to look that scared.’ Which obviously goes to show she knows zilch about Alice. ‘I know it’s a lot different from making those beautiful dresses, but we’ve all got your back until Alice takes over.’

Which is nice to know, but might not be enough. Some things it’s best not to think about, so I change the subject. ‘You sound like you know Quinn well?’

‘Hell yes.’ Immie’s dramatic eye roll says it all. ‘He used to turn up at the big house – Rose Hill Manor – every summer.’ She pulls a face. ‘When we were teenagers, we did a lot of underage drinking together at the Fox and Goose. Back then he was as bad as they make them, but charming with it.’ She gives a gruff laugh. ‘And I don’t think he’s changed any.’

Immie’s famed for telling it like it is. And the more she says about Quinn, the more it sounds like she’s got him to a ‘T’.

There’s a click as the bathroom door opens and the next moment we hear Quinn. ‘Who hasn’t changed?’

Shit. I wince as he saunters across the wooden floor, naked except for a hand towel knotted around his waist. Okay, on second glance – yes, I’ll admit I looked again – it’s a long way below waist level.

‘Bloody hell, sight for sore eyes or what?’ Immie shakes her head and groans. ‘Still just as much of an exhibitionist, I see.’

Right now I’m thanking my lucky stars Immie’s here to slap Quinn down. Although maybe this was all to wind her up. Whatever, I’m glad I’m not alone with this un-clothed version of the man, even if he does look completely relaxed in his own skin. There are so many ripped torsos on the beach, I barely notice them. Whereas this almost-naked guy rocking up on the tufted rug has me entirely horrified, with a tiny undercurrent of thrill I’d rather not admit to. And I’m hoping the others will assume my burning cheeks are down to the fire, not the hormonal flush. I’m definitely going to need a few pointers from Immie on how to handle him.

Quinn seems impervious to Immie’s accusations. ‘Not guilty, I promise.’

As he turns to me and holds up his hands, I’m praying the knot in his towel is well tied. Otherwise we’re all in trouble.

‘I thought I’d get the sausages underway before I got dressed, that’s all.’ As he rubs his arm, the biceps he’s flexing are pretty damned honed, so maybe Immie’s spot on with what she says. ‘And these days I’m fully tamed, house-trained too.’ He’s upping the protest now. ‘Jeez, I’m cooking breakfast, aren’t I?’ The next thing, he’s wandered over and he’s giving me the smallest and cheekiest naked elbow nudge on his way to the fridge. ‘You couldn’t ask for anything more domesticated than that, could you, Sera?’

Immie shakes her head at me and lets out a long sigh. ‘You’ve got your hands full with that one.’

‘It’s fine,’ I say, meaning anything but. I need to start as I mean to go on, even if I’m dying inside. ‘We’ve got so much work to get through it’s unreal,’ I say, completely truthfully. My recent readings revealed a ‘To Do’ list of mind-boggling proportions. ‘We’re keeping it fun, so we’re definitely saying “stuff the snow machines” for now. We’ll be starting with Christmas deccies in the holiday cottages, if that’s okay with you, Immie?’ Let Quinn have what he wants, but at the same time make sure we do something useful. If I don’t stand up to him from the start, I’ll be dead meat. ‘All good, Quinn?’ I make sure I’m smiling, then turn to check out his reaction.

There's a string of sausages dangling from his hand, and he's opening and closing his mouth like a guppy. Given he's pretty much lost for words, I'm guessing surprise is a good tactic.

'We'll take that as a "yes" then.' Immie winks at me. 'Let yourselves into the cottages, the keys are all in the office.'

While I've got Immie here for back up, I go again. 'Be careful in the kitchen, Quinn, if you're playing the naked chef. We can't have the best man burning himself.'

Immie's straight in after me. 'Make sure you cook the right sausages too.' She gives a guffaw and holds out the key to me. 'I'll let you get on. I got you a Santa keyring that flashes,' she says. 'So you can keep track of it.'

Seeing as the light-up Santa in question is at least eight inches high, I'm guessing someone tipped her off about me losing stuff.

'A flashing Santa from Immie? Why does that not surprise me?' Quinn quips, as he emerges from behind the kitchen units.

Immie rounds on him. 'You... Stop cheeking people and damn well go and get some clothes on.'

Surprisingly, he saunters across the room like a lamb.

I wait until he's almost at the bedroom door. 'Nice tats, by the way.' I note the way he jerks to a halt, then laugh at Immie. 'But now I've seen them once, I won't need to see them again. Understood?'

'Okay,' he says grudgingly, and gives us a crestfallen-puppy shrug. 'Your loss, though.'

Immie heads for the other door, but when she reaches it, she drops her voice. 'I can tell he likes you. Joke around, but stay firm. You'll have him eating out of your hand.'

I really hope she's right.

7

Saturday, 17th December **At Rose Hill Manor: Records and pocket handkerchiefs**

Anyone who cooks a breakfast as delicious as the one we just ate deserves to get a little bit of their own way, even if they did do it with too few clothes on. So when we finally get to work on the list of stuff to collect for the cottages, Quinn gets to decide the order of the pickups. By the time we turn into the drive to Rose Hill Manor to pick up a consignment of boxes, the hire van Alice had thoughtfully had delivered to the farm is already groaning under the weight of fifty Christmas trees in pots for inside and out at the cottages.

He gives a satisfied nod as we make our way between the avenue of huge trees flanking the approach road. As we round the final corner, and the house comes into view, the steep roofs and mellow stone facade are glowing gold in the pale-pink afternoon light.

He pulls the van to a halt. 'There you go, Rose Hill at its rosy winter best.'

'Wow... beautiful.' Squinting at it through the wide windscreen of the van, I'm almost lost for words. The house is larger than I'd imagined, but its higgledy piggledy mix of windows make it wonderfully welcoming. 'Alice is *so* lucky to be getting married here.'

Of everyone I know, Alice and Dan are one of the most perfect and solid couples, and they truly deserve this. And I don't mean to imply they're boring. It's just I couldn't actually imagine settling down together as early as they did myself. They met on their first day at uni and have been going out ever since. As soon as they got their degrees, Dan set up the business and Alice zoomed up her career ladder. Next came the most gorgeous Hampstead flat, and fast-forward to a textbook romantic proposal on a private launch on the Thames. Now three years later, this fabulous wedding is the icing on their perfect cake.

'I thought you'd like it.' Quinn's smile is full of warmth. 'There's a formal garden and more parkland round the back.' From the way Quinn's talking, he could be describing a pocket handkerchief lawn with a barbecue on a patio. 'Oh, and a bit of a lake too.' Just as an afterthought, then.

I pause for a moment, trying to take it all in. 'It's so wintery, with the bare trees silhouetted against the land.' I can imagine how it looks, dusted with the rime of a hoar frost. If Alice gets one of those for the day of her wedding, even though I know they don't happen very often, it'll be worth freezing our butts off for the pictures.

He nods at my satchel, clamped between my feet. 'Not sure if you've got that far in the *Wedding Story*, but they've got a hot-shot photographer coming down. One of the best in London. Friend of a friend. I blagged them a four-figure discount.'

The more I hear, the bigger Quinn's involvement seems to be. 'Alice must be very grateful,' I say.

He gives a sigh. 'Alice and I have our moments. She doesn't always approve of me, or my methods.'

'She's always been conventional,' I admit. After a few hours with Quinn, I can see his individual brand of anarchy probably drives Alice up the wall. 'You should be in her good books after this, anyway.'

'I'm not sure I'll ever make it that far.' He gives a laugh. 'Thank Christmas you're more Team Dan than Team Alice.'

Whoa. 'I wasn't aware we were taking sides here. Isn't this a joint effort all round?'

'My point entirely,' he says.

I'm not certain, but I think he just contradicted himself hugely there. Not that I'm going to point it out.

He goes on. 'Which is exactly why you should come and join me and stay at the cottage.'

'What?' For some reason I haven't kept up with the logic here. Worse, I seem to be squeaking like a strangled mouse.

He drums his fingers on the steering wheel. 'It makes perfect sense, given we get on so well. At least until the others arrive. Bunking in together would save you running back and forwards into town.'

When I turn to examine his expression, there's not an ounce of flirt in his eyes. Just a very direct, honest, blue green gaze. Which is actually way more unnerving. Because now I don't know what the hell to think. Other than knowing this would be completely banned by Alice. And remembering there's no way he'd be attracted to me with my non-existent figure and scruffy clothes.

As I open my mouth I'm unsure how to reply, but it doesn't matter as he cuts me off short.

'Obviously we don't have to decide now.' He gives me another elbow nudge, but this time there's the thickness of an extra sweater between us, so it's way less jolty than this morning's naked one. 'For the record...' There's a bit of a dramatic pause. 'I do think hanging out with me twenty-four seven would do you a lot of good.' He tops that off with one of those unapologetic grins of his.

'Thanks for the offer,' I say. *For the record*. Was that completely arrogant of him? Or just plain cheeky? Or an extremely kind thought to save me travelling time? As for exactly what he thinks I'm going to be hanging out... After this morning the mind boggles. 'I'll stay at home. At least for now.'

For a moment, thinking back to the shop and the best man that could have been, I consider a parallel universe where Johnny and I had just loaded fifty potted pines into the back of a van. Where he asks me to stay over. But before I decide how to answer, my sensible self takes over and stamps on that thought. Hard.

'Okay, next job,' Quinn says, rubbing his hands together. 'Decorations for the cottages, from the Coach House.' He's suddenly sounding like Mr Efficiency. 'And there should be a handyman guy in there doing repairs to the pony and trap Alice is hoping to arrive in.'

'Cool.' My reading hasn't got as far as the bridal carriage yet. Hopefully I'll get onto that tonight. On my own sofa.

As he pushes the gear stick forwards, his forehead creases into a frown. 'You do realise, people don't often turn me down, Sera.'

He seems particularly perplexed that I have. Although it's really not exactly clear what I've said 'no' to here.

'I don't imagine they do.' My lips twitch into a smile, but I can't resist the next bit, because he said the same thing to me only half an hour ago. 'But then I'm not "people", Quinn.'

Me? I'm wary enough to put that easy charm and those aching good looks on hold every time. At least until I get to know him better.

In the meantime, we need to push on.

8

Saturday, 17th December In the kitchen at Daisy Hill Farm: Mistletoe sprigs and hearts on strings

As I reach the farmhouse, later that evening, I walk straight into Rafe giving Poppy what looks like the good-bye snog of her life on the doorstep.

‘Don’t mind him, he’s acting like he’s disappearing for a year,’ Poppy laughs, as she peels herself away. ‘He’s only going out to check the cows.’

It’s taken these two a year to make this work, but it’s been worth the wait. Believe me, if there was a guy who looked at you the way he looks at her, you’d reconsider your single status. Every time.

‘Are you still here working?’ As Poppy steps back to let me past, the scent of warm spice whooshes up my nose. ‘Come on in and warm up, I’m trying out Rafe’s Aga.’ She’s got her hair in a twist and icing sugar on her nose.

‘Thanks, it’s so cold out here, my fingers are like ice pops,’ I say. It’s dark and after stringing lights on trees, by every cottage door around the farm, despite my woolly gloves my hands feel like they belong to someone else.

Poppy peers down at the light-up Santa poking out of my pocket as she leads the way into the kitchen. ‘I see Santa’s doing his job, if you still have the office key.’

Between us, keeping track of all the cottage keys has been a nightmare. Quinn might be enthusiastic and strong, and know some hilarious jokes, but he’s a total ditz when it comes to losing things. For the first time in my life I completely understand why I’ve sent people round the bend with my vagueness in the past.

‘Look at your hessian hearts on strings, there’s so many of them,’ I say, as I take in the garlands criss-crossing the room. I thought we’d got a lot of deccies for the cottages, but seeing the number of hearts and bows in here, I’m not so sure we’ve got enough.

Poppy laughs. ‘This is Rafe’s welcome-back effort. Not a tractor part in sight either, though I’m not sure how long that’ll last.’

‘Are you baking?’ My mouth’s already watering, as I see the bowls and drifts of flour on the long kitchen table. It’s been three long months since I last wolfed down Poppy’s cakes, and I’ve missed them almost as much as I’ve missed her. Seeing as I was often in the studio at Brides by the Sea when she lived and baked her cakes in the top-floor flat, I was officially her chief taster.

‘You’ve timed it well. Fancy testing my gingerbread men?’ She nods at a pile of biscuits on a cooling tray. ‘They haven’t got any eyes yet. My icing pipes are still at the shop.’ She slides the kettle onto the Aga. ‘You’ve got roses in your cheeks from the cold. Like a drink to warm up?’

I’m suddenly so hungry I’m practically swooning at the thought of gingerbread. ‘Tea would be fab, please.’

‘I’ll make one for Quinn too.’ She pulls some mugs from the shelf. ‘You two looked like you were having fun when I saw you earlier.’

‘He’s a long way from the stuffed shirt I was expecting,’ I laugh. ‘He’ll be along soon. Great with fairy lights, too.’ Since he put his clothes on and covered up that disgustingly deep tan of his, we’ve got on better.

Poppy frowns. ‘Immie said she’d have been happy to put up the usual cottage decorations, but Alice wouldn’t hear of it.’

I pull a face. 'I'm sorry Alice is a bit fussy. She wants every cottage themed, to match the wedding and the occupants.' This won't be the last time I apologise for her. 'Actually I came to check if it's okay to take the pig pictures down?' Another of Alice's specific instructions.

Poppy's face breaks into a grin. 'We're all with Alice on that one. Those pigs are hideous. Leave them in the office, with any luck they won't go back up again.' She puts three mugs on the chunky wood table and piles a plate high with gingerbread men. 'Is there much left for you to do in the cottages?'

Sliding onto a chair, I slip off my jacket, then grab a tea and dunk my biscuit. 'Loads.' I sink my teeth into a delicious gingerbread leg to stem my panic. Because 'loads' is a huge understatement. Each cottage has an individual tree with hand-made decorations. Then there are bespoke toiletries, wicker wreaths, pillow chocolates, rose petals, scented candles, boxes of Turkish delight, hampers, fruit bowls and a mistletoe sprig. And tasteful pictures to replace the pigs. And Christmas garlands. 'The job's so massive, if I hadn't had a gingerbread intake at exactly this minute, I might actually have given up.' I'm not joking either.

Poppy stares at me over the top of her mug. 'Maybe Immie and I could help?'

'No, I couldn't possibly expect you to do that. You haven't even met Alice yet.'

'Really, it's fine, Sera. We're all here for each other. Look how you stepped in with my bestie last summer. The dress you lent Cate gave her the wedding of her dreams.'

'But Cate let us use her photos for publicity...' I'm hesitating, knowing the difference more hands would make.

Poppy comes over and squeezes my shoulder. 'Think of this as payback for you making Cate's day wonderful. That wedding might not even have happened without your dress.' She's being very persuasive.

'You really have time to help?' If I didn't have my mouth full of gingerbread man, I'd kiss her.

She smiles. 'I'm just back from London, with no cake orders, and no weddings to sort out. And who doesn't love Christmas decorations?'

'You might not be saying that when you get to the end,' I groan. 'But if you're sure, I'd be *so* grateful.'

'Call in first thing, show us exactly how you want things. Then leave it with us.' Poppy's still patting my hand when the door opens.

'Can I smell gingerbread?' Quinn's rugged face appears as he dips under a heart garland. 'I let myself in, I hope that's okay?'

This is the measure of the guy. He's laid back and confident enough to walk right in like he owns the place. And he gets away with it every time. Unless there's a parking warden involved.

Poppy's pushing crumbs into her mouth. 'Sit down, grab some tea and tell us how the biscuits are.'

'The good news is Poppy and Immie are going to help with the cottages.' I say, knowing he'll be ecstatic.

'Amazing,' he says. 'Thank Christmas for that.' He folds himself into a chair, helps himself to a biscuit and takes a bite. Then takes a few seconds to deliberate. 'Delicious,' he says eventually, turning to Poppy, waving his biscuit. 'But look, you've bitten off the head of yours, which is pretty cruel.' He sends me a wink. 'Whereas Sera and I are both eating ours feet first.' He leans over and gives me another significant nudge. Which makes four today. If you count the one where we had hysterics because I dropped the Christmas tree on his foot.

I pick up what's left of my gingerbread man – just the head – and pop it into my mouth. Not that I'm trying to eat the evidence, but I'm not sure it's *that* significant. I help myself to another and try to start at the top, but I can't. So I begin to nibble the toes, except this time I'm eating more slowly, because I feel like I'm being watched.

‘It’s the same with chocolate teddy bears,’ Quinn goes on, chomping his way up to chest level on his biscuit. ‘The world is split into two groups – people who start with the head. And people who start with the feet. There’s no switching sides. You are how you are.’

‘When did eating gingerbread men get this complicated?’ I twist my sleeve around my fingers, take another bite and try to work out what he’s getting at here. Or if he’s just bullshitting. Which he might be.

Quinn carries on eating until only the head’s left, then he holds it up. ‘Twelve out of ten for taste.’ He nods at Poppy. ‘I’d score even higher if he had a grin.’

‘Waiting for icing pipes,’ she explains, even though Quinn probably has no idea what she’s talking about. ‘I think what Quinn’s trying to point out, Sera... very subtly...’ Poppy’s nipping back her smile. ‘... Is that you two have quite a lot of common ground.’

‘Excuse me?’ I say. I’m not sure this is what I need to hear. Because it’s patently not true.

Quinn’s wagging his next biscuit at Poppy. ‘Twelve out of ten for observation there, Pops.’

Listening to this, I’d say they’re the ones with the common ground. She didn’t even flinch when he called her Pops and she usually hates it.

‘It’s not just the gingerbread. Look at you both.’ Poppy’s laughing now. ‘The same ripped denim, the same sun-streaked hair, your sweaters are practically identical...’

Pretty appalled, I look down to remind myself what jumper I pulled off the bedside chair this morning. Yes, it’s one of my favourites. Burnt orange, sloppy. I chose it as my comfort blanket because I was stressed about this random best man I was going to meet. With good cause, as it happens. *Was that really only this morning?* The end of my sweater sleeves are fraying where I’ve been tugging them over my hands, which is what I’m doing now. As I turn my gaze onto Quinn, my tummy sinks.

Shit. ‘So, we’re both wearing orange sweaters.’ I’m praying Poppy won’t pick up on his ragged cuffs. ‘And your point is?’ As I push back my sweater sleeve, because actually I’m getting a bit hot here under all the scrutiny, Poppy lets out a yelp.

‘Omigod, you’ve got the same leather wristbands too.’ She gives a guilty shrug. ‘I’m sorry, Sera, but it’s much more than what you’re wearing. Your expression is so similar, it’s unreal.’ She chews her thumbnail as she studies us. ‘You’re like a couple of beachy twins.’

I pull in a long breath. Twins I may be persuaded to go for. Non-identical ones, obviously. Where the siblings disagree over most things. It’s the ‘couple’ bit that has me lifting off the chair.

‘Actually we have really different views on practically every subject.’ Even as I blurt it out I can see Quinn smirking behind his hand.

‘Really...’ Poppy sounds unconvinced.

‘Yes,’ I’m determined to fight my case here. Quinn and I have been together for less than a day and we’ve been at odds right left and centre. ‘Like I really disagree with inconsiderate parking... which Quinn does all over the place.’ I stick out my chin. One to me. ‘And I completely disagree with guys walking around the cottage nine-tenths naked...’ It’s out before I think. This is how crap I am under pressure. And it’s way more embarrassing for me than anyone else, which is why those roses in my cheeks have now spread to the tips of my ears. Dammit.

Poppy’s elbow is on the table and she’s propping her chin on her hand, widening her eyes at Quinn in mock horror. ‘Don’t tell me you’ve been walking around without clothes, Quinn?’

He grins, but looks entirely unashamed. ‘I have. But only to put the sausages on.’

Poppy blinks at that. At least the sausage part slowed her down a bit. But then she turns to me. ‘Not wanting to put you on the spot, Sera, but what about that string bikini you walk round in the entire summer? The one that covers a whole lot less than a tenth of you. The one you wear all the time. In the studio, down the mini market, in the Cats’ Protection shop. Basically everywhere, except if there are customers around?’

Quinn laughs. 'So we park in different places. But it sounds like we definitely both like to chill...' He pauses, and the skin at the ends of his eyes crinkles as he smiles. '...Nine-tenths naked, that is.'

I'm kicking myself for coining that phrase. And although I'm hungry enough to eat for an army, if I have one more crumb of gingerbread man I might just choke.

'Talking of chilling...' Quinn's suddenly much more serious. 'If I see another fairy light, I might just explode, so it's probably time for some down time.' He claps his hands. 'I've got wine and supper waiting across at the cottage for anyone who's interested.' He switches his gaze to Poppy. 'We were thinking it might be easier if Sera stays over at mine tonight.' Smooth as anything. Just like that.

My eyes practically pop out of their sockets in shock. What part of 'no' does this guy not understand?

I take a deep breath and count to nine... 'Actually, I was hoping to get back to St Aidan, if anyone's going that way?' The look I send Poppy is pure desperation. What's more, she did create the opening for Quinn here, although I've a feeling he'd have made it regardless. 'I've got too much reading and designing to catch up on to spend time... chilling.' Naked or otherwise.

'Maybe another night, then.' Poppy smiles at Quinn, then turns to me. 'No problem, I'll pop you back home, Sera. Let's face it, I can hardly ice a Christmas cake without my piping bags. And I might grab some cupcake cases too.'

Now she's talking. Right now I could kill for one of Poppy's cupcakes. Plain sponge. With lashings of vanilla buttercream. All white, like the wedding dresses. Just in case the crumbs get in the wrong place in the shop.

As for tomorrow, I'm going to need all the calories I can get, to keep the Naked Chef in hand. There I go again. Definitely not in hand. Anything but that.

9

Sunday, 18th December

At Brides by the Sea: Blaring horns and short circuits

Sera, Pls can you bring me some pieces of lace – working on Christmas cupcake designs – cd always make a few Chrissy cupcakes for Alice’s cake table? Poppy xx

I’m in the studio the next morning and as Poppy’s text pings into my phone, I can hear Jess’s loafers clattering up the stairs. Although, if Poppy imagines there will be a place for unscheduled cupcakes at Alice’s wedding, it’s because she doesn’t know Alice.

‘How long have you been here?’ Jess pops her head around the doorframe, frowning, her voice high with surprise. ‘Aren’t you supposed to be on wedding duties today?’

Poppy’s text gives me the perfect excuse. ‘I just called in to get some lace scraps for Poppy.’ I’d rather Jess didn’t know I’ve been here since five, bent over the sewing machine. Having hit a brick wall with my as-yet non-existent designs, I’ve gone back to basics. I’ve been messing around with silks and satins and scissors, trying to free myself up by skipping the drawings and working very fast, straight onto the mannequin. If I stop worrying and work entirely instinctively with the raw materials, like I used to do when I was a student, maybe, just maybe, I’ll short-circuit my creative block. Come up with some entirely new ideas and shapes for wedding dresses. Although thus far, all I’ve got are a line of limp shifts, dangling from hangers. Like ghosts waiting for a Halloween party.

‘Are you okay? You’ve got very dark circles.’ Jess motions to her eyes, although if she thinks I’m looking sleep-deprived, she should find a mirror.

‘I was up late, reading up on the wedding strategy,’ I say. It was well after midnight when I crawled into bed, my head throbbing with wedding facts. I definitely don’t need to admit the pre-dawn start to work on my collection. ‘What’s your excuse?’

She rolls her eyes. ‘Jagers until four.

‘Again?’

‘It was the “Grab a Granny and a Cocktail” Christmas do. Believe me, some of these forty-year-olds really know how to whoop it up. Jules was there, with his mum.’

‘That was nice.’ Jules is Jess’s tame and very talented photographer, who hasn’t actually untied the apron strings and left home yet. As for age, Jess’s is a closely guarded secret. Between us, forty is a long way short of the real figure, but she talks a good job. And she swears by what she calls her ‘hope in a jar’ products – anti-gravity potions and wrinkle repair creams. She keeps them in the prosecco fridge and slaps them on by the gallon.

‘Actually Jules’ ma was drinking like a bloody fish, I couldn’t keep up with her at all.’ Jess gives a grimace. When it comes to alcohol, Jess is the original hollow-legged woman, so who knows what Jules’ mum is like. ‘So many Christmas parties, I’ll be damned relieved when it’s January. What are you doing today?’

And now she has me. Alice rang last night to say she’s finally got a flight into Devon later on. Which is brilliant news, because that’ll take the heat off me. Right now I’m actually putting off the awful moment when I have to leave the building and drive to the airport to pick her up. Exeter’s a bloody long way when the furthest you usually drive is to the launderette, once every two years, when the washer breaks down.

‘As I said, I’m taking Poppy some pieces of lace.’ I recap, for both our benefits. ‘Then she and Immie are helping with the cottages.’

If Jess gets a sniff of the truth about where I’m heading she’ll go into overdrive. If she starts reeling off road numbers and asking if I’ve got life insurance, I’ll get so hot under the collar, I’ll melt into a pool of grease. Driving round St Aidan I’m fine. But dual carriageways and turning-right

arrows in the road give me the willies. And somehow I have to get all the way to Exeter. And it's no good saying 'use your sat nav', because that just confuses me even more. And half the time there's no connection anyway.

A car horn beeps down below in the mews and makes me jump. Omigod, this is how nervous and wound up I am. That'll be me in half an hour. Getting lost. Causing hold-ups because I don't like driving over forty. Everyone beeping me because I'm in the wrong lane.

When I peer past my fabric samples and magazine piles to see out of the window at the car roofs three floors below, I seem to be looking down on a log jam. Except these are cars not logs. There are three or four horns blaring now, their discordant notes clashing. At first I think I'm having some weird fast-forward see-into-the-future vision of me, having a mid-road crisis, en route to Exeter. When I blink myself back to the present and force myself to calm down, even from above I can tell the car at the front is sleek and low. Even though it's one of those cold, murky, December mornings, when the daylight never really takes a hold, the highly polished, metallic granite paintwork of that car sticks out a mile. Given that by rights Quinn should be miles away, I'm bracing myself for something. I'm just not quite sure what.

'Sera...' It's the Sunday girl calling up. 'There's a guy waiting for you downstairs. I put him in the White Room.'

If this is Quinn, it's an entirely unscheduled visit. Right now he should be at Rose Hill Manor, taking delivery of the starry ceilings for the ballroom. Thank goodness he didn't do his usual trick of walking right on in like he owns the place, and make it all the way up to the studio. I hurl myself down the stairs, and thirty seconds later I'm skidding to a halt on the bleached floor of the White Room, gasping.

'What the hell are you doing here? What about the heavenly ceilings?'

From the way Quinn's holding back his smile, he looks like he's trying not to laugh 'Nice to see you too.' His hands are deep in the pockets of a well-worn duffel coat. 'Poppy told me I might find you here.' He's really rocking the laid-back thing this morning. Which is really damned annoying, when I'm in such a razz.

I pull out my phone and check the time. 'Well I'm in a hurry, even if you're not,' I snap, and give him the most threatening stare I can drum up at short notice. 'Some of us have to get to the airport.' Between us, this is the kind of move I usually practise in front of a mirror for a few weeks before I let it loose on the outside world. But we all know there's no time for that here. 'If you miss the Celestial Ceilings people...' Alice will go apoplectic/through the roof/ape – or maybe even all three.

But before I can get that far, he interrupts. 'Okay, take a chill pill, Sera...'

If he knew how patronising he sounded, he really wouldn't say that.

He carries on. 'The flight's not in until this afternoon, there's no need to set off yet.'

I've done the calculations and I know better. 'At forty miles an hour it takes...'

He cuts me off mid-sentence. 'That's what I came to say. Given you said yesterday how much you hate driving, maybe we should swap jobs. You stay at Rose Hill and I'll do the airport run.'

'Right...' I'm not sure how he picked up on that, but I'm relieved enough to go momentarily floppy. 'That would be so brill,' I say weakly, propping myself up on the tilting mirror as my knees collapse with gratitude.

'But then I got side-tracked by your flamingos.'

'Flamingos?' I really have no idea what he's talking about here.

He lets his smile go. 'On those very smart pyjamas you're wearing...'

For a second I think he's joking, then I look down. As I catch sight of my favourite Topshop shorts sleep set on top of my woolly winter-night tights, my tummy takes a nose dive. How the hell did I forget to get dressed before I came out?

As I squirm in embarrassment, my mouth is gaping, but no words are coming out.

Jess, who's arrived without me noticing, swoops to my rescue. 'Sera often wears leisure wear in the studio. Basically talented designers *have* to feel relaxed or they can't come up with the goods.' She's beaming at Quinn, extending her hand. 'We haven't been introduced yet, lovely to meet you, I'm Jess.'

I wince at how horribly close Jess is to the truth there. She'd have a complete hissy fit if she knew about the state of my current non-collection of wedding dresses.

'So this is your shop? What a fabulous place.' Quinn's turned all his attention onto Jess now. 'I'm Quinn, by the way, Alice's best man.'

'Lovely.' From the way Jess's purr has switched on, she's warming to Quinn. 'Do come through and have a peep at Sera's room, while you're here.' As Jess steers him through, the heat's right off me, because, true to form, she's pretty much taken him over.

In a last-minute move, she grabs my wrist and yanks me with them. Before you can say petticoat, there's a flurry of tulle and lace and whispering voile and she's whipping dresses off the rails right left and centre. In thirty seconds flat she's whisked Quinn through the key pieces in the Seraphina East collection, and she's onto the celebrity pictures.

'And this is the couture dress designed by Sera, which Josie Redman wore for her celebrity wedding.' She sounds like a cat that got double cream.

'*The* Josie Redman?' Just this once Quinn is gobsmacked enough to look shocked. 'Impressive... When you said you made wedding dresses, Sera, I had no idea you meant real ones.'

Even though I hate being around when people see my dresses, I'm indignant enough to chime in here. 'What other kind are there, Quinn?'

For a moment he's chastened. 'Okay, what I mean is, I had no idea they'd be this beautiful... or high end.'

'Well thanks a bunch for that.' Talk about wrapping a compliment up in an insult.

He frowns. 'I can see I'm digging a hole for myself here. But even when you're not in your jim jams, there's a big gulf between Sera's holey denims and Seraphina's exquisite dresses.'

Even though I think he just said 'exquisite', he's still coming over as pretty insulting, overall.

'You'll see.' I stick out my chin in protest. 'I scrub up.' It's complete bull. The furthest I go is black silk shorts rather than ripped denim. But I can't let him talk down to me like this.

He laughs. 'I'm not saying it's a bad thing. It's a surprise, that's all. In a good way.'

As a particularly long and loud blast on a horn in the street resonates around the room Jess hangs up the dress she's holding and covers her ears. 'Whatever's going on out there, it's playing havoc with my head.' She pushes back a swathe of tulle and fairy lights and peers down the mews. 'Looks like some kind of traffic jam...'

Quinn puts his hand to his mouth. 'Ooops... I think that might be me...'

Jess is at the window in a flash. 'No, it won't be, it's actually a sports car causing the trouble. Dark grey. There's a traffic warden too.'

Dark grey? I groan. It's the traffic warden that's the real giveaway. 'Quinn, what did I tell you yesterday?'

'Sounds like my free parking's over.' He pulls a face. 'Sorry to rush you, but we'd better run. Sera, I'll take you home to get some clothes and drop you at Rose Hill...'

'But why didn't you tell me Quinn drove a Ferrari?'

Actually I told her as little as I could. Not that she needed my info, after she'd pumped Poppy dry. As if I noticed the car make. 'Maybe I was too busy counting the parking tickets.' As a reply it's completely true. One blingy car is very much like another, after all. Let's face it, they're all totally impractical on the roads round here.

'Sera's not the only one full of surprises.' Quinn's laughing over his shoulder at Jess, as he heads towards the door.

As I hurtle off towards the stairs to grab my coat and satchel I can't help hoping there won't be any more surprises today.

10

Sunday, 18th December At Rose Hill Manor: A cottage by the sea

It's no surprise that Quinn drives at the speed of light, all the way to Daisy Hill Farm, where we show Poppy how Alice would like her cottages. Then we head over to Rose Hill Manor, which is quarter of a mile down the lane. Yesterday, in the van, we went around the back to the coach house, but today we roar all the way up to the front door.

'The great thing about this house is it's relaxed rather than starchy and grand.' Quinn leaps out of the car and digs deep in his duffel coat pocket for a key. Seconds later he's pushed open the wide oak door and his arm's sliding around me, as he shows me into the hall.

It's a shame he wasn't this efficient with the cottage keys yesterday, but whatever.

Blinking as I spin away from Quinn's grasp, I take in a tall white hallway, washed with pale light from high leaded windows. A staircase that's wide, but definitely more 'Sleeping Beauty in the country' than 'Cinderella at the ball'. Given he smells of something manly and expensive rather than salt, I'm guessing he hasn't been for a dip in the sea today yet.

'See what I mean?' He leans a shoulder on the stair post as he gazes around. 'Small, yet perfectly formed.'

I'm not sure where Quinn hangs out if that's how he sums it up. There's nothing small about the rooms I'm glimpsing behind the half-open doors. But despite the lofty ceiling and the expanses of white walls, the warm pine-drenched scent of the house immediately wraps itself around me. I feel welcomed rather than intimidated.

'And what a whopper of a Christmas tree.' I get a crick in my neck as I look up at the branches, tapering up the stair well. It has to be the largest I've seen outside Oxford Street. For a moment it spins me back to the last Christmas at uni when one of the guys from the upstairs flat hauled in a tree from someone's garden that was so big and spiky we couldn't get down the hallway.

'And like the rest of the house, it's still waiting for its decorations.' Quinn raises one eyebrow. 'How are you on step ladders?'

I don't reply, because right now I'm remembering that somewhere upstairs there are bedrooms for the entire bridal party, and more, plus all the ground-floor rooms, where the wedding celebrations will take place on Christmas Eve and roll straight on into Christmas next day. With everything still to do, I can't believe we're hanging around in the hall. 'Maybe we'd better hurry up.' My voice rises as my chest tightens with the stress. That's possibly the understatement of the year. 'We haven't got time to stand around chatting.'

'Chill, Sera, you've done the most important thing for the morning. At least you're dressed now.' That same old smile is lilting around his lips. And no surprise he's making a dig about the pyjama blunder. 'As for the wedding, it's all in the manual...' He leans over and taps the file I'm clutching, then glances at his watch. 'There's time to whizz you round the rest of the ground floor before I leave for the airport.'

'About that...' I say, as we push through a door and I take in a series of simply furnished interconnecting rooms, which might have come straight out of an *Elle Deco* magazine. 'How did you know I hated driving?'

'The ceremony will be in what we call the winter garden, by the way.' He pauses and points to a room with doors looking out onto the garden, then carries on where he left off. What begins as an elbow nudge, somehow ends up with his arm closing around my rib cage. 'As for the driving, you're neurotic about parking and a terrified passenger. I joined up the dots.' The squeeze he gives

me forces every bit of oxygen out of my lungs. 'At a guess you'd rather fly to the moon than drive to Exeter? Which is why I'm going instead.'

Given I haven't any air to form words, I nod and offer up a silent 'thank you' for what he's saved me from.

'You could always come too?' he says, with a wistful look I can't quite judge.

For a second the idea of racing across into the next county, even with Quinn driving like a crazy person, is quite appealing. Then reality hits. 'Someone's got to stay to let the ceiling guys in.' How can he have forgotten that? Then another thought. 'Plus, you're driving a two-seater, and picking up Alice.' Not to mention all the work there is to do.

'Shit, so I am.' He smacks himself on the forehead. 'Maybe another time then.'

'Great,' I smile. Suddenly I don't feel so bad about going out in my pjs.

He moves on through the house, talking as he goes. 'My uncle calls this his "cottage by the sea". He had it redone to look like a beach house a few years back.' Quinn's propelling me through the winter garden into an enormous room with sloping ceilings. 'This was originally built as a ballroom. It's perfect for the wedding breakfast and the party afterwards. This is where you'll bring the guys to install the ceiling, okay?'

I screw up my face as I take in more white criss-crossing beams in the roof space.

Again Quinn reads my mind. 'I don't understand why Alice would want to hide this either.' He gives a bemused shrug. 'But she insists she wants a ceiling with stars that twinkle. They're the current must-have. Can't get married without one. It's the same with the disco floor'.

'What?'

'Tut, tut, you really are behind on your wedding reading.' His lips twitch into that grin again. 'It's a kind of electronic light-show dance floor that changes colour with the music. They're very cool. It's coming later in the week, once the sky is up.'

'I suppose she's only getting married once... ' I muse, wondering why the perfect uncluttered backdrops aren't enough.

'We are definitely doing this for one time only,' Quinn echoes my thoughts as he whisks me through more rooms. As the white painted walls and floors give way to the polished stone and stainless steel of several interlinked kitchens, we come face to face with a wall of cardboard boxes.

The packaging is familiar. 'Bedroom supplies, for here?' I'm pointedly ignoring the tray of mistletoe.

'I brought them in earlier. I thought you could put them out while you were waiting for the ceiling to arrive?'

'Sure.'

Quinn must have had a very early start, then.

'And not being sexist...'

I frown at him, because I've spotted an ironing board across the room, already erected. 'But...?'

He nods at the boxes. 'Somewhere in that lot there are a few hundred seat covers and bows that all need pressing. Don't worry, the hire chairs have arrived, and they're in the coach house.'

As it happened, I wasn't worrying about chairs, because I don't even know about them yet. I can't believe he's a) got so far ahead of me in the instructions, and b) is dishing out the jobs. Which actually is what I intended to do, but whatever.

'Before you shoot me down, I *can* iron...' he says. 'I would iron... but I'm off to get Alice.'

Even though this arrangement couldn't suit me better, I can't resist staring at the creases on his shirt. 'Yeah, I can *really* see how much you like ironing.'

'Designer wrinkles.' He laughs as he smooths his hand over the cotton. 'I prefer my clothes this way. Just like you obviously do with yours.'

Damn. Just my luck that the flowery silk cami I grabbed from the bedroom floor looks like the original crumple zone. Sometimes it's best to back down gracefully.

‘Don’t worry, you get off, I’ll look after the ironing.’ I’m not going to tell him that I iron anything I can get my hands on. Apart from the clothes on my bedroom floor, obviously.

‘Okay.’ He sticks his hands in his pockets. ‘Help yourself to lunch, help yourself to the bedrooms, and remember...’ He flashes me the ‘hang loose’ hand sign. ‘Stay chilled. Alice is on her way and it’s all going to work out fine.’

With Alice here I’m not sure how much chilling there will be. But I’m giving silent cheers, because I’ve avoided an upstairs tour, complete with all the nudging and squeezing opportunities that offered. ‘And Quinn...’ I know he’s already had at least one parking ticket today. And possibly a whole load more I don’t know about. So I may as well give him the benefit of my local knowledge anyway. ‘If you park on the runway, they’ll tow you away. Every time.’

As he backs out of the kitchen, he drops the ‘hang loose’ sign and flashes the ‘birdie’ at me instead.

11

Sunday, 18th December At Rose Hill Manor: Home alone

When I finally screw up my courage and dare to tiptoe upstairs, I find a dozen lovely bedrooms, all decorated in the same chic yet uncluttered style as down below. There are a couple of gorgeous master suites, with understated four-posters and French-style wardrobes practically the size of my cottage. Between us, if I had one of those at home, I'd put more effort in and the pile of clothes by my bed might be less chaotic. The rest of the bedrooms are still luxurious, in diminishing sizes, all with en suites. And then there are attic rooms too. Lingered by the window, I'm looking out over what could almost be a hidden kingdom nestling in the surrounding hills. Beyond the gardens, there's parkland and fields, then the lake beyond, which is huge.

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