

Daisy James

The
Perfect Summer
Wedding



The
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Wedding
by
Daisy James

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Dedication

To Mum and Dad,
for instilling in me a love of reading.

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Chapter One

‘Sophie? Earth to Sophie?’

Flora dragged a gargantuan cardboard wardrobe across the floor of the design studio towards Sophie’s desk, with several bangles of brown tape around her wrist and a takeaway coffee balanced precariously in her hand.

‘Sorry?’

‘Are we ready to pack this glitzy creation of silk and pearls into its protective shell? The courier will be here any minute and you know what they’re like – won’t be kept waiting for anything. You don’t want to miss the deadline, do you? Can I help?’

‘No!’ Sophie raised her head from where she had been snoozing at her desk, wrinkling her nose at the unpleasant waft of stale pizza that assaulted her nostrils. She brushed away a crumpled yellow post-it that had attached itself to her cheek and held up her palm to Flora’s face. ‘Step away from the dress! I mean it, Flora. If you even come one step closer with that skinny latte, I’ll be forced to shoot you with my staple gun. What’s possessed you to bring coffee in here, anyway?’

Sophie cringed when she heard the tone of her voice; she sounded like the snap of an irate dragon, a mother protecting its young. But that was exactly how she felt. The gestation of the Sophie-Louise entry into the wedding gown competition of the decade had been a full nine months in the making and was now, save for a few final tweaks, ready for its delivery into the outside world – well, to the Audley Suite at The Dorchester where the judging would take place the next day.

‘Sorry, Flora, don’t take any notice of me. I’m just exhausted. Thanks, though. Only these last few seed pearls to

sew on and I'm done. But you could do me a huge favour by asking Scarlet to come down here?'

'Sure.'

Flora meandered from the room, humming softly to herself. She was not the sharpest pair of scissors in a tailor's armoury, but her sweet temperament and her willingness to skip down the street for their regular infusions of espresso, latte, and cappuccino made her a popular and essential member of the Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture team.

Sophie rethreaded her needle, knelt down at the hem of the gown and, with her bottom pointing to the ceiling, resumed the intricate task of squinting at the exquisite ivory silk that had formed the backdrop to her dreams for the last six months.

The nationwide competition to design the wedding dress that the celebrity actress Lilac Verbois would wear for her forthcoming marriage to Finn Marchant at Gloucester Cathedral at the end of July had gripped the country. She hadn't been able to believe it when she'd been informed on the first of January that her design had been shortlisted from over two hundred and fifty entries to be made up as a sample garment.

These gowns were to be presented to Lilac, who would make a final decision on the choice of her wedding dress with the assistance of her mother, her PA, Nikki Coates, and her wedding planner, Tish Marshall, at her hotel suite at The Dorchester on the last day of March when she had a break in her filming schedule. There wasn't an academically trained fashion advisor in sight so it was anyone's guess who would win.

Sophie experienced a flash of excitement. The wedding was being billed as the celebrity event of the year. TV crews and the paparazzi would be out in force at the ceremony. The reception, to be held in a majestic stately home in the Cotswolds, would be attended by every A-lister who could wangle an invitation. The whole wedding had morphed from being just one more movie star marrying a musician into a fairy-tale romance. Lilac and Finn, whether by generosity or

insanity, had opened up the celebration of their union to the whole country by creating the competition to design Lilac's wedding gown.

Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture was her creation, a project she had worked ferociously and diligently on ever since leaving university. She understood what an honour it was whenever one of her designs was chosen to become the star attraction at the most important occasion in a girl's life. She had designed wedding gowns for several actresses, even a minor royal, but Lilac and Finn's wedding would be the highlight of her career. She did not intend to let anything scupper the opportunity of a lifetime to showcase her talents to a nationwide, if not international, audience. She intended to seize it with both hands, even if this had meant the exclusion of all life's other demands.

Over the last three months her world had become a frenzy of late nights, cold pizza, and too much coffee. She had existed on snatched catnaps at her worktable. Mannequins heard her complaints, dressmakers' dummies her confessions, but there was nothing new there.

Sophie checked her watch. Her initial excitement and anticipation tipped over into nausea and tendrils of fear looped around her chest. Time was running out. She had less than an hour left to apply the final embellishments by hand, and she could not depend on Scarlet or Flora to do it to her exacting standards.

Once she had attached the final pearls, the gown had to be sealed into the custom-created cardboard wardrobe that had been provided by Lilac's wedding planner and ready for the specially appointed courier to collect at seven o'clock that evening before completing its fateful journey from conception in their tiny studio in South West London to its debut into the glitzy world of The Dorchester the following morning.

What if something happened to the dress en route?

What if it didn't arrive?

What if the courier had an accident, or stopped for a beer and overindulged, or had to deliver twins in a roadside café?

She pushed her neurotic vacillations into the crevices of her exhausted mind. Marco Gallieri – the milliner who owned the hat shop round the corner from Sophie-Louise Bridal and who created exquisite wedding hats, fascinators and tiaras for her clients – labelled her work ethic as obsessive. It was true, and things had got worse since the competition had been announced. She'd even succumbed to regular nightmares involving James Bondesque espionage by her fellow competitors.

Lilac's team would not be announcing the winning designer to the general public until her wedding day – if Sophie heard nothing, it meant the Sophie-Louise design hadn't been selected. And who could blame Lilac for that? The media would have been camped outside the chosen studio for the next four months hoping for a sneak preview they could splash across their pages, and what bride wanted to take that risk?

Sophie trusted no one, especially in an industry where integrity fought ignorance and ambition on a daily basis. She had sworn the whole team to absolute secrecy. If even a whiff of the design were made public, her entry would be disqualified. All her hopes and dreams were pinned on winning this competition, which would catapult Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture into the upper echelons of bridal fashion design, the pinnacle of her lifelong ambition and the fulfilment of a promise she had made to her parents when she'd used her inheritance to start her business.

'Take a break, will you, Sophie? Flora tells me she found you snoring at your desk!'

Scarlet, as slender as a shop mannequin, lounged against the cutting table. She gazed intently at the deft weaving of the needle as Sophie completed the final essential touches whilst she nibbled at the tips of her fingernails, painted the colour her name demanded.

'You know, I still can't grasp the reasoning behind Lilac's crazy scheme. Why splash open your marriage to one of the hunkiest men alive in a nationwide competition to design your wedding gown? I mean, she's one of the most sought-after actresses of her genre – especially since she won that award

for best supporting actress last year. And Finn, well, what I wouldn't do to trade places and get my mitts on those buttocks of steel!

‘Scarlet, I don't think—’

‘*And* they could get hitched anywhere in the world; a yacht moored off the Cote d'Azur, a white-powdered beach in Hawaii; I'm even certain that St Paul's Cathedral would have overlooked the residence requirements. But oh, no, Lilac Verbois wanted to get married in the Cotswolds. Nothing wrong with the Cotswolds per se, and Gloucester Cathedral is a picturesque venue for the ceremony. But, well, you know... Gloucestershire?’ Scarlet wrinkled her pert, freckled nose as she twisted a glossy lock of her amber hair around her ring finger. ‘Why didn't she go for The Plaza in New York or a palazzo in Venice? There's no competition, in my humble opinion.’

‘Hey, quit dissing the Cotswolds! You know it's where I grew up,’ smiled Sophie, exaggerating her accent. ‘The Verbois/Marchant wedding is going to be the glitziest, most glamorous wedding no matter where it's held. And it's what Lilac wants, Scarlet. Don't you think a bride *should* be able to choose where she ties the knot?’

Scarlet pulled a face. ‘But why the competition to design her wedding dress? You know, I wouldn't want the job of that poor wedding planner – what's her name, Tish? – for all the silk in China. I bet you she's already tearing her hair out and the competition hasn't even been finalised yet. It's the end of March, the wedding's on the thirty-first of July; that's just four months away. I predict a confetti-infused nightmare!’

‘Well, it's just as well she did, isn't it, Scarlet?’ smiled Sophie, tucking the sharply angled sides of her ebony bob behind her ears. She blew her fringe away from tickling at her eyelashes as she finished the last embellishment, then snipped the thread like a ceremonial ribbon.

‘Why?’

Sophie rolled her eyes. Scarlet was her clear-headed second-in-command, but sometimes she seemed to inhabit a

galaxy far, far away. ‘Because, Scarlet darling, in case you haven’t noticed, Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture has been shortlisted through to the final stages.’

‘Oh, yes. And your design will win, Sophie, I know it will. It’s a heavenly creation! I’m so proud of what you’ve done.’

‘What we’ve *all* done. This has been a real team effort. Even Flora has had an input.’

‘Sure.’ Scarlet’s perfectly outlined Cupid’s bow stretched to reveal her white, even teeth.

Sophie stood up, stretched her back, then smiled at her colleague. It was difficult not to adore Scarlet, with her signature red lips and nail polish chosen to clash violently with her auburn hair. She had, without a murmur of complaint, hand-sewn the tiniest of crystals onto the ivory silk until her fingers bled and she was banished from the studio for fear of jeopardising the pristine fabric. After that, she had assumed the mantle of caring friend, force-feeding Sophie a diet of chocolate digestives and toast – the extent of her culinary knowledge – for which Sophie had been immensely grateful. Some days it was the only sustenance to pass her lips and had kept the hunger pangs at bay.

Never one to hold back when delicacy was required, Scarlet would regularly burst forth with gems of her own brand of wisdom. “You need to get out more” was a regular refrain delivered to Sophie’s ears, along with the ubiquitous “all work and no play”, before she went on to dispense a dose of friendly criticism of her failure to frequent the capital’s bars and restaurants. She would end with a demand that Sophie join her and Flora for a night on the town when Sophie could no longer focus her eyes on the wedding dress of the decade.

Sophie had watched from her seat in the Grand Circle as Scarlet took her own advice and lurched from one romantic encounter to the next, leaving her heart-broken conquests littering her fragrant slipstream.

‘So, what’s new on the relationship front, Scarlet?’

‘Well, now that I’m about to be freed from the shackles of my workaholic boss, I intend to make up for my enforced dating celibacy by hitting the bars in the West End and sampling a different cocktail in every single one of them, starting with your personal favourite – a vodka martini. And you will be perched on the stool next to me, Sophie. You haven’t had a date in months. In fact, when was the last time you agreed to go out with a guy?’

‘Oh, you know me. I don’t have time to date. I’m just too busy with...’

‘We’re all busy, Sophie. But that’s not it. You always seem to come up with a convenient diagnosis of a fatal flaw in every guy you date. You seem to perform the dating equivalent of an archaeological dig in order to unearth any perceived imperfection that you can hone in on as an excuse not to take things further. Remember Marcus? He was gorgeous – a model, for God’s sake! He could make a bin liner look sexy. He was perfect!’

‘And didn’t he know it,’ muttered Sophie.

Scarlet ignored her. ‘And Andrew? The paediatrician? The guy who sent you flowers every day for a month?’

‘Too attentive, too studious, and he talked about having kids the whole time!’ Sophie averted her eyes from Scarlet’s stony glare.

‘What about Carter? He was an American footballer! What’s not to like? He flew you to New York for the weekend! You stayed at the Waldorf Astoria!’

‘And it rained the whole time.’

‘You know, Sophie, I wish I’d had half your opportunities to find “the one”. You’ve got to relax, give someone the chance to get to know you. But there’s something else going on here, isn’t there? Something you’re not telling me. What exactly are you searching for?’

Scarlet shook her head slowly, then fixed her eyes on Sophie and lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘It’s Noah, isn’t it?’

Chapter Two

Sophie was too exhausted to disguise her emotions from her friend and she could feel heat seep into her face. The look of sadness that washed across Scarlet's pretty features sent a spasm of irritation into her chest at being sussed so easily.

'I knew it. You still love Noah, don't you? After all this time?'

'No I don't...'

'It's understandable that you still have feelings for him, Soph. You dated him right through high school and university. Hey, and wasn't he the first guy you kissed when you were, like, twelve or something? But I thought you said you'd moved on?'

'I have.'

'So why is your face the same shade as my nail polish?'

'It's not. Anyway, Scarlet...'

'And isn't Noah's band playing at Lilac and Finn's reception? It was a real coup when Finn announced he'd pulled that one off. Apparently, the Razorclaws will be on tour in Germany at the end of July, and they've agreed to interrupt their schedule as a special favour to Finn. Wasn't he at music school with Noah?'

'Yes,' murmured Sophie. She felt like a deer caught in the headlights of Scarlet's remorseless examination technique. She hadn't mentioned the fact that Noah and his band would be playing at the wedding to her friend for exactly this reason. Nothing got past Scarlet.

'So you'll get to see him again.'

‘Only if our design wins the competition and that’s by no means a given.’

Sophie watched the cogs turn behind Scarlet’s emerald eyes.

‘So... there’s a lot more than I thought resting on Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture winning this competition.’

‘Look, Scarlet, you know I have no desire to see Noah again. I had to think long and hard about continuing with the entry when it was announced his band would be a part of the wedding arrangements. But I’ve worked my butt off to make it as a fashion designer, and I couldn’t let an old relationship stand in the way of achieving my dream. If we do win, yes, I’ll need to be at the ceremony, but Noah won’t be at the cathedral, and my services won’t be required at the reception at Somersby Manor.’

‘So you’re still avoiding him?’

‘No, I just...’

‘Yes, you are. Which means you are *not* over him.’

‘Scarlet, you know what happened. You know what he did.’

‘Yes, but there are two sides to every argument.’ Scarlet affected an American accent. ‘I’ve heard *your* submission, Counsellor, now let me consider the case for the opposition.’

‘Oh, no...’

Sophie slumped into the seat behind her desk and buried her head in her hands, massaging her temples with her fingertips. She didn’t want to hear this right now. She didn’t have the strength to fight back.

‘Let’s see, these are the facts, Your Honour. A rep from a record company was attending one of The Razorclaws’ gigs. It was the most important night of Noah’s life and his girlfriend had promised to be there cheering him on from the wings. Said girlfriend was, once again, so engrossed in fulfilling her own dreams that she was late to the party. The Razorclaws got the contract, the champagne flowed, and they had been celebrating for hours before Noah’s neglectful girlfriend arrived to witness

a drunken clinch with an anonymous girl groupie whom he said had thrown herself at him. What was Noah supposed to do, Soph?’

Sophie swallowed down her agony. Every time his name was mentioned it surprised her that the pain was still so raw and near the surface almost four years later. After that fateful night, she had escaped to London and used the money her parents had left her to set up Sophie-Louise Couture. She’d refused every one of Noah’s calls and made her Aunt Claire, who had brought her up after her parents’ death, and her best friend, Nessa, swear they wouldn’t disclose her new address to Noah.

She had never thought she could experience such a kaleidoscope of emotions. Noah had always been there for her. He knew every detail of her history; they’d shared the same highs and lows, the same friends, the same dreams, or so she’d thought.

When she was thirteen, Noah had borrowed his father’s spade and dug up one of his mother’s prize rose bushes that had enjoyed pride of place in her front garden. He’d then raced round to collect her from her aunt’s house and dragged her to the local churchyard where he proceeded to plant the white rose bush next to the headstone of her parents’ grave.

When she was fourteen, Noah had kissed her under the canopy of the old oak tree in the garden behind her Aunt Claire’s haberdashery shop, *Gingerberry Yarns*, and then he’d carved her initials into the knobbly trunk. The entwined initials “SLH”, had, years later, become the logo for her bridal boutique. She had loved him – his photograph had been glued on the top of her wedding scrap box that she had added to from the age of twelve – and it still hurt a great deal that he was no longer in her life.

However, he’d never understood her need to sever the rural guy ropes and branch out on her own, to forge a life for herself away from the bucolic idyll of the Cotswolds. She had been so adamant about her desire to leave Somersby that she had expected Noah to share her ambition, with the clamorous draw of city music venues proving too tempting to refuse.

But refuse he had.

He had remained at home with his parents and insisted on commuting to his degree course in Bristol, crashing at his friends' digs when he had to. He had also remained loyal to their childhood friends – four of them made up his band – but whom, apart from Nessa, she'd not seen for years. Tears always gathered on her lashes whenever she recalled the nights they had spent together in his friend Archie's parents' garage, jamming and tossing around suggestions of what to call the band. The Razorclaws had been an amalgamation of Noah's suggestion of The Cotswold Claws and hers of The Razors.

The three years she'd spent studying at Manchester's prestigious Fashion Institute had been the best years of her life. She'd loved the people, the nightlife, the restaurants, the theatres, the fashion opportunities, even the football club. She had emerged from her time in Manchester with a first-class honours degree in Fashion Design and Textiles and won a coveted place at the Royal College of Art to study for her MA in textiles.

Whilst in London she had striven to put her dreams of becoming a fashion designer first and had embraced the freedom of the individual creative design philosophy her MA allowed her to explore. She had served her apprenticeship with Christianna Boulet, the well-respected doyenne of haute couture with a penchant for geometric print fabric edged with neon-woven tweeds. At Christianna's insistence, she had learnt the more mundane aspects of the fashion business as well as the techniques required to produce a glittering showcase of catwalk-quality garments.

But it had all come at a price when, after years of religiously returning to Somersby to fan the flames of their courtship, she had returned that night, albeit late, to stumble upon the scene that had remained scorched on the inside of her eyelids ever since. The shock had galvanised her into taking her dreams to a new level and the eponymous Sophie-Louise Couture had been born.

Every spare crumb of her love and affection had been lavished on her business. It was her baby and craved every

moment of her attention. She was grateful for that as it meant she had no time to dwell on what had happened. But she had never forgotten Noah's betrayal of their relationship.

However, Scarlet was also right.

What was Noah to do when girls threw themselves at him? And things could only have got worse now that The Razorclaws had topped the charts with their recent album. She just couldn't see herself as part of that itinerant lifestyle. And she definitely couldn't handle the rollercoaster of emotions that went along with dating a famous rock musician.

And, anyway, wasn't Sophie-Louise Henshaw about to become the most celebrated fashion designer in the country?

Chapter Three

‘Look, come on. The courier will be here any minute now and we can’t risk him leaving empty-handed. I’m going to slide the dress into the wardrobe on the dressmaker’s dummy; less opportunity for it to crease. I’ll never forget that image of Princess Diana’s wedding gown on the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral.’

Sophie grimaced as she recalled the profusion of crinkles the dress had displayed to the seven hundred and fifty million people who’d been watching around the globe.

‘This is, without a doubt, the most beautiful wedding gown I have ever laid eyes on – you know that, Sophie, don’t you?’ said Scarlet, as she stepped forward to help Sophie. ‘It’s definitely going to win the competition, and you’ll see your own design worn by one of the most famous actresses in the world. How exciting is that?’

‘It’s very exciting, and a little nerve-racking, too.’

Despite her natural reluctance to sing her own praises, Sophie allowed herself a tiny nod to her ingenuity with a needle, coupled with her God-given talent, which had produced such dazzling results. It was one of her most adventurous creations to date, but every aspect of the gown had merged to form a true work of art. She had laboured through eighteen-hour days over the last three months, including Saturdays and Sundays, to get the sample ready for the final judging the next day.

The gown’s pale ivory, organic silk flowed like ripples in a summer breeze. The strapless bodice draped exquisitely to enhance Lilac’s pale, swan-like neck and pert breasts. The nipped-in waist would amplify her slender measurements, but it was the A-line skirt that drew the appreciative eye, ruched to the right where a darted panel of inlaid crystals and seed pearls

shimmered like a sparkling waterfall whenever the bride moved, especially under the neon lights of Sophie's workshop.

It was a fantasy dress for a fairy-tale wedding, putting even Cinderella's to shame.

Of course, if the design won it would have to be custom-altered and remoulded, but she would do anything, work 24/7, if it meant her dress could be displayed to the fashion world on such a famous model. That kind of exposure could jettison the Sophie-Louise name into the order books of every style-conscious celebrity in Britain. It was everything she had been working towards. Every single, painful sacrifice she had made would have been worth it.

Except maybe one.

The two girls gently gathered the gown's delicate folds and straightened the underskirt and hem. Sophie fought a cauldron of emotions not to shed a tear as she and Scarlet manoeuvred the cardboard wardrobe crate towards the dressmaker's dummy and carefully inserted the textile sculpture.

They draped sheets of acid-free tissue paper around the dress until it was packed as tightly as possible without scrunching the delicate material, and then stood back to admire their handiwork before they sealed the door, knowing there would be no further tweaking allowed.

As Sophie closed the door and sealed the box with the brown tape, both girls let out a sigh of pleasure and of satisfaction.

'A true masterpiece, Sophie. Lilac would be crazy not to pick it.'

Sophie couldn't speak. Her throat had tightened around a lump the size of a golf ball. 'Oh, God, I nearly forgot! The paperwork for the courier.'

'Sophie? Sophie?' Flora's voice floated down from the floor above. 'Call for you in the Tumble Room. Said it was urgent!'

'Okay, Flora, be right there.'

Sophie exchanged a smirk with Scarlet as she slipped on her black ballet pumps, stretched her long, colt-like legs and wiggled out the kinks in her shoulder muscles to her full six-foot height. She flicked the sides of her bob behind each ear and slid the pin cushion from around her wrist. Every call Flora put through was “urgent”. Despite being the salon’s receptionist since its inception, she invariably fell for the caller’s assertive demands.

Rolling her eyes and experiencing a sweep of relief at the conclusion of the most important project of her career, she took the stairs two at a time to their “ideas” room. It had been nicknamed the ‘Tumble Room’ because it was where Sophie hoped their creative juices and ideas would tumble forth from brain to paper. In reality, it was a small conference room they used to receive their clients and listen to their dreams, decorated with wall art ranging from framed photographs of 1950s brassieres to Sophie’s prized Banksy, the celebrated Bristol-born artist, which she’d inherited from her father.

‘Thanks, Flora. Hi, Sophie-Louise Henshaw speaking.’

‘Sophie, at last! It’s Seb,’ announced her cousin with none of his usual comedic preamble.

‘Oh, hi, Seb. What great timing. We’ve just put the finishing touches to—’

‘Sophie, it’s Mum. Delia’s just rung. She collapsed when she was shutting up the shop. She’s been rushed to Cheltenham hospital by ambulance. You’d better get up here. Delia is with her but she’s unconscious. The medics’ early diagnosis is a perforated bowel and she’ll be going straight into surgery. I’m racing across there now.’

‘Oh, my God, Seb, I’m on my way!’

Sophie’s breath caught in her throat and an anvil-heavy weight pressed down on her chest causing her to gasp for air. She tried to move, but her body felt like it was encased in concrete.

‘Sophie? Sophie? What on earth’s happened?’ Scarlet rushed to Sophie’s side, rousing her from her shock and

sending her stalled brain into motion.

‘It’s Aunt Claire. She’s collapsed. On her way to the hospital. Having surgery. Got to go. Now!’

‘Oh, Sophie, no!’

Sophie rushed past Scarlet’s blanched face, back down the wooden treads to her workshop and grabbed her handbag and coat. Fear wrenched at her gut. She couldn’t lose her aunt, she just couldn’t. When her parents had died in a head-on crash when she was only ten years old, Aunt Claire had surrounded her with a comfort blanket of love and brought her up alongside her two older cousins, Seb and Dominic, in a home filled with chatter and homely warmth. She adored her. She couldn’t envisage life without her.

‘What about the dress, Sophie?’ cried Scarlet as she darted in Sophie’s wake down the stairs to the workroom. ‘You need to fill out the forms and sign the seal and the courier’s documentations. It’s part of the requirements, as evidence that the entry hasn’t been tampered with.’

‘Oh, erm, you do it, Scarlet,’ Sophie called over her shoulder from the top of the stairs, the helix of panic tightening in her chest and throat, her brain ricocheting off into myriad nightmare scenarios.

Scarlet jogged to keep up with Sophie’s beeline for the exit and the car park at the back of the salon with a visibly upset Flora joining them.

‘Sophie...’

‘Scarlet. Just make sure it goes. It’s packed and sealed. It only needs a signature. I have to get to the hospital.’

Tears sprang into Sophie’s eyes and trickled down her pale cheeks. Her shallow breathing induced a dizzy spell causing her to pause at the door to draw oxygen into her screaming lungs. An icy drench of panic rose up her arms, leaving goosebumps in its wake.

‘Look, Sophie, you can’t drive all the way up to Cheltenham by yourself – you’re in no fit state. I’ll drive you.’

‘Scarlet...’

‘What use will you be to your aunt if you end up in the same hospital after an RTA? Give me your keys!’ Scarlet brandished her palm and the expression on her face brooked no further argument.

Sophie realised that her objections were only serving to delay her journey. Any further refusals would only extend the time until she arrived at her aunt’s bedside.

‘Okay. Flora, if you can’t find Lizzie, will *you* stay until the courier arrives to collect the gown? All you have to do is fill out the documents and get a receipt.’

‘Sure, Sophie. I hope your aunt’s going to be okay.’

Sophie could not recall much of the journey to Cheltenham Hospital. Scarlet drove swiftly, the car’s headlights tunnelling two piercing beams through the London streets, strangely devoid of their daily bustle on that late March evening, the clientele of the busy bars ignorant of the curling veins of turmoil swirling around Sophie’s ragged brain. Raindrops splattered sporadically on the windscreen, the blades flicking them away like irritating flies. The amber glow of the streetlamps cast their mellow light into the inky black puddles gathered in the gutters and across the rooftops.

She couldn’t lose Aunt Claire! Especially as she’d already lost her parents. God couldn’t be that cruel, surely?

Silence pervaded the vehicle whilst Scarlet concentrated on handling the unfamiliar controls of the Mini Cooper and delivering Sophie to the hospital as quickly as possible, her own features pinched and sombre in the half-light. Anyway, what words were there to ease the pain?

At last Scarlet pulled into the deserted hospital car park. Sophie glimpsed the stout figure of Claire’s best friend on the stone steps leading to the entrance hall, clearly keeping an anxious lookout for their arrival. Sophie leapt from the car, grateful for Delia’s foresight – it meant she would not have to wander the neon-bleached corridors, going through the rigmarole of repeated questions to locate her aunt.

‘Delia? Where’s—’

‘Oh, Sophie, I’m so, so sorry, my love. So very, very sorry.’

Tears streamed down Delia’s powdery, wrinkled face, her pale blue eyes gentle as she hooked her arm threw Sophie’s elbow.

‘Delia?’ Sophie’s voice trembled.

‘Come on. Seb and Dominic are just in here,’ and she steered Sophie into a tiny, fluorescent-bright room just off the entrance-hall corridor.

As soon as the door swung back, Seb leapt out of the brown plastic chair and took Sophie into his arms. Over his shoulder, Sophie swung her horrified stare from Dominic to Delia as icy fingers of dread curled around her heart and squeezed.

‘No... no... no...’

‘I’m so sorry, Soph. Mum passed away twenty minutes ago during surgery. Heart attack. They did everything they could...’

‘No...’

Chapter Four

A soft breeze laced with the fragrance of spring wove its way through the village of Somersby. Shafts of early April sunshine spliced through the leaden clouds clothing the church with a mantle of golden light. It was a picturesque venue, and it was no surprise that St Peter's parish church, complete with rose-entangled lychgate, was regularly chosen as the venue for much happier occasions.

But no ivory ribbons rippled on the gateposts that morning.

How could life dispense such cruelty? Sophie wondered as she dabbed away the tears from her cheeks with the scrap of embroidered cotton Delia had given her that morning. First the Director of Fate had snatched her parents, leaving her an orphan, and now he had seen fit to take her beloved Aunt Claire as well.

Seb and Dominic were her only real family now – her only remaining link to her life in the Cotswolds. She laced her arms through theirs as they thanked the vicar for the very moving eulogy he had delivered to a packed congregation. Claire had been a popular resident of the village of Somersby, a committee member of the WI as well as a regular church attendee, and the Reverend Aubrey knew her well. There had been genuine sadness in his words of comfort.

The mourners spilled out of the church and meandered their way down the path towards the village green where a snake of black limousines waited. Those closest to Claire had been invited to join the family in a toast to her life at her home in Cranbury a few miles away.

Sophie had known Noah would be at the funeral to pay his respects to his best friend's mother and the person who had taken his girlfriend under her loving wing when she was only ten years old. Her aunt had possessed an infinite capacity to

love and had extended her affection to Noah, the boy who had loved her niece for as long as she could remember. But Sophie hadn't anticipated the depth of emotion she would experience when she set eyes on him for the first time in four long years as he loitered on the worn-out steps of the church with his parents whilst they chatted to the vicar.

Her first reaction was to turn and run, but how could she?

Seb must have felt her arm tense. He glanced over her shoulder, a smile cracking his face for the first time that day.

'Noah!'

Sophie had no choice but to accompany Seb and Dominic to receive the heartfelt condolences of Noah's parents, Geoff and Julie Drake. They shook hands with Seb and Dominic and then turned to hug her to their chests with such compassion that she had to swallow down hard not to open the firmly sealed floodgates. She knew the last thing her aunt would have wanted was for her to be a tear-strewn wreck. She managed a weak smile of appreciation, muttered how grateful she was for their words of genuine comfort, and was keen to move away before Noah took his father's place and enveloped her in his own embrace.

'Geoff, Julie, I think Noah and Sophie could do with a little space,' announced Seb, his eyes lingering on Noah's as he guided his best friend's parents out of the churchyard.

'Oh, no, Seb, I...'

Sophie hadn't intended to meet Noah's gentle, silver-grey eyes. When she did, her heart dropped like a stone down a well before bouncing straight back up again, lodging somewhere between her chest and her throat. Her knees weakened under the strain of her swirling emotions as she drank in his familiar features.

Nothing about him had changed; he was still the teenage boy she had given her heart to. He still spoke with his west country accent, unlike her, who'd worked hard at eradicating it. He still wore his sandy-blond hair on the long side and favoured the designer-stubble look. The smattering of freckles

across the bridge of his nose remained, reminding Sophie of the time they had spent one scorchingly hot summer lying amongst the wheat in a farmer's field when she had counted every single one and had declared there to be one hundred and thirty-two. He'd asked for a recount before grabbing her by the wrists and smiling into her eyes to tell her he was joking. It was the first time he'd told her he loved her.

'Soph, I'm so sorry about your Aunt Claire. I know how much she meant to you. She was a wonderful lady. When Seb called to tell me about the funeral, I grabbed the first flight back to the UK.' His smile was a peace offering.

'Thanks, Noah.'

He reached out his fingers and gently touched the back of her hand. 'If there is anything I can do to help ease your pain, I want you to know that I'm here for you. I will always be your friend.'

Tears amassed on her lower lashes, but she could think of nothing to say. They weren't the same people they had been four years ago. They led totally different lives. Yet, after all this time she was still unable to view Noah as just a friend. He had ensnared her heart and refused to return it. Now she realised that it would hurt too much to maintain the civility required to sustain even friendly relations.

A lone tear trickled down her cheek and Noah reached over to brush it away with his thumb. His lips parted as he cupped her chin and lifted her face to his.

'Soph, I want you to know—'

'Don't, Noah. I can't do this. Not today.'

A cloud of regret passed across his handsome features, but he respected her request. 'Okay, but we do need to talk. I've got a break in my commitments at the moment, and I'm back home for a few weeks. How long are you home for? That's if you still call Somersby home.'

They had reached the village green opposite Gingerberry Yarns, the haberdashery shop her aunt had owned and run with the help of Delia. 'It's the Cotswolds' cosiest little wool shop,'

Delia was forever quoting as her catchphrase. It had certainly been the place Sophie had spent her happiest times and its contents had nurtured her passion for all things woolly and had inspired her to follow her dream of a career in fashion.

‘The will is being read tomorrow,’ said Sophie, unable to prevent the crack in her voice. ‘I’ve promised Seb and Dominic that I’d go to the solicitors with them, although I don’t know why they need me there. Then I’m heading back to London. The announcement is being made on Monday.’

‘What announcement?’

Sophie cursed her lapse in concentration. The last thing she wanted was for Noah to know about her submission to Lilac Verbois’s wedding gown competition. She knew he’d tell her that his band had been booked to perform at the evening reception and she didn’t think she could take any more trauma that day. The Razorclaws and their music would be forever linked with Noah’s betrayal. All she needed to do was get through tomorrow, then she could leave Somersby and eradicate the risk of bumping into Noah again.

‘Oh, just something to do with the boutique. Bye, Noah.’

Before Noah could say anything else, she turned her back on him and strode away, jumping into the back seat of one of the limousines waiting to take the mourners to the wake at her aunt’s house in Cranbury.

Noah was a spectre from her past and she had to make sure he stayed there.

Chapter Five

‘May I start by expressing my sincere condolences and thanking you all for coming today. I’m Gordon Braithwaite, senior partner here at Braithwaite, Cobbs, and Fisher. We’re proud to have handled all of John and Claire Garside’s legal affairs over the years.’

Sophie cast her eyes around the room. It wasn’t what she had been expecting at all. She had envisaged the boardroom of her aunt and uncle’s solicitor’s office to be lined with mahogany bookcases crammed with weighty, leather-bound, legalistic tomes and the faint smell of dusty parchment fighting for supremacy with the aroma of wax furniture polish like the venue – straight out of a Dickensian novel – that she had reluctantly attended for the reading of her parents’ wills after the car crash.

She wondered briefly why solicitors bothered with the charade when there was only one beneficiary – she was an only child – or in the case of Seb and Dom, only two members of the family remaining. However, here she was, a scant eighteen years later, being invited to listen once again to the monotone drone of a probate lawyer as he read through the terms of her aunt’s will, but this time she sat, along with her cousins, in what was essentially a glass cube.

The view from the window was picturesque, looking straight out onto a neatly maintained village green complete with well-populated duck pond, and surrounded by a profusion of pink-flowering cherry trees. On the other side of the manicured green was the popular pub, the Dancing Duck, as well as a French bistro – Bistro Angélique – that drew diners from all over the area, and even from as far afield as Bristol and Oxford. Her aunt and uncle had adored Cranbury, and the

sense of community it engendered, frequently declaring it to be one of the UK's happiest places to live.

She dragged her attention back to the room, surprised to see that Mr Braithwaite was looking over his tortoiseshell spectacles at her with an expectant expression on his face. Seb and Dominic were smiling.

'Erm, sorry, I was just admiring the view.'

'Yes, Miss Henshaw, I have to agree with you, and I think it's at its most beautiful this time of the year.'

She smiled back, but the silence continued.

'What?' she blurted out.

Seb got up and went to sit next to her. He took both her hands into his. 'Mum has left her house here in Cranbury to me and Dom.'

Sophie nodded, smiling into Seb's kind brown eyes which reminded her so much of his mother that she had to inhale a quick breath to quash the rising panic in her chest. Mr Braithwaite didn't look like the type of lawyer who would appreciate people sobbing onto his smoked-glass conference table.

'And she left Gingerberry Yarns to you, Soph.'

'She... I beg your pardon?'

'Dom and I knew she wanted you to have it. It was half your mum's before she and your dad...well... And you did love the place, didn't you, before you left to chase your fortune in London? You know, one of my earliest memories is of you designing and sewing your own clothes for your Barbie doll from remnants of fabric and ribbon. You even knitted jumpers for our teddy bears, remember? We're not interested in the shop. Mum made the right decision.'

Sophie knew her jaw had slackened. She flicked her eyes from Seb to Dominic and back again. The brothers nodded at her in unison.

'Seb's right, Soph. You adore that place. Whenever I go there it feels weird not to see you sitting at that huge table

doing your homework. You spent every spare second there. Well, when you weren't out gallivanting with Noah or watching his band crucify some of my favourite rock anthems,' added Dominic.

'Gingerberry Yarns is mine now?'

Her cousins nodded. The solicitor shuffled his papers back into the buff file in front of him, tied it with a green ribbon and rose from his chair.

'I'll leave you to your discussions. Please take your time and help yourself to coffee. If you need any advice about the disposal of either the property here in Cranbury or the shop over in Somersby, then it goes without saying that my firm's services are at your disposal.'

The door swung closed behind him.

'But I can't run a haberdashery shop in the Cotswolds. I live in London. I have a business that devours every second of my time, perhaps even more if my prayers are answered.'

'Mum was so excited about the wedding gown competition, you know. She told everyone who came into the shop about it.' Seb's eyes sparkled with tears but he managed to hang on to his emotions. 'Dom and I have already decided to sell Mum's house. If you want to sell Gingerberry, you have our blessing. Lives move on, things change. We know that. Just promise to come and visit us up here in Gloucestershire once in a while. We miss you.'

Sophie couldn't hold on to her emotions any longer. She'd thought she had no tears left to shed yet a deluge burst from within.

'I promise,' she managed.

'Oh, and before you go back down to London, why don't you make your peace with Noah? Remember what Mum always used to say? Life's too short to carry grudges. You know, I don't have a single childhood memory that doesn't feature you and Noah together in supporting roles.'

'Seb...'

‘And perhaps, before you make any decisions, you should take a good look around the shop. Maybe take a few photos? It’ll bring back memories you thought you’d forgotten. It did for me and Dom.’

‘I will, yes. Thanks, Seb. Thanks, Dom. But, really, I can’t see any other alternative but to sell up.’

‘Whatever you decide, Soph, you have our full support.’

She would do as Seb had suggested. She’d drive over to Somersby and spend an afternoon in the shop. It was the least she could do after such a generous gift from her Aunt Claire. It would also be an ideal opportunity to check out the stock, to box up anything suitable for Sophie-Louise.

Seb was right. She had left her life in the Cotswolds behind and carved out a new one in the capital, although it was career-orientated with very little social life. She found herself yearning for the anonymity of London where the streets were filled with dull, grey office workers unconcerned about their fellow humans’ difficulties – in fact she had become one of them, a fellow member of that overworked, harried tribe. On the other hand, in Cranbury and Somersby, everyone knew their neighbours’ business, happy or sad, and had a ready word of congratulation or solace to offer.

However, she did have a plethora of happy memories wrapped up in Gingerberry Yarns and it would be tough to leave them behind for good. Yet a stab of regret needled her conscience – there was one thing that pained her above all else.

If she did sell Gingerberry, what would happen to Delia?

Chapter Six

Sophie paused in Somersby High Street to look up at the sign, fashioned from bronze in the shape of a ball of wool stabbed through with a pair of knitting needles. Gingerberry Yarns, it announced. She smiled despite her sadness as she recalled the day it had been delivered; first the shock, then the burst of hilarity her mum and Aunt Claire had shared.

In a certain light, the signage looked just like a skull and crossbones. Would customers think they were pirates, Claire had asked. Delia had been summonsed for her valued opinion, but after much deliberation over the big brown teapot, they had all declared they loved it and hung it outside the shop with tongue-in-cheek pride. It would be a talking point if nothing else. They'd christened its erection with a bottle of Prosecco rosé and a Victoria sponge cake filled with oodles of jam and cream made by old Tom Wallington's bakery.

Gingerberry Yarns had been closed for a week as a mark of respect after the passing of her aunt. Shading her eyes, she peered through the grime-coated window. The little shop still held a hint of magic for Sophie – once inside the door, the visitor would be enveloped in a warm comfort blanket, safe, just for a few moments, from all the traumas life tossed in their path.

She inserted the key Seb had given her and pushed open the door. The brass bell above her head reverberated with a jaunty chime of welcome but it jarred against Sophie's ragged nerves.

'At last dear, it's perishing out here. What kept you?' Delia bustled in behind her, a rich aroma of warm baked pastries following in her wake and permeating the shop's motionless air. 'I'll just butter these whilst they're still warm. Young Tom Wallington really is proving to be a baking maestro. These croissants of his really do melt in your mouth. You should

taste his cherry and almond macarons, and his white chocolate profiteroles are simply delicious, too. If you ask me, his talents are wasted here after all that training he did in Paris and at Betty's, but, well, his father can't...' Delia's prattling dropped off when she noticed Sophie's expression. 'I'll pop the kettle on. See you upstairs when you're ready for a cuppa.'

Sophie's eyes followed Delia's plump backside as she disappeared up the stairs to perform the same task she had done every morning for the last sixteen years, only this time for her best friend's niece. She stepped further into the high-ceilinged room, memories crashing through her thoughts whilst she listened to the cheerful tinkling of cutlery and cups as Delia busied herself in the upstairs kitchen, one that was as familiar as her own.

Sophie smoothed her palm over the glass-topped counter, its surface reflecting her pixie-like features and the misery swirling in the far corners of her soul. A wave of desolation rippled over her when she realised Gingerberry Yarns would never again be blessed with the smiling presence of its proprietor. The fact that the world could keep on turning despite this devastating knowledge annoyed her.

She sighed, then cast her professional eye around the room. Her recent absence afforded her the opportunity to scrutinise its outmoded contents with a fresh perspective. What her eyes met instilled no creative enthusiasm. The place was old-fashioned and shabby at the edges.

Why hadn't she noticed this careworn façade before?

Puffs of dust and sadness hovered amongst the packed wicker baskets. Garlands of twisted yarn nestled in cubbyholes or behind glass doors with tiny brass knobs more befitting a gentleman's outfitters from the fifties. The shop was well stocked but everything on the shelves depicted a bygone era when communities were tight and pockets tighter. It was a place you would find your granny holding court, not a young mothers' chinwag or a teenagers' coterie of gossip. But then, "Gran's Woollen Emporium" was exactly what Gingerberry Yarns was – an old people's social club or a place for the

knitting circle from the local WI to persuade their deft fingers to twirl yarn into garments for the needy.

Polished teak shelves ran round the remaining two sides of the room, stuffed with lurid, multicoloured acrylics Sophie had last seen on Barbie. Where were the natural lamb's wools, the organic silks, the fair-trade cottons? Even the Aran was synthetic.

Knitting needles had been jammed into spaghetti jars like forests of pasta. Cards of pearl buttons and other assorted fastenings dangled from racks of chipped steel. The sample garments displayed on coat hangers on old mahogany hat stands, clearly knitted by her aunt or Delia, to Sophie's trained eye resembled bed jackets for the terminally ill. There were so many trendy designs coming out of Scandinavia at the moment, inspired by the wave of crime fiction that had been serialised for television, and the art of knitting was now a celebrity-endorsed pastime. She thought of the chunky sweaters Scarlet adored; hers was red and cream, a prized possession that had cost her well over a week's salary.

Her fertile designer's mind drifted to the Kaffe Fassett designs, works of art every one of them, all sculpted in natural wools, if not organic or locally sourced. She remembered the "knit and natter" sessions she had attended when a penniless student in Manchester, where, for the price of a cup of coffee in the local coffee chain café, she'd spent warm, aroma-filled evenings with a diverse gathering of friends, from eager teenagers to harassed new mums grabbing a couple of hours of sanity away from the baby, and even professional women escaping the testosterone-infused office for a more girly activity that would not be judged against the bottom line.

The shop sported the most magnificent glass-plate frontage with its title embossed in arched gold lettering. But the window was almost opaque with rain-streaked grime and its display of misshapen sweaters did not invite curious perusal by passing window-shoppers.

In the farthest corner of the room, behind the counter where Sophie slumped, her elbow supporting her chin, Claire and Delia had squeezed in an enormous antique mahogany table,

complete with green leather inlay as wrinkled as an octogenarian's knees; its tooled edges inlaid with gold leaf and the deep scratches testament to the passage of time. Around this monstrosity huddled a disconsolate selection of equally ancient hard-backed chairs. A couple sported chintzy cushions as a nod to the comfort of their users' buttocks.

Clearly this was where the serious business of the day was conducted – just not the money-making kind. It seemed as though ghosts still lingered there, at the table, completing unfinished projects before they could rest in peace.

The whole store screamed warmth and comfort; a genteel, English lady's boudoir of the 1950s. Its painted walls blistered and flaky to the touch, its flooring worn and patched. Places like Gingerberry Yarns would not have survived in the metropolises of Bristol and Manchester. They had been replaced by trendy wine bars and the ubiquitous coffee shops, estate agents and nail bars, although even these businesses were struggling now.

Sophie glanced out of the front window to the row of shops on the other side of the village green. Marietta's Hair Salon, its windows reflecting the golden glow of the mid-morning sun, displayed three giant black-and-white portraits of cutting-edge hair design. With the bakery producing fresh croissants, Sophie wondered whether Gingerberry Yarns was the only shop in the vicinity that had not moved with the times.

As she straightened up, the realisation came to her with a jolt that slammed straight to her heart. Her aunt and Delia had run this compendium of yarns and ribbons over the years, not as a business, but as a social enterprise. A note of dread rang in the back of her mind for what she would discover in the accounts when she marketed the business. It was blatantly obvious from the noticeable voids on the shelves behind the gargantuan meeting table that very little had been spent on the shop's maintenance. There was no point thinking about that, though, now the building and the business were going to be sold.

Delia appeared at the bottom of the stairs carrying a tray. 'Here we are, love, one steaming cup of your favourite Earl

Grey tea. Warms the cockles of your heart, it does.’

Unlikely, thought Sophie. Anxiety and grief had lodged a tight knot in her chest that no amount of alcohol-free beverage could dislodge. Only in the welcoming arms of Jack and Daniel could Sophie feel the suffocating weight begin to ease and that was only a temporary reprieve.

‘I’ve made a pot for when Iris and Marcia arrive. They usually pop in after collecting Iris’s pension on a Tuesday morning, after a compulsory visit to old Mr Wallington’s bakery. Oh, I shouldn’t continue calling it that now, I suppose. Did you know he’s moved into Cranbury Residential Care Home? Oh, and even Susan from the village store has decided not to open her teashop this summer – she’s struggled to find anyone willing to work there for just six months of the year – which means there’s nowhere for visitors to the village to pause for a cup of tea or coffee. Ah, everything is changing in Somersby. The passage of time favours no one, I’m afraid.’

As Delia busied herself dusting the shelves with a long feather duster, accompanied by a running commentary of complaints about how quickly the dust settles when not kept on top of, Sophie swung her contemplation and analytical eye onto her aunt’s best friend of over forty years.

Her hair, the colour of autumn mist, had been cut in a surprisingly modern style – spiky fringe, tufted at the back, and finished off with the suspicion of gel! In fact, Delia carried her sixty years well. In spite of her ample hips and bosom, Sophie’s expert eye told her that she modelled her wardrobe on the latest trends; hand-knit apricot cashmere sweater, embellished with tiny shimmering beads around the neckline and a pair of flatteringly cut trousers. She had a suspicion – no, a certainty – that Delia had designed and hand-sewn the items herself to flatter her figure perfectly. Delia had completed her day’s attire with the largest pearl earrings Sophie had seen and a long silver chain from which her jewelled glasses swung like an optical pendulum as she swished away the offending dust.

But there was a tightness at the corners of Delia’s thinning lips and pronounced creases between her eyes. With a jolt of

guilt, Sophie realised how anxious the older woman must be about what would become of Gingerberry Yarns and, therefore, her own future. Delia would never have admitted it to Sophie, but Sophie knew she had relished the role of the shop's co-chatelaine over the years. It was what she had lived for.

‘Delia, let’s sit down.’

Sophie strode over to the gigantic table and folded her six-foot frame into one of the uncomfortable chairs. Its wooden spindles dug sharply into the small of her back. Silence extended through the room. It felt weird because the whole place was usually suffused with chatter and the aroma of her aunt’s favourite coffee brewing in the corner for customers to help themselves.

Best just launch in, she thought. The residents of Somersby were renowned for their straight-talking. ‘Delia, Aunt Claire left me Gingerberry Yarns in her will.’

‘Oh, that’s marvellous, my dear. Your aunt truly loved this place, you know. She spent more time here than she did over at her house in Cranbury. She adored the yarns, the cottons, the silks, the mohairs. Oh, the way she used to run her fingers through those spools of ribbons and laces. But, most of all it was the people she loved, Sophie, the regulars. Her “posse”, she would call them, “Claire’s haberdashery posse”.’

Delia stared out of the window, lost in her memories. Her trendy haircut made her look like she was wearing a pewter helmet, but her face reflected the kindness that oozed from her pores. She twisted her rings around her fingers as she reminisced. Her tear-blotched face was pale and drawn, the red spidery veins bleeding across the whites of her eyes evidence of the copious weeping the trauma of the previous couple of weeks had caused.

‘I know mere words can’t erase your sorrow, Sophie. William and I were never fortunate enough to be blessed with children of our own, nor as an only child from a single mother do I have any nephews or nieces or other relatives, but you, Seb and Dominic are as good as family to me.’ Delia drew in a

deep breath as she prepared to deliver her next sentence. ‘We need to open the shop back up. It’s been closed for over two weeks now and people are asking. I’m happy to stay on, but if you don’t want me to... I’ll understand.’

Delia crooked fingers, gnarled by years of gripping knitting needles and the onset of arthritis, continued to twist at her wedding ring, fearful of the response.

‘Stay on?’

‘Well, just if you wanted to run it yourself, that’s all? Or, heaven forbid, close it down and sell up. It seems to be what’s happening around here in the village.’ Delia closed her eyes against the potential heartbreak of not only losing her best friend, but also her reason for getting out of bed every morning.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, I’ve already told you about the teashop, and look at what used to be the butcher’s shop across the road, its frontage clad in a cage of scaffolding. A so-called property developer is renovating the building into “*a desirable country dwelling, boasting wood-burning stoves and a sleek, stainless-steel kitchen; a stylish weekend retreat in the stunningly beautiful Cotswolds for the discerning City banker*”. That’s what the sales particulars say, or something along those lines – they’re not even attempting to market the place as a home to local residents who will become part of the community. I shudder to think what the village of Somersby will become if yet another shop loses the fight to stay open. And there’s no point in objecting to the planners. We tried that.’

As Sophie met Delia’s eyes a barrage of guilt tumbled through her veins. In that instant her aunt’s oldest friend had understood that Sophie would indeed be selling up.

‘Sorry, Sophie, please don’t pay any heed to me. I’m a sentimental old woman. You have to be free to make your own decision, unburdened by any feelings of loyalty or, heaven forbid, pity. You have your own life and future to think of.’

‘Delia, I’m so sorry. I’m going back to London tonight. I need to get back to work and resume some sort of normality. I want to be at the salon just in case... well... just in case our design wins. Only the winner is going to be informed, to keep things as private as possible for Lilac, so if we don’t hear anything tomorrow it means our design hasn’t been chosen. Do you think we might have a chance, Delia? It’d be such a fabulous opportunity for everyone at Sophie-Louise.’

‘I don’t know, Sophie dear, but I’m sure your design was the most adorable. Your aunt was so proud of all your achievements, you know, not just these star-studded creations. Every day we’d sit at this very table and chat about you and Seb and Dominic; about your fantastic designs, about Seb and Dominic’s promotions at work, about Noah’s success with his band. It made her happy just to know you were all following your dreams – wherever their paths took you.’

‘She was just so excited when we closed the shop on that last Friday. Lots of our customers and friends had called by during the day to wish you luck, before she... before she...’ Delia withdrew a lace-trimmed, cotton handkerchief embroidered with a large blue ‘D’ and dabbed the falling tears away from her papery cheeks.

‘I miss her so much. Every day of the last sixteen years since your Uncle John died we’ve been running Gingerberry Yarns together. Then, after my William passed away, it was just the two of us. This isn’t simply a shop to us, Sophie, a means of making a living. Gingerberry Yarns is an integral part of this community. Oh, I know you youngsters think Somersby is a dull, parochial village, and it may be, compared to the pull of the bright lights of the metropolis, but your aunt’s shop provides an escape, offers solace from the lonely daily routine that we older people find our lives becoming when our children and spouses have moved on.’

‘I’m sorry, Delia. I can’t run Gingerberry from London, I just can’t. Even if my design doesn’t win, I have enough commissions to keep me working every hour God sends for the next two years. I don’t have a choice. Gingerberry will have to be sold.’

As she spoke those painful words the doorbell tinkled like a wedding ring on a crystal champagne flute, announcing the arrival of a customer despite the sign having been turned to “Closed”.

With the sun behind him it was a few moments before Sophie realised who it was, but Delia knew straight away. She collected her handbag and bustled off, pausing to kiss Noah on her way out of the door.

Chapter Seven

‘Hi, Sophie.’

Noah reached out and pulled her into his spice-infused chest. His familiar cologne caused her mind to zoom back to the last time they had been together. He dropped a kiss on her cheek and awaited her reaction.

‘Erm, hi,’ she croaked as her heart pummelled her chest and a cauldron of emotions whipped through her body, sending sparkles of electricity to her fingertips.

The immediate environs of the shop receded as all Sophie could see were those steel-grey eyes that had frequented so many of her dreams. It was as though the last four years of loneliness had melted into oblivion as Noah stood before her, matching her height and meeting her stare. Unlike her heart, her brain refused to process his presence despite the visual evidence of his choppy, tawny-coloured hair and his strong, determined jawline, sporting a suggestion of stubble, not to mention the familiar curve of his lips.

As always, it was Noah’s eyes that drew her gaze. Now, face-to-face with the only man she had ever truly loved after four long years, Sophie scrutinised his face for a sign that he was a different person to the one she had adored. For confirmation that the passage of time had justified her relinquished love; a love they had sustained throughout their teenage years and the three years of university. But the Noah she saw slouched in front of her was exactly the same, no wrinkles or errant grey hairs, and her heart confirmed with every beat that she did still love him.

She crushed down that unwelcome confirmation, as she was becoming so adept at doing, and cast around for a topic of conversation that wouldn’t bring their past screaming back.

She plastered on a smile and prayed her voice would not give her away.

‘It’s great to see you, Noah. I hear The Razorclaws are playing to sold-out arenas now. That’s fabulous. Even got a gig at the wedding of the year. Congratulations!’

‘Yeah, we’re stoked.’ Noah stuck his hands in the front pockets of his figure-hugging black jeans and flapped his elbows, a clear signal to Sophie that he was nervous about what his reception might be. She led him to the table at the back of the shop, still strewn with culinary debris, and offered him a mug of tea from the big brown teapot. ‘Couldn’t let Finn down. We’ve been friends since uni.’

Sophie struggled to drag her eyes from his soft-pewter stare, annoyed that she still experienced the deep emotional pull of their connection. They had been soulmates, but how could that bond have endured? How could this man’s mere proximity still cause her stomach to churn and her nerve endings to tingle after what he had done?

No, she had to pull herself together, act as though he were a treasured friend, as indeed he was. He remained one of Seb’s best friends, along with Archie who played bass guitar in the band. She reminded herself that she had been only twenty-two when their relationship ended; she was now almost twenty-eight and a lot had happened to both of them since then. She would deal with this situation with maturity.

She smiled at Noah, intending to continue with enquiries about his band’s success or queries about his family’s well-being, but what she saw reflected in the depths of his eyes flashed an unexpected jolt of desire around her disloyal body. But she was determined that her head would fight this battle, and she pressed on with her attempt to prove to Noah that she had moved on.

‘My aunt left me Gingerberry Yarns, you know.’

‘Oh, wow, Soph, I’m so pleased about that. You loved this shop. I have so many happy memories of hanging out here with Seb and Dominic, you and Nessa. I bet you have loads of plans for it. Perhaps it could do with a lick of paint.’ Noah ran

his gaze over the walls where the paint blistered like sunburnt skin.

‘I’m not keeping it.’

Noah’s smile died on his lips. ‘You’re what?’

‘I’m selling up.’

‘You’re joking, right?’

‘No.’

‘Claire adored this shop. I can’t believe you would do that.’

‘I do have a life of my own, you know. In London. I run my own bridal boutique now. It’s successful.’ She had no idea why she’d felt the need to add the last sentence.

‘Oh, yes, I heard. You make clothes for rich brides to wear.’

‘I design clothes. No, not just clothes – haute couture.’ She could hear the defensive hint that had crept into her voice, along with the surprise resurrection of her west country accent. Noah had always known what buttons to press in more ways than one.

‘How can you even think of selling Gingerberry Yarns? It’s part of the fabric of our lives. And it’s more than that. It’s an essential part of this whole community.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Noah. When was the last time you were here?’ she challenged.

Noah held her eyes for what felt like an eternity. ‘Three weeks ago, actually. Two days before Claire passed away. Unlike you, I still live here. I haven’t run out on my friends, or forgotten what home means. I loved Claire as much as you did, Soph.’

‘Well, I’ve moved on. My life and my career are in London. I’m leaving tonight.’

‘Tonight? So you’re not even staying on to sort out the shop? What about Delia? And aren’t you even going to catch up with Nessa? The Sophie I knew would never pass up the opportunity for a chinwag with her best friend!’

‘Not that it’s any of your business, but I saw Nessa for a long weekend of Christmas shopping and partying at the beginning of December and we talk all the time on the phone. But guess what, smartass, I’m not the Sophie you knew anymore! Something happened to change all that, didn’t it? You betrayed me.’

‘I didn’t betray you, Soph,’ Noah said softly. ‘I loved you.’

‘No, you didn’t. I was just the first girl you kissed and who was crazy enough to stick around. So if you didn’t betray me, what were you doing with that girl? The Tonsil Tango?’

She forced her duplicitous heart to recall the last image she had of Noah; the one that had lingered in her mind over the years like dripping acid in which he had his arms wrapped around the voluptuous curves of a flaxen-haired fan of The Razorclaws. She could still recall the girl’s cat-like eyes gleaming with triumph at her conquest of the lead singer.

Of course, Noah’s explanation for that terrible scene had been relayed to her from numerous sources: Seb, Dominic, her best friend, Nessa. Even his bandmate Archie had sent her a text with a plea to speak to a devastated Noah, explaining that what she had blundered in on had meant nothing; that in fact it was a regular by-product of being a member of a moderately successful band; that inevitably there would be fans, groupies, girls who went to extraordinary lengths to gain access to their heroes, and from whom there was often no polite escape. But Archie’s protestations and explanations had only served to make her discovery worse and her pain sharpen. The incident and its fallout had solidified her sneaking suspicion that, when she could not be at Noah’s side, there was a line of girls willing to walk into her shoes.

‘I just knew you wouldn’t be able to resist bringing that up. Nothing happened with Lydia. She threw herself at me. What was I supposed to do? Throw her back?’

‘Yes, that’s exactly what you were supposed to do!’

‘But it didn’t *mean* anything. It just goes with the territory. You promised to be there to watch us play. For God’s sake, Sophie, it was the night we finally made it into the big time

and my girlfriend wasn't even there to share it with me. Oh, no, she had something much more important to do, like sewing sequins on some rich person's dress!

'Well, I suppose now you are famous, that would put you in the same category as a rich b... Where are you going?'

'I'm leaving. You've done it. You should be able to recognise the signs.'

Noah wrenched open the door so hard the bell jangled on its chain and came loose, dangling down into Sophie's face. She slammed the door behind him and reached up to drop the sneck, tossing the bell from her cheek like a recalcitrant fly, only for it to swing straight back and hit her in the nose. She flapped her hand at it again, but it returned to give her a sharp and painful blow on the temple.

Her eyes smarted with tears as Noah rolled his eyes at her through the glass and marched off to his battered old Saab, revving the engine with alacrity and sending a cloud of dust in his slipstream as he exited the village at speed.

Sophie slumped down at the table, scene of many a traumatic discussion that was more often than not accompanied by the standard prescription of a cup of sugared tea and a boatload of sympathy, and maybe a scone or two from the teashop on the corner, made by the famous children's book illustrator who lived in the village, Bernice Marshall. Her conversation with Noah had caused her to reconsider her plans, as he had no doubt intended, and she realised that her insistence of returning to London so swiftly after the funeral and the will reading was disrespectful on several levels, not least because Delia needed her.

She pulled her phone from her pocket and stared at the screen for several seconds before exhaling a long breath and selecting Scarlet's number. Her friend and colleague answered immediately, and Sophie explained her decision, knowing that she would understand.

'Are you sure you can manage without me, Scarlet?'

‘I’m not totally useless, you know. Haven’t I had the most fantastic mentor a fledgling fashion designer could wish for these last four years? If you need to stay on in Somersby for a couple of weeks to sort out your aunt’s shop, then do it. The decision on Lilac’s wedding gown is out of our hands; there’s nothing more you, or anyone else, can do. Anyway, I’ve got Flora, although she’s as much use as a shop-window mannequin, and there’s Lizzie.’

‘You *will* ring me tomorrow as soon as you hear anything, won’t you?’

‘It’s a promise. Pinky swear. Now do what you have to do, Soph. Actually, the break will do you good. You’ve just had the most devastating shock, and on top of the hours you’ve been putting in for the last three months it’s enough to drive anyone to the edge of their sanity. And, hey, I’m loving the broad west country accent, by the way!’

Sophie smiled. ‘Thanks, Scarlet. You are the best friend ever. I owe you.’

‘Well, I might just extract a promise that you’ll take me along to every one of Lilac Verbois’s fittings as well as the wedding ceremony. That should repay the debt!’

‘Scarlet! We haven’t won yet.’

‘We will.’

Chapter Eight

Tossing back the embroidered cotton sheet and ancient woollen blankets her aunt had favoured, Sophie flicked the sides of her ebony bob behind each ear and dragged her sluggish bones to the bathroom to jump-start her senses. She felt as though she had been flayed by a dominatrix's whip.

Her heart leaden, she was aware that today held her fate in its grasp. But misery had enveloped any trace of excitement at the pending announcement, sorrow extinguishing any hopefulness. Every crevice of the tiny flat above Gingerberry Yarns where she was staying resonated with her aunt's presence, her laughter, her jovial personality, her cheerful chatter. The whole day stretched into the distance as she waited for her future path to be sealed.

Nerves tingled their insistence at her empty stomach. The only sustenance she had managed to provide it with the previous evening after her decision to stay on in Somersby had been a mug of Earl Grey tea; anything more solid and it would have screamed its objection. As she sagged over the kitchen table staring out of the steam-covered window, she wondered when the director of her destiny would grant her asylum from grief.

After taking a few deep breaths, she grabbed her courage and ran her eyes over that morning's media frenzy on all the social media platform she was on. Even though the final choice would not be made public until Lilac Verbois walked down the aisle, it hadn't stopped the rampant speculation on the identity of the designer that would win the coveted assignment to create the wedding gown of the decade. Many posters had displayed a selection of photographs from each of the finalists' previous work, keen to give their followers their daily fix of the celebrity wedding fiasco that was sweeping the

nation, and hoping to be the one who correctly predicted the outcome.

It seemed to Sophie that everyone and their granny was talking about it.

Astute in their understanding that their special day would inevitably be a media circus whether they liked it or not, Lilac and Finn had ingeniously decided to embrace this fact by inviting the public's engagement rather than railing against the offensive intrusion of their privacy. They had made themselves available for interviews, photoshoots, and had even run a competition for fifty of Finn's lucky fans to win tickets to his concert in Paris a month after the wedding.

On that crisp, clear morning, Sophie did spare a thought for the other designers and their supporting teams. Today someone's life would change for ever, if not that of their whole entourage. Of course, she hoped it would be her team, but she empathised with the fact that, whoever won, it would mean others who had slogged their hearts out just as she had would be left reeling with disappointment.

By four o'clock she could bear it no longer. She grabbed her phone and, with her hand trembling, called Scarlet.

'Any news?'

'Nothing.'

'Oh, God, that means we haven't won.'

'There's still another couple of hours...'

Sophie's stomach felt like it had contracted around a pineapple. Tears, always so ready to breach the surface, pressed up from the back of her throat to her eyelids, but she managed to gulp them down.

'We worked so hard, Scarlet – all of us: you, Flora, Lizzie. But you know what? I can honestly say that Lilac's dress was the best wedding gown design of my career so far. I couldn't have produced anything better. So, if we didn't win, then so be it. It's back to the drawing board and I intend to work even harder to reach the pinnacle of bridal couture.' She silently cursed the audible wobble that had crept into her voice. 'I'm

watching the TV as we speak and they've just shown Lilac's PA, Nikki Coates, and her wedding planner, Tish Marshall, climbing into a limousine outside her house in South Kensington. Don't you think they would have called the winner before they left?'

'Maybe you're right, Sophie. Oh, God, I'm absolutely devastated. I really thought we were going to win.'

'Nikki, you're going to have to break it to Lilac that she needs to choose another dress.'

'No way – that's your job. You're the wedding planner, Tish.'

'But you've been her PA for years. She's going to take the bad news better from you.'

'Are you absolutely sure there was no documentation with the gown she selected? Nothing at all?'

'Certain.'

'What kind of high-end bridal designer goes to the trouble of painstakingly creating such an exquisite sculpture of silk and pearls only to submit their masterpiece without their contact details?'

'And what kind of actress just has to pick their dream dress from one of the gowns their wedding planner can't supply?'

'What do you mean "one of the gowns"? There was more than one?'

'Two of the twenty that were submitted had no paperwork and the documents of one were illegible.'

Nikki watched from her desk as Tish, kneeling in front of the coffee table, shoved the scattered papers into a box file and cringed at the girl's lack of orderliness. Whilst her haphazard attention to detail was unlikely to have been the cause of their current predicament, she still despaired of the wedding arrangements being perfect. Tish's chaotic approach to life also extended to her appearance, yet Nikki had to admit she

suited the tousled, just-got-out-of-bed blonde curls and not-quite-perfectly-applied vivid-blue eyeliner.

'What about asking Lilac to go with her second choice?'

'You were there, Nikki. You saw how she reacted to that first-choice dress. And you have to admit, it was stunning – totally made for her. I know she's already a celebrity, but she looked like a fairy-tale princess in that gown, didn't she?' Tish's eyes, the colour of liquid sapphires, glazed over as she tumbled into her own fantasy world.

'Tish, quit the Cinderella fantasy. We have to sort this fiasco out ourselves. We can't burden Lilac with the problem. She's got enough to worry about.'

'So what are we going to do? I'm slammed as it is. I've not eaten since yesterday lunchtime. I've got the bridesmaids' bouquets to finalise, the wedding cake topper to chase – you know the confectioner is crazy, don't you? There's the champagne still to source, and I have a meeting with the printer tomorrow to finalise the wording on the invitations and orders of service. The invitations need to be sent out by the end of the week at the latest, although the whole world knows when the wedding is going to be.

'The only thing that seems to be on schedule at the moment is the music. The organist at the cathedral is sorted and he's rehearsed the pieces Lilac and Finn have selected for the ceremony. And the band is booked, and the lead singer has even written a song especially for the happy couple that he's agreed to debut at the evening reception. Oh, Nikki, I'm so excited we're getting to meet The Razorclaws. That lead singer, Noah Drake – what a dreamboat. I hear he's unattached. Do you think he has come-to-bed eyes? My sister thinks he has.'

'Good grief, Tish will you calm down with the hearts-and-flowers fixation. You'll have to squeeze some time from somewhere and it'll have to be straight away. We promised to inform the designer they've won the competition as soon as possible. Everyone who submitted will be thinking their design hasn't been selected and they'll start accepting a bunch of new

commissions. There'll have to be a couple of fittings at least and Lilac is a busy girl. She's on location in Croatia for three weeks before the wedding which, can I remind you, is just three and a half months away.'

Nikki was used to lurching from one crisis to the next. In fact, she thrived on the daily adrenalin rush. It made her feel worthy of her position as Lilac's right-hand woman – her Girl Friday. She almost hated it when things went smoothly. But this wedding had proved to be the ultimate headache. Tish was so involved in the romance of it all that, on occasion, she had to restrain herself from throttling her.

Okay, yes, wedding planners had to be in love with everything 'planet bridal' to work in the industry, but Tish had taken her obsession to a new level. She was usually to be found floating around the office on the wings of Eros, constantly chattering about diamanté tiaras, personalised confetti (with pictures of the bride and groom printed on it, for God's sake!), and sugared almonds, which she had the perfect excuse to indulge in. Annoyingly, Tish also seemed to have been blessed with a metabolism that ignored the onslaught of sugar. She, on the other hand, despite following a semi-vegetarian diet, still struggled with losing the extra pounds that had crept up on her unnoticed – and it had nothing to do with the cupcakes from the Parisian patisserie that had popped up on the corner in the last three months.

Tish had certainly thrown herself into her chosen career, happy to hunt down the most bizarre of requests as she waited patiently to play the lead role in her own fairy-tale Happy Ever After. Of course the girl had her own wedding day planned right down to the toilet tissue she wanted in the ladies' cloakroom of the Savoy. Only one tiny detail was missing – there was no groom loitering in the wings, or backstage, or even on the auditions list. So, whilst her own personal hearts-and-flowers scenario was on the back burner, she was content to pour all her energies into conjuring up everyone else's dream wedding.

'But where should I start?'

Nikki rolled her eyes. 'Look, make a list of all the designers who were asked to submit. Then go through the dresses that did arrive with the correct paperwork and tick them off. See what's left. There may be a couple who decided not to submit, but at least we'll have narrowed it down. I'm late for a meeting with Lilac's agent, but I'll be back in an hour and we'll go through the list together.'

'Don't worry, I'll ring them.'

'No! You can't do that.'

'Why not?'

'Well, how do you plan on finding out if it's their dress?'

'Email them a photo – oh, no, right, I see.'

'We've got to be careful not to disclose the final design of the most anticipated wedding dress this year to anyone. Absolute secrecy – we promised Lilac – nothing until it is unveiled to the world on the steps of Gloucester Cathedral. We can't go around emailing everyone a photo. Especially the designers whose gowns failed to make the cut. Think about it!'

'So what are we going to do?'

'I'll think of something. Just get that list sorted and I'll see you in an hour.'

Nikki gathered up the designer handbag Lilac had given her for Christmas and a bundle of box files and left Tish to her task. This latest development was the last thing she needed, but her ordered mind was already clicking through the possibilities as she affixed her new badge of 'Nuptial Detective' to her already crowded breast.

Solving problems was her forte, along with a mild addiction to list-making and fighting off the media, sometimes physically. Everything she did was organised with almost surgical precision. There was no conundrum that outfoxed her. She knew Lilac's entourage gossiped about her for catering to the actress's every whim, no matter how bizarre or outlandish, and her strategies for negotiating the best price would have embarrassed the head buyer of Poundland. They would locate the creative idiot who had submitted the gown without the

paperwork, but she'd have something to say to the designer about his or her business practices.

As she stepped into the glass elevator for her ride down to the foyer, Nikki allowed herself a faint grimace. They would probably end up having to tour the whole country in their search for the elusive designer, which meant Tish had actually got her wish, after all. This wedding was turning into a real Cinderella story, just not the hearts-and-flowers bit – the Poirotesque bit.

Chapter Nine

When she woke a few days later, Sophie felt like she'd been hit by a juggernaut. Her body ached, her head was fuzzy, and when she tried to get out of bed her legs could barely support her as she made her way to the bathroom. She had barely slept, with the competition whirling around her head as she asked herself whether she could, or should, have done anything differently, even though the sensible side of her brain assured her over and over that she couldn't.

She took a long, hot shower, dressed quickly, then padded into the tiny kitchen to make herself a rejuvenating mug of tea. She felt better, but she still couldn't stop thinking about the boutique, and she had to struggle against the insistent voice in her head that whispered that all her designs were substandard, and it was time to call it a day on her dream. She grabbed her phone and dialled Scarlet's number.

'Is everything okay, Scarlet?'

'I told you when you called yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that, *everything's fine.*'

'Well, I hope to be back at the boutique by the end of the week.'

'Look, Soph, why don't you take this opportunity to have some time out? A sort of short sabbatical?'

'What? No! After I've sorted out the shop I need to come back and bury myself in the studio. I really need to up my game, Scarlet, especially after receiving this blow to my confidence, and I have to keep designing for my sanity. I also need to return to my own life in London. There's nothing left for me here in Somersby. I've got a few ideas for the Spring/Summer Collection next year floating around in my head that I want to brainstorm with you, and I... I... sorry.'

Despite her attempt to keep a lid on her raging emotions, to her embarrassment, she burst into huge racking sobs.

‘Sophie, you’ve just lost your aunt, your only remaining parental figure. It’s hard to come to terms with the fact there’s no safety net to catch you if you fall. You have to take some time to grieve; let it out, don’t bottle it up. Of course we’ll miss you, but we can manage for a couple of months.’

‘A couple of months?!’

‘Mourn, recharge your creative batteries, organise your family’s affairs. Spend some time with those handsome cousins of yours. Market the shop, sell up, or whatever you decide, but don’t rush this decision.’

‘You can’t seriously be suggesting that I run a little haberdashery shop in the Cotswolds alongside a couture bridal boutique in London?’

‘I’m just saying, take your time. We’ll keep in touch, let you know if there are any panics or problems we can’t handle. We can video conference every week, or more often if you want, and it’s only an hour or so’s train ride away if you need to come down.’

An invisible force pressed down on Sophie’s shoulders, inducing a dark, heavy lethargy. She had no idea how long she remained at that scarred pine table in the shop’s cosy kitchen, staring out of the window at the village green. It was a familiar scenario, as she, along with her best friend Nessa, had lurched from one adolescent crisis to the next; all of which seemed trivial with the benefit of hindsight, compared to the current turmoil in her life. Sadness lanced her heart and failure sapped her self-esteem, but mingled in with the mix were spirals of indecision about what to do with her aunt’s beloved Gingerberry Yarns.

Outside, twilight tickled at the branches of the trees that lined the high street as the traders began to close their shops for the day. If she *did* decide to carry on her aunt’s legacy – to honour her memory, to preserve Gingerberry Yarns for the community – at what cost would that be to her own dreams and ambitions?

She consciously shook herself out of her self-pitying reverie and chastised herself for her despondency. She dragged herself from her seat to dump her mug in the kitchen sink, her mind a scattergun of confused thoughts as she tried to assimilate the consequences of her failure to win the most coveted prize of her life. All those months of unrelenting hard work and unerring focus on one solitary goal that had been disallowed. A goal, she had to admit, she had thought would clinch the whole match.

Was she arrogant, overly confident in her own creative ability? Clearly she had been. She had neglected everything and everyone – her aunt, Seb and Dominic, her friends, her love life – in her quest for recognition, notoriety even; for the chance to showcase her design talent to the world, to become a part, however small, of the celebrity circus that was Lilac and Finn’s perfect summer wedding.

If it had been *her* wedding, this farcical competition would be the very epitome of what she did *not* want. Such an intimate, joyful union demanded only the involvement of those who truly loved and cared for the couple and, as her fragile self-worth plummeted even further, Sophie thought she could count on one hand those stalwart friends who would be in attendance at her own marriage ceremony.

Anyway, what was she doing dreaming about her non-existent wedding? And there was no point in speculating on the identity of any potential groom. There was only one person up there in prime position.

Noah.

But she had no spare emotion to waste on dissecting her relationship with Noah. She shoved that cushion full of pins to the back of her mind for future examination. She had enough emotional pain in her life to be getting on with – neglectful niece to Claire, uninterested cousin to Seb and Dominic, absent friend to Nessa and Scarlet, and now mediocre fashion designer at Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture. Adding failure as a girlfriend to the list would tip her over the edge and she’d be looking at her sanity in the rear-view mirror.

Anyway, she had a shop to get ready for sale.

Chapter Ten

‘My design didn’t win the Lilac Verbois wedding gown competition, Delia.’

Sophie broke off to inhale a steadying breath and tried to concentrate her attention on the window of the shop, beyond which the day promised warmth. The pavements of the high street were swathed in golden sunshine as the locals went about their daily business, popping into the village store, attending their hair appointments at Marietta’s Hair Salon, or leaving their car to be serviced at Andrews Autos.

She’d found it difficult to elucidate her failure aloud but was surprised to experience a welcome surge of relief now it was out there. She hoped Delia would grasp the baton of its knowledge and pass it on to the curious, as she knew her aunt had shared her shortlisting in the competition far and wide.

‘And also, Scarlet has agreed to look after the boutique for a couple of months to, erm, allow me to sort things out and recover from the duo of shocks.’

A fresh flash of guilt stabbed at her veins that her courage had failed her once again. She couldn’t mention the sale of the business to Delia. She experienced a heavy tug of dawning realisation of what kind of person she was – shallow and deceitful.

‘Oh, Sophie, you don’t know how delighted I am to hear that,’ Delia exclaimed, releasing Sophie from a flowery perfume-infused hug. ‘I know you have a busy and absorbing life down there in the capital, and colleagues desperate for your return, but you also have a great many friends up here in Somersby, you know. I’m so pleased you’re staying on for a while. Your aunt would definitely approve.’ Delia raised her eyes up to the cracked ceiling. ‘Claire would never have wanted the shop to close down. She was so angry and upset

when she heard what had happened to the butcher's shop. She even went as far as objecting to the planning application for change of use to residential – made no difference, of course. But what will happen to this village if *all* the shops close down and are converted into holiday homes and weekend retreats for escapees from the corporate rat race? Somersby would become a faded image of its current vibrancy.'

'I—'

'Gingerberry Yarns isn't just a shop selling wool and trimmings; it's a hub of social activity and provides a much-needed service to this community. Don't you remember when you were still at home? All your aunt's friends calling in for a chat, a word of support, of sympathy, of guidance? We're part of the fabric of people's lives. Look how supportive everyone's been these past weeks, rallying round to offer not only a baked pie or a chicken casserole, but a listening ear, a word of comfort, and I have to admit I've succumbed to that offer more than once.'

Tears sprang into Delia's tired eyes as she anxiously tried to get her message across to Sophie, who sat, head bent low to the table, studying the dregs of her cold tea. She reached across and took Sophie's slender fingers in her own.

'We can't sell the place to a property developer out to make a fast buck. If it has to be sold, then let's try to pass on the legacy to someone who will continue to run it with the same ethos. I'll manage on my own so you can market the business as a going concern, a viable proposition for a potential buyer. It'd probably be worth more that way, or it would be more likely to sell to someone who wanted to keep it on.'

Sophie's heart contracted. Was Delia right?

Was she letting her aunt down by not at least trying to keep Gingerberry Yarns open? Could she handle the guilt of cutting all her ties with her childhood home? She had adored this shop, this village. The people who came were like an extended family to her. Many of her aunt's friends still recognised her and had stopped her on the street to offer their condolences and had been touchingly devastated at her passing.

She recalled bumping into Iris, one of Delia's best friends, and her daughter, Marcia. But what had really surprised her was that they'd been genuinely frightened about what decisions she was going to make about Gingerberry's future. Marcia had even said it was the only thing she lived for, being able to bring Iris out in her wheelchair to the shop every day, leaving her chatting to Claire and Delia whilst she ran her errands.

'When was the last time you and Nessa got together for a good old chinwag? Okay' – Delia held up her palm, her stout fingers glittering with a cluster of rings – 'I know you saw her at the funeral, but I mean really connected? You two were inseparable at school, as close as primer and paint. Pair of devils, you were! You know she'll be over at the Fox & Hounds on Friday night. Why don't you go and join her for a drink?'

'Oh, Delia, I'm not...'

'I want you to rekindle some of the love and community spirit Claire and I were fortunate enough to enjoy, even if it's just for a short time. The community's support has been such an integral part of our lives, especially for your aunt after John passed away. She missed him terribly, as I'm sure you all did. Claire drew on the comfort and friendship offered by her many friends. It helped to heal her sorrow, if not her heart. And it could do the same for you, Sophie dear. Steer you through this miasma of grief and confusion.'

Delia paused, her eyes peering over the top of her glasses, their silver restraint glinting in the shafts of sunlight forging their way through the dirt-ridden windows.

'Fate has a carefully drafted plan for us all, Sophie, but sadly it must remain confidential.'

'I don't believe in fate, Delia. I believe that we should mould our own destiny, not wait until it lands fully formed in our path.'

But she knew Delia had a point. She had to at least try to give the misfortune that had befallen her in the last few weeks a positive spin. Life did go on, and if her aunt could survive

after the loss of her beloved husband, then she could stop acting like a puppet clipped of its strings. She needed to quit wallowing in self-pity and put some elbow grease into those filthy windows.

‘I think I’ll just give those windows a bit of a clean.’

Delia smiled. ‘Good idea.’

Sophie collected a cloth from behind the counter and tentatively rubbed at a small patch of the front window to reveal a sparkingly clear outlook over the road to Marietta’s and the scaffolding-bedecked ex-butcher’s shop. The honey-hued stone façades of the depleted row of shops, their painted doors and bay-fronted windows open to trade, spoke volumes. Sadly, the four shops which had thrived for the last fifty years had been slashed to two with the closure of Wainwright’s butchers and Greenwood’s grocers.

Delia joined Sophie in her toil, and they spent the day scrubbing, dusting and reorganising the shop. ‘The village high street is dying, I’m afraid. It’s not only the supermarkets’ advance that’s draining away our business to their neon-lit cathedrals of consumerism; it’s the influx of the weekenders. Those wealthy families chasing the rural idyll for a few snatched hours of calm before they return to their hamster-wheels in the city to churn out more money for their masters or their pension pots. Claire despaired at every shop closure, every one a shining light extinguished along with the proprietor’s dreams. Our lives are wider than one, Sophie.’

All Sophie could do was nod; Delia had a point.

When the sky dimmed, signalling the end of the working day, Sophie smiled her gratitude to Delia as tears brimmed and choked her vocal cords. She waved her off and, as she secured the shop door behind her and pulled down the blind, she took a moment to survey the careworn contents of the shop again. The only thing she wanted to do at that moment was abandon herself to the onslaught of grief, mingled with a splash of nostalgia. The waft of her aunt’s favourite perfume still lingered amongst the multicoloured gems of synthetic yarn jutting from the stands like jewels on a Fabergé egg.

She mounted the stairs to her bedroom, cloaked in a shroud of loneliness. Happiness was a mere apparition that punctuated her life with decreasing regularity. Instead, anguish and heartache stalked her daily path to sleep, the relief in its oblivion always a delayed destination.

Fear gripped her heart as she realised she would now have to live her life without the safety net of her aunt's, or anyone else's, love.

Chapter Eleven

On Friday night, Sophie took a deep breath and pushed open the door of the Fox & Hounds, feeling like a seventeen-year-old about to order alcohol for the first time. The buzz of muted conversation and background music swirled through the air, producing a welcoming atmosphere. She had spent too many nights to recall drinking at the village pub and it was as familiar as an old pair of favourite boots.

‘Hey, is that you, Sophie? You look like you just walked off the catwalk!’

‘Hey, erm...’

‘Juliette? We were in the same art class at school?’

‘Of course we were. How are you, Juliette?’ Sophie cast her eyes over the barmaid’s fresh face, devoid of any scrap of make-up, her cheeks glowing with the flush of health and her lips a natural rosebud pink.

‘I love your top. Where did you get it? M&S?’

‘Erm, no, it’s one I designed myself...’

‘Ah, sorry, yes. I did hear you made clothes now. Sophie, I’m so sorry about your aunt. She was a lovely lady and we’ll miss her in the village.’ Juliette reached over and pulled Sophie into a hug. ‘Hey, you’re all skin and bone. Look at you, like a line prop, bones jutting from all angles. What you need is one of Gavin’s signature hotpots.’

‘No! Thanks. No.’ Sophie hadn’t eaten meat since she moved down to London. ‘Ah, Nessa!’

Relief at seeing her old friend swarmed through her veins. Sophie took in Nessa’s familiar features as she pushed her way towards her through the regulars hogging the bar, her long auburn hair flowing free from its usual clasp in honour of her

escape from the strict regulations placed on gym teachers at St Hilda's High School.

'Hi, Sophie, great to see you. Come on – Seb and Archie are in the snug playing snooker.'

'Is... is Noah with them?' She prayed that the hint of hopefulness in her voice wasn't too much of a giveaway. Sadly, her friend missed nothing.

'No, but he might join us later. He usually does whenever he's home. You okay with that? He said you'd thrown him out of the shop when he went to see you.'

'A bit of an exaggeration, but that was always one of Noah's charming quirks. I didn't throw him out.'

'Oh, Sophie, it's so good to hear your accent's back when you're hyped up over Noah!'

'I'm not hyped up over Noah, Nessa.'

'Okay. What'll you have to drink?'

'I'll have a vodka martini.'

'Sure.'

Sophie waited whilst Nessa pushed her way to the bar and returned with their drinks.

'What's this?'

'Pint of cider.'

'But I asked for—'

'We used to drink this stuff by the gallon, remember?'

'Yes, but I... Oh, never mind.' Sophie took a sip and ran her tongue over her lips. It was delicious – light, golden, fresh – and she swallowed a long draught, wiping the liquid from her upper lip with the back of her hand.

'Now we see her! The old Sophie-Louise Henshaw is back with us again!' exclaimed Seb, drawing her into a squeeze and dropping a kiss on her forehead. 'Sophie, I'm so pleased you decided to stay on for a few weeks.'

‘Hey, Sophie! Great to see you.’ Archie rested his snooker cue against the table and strode round to envelop her in his arms. ‘Missed you, darling. We all do. It’s just like old times. Well, it will be when—’

‘So, Sophie...’ Nessa guided her away from a trip down Archie’s Memory Lane to a bashed copper table in the corner of the snug next to a museum-standard display of Gavin’s best horse brasses and Toby jugs. ‘I hear you’ve decided to sell Gingerberry? Is it really true?’

‘Did I hear you right?’ asked Archie, who had edged round the table to take his next shot. ‘You’re selling up? You’re leaving again? Aren’t we your friends anymore, Sophie?’

‘Of course you are, Archie.’ But she couldn’t quite meet his accusatory stare.

Another pint arrived and Sophie gulped half down in one go. The unfamiliar dose of alcohol was working very nicely at erasing the sharp edges of the local pub. Good grief, she thought, what was Archie doing here, anyway? Why wasn’t he living it up in the nightspots of London or Bristol? He was the bass guitarist in one of the most successful bands in Britain at the moment. Heck, The Razorclaws were lucky enough to be booked to perform at the wedding of the decade. If they weren’t in demand now, they certainly would be after that. Jealous? Her? Yes!

‘I’m so sorry about Claire, Sophie. I loved her, too,’ said Nessa, sipping her cider. ‘We didn’t get a chance to talk much at her funeral. How are you holding up?’

She saw her childhood friend study her over the rim of her pint glass, casting a worried glance over her scrawny frame. They’d been exactly the same build at school, but now Nessa possessed the taut, muscular silhouette of a sports instructor as well as the rosy glow of health and vigour achieved by spending her days on the hockey field with eleven adolescent girls. Securing her position as their old high school’s gym teacher was a dream come true for Nessa.

‘Oh, well, you know, I’m doing okay, I suppose.’

The scene was a replica of their adolescent dialogues – the welcoming atmosphere of the Fox & Hounds, a ready supply of beer and cider, and her friend’s soothing words – it was the balm to cure many a teenage heartache. But with the empty space in her heart her aunt had inhabited, Sophie doubted any amount of the local artisan cider would heal the trauma she was experiencing at that moment. The aroma of Nessa’s favourite perfume, and the sympathy oozing from her oldest friend conjured up the pain-lashed memories of the last few weeks and caused hot tears to flow down her cheeks.

‘I miss her so much, Nessa. I was a useless niece. I’ve hardly been home in the last four years. Too engrossed in my selfish ambitions, thinking I could run with the pack of celebrity wedding gown designers. Now I’m a true orphan.’ Her grief resumed; raw and violent.

‘You are not useless, Sophie.’ Nessa’s habitually jolly face, strewn with freckles, reflected the pain she herself was suffering.

Sophie saw her friend sweep her eyes over her hair, usually as glossy as liquid tar, but which today hung flat and dull, her fringe skimming her spidery lashes and in need of a salon’s attention. She knew she looked a mess. Dark triangular smudges had lodged themselves beneath her eyes that no amount of foundation could disguise, not that she had tried; she sported not a scrap of make-up. What was the point?

‘I am, Nessa. Not only as a niece, but as a cousin’ – she shot a glance across to where Seb and Archie were studiously avoiding looking in their direction – ‘and as a friend. And I might as well add as a fashion designer, too. You heard, didn’t you? Delia is this village’s one-woman Twitter feed.’

Nessa nodded, her amber lashes sparkling with empathic tears, but she knew Nessa was not going to stand aside whilst she slipped into self-obsessed oblivion.

‘Yes, I heard, but it’s not the end of the world, Soph. So you didn’t make it to the pinnacle of the pile this time, but you *did* make it to the shortlist. That, my girl, is a fantastic achievement and one which two hundred and fifty others

would have given their right arm to achieve. Your aunt was so proud of your talents.'

'Oh, Ness, all I want to do now is sell the shop and slink back to my old life, hide in the familiar routine of eighteen-hour days and as little contact with the outside world as I can get away with. Is that so awful?' Sophie paused to blow her dripping nose on the tissue offered by Nessa and take a gulp of her cider. She managed to pull herself together and produce a weak smile. 'My plan is to block out my grief in a whirlwind of crazy schedules, deadlines and prenuptial angst.'

The evening passed in a swirl of shared memories, snippets of recent gossip, and several more pints of cider. After a while Sophie began to relax and enjoy herself. She even managed to giggle at one of the stories Nessa told her about dating a guy from the golf club who had helped her to "improve her swing".

'Ah, I see Little Miss Dior has decided to grace us with her presence. Thought you couldn't wait to get back down to the bright lights of the big city? What are you still doing here loitering in the dull Cotswolds backwater that you used to call home? Oh, is that a pint of cider? I thought designers of bridal couture only drank vodka martini – stirred not shaken, if you please?'

'Noah...' cautioned Nessa, her green eyes flashing.

'It's okay, Ness.,' said Sophie, grateful for the composure the alcohol had provided. 'Hi, Noah. I've decided to stay up here for a few weeks to sort out some of my aunt's things and then, yes, you're right, I'll be gone.'

'So, I did hear right. You *are* selling the shop. Why are you so keen to permanently erase any memories of your past, Soph? Do I take it from your change of heart that you failed to win the coveted wedding gown competition?'

Sophie felt warmth flood her face, but it was accompanied by a flash of white-hot anger.

'You know that's confidential. What business is it of yours anyway? We're not a couple anymore. You don't know what

I've got going on in my life!

'I know you left your friends behind to pursue your dreams without so much as a backward glance. What sort of person would do that?'

'One who was betrayed by her boyfriend!'

Noah held her eyes for a moment, his irises glinting silver with resentment.

'You know, Sophie, I'm tired of you throwing that golden nugget in my face every time we meet.'

Sophie felt Nessa squeeze her arm, so she remained silent.

'Like I've told you a hundred times before, Sophie, I did not betray you, but you betrayed your friends. These wonderful people' – Noah cast his hand around the sun to include Seb, Archie, and finally, the insinuation that hurt Sophie the most, Nessa – 'these wonderful people who loved you, and whom you hurt badly when you left in a fit of fury to focus on your ambitions in London.'

Sophie met Nessa's eyes and a coil of guilt wound through her veins. She opened her mouth to reply but Noah was still speaking.

'I may have made a mistake, but at least I know who my friends are. I would never treat them with the disdain you have by eradicating them from my life, only returning when I *have* to and only staying long enough to extinguish every connection I had with my childhood.'

Noah slammed down his half-finished pint on the green baize of the snooker table and strode from the pub, his long stride assisting in his speedy exit. Nessa patted Sophie's hand as Seb and Archie wound in their necks, closed their mouths, and set up another game of snooker.

'He went crazy when you left, Soph,' Nessa whispered.

'I find that hard to believe. He had an army of star-struck young women buzzing around him like bees to a honey pot. I'm sure he forgot about me straight away.'

'He went looking for you.'

Sophie's heart bounced. 'What do you mean?'

'To London.'

'Noah came to London?'

'Yes. Of course, Claire respected your wishes and refused to divulge your address. But she loved Noah as much as she loved you and Seb and Dom. She struggled with your decision to cut Noah from your life, so she told him you'd gone to London. He didn't know *exactly* where you were, but he went anyway.'

'I never saw him.'

'It's big place, Soph.' Nessa laughed, but there was no joy in her reaction. 'When he came back, he didn't say much. We didn't ask, either, because we knew he hadn't found you, and how devastated he was about that. Over the next few months, he threw every last crumb of his energy into making The Razorclaws a success. As you know, they'd just signed their recording contract, so they were caught up in a mad frenzy of songwriting, recording, and touring which I think helped him to ease the pain of losing you. But Sophie, he always loved you. Noah without Sophie by his side took some getting used to for all of us. He still loves you.'

'No, he doesn't.'

Nessa studied her. 'Have you been over to pay your respects to your parents since you've been back?'

'Oh, Ness, you know how hard that is for me.'

'Come on.'

Nessa drained her pint, jumped from her seat, and linked her arm through Sophie's so she could pull her to her feet. She nodded across to Seb and Archie and guided her friend out of the pub.

'Where are we going?'

'Wait and see.'

The night sky was swathed in velvety blackness with scant pinpricks of scattered stars. The cool, fresh air sharpened

Sophie's senses, and she loved the feeling of having Nessa so close to her. For a moment she felt like she'd never left Somersby. They were still the two mischievous teenagers making their way to sit on the wall of Reverend Aubrey's churchyard to exchange secrets, divulge confidences, sneak sips from a bottle of cider, and giggle at the childish antics of Noah, Seb, Archie and Dominic. Boys, eh?

'I'd forgotten how beautiful it is here. Seems I forgot a lot of things, not just Noah.'

Why hadn't she come back home more often after she'd left? Even if it was just to snatch a weekend with Nessa. Why hadn't she insisted more firmly that Nessa come down to stay with her in the flat above her boutique in south west London during the school holidays more often? Suggest they take in a show or a concert or the rugby cup final – Nessa adored rugby; well, she adored all sports really.

'I really am sorry, Ness. I've been a truly awful friend. Will you ever be able to forgive me?'

'Real friends need no apologies, Soph. You were just investing in your dreams; dreams you've had since I met you. And I've followed mine, too. I'm happy. Only one thing would put the proverbial cherry on top of my cupcake.'

'What?'

It was Nessa's turn to colour up.

'Or should I say, who?'

They had reached the lychgate of the parish church. Nessa lifted the rusty iron handle, and they sauntered along the churchyard's cracked pathway, meandering through the moss-strewn graves which protruded from the ground like a set of crooked ogre's teeth.

Then Sophie saw it. Her parents' grave. And there, in front of the grey marble headstone, was the white rose bush that Noah had planted for her all those years ago. It had been carefully pruned and well cared for.

'Beautiful, isn't it?'

‘Yes,’ Sophie murmured, allowing the tears to trickle unchecked down her cheeks.

‘Noah comes here every time he’s home from a tour to tend the rose bush that you planted together for your parents.’

Sophie turned in astonishment to her best friend in the world.

‘He...’

‘It’s like a ritual with him.’

Sophie was suddenly so overwhelmed by a surge of grief that she dropped down onto her knees and sobbed as though the tears would never stop.

Chapter Twelve

Spring cast its blanket of hopefulness and renewal across the undulating fields but it failed to restore Sophie's desolate spirits. Fingers of pale ivory light spread across the horizon promising a sharp new dawn and hinting at a warm sunny Sunday morning. All village activity was confined to the churchyard perched at the end of the village, so Somersby's village green was deserted.

Grimacing with annoyance at missing the best part of the day, Sophie sat cross-legged on the threadbare Persian rug in front of a scarred red suitcase, its lid yawning wide, stuffed with a plethora of documents, yellowing newspaper clippings, official-looking letters and random receipts, all of which masqueraded as her aunt's business accounts.

She'd been putting it off, but it was time to delve into the murk that was Gingerberry Yarns' finances, such as they were. The task was turning into a feat of financial archaeology that even *Time Team* would have balked at!

Her mug of Earl Grey tea had grown cold, and her neck and shoulders were screaming their objection when her toil was interrupted by a loud hammering on the shop door downstairs.

It's Sunday morning, for heaven's sake, Sophie thought grumpily, unfolding her stiffened, jean-clad legs and raising her numb buttocks from the mat. She rolled her neck muscles by twisting her shoulders, before trotting down the stairs to answer someone's urgent call for that last ball of yarn required to complete a project that could not have waited a single moment longer.

But it wasn't a desperate customer.

'Nessa!'

'Hi, Sophie.'

‘Come on in. I’m busy trying to scale a mountain of my aunt’s paperwork.’

Sophie led Nessa upstairs into the room that served as both kitchen and lounge, seeing the place through Nessa’s eyes. Documents were spread over every available surface, some tumbling like an alpine avalanche from the chintzy sofa down to the rug and the nest-like space in which Sophie had been sitting as she thrashed her way through the maze of bureaucracy.

‘I had an inkling you’ve not been eating properly since you arrived home. That is why, my friend, I have arrived on this mercy mission to rescue you from your hunger pangs with these little beauties.’ She held aloft a familiar pale peppermint box tied with ivory ribbon. ‘Picked them up yesterday from Wallington’s bakery. Everyone’s talking about it, so I thought I’d make a special detour.’

‘Thanks, Nessa. I’ll put the kettle on.’

‘Did you know the guy did his training in Paris and then honed his spectacular talent at Betty’s, or maybe it was the other way round? You do remember that Betty’s Emporium of Confectionary is my most favourite shop in the world, right? These cupcakes are to die for. Erm, I have to confess that we started off with three each, but, well, I felt honour-bound to ensure they were up to scratch for my best friend’s delectation!’

Nessa had already flicked open the lid and set about arranging the little sugary gems onto a fancy china plate she’d pulled from the cupboard above Claire’s old-fashioned cooker.

‘Is Earl Grey okay?’ asked Sophie.

‘Perfect.’

‘Great, grab a seat.’

Sophie’s heart gave a nip of sadness when she saw Nessa slump down at the scrubbed pine table that had always invited a good gossip. The unloading of worries into willing ears had been Claire’s cure for the side effects of hanging onto trauma until it gnawed at the gut and allowed bitterness to take its

place. She placed her aunt's old brown tea pot and two mugs in front of Nessa, then took a seat next to her, waiting a few moments for the tea to stew before pouring.

'Mmm, just what the doctor ordered,' said Nessa, before meeting Sophie's gaze. 'Okay, come on then, Soph, spill the details, and I mean every minuscule embellishment, every fold, drape, crease, and stitch of this spectacular bridal creation Lilac Verbois did not possess the good taste to select. Do you have a photo?'

Sophie smiled at last, her cheeks cracking under the unfamiliar strain and the fact that her skin hadn't enjoyed a smudge of moisturiser in weeks.

'Sure I do. And I suppose there's no reason not to share the design with you now. The veil of secrecy is redundant as Lilac will be wearing someone else's design on her wedding day. I know I don't have to say this, but promise me you won't mention it to anyone?'

'Cross my heart and hope to die.'

Sophie laughed, fished out her phone and scrolled through the hundreds of images of Lilac Verbois' would-be wedding dress she had stored, from conception to completion and all stages in between, picked out the best photo of the finished gown, and turned the screen round towards Nessa.

'Oh, my God, it's absolutely stunning. A little on the elaborate side for my taste, but then I'm not a BAFTA-winning actress. This wedding fever has really gripped the nation, hasn't it?'

Nessa lifted her mane of copper hair and let it fall in waves down her back, clearly enjoying the lightness and freedom wearing it loose gave her.

'It definitely has.'

'You should eavesdrop on the conversations of some of the girls at school – it's all they talk about. Well, what's not to obsess over? A wedding almost on the doorstep – Somersby Manor is the perfect place for the reception – and a whole host of celebrities from the music and acting world descending on

the area which means fashions to scrutinise and criticise. Oh, I've not had chance to tell you. One of our girls, Alicia Walker, has been selected to sing the solo in the Gloucester Cathedral wedding ceremony, no less! With the level of excitement and the raging hormones, needless to say not much academic work is getting done at the moment. Fortunately, Alicia is in Year Ten and doesn't have exams to worry about this summer.'

'It's great for the school, Nessa, but I have to admit I am curious about what made Lilac and Finn choose Gloucester Cathedral for their ceremony. Wouldn't you have thought they'd have chosen a venue in London? Much more central, more convenient for everyone?'

'What do you mean? It's obvious why Lilac chose the cathedral. She grew up in the Cotswolds – or so her publicity blurb says. She's maybe on some nostalgic jaunt into her childhood, which I assume was "tormented by abusive parents or boyfriends, thus enabling me to bring my real-life experiences into my roles" – you know, the kind of garbage they spout out in these résumés. Anyway, all chaos broke loose when it was announced that Alicia had been selected. Mrs Coombes even had to sedate one of the girls.'

'Oh, that's awful.'

'I have to admit,' said Nessa, tucking tendrils of hair behind her ears, her soft cheeks glowing with pleasure. 'That I've also succumbed to following the twists and turns avidly, especially as it turns out that I know four of the people involved personally! You, Noah, Archie, and Alicia. I wish I could sing, but as you know my multiple talents lie in the sports arena. If only there were a netball, or a hockey, or a golf competition, I'd be right up there with the rest of them. Unsurprisingly, there's no call for those skills in the circus that is Lilac Verbois and Finn Marchant's wedding, but...'

'What?'

'Soph, I'm so sorry your design didn't win, but we've still got to go to Gloucester to watch the ceremony.'

'I'm not sure about that, Ness.'

Sophie had often wondered over the years why Nessa had stuck to training recalcitrant teenage girls on the school sports field. Only last year she had been offered a position as a ladies' golf instructor at one of the newly built courses in Dubai – mega-money compared to her teacher's salary, along with a spectacular apartment overlooking the Burg Al Arab which came with a maid thrown in for free.

But Nessa had not hesitated in turning it down. She excelled in every sport Sophie had known her put her mind to, threw herself headfirst into dating every eligible guy who crossed her path, and generally lived life to the max with a cheerful smile, a flick of her hair, and a cute wrinkle of her freckled nose. Nessa had always professed to loathe her freckles and Sophie recalled with fondness one Saturday night, when they were around twelve, that they'd spent scrubbing her nose and cheeks with her mother's expensive body exfoliator. Nessa's face had smarted with a red hue for a full week afterwards, but even that had not diluted her zest for life.

Together they had run marathons, swapped secrets, and dressed up in the forerunners of Sophie's designs made from old cotton sheets and velour curtains donated by Nessa's mum, Audrey. She still squirmed at the memories of the chaffing! Over the years they had each added more items to their respective wedding scrap boxes – oversized shoe boxes they had covered in sheets of wedding wrap and filled with snippets of fabric and lace, glossy photographs and articles cut from magazines, and sketches of what their individual dresses would look like. On the lid they'd taped a picture of their current crush – first Seb, then Robbie Williams, then a whole string of eligible pop stars and actors for Nessa's, and Noah, always Noah for hers. She still had her box under her bed at home in London and continued to add to it even now. The latest addition was a photograph of a gorgeous pair of ivory stilettos from the Jimmy Choo bridal collection that had her name embroidered all over their smooth satin toes. She wondered if Nessa still did the same.

A hammering on the door of the shop interrupted their girly conversation.

‘Gosh, another visitor. I’ve never been so popular.’

Sophie skipped down the stairs and let Seb in. She pecked him on his bristly cheek and smiled at his pale, pinched face, the smudges of tiredness under his dark brown eyes more prominent when he removed his tortoiseshell glasses to rub the bridge of his nose. He slumped his six-foot-two frame into the chair opposite Nessa and stretched out his legs.

‘Hi, Nessa. I’m not interrupting anything, am I?’

‘Not at all.’

Sophie poured him a mug of tea and pushed one of Tom Wallington’s delectable cupcakes towards him. Hers remained on the china plate untouched; its aesthetic perfection felt like an insult to her emotional chaos. She couldn’t bear to sully its beauty with her unworthy lips.

‘Sophie, I’m so pleased you decided to stay for few weeks to sort out the shop. What’s your plan? I reckon a lick of paint wouldn’t go amiss.’

‘I agree, I thought—’

‘Great, then I have the perfect solution. Me, Dom, and Archie will pitch in and help.’

‘Count me in, too,’ added Nessa, her eyes lighting up with possibilities. ‘You’ve got to keep Gingerberry Yarns open whilst it’s on the market. After all, Gingerberry Yarns is the social hub of Somersby. Its faithful customers have lost not only a beloved friend, but a stalwart of the local community. Someone who swore she would protect the fabric of this village. I know I don’t have to remind you that some people’s lives revolve around their visits to this welcoming oasis of calm and acceptance – it’s better than a spa treatment any day, and much more affordable. Do you know how much a spa day is up at Somersby Manor?’

Nessa sighed and reached over to replenish her mug from the pot, wrapping her palms around its warmth. She pushed back her seat and strolled over to the window that looked out over the village green, staring at the row of houses and shops

opposite the haberdashery, her back to Sophie and Seb, deep in thought. After a while she continued verbalising her thoughts.

‘Since Susan decided not to open the teashop for the summer season this year – apparently she’s flown off to visit her daughter and her family in New Zealand – there’s nowhere else to go. People can’t hang out at the garage, or the bakery, and since the library closed down last year there’s nowhere to grab a cappuccino or a latte or a good old pot of tea and have a chat. The nearest café is in Cranbury, now, and that’s three miles away. Hey! Yes, that’s it!’

Nessa swung round to stare at Sophie, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

‘What?’

‘This is your chance to create something truly fabulous!’

‘What?’ Sophie rolled her eyes at Nessa who, as always, was speeding along on a different tangent.

‘The “Gingerberry Emporium” – vendor of bespoke yarn creations and aromatic coffee concepts!’

‘What are you dribbling on about?’

Sophie collected their empty mugs and ditched them in the sink before resuming her curled-up position on the ancient rug surrounded by paperwork.

‘I’m talking about Gingerberry Yarns, international supplier of custom-made knitted garments to the connoisseur of sculptured yarn and modern creative art, and purveyor of the best cappuccinos, lattes, and espressos for a ten-mile radius!’

‘International? Now you’re being plain ridiculous, Ness...’

‘Set up a website – that’ll cover the international bit. Get busy researching a selection of designs worn by the trendy jet-set and TV celebrities – like those Danish Fair Isle sweaters from that detective series. You can get the WI’s knitting club involved – they love a good challenge. Hey, we could even run knitting sessions here in the shop, start teaching those who are interested to knit and crochet? Maybe market it as an

opportunity to contribute to a charity project in the form of a blanket or throw for the Cranbury hospice?’

‘Wow, I think Nessa might be onto something here, Soph.’ Seb had swivelled round in his seat to join in the discussions. ‘The shop downstairs is crammed with miles and miles of ribbon and lace. You could even coach the ladies to sew garments for your bridal boutique in London, such as garters and knickers. Maybe Gingerberry can become the first branch of Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture outside London.’

‘Great idea, Seb!’ Nessa exclaimed, her expression filled with gratitude for his support of her idea. ‘We could offer hand-embroidered silk lingerie for a bride’s wedding night and honeymoon as part of her trousseau. We could—’

‘Hang on, Nessa, hang on, who’s going to do all this? Teach people to knit and sew and...’

‘*You* are, of course, you idiot! Have you forgotten you grew up with knitting needles protruding from the ends of your arms? You are your mother’s daughter, Sophie. And what better way to mark Seb’s mum’s passing than to design a blanket that everyone can contribute to in honour of Claire and everything she did for this village, then to present it to the hospice at their annual summer fayre!’

‘You are joking, Nessa. I can’t possibly—’

‘Well, not by yourself, no.’ Nessa placed her palm on her chin and drummed her fingernails on her glossy apricot lips. Sophie could almost see the cogs whirling behind those emerald eyes. ‘You’ll need some help.’

‘But who would come? No one is interested in—’

‘Wrong! In the last year alone St Hilda’s has had more interest in baking and crafts from the students than we can meet demand. All the girls want to get involved in making cupcakes, perfumed candles, fabric design and screen printing, sewing, embroidery... and *knitting!*’

Nessa’s eyes strayed to the untouched perfect swirls of the baby-pink buttercream icing atop the cupcakes on the table.

‘It’s the Great British Bake Off and Sewing Bee effect. You should see some of the girls’ fashion designs, Soph. They’d give Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture a run for its money! I’m sure they’d come up with some awesome designs for bras, knickers, bodies, and teddies if we asked them. Two of our girls were accepted at the Royal College of Art last year, the first students to attend since the person sitting glowering opposite me!’ Nessa smirked.

‘I can’t teach a bunch of teenagers to knit and crochet when all they want to do is party in the bright lights of Cheltenham and Gloucester. They don’t want to hang out at the village haberdashery shop chatting about threads, buttons, and ribbons and whether to use a cross-stich or blanket stick. Anyway, I do have my own social life, you know.’

‘What social life is that?’ Nessa said accusingly, certain of the reply.

‘Well, in London...’

‘It pains me to remind you, but you have not exactly been the life and soul of the party since you started work on Operation Lilac’s Wedding Gown of the Century. And when was the last time you went out on a date?’

‘Mmmm...’

‘Pardon, I didn’t quite catch that excuse?’

‘Not since Christmas.’

‘I rest my case, Your Honour.’ Nessa performed a theatrical bow. ‘You can stay here in the flat, run the shop, and arrange the classes. Delia will help and so will I. Seb, Dom and Archie, if he’s around, will get stuck in with the decorating. We’ll give the shop a lick of paint but, more importantly, you can look into restocking the shelves with a decent selection of natural merchandise instead of all that rainbow acrylic that’s only fit to dress Barbie’s pet unicorn.’

‘Even if it’s not *your* life’s ambition, then do this for your aunt! She adored this village and its inhabitants. Every time I came in here it was buzzing with conversation, with laughter, with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and lavender.’

Nessa closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath, apparently hoping to catch a sniff of the nostalgia from her teenage years.

‘Last time I was in here was on Christmas Eve. Delia’s friend, Iris, and her daughter Marcia were camped out at the table, tucking into a batch of Marcia’s home-made chocolate brownies and slurping the most divine-smelling hot chocolate. I stayed for two hours! What an antidote to the stresses of persuading hordes of unruly adolescent females to play hockey on a frozen, mud-caked pitch.

‘That’s why I think this crafting bug has taken the country by storm. People are sick of the daily grind of anxiety and angst, the clamber to work harder, faster, longer, to earn more in the rush to the top. They’re tired of the obsessive addiction to celebrity culture, frazzled with the expelled energy required to strive for the perfection those magazines tout to our youngsters, or amass the right number of followers or clicks on their social media apps. Did I tell you the head has banned the girls from bringing their phones into the classroom?’

‘People crave a return of real community spirit – the sharing of warmth, mutual support and friendship over a freshly prepared brew and an injection of sugar-sweet confectionary, not a cocktail down at the local wine bar to douse the stress and boast about the last deal. The top rung of the corporate ladder is stuffed with pompous idiots feeding off the talents of those on the step below before shoving them back down with the tip of their boot. It’s a world many of us refuse to join now, let alone aspire to.’

Nessa stopped, her eyes serious.

‘Don’t close the door on Gingerberry Yarns just yet, Sophie. What have you got to lose?’

Chapter Thirteen

Lilac's house in South Kensington, London.

'So you've narrowed it down to three?' asked Nikki.

'Yes. Every designer who was asked to submit their sample gown did, so that leaves two who submitted without paperwork and the one who submitted the documents which were illegible.'

'Why were they illegible?'

'Erm, well, they were covered in a sort of yellowy-brown stain,' said Tish.

'What?' Nikki curled her upper lip.

'I think it may have been a coffee that got spilled, but it could have been whisky. Or maybe something else? And it could have been the delivery guys, not the designer.'

'Okay. So let's look at the photos of the three possibilities.'

Tish produced three pictures she'd printed out before Nikki arrived back from her meeting. 'As you are always telling me that I bring chaos to an empty room, I've made a special effort to be organised. I know I'll never get a seat on the top table in orderliness, but I can aim for a table mid-room, can't I, instead of one next to the toilets?'

Nikki forced herself not to smirk as she studied the three dresses. They were all gorgeous, but the one Lilac had selected to wear on the most important day of her life was beautiful. Strapless, the bodice shone with tiny crystals that would look stunning under the lights of the Cathedral. From the back, the A-line skirt was simple with a short train edged in seed pearls that matched the ivory silk to perfection. At the front, crystals spilled from the bodice to a dart from the waist to the hem, twinkling whenever the wearer took a step.

'Ah,' Tish sighed, 'the designer may be a dunce in the paperwork arena but she's a wizard when it comes to fabric. Just look at all those sparkles. If I didn't already have my dress sorted, I would definitely go for one like this.'

'You have your wedding gown? I thought you weren't dating anyone at the moment.'

'Oh, I'm not.'

Nikki rolled her eyes.

'Okay. So we have Carla Masconi, Brigitte Gasnier, and Sophie-Louise Henshaw. So which designer goes with which dress. Have you worked with any of these designers before?'

'No, I haven't. Sorry.'

Nikki placed the headshots of the designers, all printed from their websites by Tish, next to each dress and studied them, then swapped them around. 'It's no good. We can't do it like this. I've had an idea. One of us will impersonate a celebrity who's shopping for her perfect wedding gown. We'll visit each of these designers at their boutiques and ask them to produce a sketch of the gown they would envisage for such a wedding. With any luck, they won't be able to resist producing a similar design to the one they believe didn't win the competition. Why wouldn't they?'

'You're a genius, Nikki. And you'll totally pull that off.'

'Oh, I wasn't thinking of me. You'll have to be the celebrity. I'll play the part of your fabulously efficient, but long-suffering PA. You're the same dress size as Lilac for a start and I'm sure she won't mind if you borrow one of her Stella McCartney dresses. If you tie your hair up in one of her Hermès scarves and wear a pair of dark glasses, I think we can pull this off. Of course, you'll have to be a reality TV celebrity.'

Nikki turned her back on the expression of outrage flooding across Tish's face and couldn't resist a smirk.

'Why can't I be a movie actress like Lilac?'

'Okay, what films have you been in?'

'Erm, well, there's...'

'See, if you were asked that question by one of the designers you'd totally give yourself away. I'll do all the talking. As soon as we're sure we can strike the designer from our list, we leave, okay? No mooning over the gowns. I don't even want you to try any of them on if we can help it.'

'Nikki...'

'Look, Tish. This is a nightmare that should never have happened. We need to rectify the problem as soon as we can and get on with everything else on our lists. Didn't you say you were slammed? You don't have enough hours in the day? Haven't you got the cars to finalise?'

'Yes, I suppose...'

'Okay. It's two o'clock. We'll start with Brigitte Gasnier as she's the nearest, then we'll do Sophie-Louise Bridal over in Wimbledon. Just pray that it's one of those, as I see Carla Masconi is based in Milan.'

'Oooo, Italy, I'd love to go to Italy.'

'Oh, God.'

Nikki rolled her eyes. She grabbed her mac, swung it around her shoulders and stalked from the room, with Tish scrambling to follow in her wake. By the time she'd reached the pavement outside and hailed a cab, her irritation with Tish had evaporated. She chastised herself for her recent propensity towards shortness. It wasn't Tish's fault that since Owen had dumped her, she'd disabled her happiness app and downloaded a bitterness one in its place; but still, the girl had to ditch the delusion that she was playing the lead female role in her own romantic comedy.

'Isn't this exciting? We're like a couple of Princess Charmings, touring the country as we search for the foot that fits the crystal stiletto, only this time we're looking for a designer to fit a wedding gown. When we find the right person, I think I'll feel like Lilac's fairy godmother.'

Yeah, thought Nikki, as she ran through the kaleidoscope of things on her "to do this week" list, never mind her "to do

today” list, and glared at Tish’s exuberance – and I’m the wicked stepmother.

Chapter Fourteen

The next day, Sophie skipped down the stairs to the shop with much more energy, her mood elevated from the first decent night's sleep she'd had for months. It was so quiet in Somersby, with none of the screeching brakes, blaring car horns, and noisy late-night revellers that frequented the street outside her home in London. In fact, she could even hear the bird's delivering their daily dawn chorus, something else that had lifted her spirits.

Even though it wasn't quite nine o'clock, she wasn't surprised to see that Delia was already there, feather duster in hand, reaching up to flick the non-existent dust from the top shelves. Sophie wrinkled her nose as her gaze swept across the drab walls, which seemed to blend in with the coffee-coloured carpet and highly polished teak furniture to portray a sepia-tinted emporium of a bygone age.

'Delia, would you object if I gave the shop a lick of paint? I'm not sure what colour the walls are *supposed* to be, but nicotine-yellow is definitely not this season's must-have interior design colour.'

'Of course not, dear.'

'Great.'

Sophie decided that while they were talking about making improvements to the shop, she should take the opportunity to broach another, more delicate, subject. She strode across the room and grabbed a ball of neon-pink yarn, its scratchy fibres clicking the scraped skin around her fingernails. The contents of the floor-to-ceiling wooden shelves were a veritable cacophony of the tropical colours more commonly seen in a Caribbean aviary.

‘Why do we stock all this bright pink acrylic? Do we supply Barbie’s stitch and bitch parties?’

‘I’m not sure what you mean,’ said Delia, her forehead creased.

‘Why not stock a selection of natural wools? You know, there’s a farm in Devon that produces hand-spun organic yarns from their flock of Whiteface Dartmoor sheep. It’s expensive; I sourced a batch to weave into one of my designs for the Autumn/Winter collection last year, but I’m sure they would guide us to other suppliers, local if possible. And if we can, what about organic cotton and silk? And where’s the cashmere? And what about mohair and angora – but only if it’s ethically sourced.’ She was vividly aware of the horror stories doing the rounds about the production of angora.

She marched around the dowdy room, dragging random balls of yarn from their resting places, delving into the scattered wicker baskets and cracked leather valises, discarding every specimen as too brash or made from synthetic fibres and imported from China. She felt her inherent sparkle for all things fleece-related begin to return, just not for the type of products currently stocked by Gingerberry Yarns.

She could see Delia’s gaze following her actions with interest from her position behind the enormous glass and mahogany serving counter, calm and serene, a faint turn at the corners of her lips, but she remained silent, so Sophie continued with her commentary.

‘Each one of these brightly dyed balls of yarn is supposed to be the catalyst for the creation of an original garment,’ she said, feeling her passion for the subject mount. ‘A raw material that can be sculpted into an item to bring joy – from a baby’s bootee to a christening shawl, from a grandmother’s cosy bedjacket to an attractive sofa throw – each with a purpose and a story to tell. It’s a unique garment made with affection for the recipient instead of the modern attire that’s replicated a thousand times, bought for a few pounds, then discarded after one or two wears. If it’s worth spending the time creating such a work of art, then surely, it’s worth sourcing the best materials?’

Sophie turned her attention on the huge leather-inlaid table and the congregation of chairs that looked like they'd been sourced from the local rubbish dump, or at the very least, the second-hand shop in Cranbury.

‘And why all these mismatched hard-backed chairs? They’re like instruments of torture for people who knit. And they make the room look like a junk shop!’

‘Well, our customers do need somewhere to sit, Sophie.’ Delia’s soft eyes clouded as she continued her explanation. ‘Your aunt and I loved to hear the women’s stories. They’re not just our customers; the majority are our friends, people who have been coming into the shop for the last thirty years. Iris and Marcia have been coming in for ten. It’s not exactly wheelchair-friendly, but we manage.’ Delia paused to inhale a breath; her eyes fixed on the middle distance. ‘Then there are our WI friends. They call in once a week – we donate any end-of-batch yarn to their knitting club, and they turn it into fabulous blankets and dementia mitts for the Cranbury hospice.’

Unshed tears sparkled at Delia’s eyes as she crashed back down to reality. She checked her watch, tutted to herself, and began to gather together the various cleaning products she had been using before the shop opened to the public.

‘Ah, here are Marcia and Iris now.’

The brass bell tinkled as Marcia reversed through the doorway, hauling her mother’s wheelchair backwards up the stone steps and parking her at the gigantic table. She dragged off her knitted, Inca-inspired hat complete with multicoloured pom-poms on strings. Her curtain of hair fell almost to her waist and her ears protruded through the sides like Noddy’s famous best friend.

‘Hi, Delia. We called at Wallington’s for a box of those cupcakes you recommended. They are gorgeous – today’s speciality is peppermint buttercream icing with raspberry stars and edible glitter. We got one for you too, Sophie,’ Marcia added shyly, having just spotted her crouching in the window display, but unable to meet Sophie’s eye.

‘Oh, thanks Marcia. Sounds like just what I need,’ said Sophie, smiling her thanks. *Especially after the two huge croissants Delia had left for her breakfast*, she thought. She stepped forward to accept the gem of culinary perfection from the proffered box. It was a masterpiece of sugar-fuelled artistry. Tom was indeed a genius confectioner.

Drawing out a chair to join the gathering at the table, she ran her eyes over the features of the young girl hunched before her. With not a trace of make-up, or a nod to the twenty-first century, Marcia’s face displayed the lacklustre pallor of those who did not enjoy enough sunshine or fresh air. Her skin cried out for one of Scarlet’s invigorating facial scrubs and her eyes, the same colour as Sophie’s, were obscured by a pair of overlarge reading glasses that lent her a studious countenance. Any curves she possessed had been well disguised beneath the hand-knitted, black-and-amber-striped sweater with the hint of a grey thermal vest evident at her neck and wrists.

Sophie experienced a burst of protectiveness for this caring young girl and realised belatedly that Marcia had been aware of her assumed-covert scrutiny. She watched guiltily as she self-consciously swiped away her glasses and stored them in the appliqued pocket of her jumper, cut in the shape of a daisy.

‘Oh, these are Mum’s old reading glasses. I borrow them occasionally.’ Marcia swung her sweep of hair forward across her face, anxious to escape from the uncomfortable inspection. ‘Is there tea in the pot upstairs, Delia?’ She scuttled away, the block heels of her candy-pink shoes clacking on the stairs.

Sophie glanced down at her own familiar attire, which could have done with a spin in the washing machine. She chastised herself for failing to pay attention to her sartorial elegance, especially as she was now the figurehead of a high-street shop. She only had to look in a mirror to be reminded that she would win no trophies in a beauty pageant. She, too, wore no cosmetics and she’d lived in her jeans and black polo-necked sweater since she’d arrived in Somersby. It was either that or rummage through her aunt’s wardrobe, which she hadn’t had the courage to do yet.

A few moments later, Marcia reappeared. She set down the cupcakes on one of Claire's patterned china plate so they could feast their eyes on their perfection, and then their taste buds. They were, without a doubt, the most attractive things in the shop. In fact, Sophie had to admit the skill and artistry that had gone into their production was nothing short of amazing. The exquisite fairy cakes were definitely not what she'd expected to see produced by the old-fashioned baker's shop on the corner of their row.

'These are mini works of art, aren't they? Too good to eat, really.'

Iris held her choice aloft for closer inspection, her soft features enclosed by a halo of curls the colour of ash, clearly reluctant to take the first bite and destroy its beauty.

'They are beautiful. Not what I had expected from...'
Sophie let her voice drift off for fear of causing offence by revealing her true feelings and the extent to which she had outgrown this rural backwater.

Iris smiled. It was clear she knew exactly what Sophie had been about to say.

'Me neither, Sophie. I thought the same thing when Tom became the third generation of Wallingtons to take over at the bakery. But Delia must have told you that he completed his training at Betty's in Harrogate, after a three-year apprenticeship in one of those glamorous hotels in Paris, whose name, like so many other things nowadays, escapes my memory. These cupcakes are fit to grace any celebrity's wedding reception, don't you think, never mind the tables of the residents of Somersby?' Small apples of red appeared on Iris's cheeks. 'If there had been a competition to make Lilac's wedding cake, Tom Wallington would have blown the competition out of the mixer.'

All three faces swung towards Sophie, and she performed a wriggle of embarrassment under the scrutiny of the gathered ladies. She felt her face become suffused with heat and swore she would never again be caught scrutinising a fellow human being's appearance.

‘Well, as you haven’t hung out the flags, I assume your own design didn’t get selected, dear?’ Iris asked.

Sophie nodded. She suspected that the time spent confined to her wheelchair had allowed Iris to become sharply attuned to other people’s disguised emotions. She saw her sweep a slow, analytical glance around the shop as though, despite having visited it almost daily for the last ten years, she was seeing it for the first time.

‘It’s not the same without your aunt, Sophie. The shop has lost some of its warmth, a piece of its soul. What will you do with the business?’

Sophie squirmed. Iris had clearly been endowed with the same down-to-earth character traits as Delia. She tensed her jaw muscles at the direct question, but she knew it was not only her own and Delia’s futures that depended on her plans, but many of her aunt’s old friends’ futures too. She just wished she had an answer to hand.

‘Well,’ said Sophie, ruffled by the inquisition about a personal decision. ‘First of all, Delia and I thought we’d spruce this room up a bit – maybe a splash of rose-tinted paint on the walls, peppermint green for the shelves, dip those wicker baskets over there in white paint. We could invest in a couple of leather sofas, a few mohair throws...’ She paused.

This was as good an opportunity as any to get the message around the village that her tenure at Gingerberry Yarns over the next few months would be a temporary reprieve only. One thing at least was still thriving in Somersby – the village grapevine.

‘But I think I will have to start marketing the shop when probate is sorted, hopefully as a going concern.’

‘Not likely, though, is it?’

Sophie stared at Iris. Her mobility may have ebbed away, but not her enquiring mind; that was still as sharp as a needle.

‘I mean, look what’s happened to Mr Greenwood’s grocery shop; look at old Mr Wainwright’s butcher’s shop – well on its way to becoming a weekend retreat fulfilling another rich

banker's Cotswolds fantasy. These people have no interest in what's going on outside their freshly painted front doors beyond the village providing a charming backdrop for their nostalgic village scene – it's like a film set for them. What they don't realise is, they are the ones who are destroying our community, one by one. The lifestyle they find so charming? They are contributing to its decimation. Mark my words, Sophie, if you sell Gingerberry Yarns – it will go the same way.'

Sophie was surprised to find that, instead of irritation at being the subject of an economics lecture, she not only agreed with Iris's astute assessment, but experienced a strong urge to protect the little wool shop from the encroachment of disinterested weekenders, and her aunt's legacy from such exploitation. After all, hadn't her aunt felt strongly enough about the subject to petition the local council's planning department when permission was requested for change of use of the butcher's shop?

They sipped the dregs of their tea, licked the sweet crumbs from their fingers and turned the conversation to the more palatable subject of the next WI meeting on Wednesday night. It was to be addressed by Dorri Mathews, a yoga enthusiast, who would speak on the benefits of veganism and a raw foods diet in the fight against every disease known to man.

Much giggling ensued when Delia and Marcia described how unhealthy, drawn and washed-out Dorri had looked when they last saw her, concluding that a good dose of home cooking, a balanced diet and chocolate was the source of not only physical, but emotional health – just look at Nigella Lawson, the epitome of a goddess of the kitchen. This observation in turn led the conversation to the subject of the baking craze sweeping the nation on a tsunami of powdered sugar, inspired by the BBC show *The Great British Bake Off*.

'Marcia loves to bake, don't you, darling?' Iris looked proudly at her beloved daughter who sat hunched forward, shoulders rounded to her chest, the ends of her hair sweeping the table. She had replaced her "reading glasses" on the end of her nose.

‘Yes I do, but no way am I up to the standard of these.’

Marcia wiped away a stray speck of buttercream from her upper lip with her fingertip and licked the end, her eyes crinkling into a smile which transformed her whole face.

‘Maybe not, Marcia,’ said Iris. ‘But then Tom can’t compete with you in the literary stakes, can he? She won’t blow her own trumpet, Delia, but Marcia’s just had another two of her short stories accepted by *LuxeLife* magazine for their summer holiday issue. That’s four stories she’s sold this month. Must be doing something right – but then everyone loves a good romance, don’t they?’

Sophie watched as Marcia’s cheeks reddened, embarrassed at her mother’s pride.

‘Nevertheless, she won’t meet the man of her dreams whilst she’s stuck looking after me in Somersby, will she?’

‘Mum!’ Marcia moaned and, as the bell jingled, announcing what Sophie hoped would be a paying customer, she took the opportunity to replace her bobble hat and prepare her mother’s chair to leave.

‘Just saying.’ Iris smirked as Marcia fussed with her knee blanket. There was no defeat in those soft blue eyes, only a burning desire to squeeze every last ounce of delight from what remained of her life.

‘Don’t forget that package we brought for Delia, Marcia, my love,’ Iris said, pointing to the Oxfam hessian bag hooked over the handles of her wheelchair, ‘and your next two stories for her to proofread before you get them sent off to the editor.’

‘Oh, yes.’

Marcia withdrew a large white envelope and placed it on the shop counter before extracting a smaller square package encased in a brown paper bag, passing it surreptitiously to Delia as Sophie strode off to serve the new arrival. But not before Sophie had caught a glimpse of the meaningful, coy looks being exchanged as Delia stowed the clandestine parcel beneath the counter, her cheeks glowing a deep shade of scarlet.

Chapter Fifteen

That night, Sophie settled down on the well-worn sofa with a glass of red wine, curled her feet under her bottom, and called Scarlet for an update on the boutique and life in south west London in general.

‘Hi, Scarlet. How are things at the couture coalface?’

‘Everything’s fine. No crises to get worked up about. Lizzie is working her socks off on next year’s Spring/Summer Collection. Oh, and did I tell you, Marco Gallieri has popped round a couple of times? He said it was to offer us a selection of this season’s fascinators, hats and wedding tiaras to display in our window, but I know it was just for a gossip. He’s a creative genius with bridal headpieces! Would you believe he’s talking about being crowned the new Philip Treacy, bless him? I’d die to wear one of his hats at the wedding of the year! And don’t you think he’s handsome? All that Italian heritage oozing from his pores?’

‘Calm down, Scarlet,’ Sophie giggled. ‘How’s Flora?’

‘Flora is Flora. When she realised that we hadn’t won the competition she spent the whole day arranging and then rearranging the threads into rainbow order, liberally interspersed with bouts of weeping. She went on and on about her psychic telling her that the Sophie-Louise design was going to win, and that Madam Clio has never been wrong before. She still forgets you’re not here at the moment and buys you a vanilla spice latte most mornings – it’s costing us a fortune. But we all miss you, of course.’

‘Any insider gossip on who did win the competition?’

‘Well, I heard from Carla Luciano that it might be Brigitte Gasnier, but I don’t think that’s true. Don’t get me wrong; Brigitte’s designs are amazing, but they are a little OTT even

for my taste. And she's been known to occasionally use animal fur in her trims. Lilac Verbois is not going to want to be associated with any controversy on her wedding day, is she?'

'What about Jacques?'

'He's away in Antibes at the moment, and yes, there's speculation he's gone over there to avoid the possibility of the media digging up any clues. You know he can't keep a secret. But if he has won, he needs to keep his lips firmly sealed. His career depends on it. My money is on him.'

'Yes, I can see Lilac wearing one of his creations on the red carpet. They are very elegant, but I somehow didn't see Lilac walking down the aisle in Gloucester Cathedral in a clingy, sexy sheath dress.'

'No one really knew what she was going to choose.'

'I'm so sorry it wasn't us, Scarlet. You all worked so hard, and it's come to nothing. Perhaps I'm not cut out to be a celebrity fashion designer, after all. I wish I had a thimbleful of Marco's confidence right now.'

'You are an exceptionally talented designer, Sophie.'

Scarlet quickly changed the subject before Sophie had chance to sail any further down the river of despondency. 'What's happening with Gingerberry?'

'Oh, Scarlet, you'd love it! We're thinking of organising a sort of 'stitch and bitch' evening, which should be fun. I've ordered in lots of new stock, too – cashmere, mohair, Aran, angora – all natural fibres. I've also sourced a bolt of that gorgeous cream silk we stumbled on when we were shopping for the wedding dress fabric. Do you think you can email me those designs I did at college for the bridal lingerie range? You know, the bustiers, the corsets, the camisoles, the thongs, the bodysuits, the teddies?'

'No problem, but why?'

'It's an idea Nessa had actually. She suggested we branch out into luxury bridal accessories, lingerie mainly, and I thought we'd make up a few samples at our stitch and bitch

sessions. Not everyone likes knitting; some might prefer sewing and embroidery.’

‘It sounds like a fabulous idea. We could display the pieces in the shop and any money we make can be sent back up to the ladies. You know, I was actually thinking of talking to you about doing something along those lines after this whole wedding debacle was out of the way. I love that little bolero jacket you designed at Christmas – the one with the high collar and full-length sleeves ending in a point over the hand – a bit like a virginal Morticia – and maybe we could make up some with gathered, padded shoulders and tiny pearl buttons from cuff to elbow? I was thinking shot silk, but now you’ve got me wondering. What about ice-white knitted angora interspersed with tiny crystals? Oh, I’m so excited. I’ll get Lizzie and Flora together in the Tumble Room and we can work on a new set of designs. What do you think?’

‘Sounds great. And Scarlet, that jumper you’re always wearing with your jeans? The red and white Scandinavian one? Where did you get it, and can you remember exactly how much you paid for it?’

‘It was a bit of a splurge, I have to admit. I bought it in Harvey Nicks. It was six hundred and fifty. I know it’s purse-busting, but I do wear it every day in the winter instead of a coat and everyone who sees it comments on it and asks where I got it from, just like you have. I wish I could knit. I’d have one in every colour. I think one in emerald-green and cream would go with my colouring, don’t you think?’

Sophie laughed. It was good to talk to Scarlet.

‘Well, if you can master the craft of teleportation sufficiently to travel from London to Somersby and back again in one night, there’s a place reserved at the stitch and bitch sessions for you.’

‘Count me in, Scotty!’

‘Oh, don’t I look fabulous?’ Tish performed a twist and turn in front of Lilac’s huge, gilt-framed mirror in the dressing room

of her Georgian home in South Kensington, smoothing the fluted crepe mini dress over her hips and experimenting with her best pout.

‘Come on, Tish. We can’t waste any time. Lilac is due back next week, and everything has to be ready for her first fitting. Whoever the mystery designer is, she’ll curse us for the delay. Every hour is precious when you have such an important commission to deliver. This gown is going to jettison their career into the stratosphere. It’s the pinnacle of anyone’s dreams to dress an Oscar-nominated actress on her wedding day.’

Tish pulled a face behind Nikki’s back but Nikki saw her in the mirror.

‘Okay, we have thirty minutes to get over to Brigitte Gasnier’s studio, then, if it’s not hers, we’ll take a cab round to Sophie-Louise Bridal. I’ve spoken to Sophie Henshaw’s assistant, Scarlet Webb. Unfortunately, Sophie has had a family bereavement and is currently away in the Cotswolds, but Scarlet assured us that she would be able to show us samples of their previous creations or work with us on a new design. And please, Tish, make sure you leave the talking to me.’

They clambered into a black cab and shot off to Chelsea. Tish spent the whole journey checking her appearance in her compact, patting her halo of blonde curls and reapplying her lipstick. She was made for a role in reality TV, thought Nikki with a smirk.

‘Hi, I’m Millie Channing.’ Nikki introduced herself and shook hands with Brigitte Gasnier, almost suffocating in the cloud of Chanel No. 5 perfume that swirled around the petite fashion designer. ‘Thanks for agreeing to see us at such short notice. As I told you on the phone, Miss Gertrude here is keen to decide on her wedding gown as quickly as possible.’

Nikki gave a polite little cough, clearly indicating that “Miss Gertrude” found herself in an unexpected predicament. She struggled to conceal her smile when Tish turned to her, her eyes widened in horror, her cheeks a hot shade of crimson.

Was that because she'd called her Miss Gertrude or because she'd spilled the beans about her pregnancy? Nikki didn't care – she deserved a little fun.

'Pleased to meet you, Mizz Gertrude. Won't you come this way where my assistant 'as a selection of fabulous gownz for you to consider? If nothing suits, I also 'ave a portfolio of designs in my office for you to peruse, or we can look at designing something to your precise specifications. Of course, it all depends on your budgie,' Brigitte said, her French accent so pronounced that Tish screwed up her nose in confusion.

'My budgie? I don't have a budgie? I have a cat, though – Fluffy?'

Oh, God, thought Nikki. She had to tie up their business here as quickly as possible before their entente cordiale with all things French broke down. 'Do you have anything that's suitable for a celebrity wedding, but that's ready to go? It's just, as I said, we are in a bit of a hurry.'

'Mmm, perhaps I 'ave something. Just wait one moment.' Brigitte disappeared into the back room.

'Why did you have to tell her I was pregnant? Did you see the way her eyes narrowed?' hissed Tish, removing her compact and reapplying a slick of pearly pink lipstick for the tenth time. 'I bet hers is the ball gown one with the lace panelling and the pointed shoulder pads, like Cinderella's but in ivory? Which one do you think it is?'

'Quit talking about Cinderella, Tish. Just concentrate on why we're here.'

Brigitte Gasnier appeared with the most stunning dress balanced over her forearms and an assistant scuttling in her wake supporting its train. It was almost identical to one of the dresses on Nikki's hit list, but not the one they were searching for. Nevertheless, she allowed herself a congratulatory pat on the back and performed an imaginary tick. Now all she needed to do was extricate Tish from her nuptial fantasy with the minimum of fuss and move on to the Sophie-Louise Bridal boutique.

She turned to look at Tish. The expression in the wedding planner's eyes reminded Nikki of the hypnotist snake in The Jungle Book. God, the girl has this wedding fever bad! She decided to turn Tish's silent awe to her advantage.

'That is a stunning dress, Ms Gasnier. It's certainly a possibility.' Then, with a look of abject horror, Nikki placed her arm around Tish's shoulders and began to guide her to the door. *'Gosh, you don't look very well at all, Miss Gertrude. You've turned the same colour as a frog with a hangover. Let's get you some fresh air. Thank you so much, Miss Gasnier. We'll be in touch.'*

The expression on Brigitte Gasnier's face could have been framed and hung in a gallery labelled "Astonishment", but Nikki didn't have the time or the inclination to think about it. She hailed a taxi and bundled a bemused Tish into the back seat.

'Why did we have to leave so quickly? You're such a spoilsport, Nikki. It was a beautiful boutique. You could have at least let me try the dress on – it wasn't as though Lilac was going to wear it or anything. You know how much I love...'

Chapter Sixteen

The morning's downpour had awakened the foliage of the trees that lined the high street like a wedding arch of sabres. The fresh green fragrance of newly cut grass rose into the warming air, lifting Sophie's waning spirits.

It was Wednesday afternoon and most of the shops in Somersby closed for a half-day, another antiquated throwback that didn't fit the consumerism of the twenty-first century, grumbled Sophie. She stood just outside the doorway of Gingerberry Yarns, her eyes focused on its stone façade, which had been bleached to a soft honey-hued colour by the passing years and the Gloucestershire weather but was as familiar to her as a beloved relative, as she tried to imagine how a new customer would encounter the store.

Sunshine shone on the gold lettering emblazoned across the huge plate-glass window spelling out the shop's title, highlighting the fact that one of the letter "r"s was missing. The door, formerly a cheery yellow, had blistered and cracked to a hue of ochre. But it was when she pressed open the entrance door, the tinkle of the bell welcoming her into the cathedral of yarns, and she was presented with its shabby interior, that she sighed.

The room was devoid of its lifeblood – its ever-present laughter. In the eerie silence and gloom, Sophie battled her rising recollections, battenning them down like a game at the fair. Against the patina of age, the colourful balls of wool crammed the labyrinthine shelving in neat pyramids; from combed mohair to woven bamboo, from baby cotton to brush, chunky Aran – a veritable library of yarn.

And yet it was a throwback to past times.

As she took a step into the shop, a gust of outdoor air favoured her nostrils with a waft of lavender and nostalgia. A

rose-tinted dreariness suffused the atmosphere – that first glimpse of the glass counter behind which her aunt had always stood – and dealt a thwack of pain to her heart. Gingerberry Yarns without Claire Garside was like London without Big Ben.

Would a fresh coat of paint be enough to drag the business into the twenty-first century? Was she a fool easily parted from her injection of cash on a few tins of paint, after which she'd sell up and scuttle back to her old life in London?

Pulling back her shoulders, she resumed her critical, professional assessment of the shop's fittings as she decided which would be painted with the peppermint paint she'd ordered and which would not. She ran her fingertips along the varnished surfaces, stroking the smoothness of the ribbons, fingering the intricate lace, and allowing the painful memories to assault her senses.

She couldn't wait for the delivery of the pure new wools, the tweeds, the fibres that the UK had been famous for in the past. If she could fill these nooks and crannies with natural, instead of man-made, yarns and display sample garments that the trendsetters would give their hard-earned cash for, then maybe, just maybe...

Her stomach hollered its objection to the forfeiture of breakfast, so she trudged back up the stairs to flick on the kettle, dragging forward her trusty sketch pad to start planning the renaissance of Gingerberry Yarns. She was determined to keep busy, to focus on menial tasks not the big picture, but disloyal thoughts strained like elastic to return to the melancholy lodged resolutely in her mind. As she sipped on her third cup of Earl Grey tea and removed a fourth chocolate-coated digestive biscuit from the tube, she pondered on how easily she had succumbed to the oestrogen trio of solace: chocolate, tea, and gossip.

She had no idea how long she had been at the kitchen table, mulling over her scribble, when a banging on the door broke through her reverie. She unfurled her legs and slotted the pencil behind her ear, the points of her ebony hair curling beneath her chin. She had made a concerted effort to avoid the

bathroom mirror lately, but she knew she needed to arrange her debut visit to Marietta's in the next week or so.

'Oh, hello?' She had expected it to be Delia or Marcis, despite the half-day closing.

'Erm, hi. I'm Tom. Tom Wallington? From the bakery on the corner? Just thought I'd drop by to offer my condolences. I know I'm a little tardy, but well, what with the shop and visiting Dad...' He attempted a conciliatory expression, shuffling his weight from one foot to the other, his gaze focused on a point to the left of Sophie's eyes, his diamond stud earring glinting in the afternoon sunlight.

'Hi, Tom, I'm Sophie. Come in, come in. I'll make us some coffee.'

Sophie eyed the pale peppermint cardboard box Tom clasped in his reddened hands and could almost feel the drool beginning to form.

'I've brought you these. They're just a few leftovers from this morning.'

Tom opened the lid of the cake box to reveal the most exquisite, hand-made selection of French patisserie Sophie had laid eyes on – and that from someone whose best friend had worshipped the world of pastries as they grew up. He pointed to a pale pink sugary gem.

'This is a raspberry *Miroir* – raspberry mousse with pink-and-white biscuit, topped with a raspberry-infused glaze, finished with a pink-and-white-striped chocolate square. This one, here, is a *Paradiso* – alternated mango, passion fruit and coconut-infused mousse topped with a rolled white-and-dark-chocolate cigarillo. And these, here, are pistachio and vanilla macarons.'

In the concentration of the description and the passion it had produced, Tom had emerged from his timid shell to present his culinary creations with the pride of any accomplished maestro, and Sophie had kept her mouth clamped shut to prevent the risk of subconscious drooling.

‘Wow, they look amazing. Why don’t you grab a seat at the table, Tom, and I’ll fetch the cafetière?’

She rushed up the stairs to make their coffee, then set the glass coffee pot on the huge mahogany table in the empty shop, and sank her teeth into one of the tiny sculptures, allowing the symphony of flavours to melt on her tongue and set her taste buds alight.

‘Delicious, Tom, you really are a genius. Delia says you trained in Paris and then at Betty’s in Harrogate?’ She watched Tom nervously lace his elegant fingers around his coffee mug so that he had something to do with his hands.

‘Yes, I adore French patisserie. I’ve been introducing a new product to the bakery every week since I took over from Dad at Christmas. I’m not sure Somersby is ready for blueberry and lemon *millefeuille* with Madagascan vanilla custard and blueberry jam, though! Dad, of course, tells me I’m crazy and that I should stick with the standard fare of lardy cakes and loaves of bread that customers buy every week, but...’ Tom shrugged.

Sophie totally got it. If he had to endure banishment to rural Gloucestershire, then he wanted to make an impact on the community’s taste buds, just like she did with her natural textiles and crafting sessions. Maybe there was a great deal to be learnt from this ginger-haired giant crouched over the table in front of her.

‘I was thinking of doing something new here, too. Like repainting the walls and the shelving, upgrading the stock, suggesting a more modern twist to the customers with the sample garments we display in the window.’ She grimaced as her gaze fell on the burnt-orange sweater draped limply over the adjacent chair like a wet flannel. Who could wear orange successfully? ‘Maybe even start with a few crafting sessions to bring in a new, younger clientele.’

‘But what’s the point, Sophie? The village is floundering under the onslaught of the hypermarkets. Our high street is in intensive care now. At least you have the option of selling up and moving back to your life in London.’ He flashed his moss-

green eyes at Sophie in apology, clearly not wanting to seem disrespectful. ‘With the greatest of respect, once your aunt’s probate has been finalised you *can* sell up. Whereas I’m subjected to daily lectures from my increasingly frail father about what I’m doing wrong in the business and how I have three generations of bakers behind me to measure up to.

‘Sorry, Sophie, but why bother? Why strive to put all your energy into a dying business when you don’t have to. We’ll all be slaving for the supermarket masters by the end of the year, working for minimum wage, watching the corporate fat cats drain all the creativity from our veins whilst we comply with their demands for homogenous loaves of bread and cream cakes the texture of polystyrene. The church congregation is flagging, youngsters are escaping to the city, small businesses teeter on the cliff of financial oblivion, like Wainwright’s the butcher’s did, like Greenwood’s the grocer’s has. Only the wealthy are beating a return path, buying up renovated weekend homes, bringing their supplies with them. We don’t have a hope of competing with that, so why are we flogging ourselves to death trying?’

Tom ran his chapped fingers over his hair and scratched at his auburn stubble. ‘Every morning except Sunday, I get up before five o’clock to prepare the dough for that day’s bread, to produce the repetitive fare the villagers of Somersby have come to expect from Wallington’s. If I had any spare time, which I don’t, I’d love to indulge my passion for hand-made chocolates, but that’s not what our customers want. One of my biggest fears is that I may be losing my culinary edge without the daily stretch of creativity to finely hone my skills.

‘And all this is before I limber up for the battle with the paperwork bureaucrats. I ask you, who needs the morning workout of kneading dough when I can flex my brain muscles in the eternal fight with suppliers, delivery guys, bankers, councillors who profess to have the small businessman in their thoughts, not to mention the spectre of the taxman. The government tells us we need daily exercise to avoid an early grave, but it’s the red tape that they throw at us that’s enough to give anyone a heart attack.’

At last, Tom met Sophie's eyes. 'I'm exhausted, Sophie. But I'm doing this for Dad. It would kill him if there was even a whiff of a hint that I intended to close the bakery. Oh, I know he thinks my intricate creations are the product of namby-pamby pandering to rich, nouveau-cuisine connoisseurs for whom he has no time. He used to cringe when I was a teenager and he saw me carry out my confectionary autopsies to ascertain the precise mix of ingredients and then attempt to reconstruct them with more panache than the original inventor.'

Sophie dropped her gaze from his eyes to his pianist fingers, picturing Tom mixing together a symphony of flavours all his own, a true genius with a wooden spoon but minus the smooth social skills and engaging personality of the celebrity TV chefs. His lack of self-confidence ensured he would not be taking part in the Great British Pageant of Patisserie any time soon.

Tom leaned towards her. 'Sophie, listen to me. You don't need to plough all your money and energy into refurbishing or wasting your design talents on a parochial shop catering to the needs of the old dears who use it as a community centre. No one would think badly of you. They all loved your aunt, but this is about *your* life, *your* ambitions. It's not worth it. Don't throw your dreams away, Sophie, like I have!'

'But, Tom, running your Dad's bakery clearly isn't preventing you from experimenting with new recipes. We adore your cupcakes – they are divine creations of sugary art,' she enthused as she wiped away a crumb from her lips.

'But do the discerning customers of Somersby want a steady diet of pistachio macarons and tiramisu pyramids?' he asked.

'Never underestimate the hungry customer, Tom. They may be elderly, but they, like everyone else, can be lured to partake of a delicious *petite madeleine* or glazed fruit tart. Many still bake from scratch at home, you know, unlike the teenagers, although I am reliably informed by Nessa, my friend who teaches up at St Hilda's, that the girls are *loving* the cookery classes they have reintroduced into the curriculum and they're

struggling to meet demand. Hey, and *GBBO* fever is sweeping the nation, too. Why not tailor your forensic culinary experiments each week to produce your own twist on one of the recipes featured on TV?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Who would be interested in that?’

Sophie rolled her eyes at the scepticism and the lacklustre response from this quiet, self-effacing man with the elegant fingers. ‘Well, *I* would, for a start, and so would Delia, and Marcia – oh, and Nessa and her students in the cooking class. Maybe you could offer to give a cooking demonstration to the class at the school, mixed in with a soupçon of gossip from your exploits in the kitchens of Paris and Betty’s?’

Sophie paused in her organisation of Tom’s future business exploits as a look of pure horror invaded Tom’s face which made her laugh for the first time that week.

Chapter Seventeen

The doorbell jangled its introduction and both Sophie and Tom turned their heads to see Marcia, without Iris in tow, blushing at the door.

‘Oh, Sophie, sorry – I didn’t realise you had company.’

Marcia hid behind her hair as she hesitated in the doorway, clearly wanting to flee but not sure if she dared, dragging her mother’s oversized tweed coat across her rounded shoulders like a shield.

‘It’s okay, Marcia. This is Tom Wallington, from the bakery on the corner?’ Sophie shot up to prevent Marcia from leaving and guided her to a seat at the table, realising that if she spent any more time listening to Tom’s take on life then she would be joining him on the pulpit of the village’s bridge. ‘And I was in the process of persuading him to present a few cookery demonstrations to the students at St Hilda’s. Don’t you think that’s an excellent idea?’

‘Sophie, believe me, I’m no good at that sort of thing. I don’t have the time or the confidence to—’

‘Why don’t you draw up a detailed lesson plan for an after-school club? Include a choice of recipes, sweet and savoury, a list of the ingredients each one requires and a set of clear, concise, easy-to-follow instructions. Maybe you could add in some photographs of the finished article and a few words about the history behind every cake, a sort of story of its birth? You know, like where does lardy cake originate from, how do Florentines get their name, that sort of thing. Nessa can then show it to the head teacher. She’s always complaining that all the after-school activities are sports-based. It’s perfect!’

Tom’s face had alarm written across it. ‘A story – for a cake – what a ridiculous idea! No, that settles it, Sophie. Thanks for

the vote of confidence, but no way.'

'I can help you, if you like?' Marcia offered, her soft voice muffled as she stared down at her fingers twisting the strings of her woollen hat.

'What do you mean?' Sophie pressed, keen to involve Marcia.

'I can help Tom write the lesson plans and the stories. I am something of an expert, after all the official documents I've had to complete over the years to get a community care assessment for Mum and my carer's assessment and allowance. We've had to appeal the council's decision on her personal budget plan on several occasions and that really does sharpen your pen, so to speak.'

Marcia chanced a flick of her jam-jar-covered eyes across to Sophie, studiously avoiding any direct contact with Tom. 'And I can write the cake histories, too. I've had loads of romance short stories published, so...' Her voice trailed off as she dropped her eyes back to the table and re-hunched her shoulders.

Sophie was forced to address the top of her head.

'Marcia, that's wonderful...'

The bell tinkled again and Sophie heaved a sigh. What was the point of closing the shop on a Wednesday afternoon when she had more visitors than she had customers in the intervening days?

'Saw you were enjoying a gathering so I thought I'd grace you with my presence.'

'Erm, right, and you are?'

Sophie slid her eyes over the handsome young guy who had already grabbed a chair and turned it backwards to sit astride it. With his immaculately barbered, jet-black hair, skin lightly tanned and clean-shaven jaw, he could have been a catwalk model but for his height. He smelled delicious, too. His pristine, candy-pink shirt had been laundered to perfection and he wore a dove-grey cashmere sweater draped artfully around his shoulders, his black designer trousers moulded perfectly to

display a taut behind. But it was his heavy gold-link bracelet that caught Sophie's eye and caused the corners of her lips to twitch.

'I'm Marc Bairstow, darling. I own the florist's shop on the other side of the green – Buds & Bows? Oh, hi there, Tom, didn't see you there. Oh, and is this your girlfriend?' he asked with an unmistakable glint in his coal-coloured eyes, his lilting tone curved into a tease.

'Hi, Marc. No, Marcia is not my girlfriend.'

All three swung their eyes to survey Marcia whose deep flush had suffused her blanched complexion as she dipped her eyes back behind a curtain of hair. Sophie could have happily murdered Marc.

'Well, anyway...' Marc's eyes danced in the knowledge he'd hit his mark. 'I'll take a skinny cinnamon latte, Sophie-Louise, my dear, and one of these divine little amuse-bouches! Even though it will *not* enhance my waistline, I'm anxious to see what it'll do to my discerning taste buds. I'll just have to endure an extra half-hour of Pilates tonight; no punishment, really – the tutor has buttocks of steel!'

Sophie plonked a fresh cafetière of coffee on the table in front of Marc with a challenge in her hazelnut stare. She was not making him a skinny cinnamon latte. What did he think she was running here, a Costa franchise?

'So' – he flung his palm around the shop – 'what are your plans for this cathedral of commercial gloom? I do hope you *have* renovation plans, Sophie dear? We are the three musketeers of Somersby High Street, charged with its salvation. Yes, you may laugh, but I ask you this. What if we also took the easy road instead of the right road? What would be left of the Great British High Street then?

'Here, I'm thinking Marie Antoinette French boudoir, marshmallow pinks and creams, a splash of that delightful peppermint green. Perhaps an espresso machine over there in the corner?' He raised his neatly plucked eyebrows and rushed on when he saw the expression on Sophie's face, refusing to be diverted from his interior design project. 'And Tom,

darling, you could supply a baker's dozen of these delectable French fancies for the discerning customers, couldn't you? What say you, Sophie? Drag this little antiquated emporium into the twenty-first century?'

'You just said eighteenth-century boudoir!' she reminded him.

'Eighteenth century-*inspired!* And you know I'd love to assist in this transformation, but...' – Marc shot a glance around the table to ensure he held everyone's undivided attention – 'I've just been commissioned to supply Hugo Marston and Avril Carter's wedding flowers!'

Marc rolled his eyes at the blank expressions around the table. 'Philistines. Hugo Marston is one of our county's most talented operatic tenors. And I've wheedled two invitations to the evening reception for me and Joseph! It'll be such a blast. Anyway, must dash. Bye, my sweeties!'

Marc drained his coffee with a grimace befitting a drama queen and flounced out. Sophie met Marcia's eye and they crumpled into a fit of giggles. Tom, however, remained stony-faced, swinging his glare from one girl to the other as he waited for them to get a grip on their laughter.

'If I agree to let Marcia draft a lesson plan for the school, then you, Sophie, have to organise those "stitch and bitch" sessions this week.' That stopped their hilarity in its tracks. 'I've got a friend over in Cranbury who owns the printer's shop. I'm sure Jon will be able to run off a few flyers for you. Who were you thinking of targeting?'

'Well,' Sophie said, wiping her eyes with the cuff of her sleeve, 'Nessa mentioned the girls at school and there are Claire's WI friends in the knitting club.'

'And there's my reading group and writers' circle friends,' Marcia offered, sitting up straight in her chair, excitement written boldly across her features.

'Okay...'

'And Delia's Friday night girls and my mum's friends from the MS support group at the hospital?'

‘Great,’ said Sophie, with diminishing enthusiasm.

‘And maybe Tom can supply the cupcakes, you know, just for the launch? “A Sweet Temptation”?’

Sophie never would have believed Marcia could become so animated about a project and it sent a surge of delight through her chest. It was true – she did have the organisational skills to match those of an army general.

‘So next Tuesday, then?’ Marcia continued. ‘Shall we say seven o’clock? I’ll design the flyer and email it across to Tom’s friend. Will you call Jon tonight, Tom?’

‘Erm, sure, okay, Marcia.’

Was that a steamroller retreating from her crushed bones? wondered Sophie.

From their seats at the table Sophie and Tom watched like frozen goldfish as Marcia tripped from the shop, neither of them quite realising what had happened and how Marc and Marcia had got away with it. She might look like a shy bookworm, but Marcia was no slouch in the bulldozing stakes.

‘Thanks for the coffee, Sophie. I’ve got to visit Dad. Bye.’

Tom disappeared leaving Sophie with her swirling thoughts. Ripples of ivory and indigo stretched across the retiring sky as she dropped the sneck on the door and pulled down the blind. She heaved a heavy sigh, wishing she could turn the clock back twelve months when her life had been dull and boring, with no celebrity wedding gown to design and no haberdashery shop to run – even if it had been nicknamed “the cosiest little wool shop in the Cotswolds”!

As Sophie reached to flick the light switch, dreaming of a hot bath and a glass of Merlot, her eye caught on the brown paper package Iris had given Delia the previous week, which she’d shoved under the counter and clearly forgotten about.

First of all, she removed the large white envelope containing Marcia’s two short stories to be proofed by Delia’s sharp eye. She flipped open the flap and drew out the neatly typed sheets of papers and glanced at the heading, her lips curling into a smile. *The Lustful Lancelot by Clementine*

Johnson – fabulous; a good romance was exactly what she needed to accompany her bubble bath and wine. She hoped Marcia wouldn't mind; as she'd had many short stories published, she didn't think so.

She tucked the envelope under her arm and was about to leave when she remembered the brown-paper-encased bundle. She lifted it from its shadowy confines, a stab of guilt causing her to pause and wonder if she was trampling on Delia's privacy. But as she peeled back the wrapping to take a peek, she saw it contained nothing more personal than a trio of paperback books.

Curious as to the sort of novels Iris and Marcia were sharing with Delia – and why they were encased in brown paper – Sophie turned the books out onto the glass counter. Her eyes bulged from their sockets. An instant tickle of amusement breached her throat and burst forth into peals of laughter, culminating in tears of mirth.

Oh, what a relief it was to laugh out loud, she thought as she picked up one of the books to study the jacket blurb, wiping her eyes on one of the pink napkins left by Tom.

She mounted the stairs, the books tucked securely under her arm, to enjoy her first foray into a trilogy of full-length stories that were clearly steamy romance.

Chapter Eighteen

Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture, Wimbledon, London

'Don't forget, Tish, you have to let me do the talking at the next boutique,' warned Nikki as she clambered from the back seat of the black cab onto the pavement outside Sophie-Louise Bridal.

'Why did you have to tell that Brigitte Gasnier woman I was pregnant? Did you see the way her eyes narrowed? Please don't use the same excuse this time, Nikki,' pleaded Tish, removing her compact and reapplying a slick of pearly pink lipstick for the tenth time. 'Oh, isn't this an adorable little shop? I love the peppermint-and-gold theme. I bet this is where the fairy-tale gown was designed. It has to be.'

'Tish, stop with the romance claptrap, will you? Someone needs to break it to you that there's no such thing as "true love that lasts forever".' She signed the universally accepted two-fingered speech marks of sarcasm.

Tish's lower lip trembled with annoyance, but she rallied. She tossed her curls behind her ears and fixed her eyes on Nikki. 'Finding a soulmate is a tough task, I get that. It can take years. And you're right; some people may never find "the one"'. But you know what? I'm never going to stop looking and when I do find him, I'm going to use every weapon in my armoury to hang on to him. If the choice is happiness versus loneliness, I know which I'd rather invest in.'

'But what's the point? There's nothing you can do if your soulmate decides to run off with a shop assistant from the local department store, is there?' asked Nikki.

Tish ignored her; she was on a roll. 'My theory is that the more love you give, the more you receive. The more you expect it to fall into your lap when you're not looking, the less likely it

is that you'll find it. You need to let people into your heart, Nikki. Sure, I adore weddings, but don't misunderstand me – I love romance more. I love happiness more. I love being in love more. After all the glitz and hype, even actresses and rock stars have at some stage to go home and cook dinner and wash the dishes. And those mundane tasks in life are made much more interesting if your soulmate is at your side slicing the sushi.'

Nikki stared at Tish as though she had gone stark raving bonkers. 'Tish, will you pull yourself together? Don't you understand how serious this is? Your first celebrity client, Lilac Verbois, is getting married in three months' time. She has no gown. Don't you think she'll have a problem with walking down the aisle in her lingerie? I've about had enough of this "make-believe" fairy tale you insist on living in. Get over it. Life isn't a picture-book story with a Prince Charming just waiting in the wings to whisk... What?'

'Lingerie!' Tish covered her mouth with her hand. 'I'd completely forgotten.'

'But surely Lilac...'

'She asked me to do it,' she squeaked.

'Oh, for heaven's sake...'

She'd just about had enough of Tish. Didn't she realise there was no such thing as true love? Even when you thought you'd found it – it could still vanish in an instant, borne away on the wings of a blonde Scandinavian girl who worked in the china department of Liberty's. Yet, sadly, you just couldn't control who you gave your heart to, no matter how much you tried to stack the odds in your favour.

However, what she could control was her job. As she stood on the pavement in Wimbledon, looking up at the pretty peppermint signage announcing in curly golden lettering that they'd arrived at Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture, she drew in a deep, steadying breath. She pushed open the door with a petulant Tish stomping in behind her.

'Ah, you must be Millie Channing. I'm Scarlet Webb – we spoke on the phone.'

Nikki shook hands with Scarlet and introduced her to Tish who simply nodded. Nikki watched Scarlet run an expert eye over Tish's dimensions.

'And I think I might have the perfect dress for your client.' Scarlet smiled at Tish but got no response. *'Please, come through. Would you like a glass of champagne? It's English sparkling wine, actually – Sophie insists on it. I can assure you it's just as delicious.'*

Tish's frosty mood evaporated. 'I'd love a glass of champagne! Thank you!'

Flora appeared with a silver tray and offered a flute of the effervescent elixir to Tish who took it and drained it in one. Nikki shook her head to refuse, but, before Flora could whisk the glass away, Tish had grabbed that one, too. She smiled like the Cheshire Cat at Nikki as she relaxed on the huge cream chesterfield sofa, crossed her slender, stockinged legs and waited for the gowns to be paraded.

Nikki's stomach growled. She hadn't eaten since supper the previous evening and then only a woeful attempt at cheese on toast. There was never anything in her fridge anyway. She usually tried to stock up on fresh salads, fruit and fish on a Saturday, but by the following Friday she'd not had the chance to eat any of it and had to throw it away in the bin and start the circle all over again.

She knew it was a waste but, as far as food was concerned at least, she was an eternal optimist – one night she would get home at a reasonable hour and cook a decent meal for herself. It just hadn't happened since Lilac had announced she was marrying the handsome hunk that was Finn Marchant and was holding a competition to select the designer of her wedding gown. If it had been she who'd been lucky enough to be getting hitched to a rock star, Nikki would have opted for a quiet, intimate wedding, perhaps in a tiny church on the beach in some tropical location, like Bali or Hawaii. Even the dress

was superfluous if you had the man of your dreams standing next to you, barefoot in the sand.

Her uncharacteristic sojourn into nuptial oblivion was brought to an abrupt halt when an exclamation erupted from Tish's lips. 'Yes! Yes! Yes!'

Nikki focused her attention on the dress Scarlet was displaying and leapt from the sofa. 'Oh, Scarlet, I could kiss you! That's it! That's the one! It's a Sophie-Louise!'

Unlike Nikki, Tish had no reservations on the kissing front. She clutched a shocked Scarlet to her chest and slapped a loud kiss on both cheeks. 'Thank God, thank God. You are an absolute saviour. I love you.'

'Erm, I'm glad you like it. Do you want to try it on?'

'No!' Nikki screamed. 'No! Sorry, let me explain. I think you should sit down.'

Nikki guided Scarlet to the sofa and perched next to her. She scabbled around in her Birkin for her business card and her ID. 'You're not going to believe this. I'm Nikki Coates. I'm...'

'You're Lilac Verbois's PA. Oh, and you're Tish Marshall, her wedding planner. I thought I recognised you. I wasn't sure, but... Why are you here?'

'The Sophie-Louise design has been chosen by Lilac as the one she wants to wear on her wedding day.'

'Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Flora, get in here!' shouted Scarlet.

Flora appeared at the door, her eyebrows raised in mute enquiry.

'We've won!'

'Won what?'

'The Lilac Verbois competition.' And Scarlet promptly burst into tears. 'I'm sorry. It's just such a shock. We thought, we thought when we didn't hear anything that...'

'Well, it's taken us some time to find you.'

'What do you mean?' Scarlet asked, dabbing at the corners of her eyes with the tissues they usually reserved for tearful brides-to-be.

'There was no documentation with your dress when it was delivered to The Dorchester. Is this the dress Sophie-Louise submitted?'

'Yes, it is, but I don't understand. Why... oh.' She turned to look at Flora's pale, almost translucent face, her eyes wide, her fingertips resting on her lips. *'You forgot to fill in the paperwork? Flora!'*

'Oh, God, I'm so, so sorry, Scarlet. I know you mentioned it, but remember, we were in a panic about Sophie's aunt, and I was so upset, and I suppose I just...'

'No harm done,' interrupted Nikki, 'except the time that's been lost. Lilac has a tight schedule. These are the dates she's available for fittings. As you know, the gown has to be ready for the thirty-first of July.'

'Sophie usually asks for a minimum of three fittings. This first date is not until two months' time. We need to do the first fitting straight away.'

'I'm sorry. That's not possible. Lilac is flying out to Croatia as soon as she and Finn have finalised everything with the Bishop at Gloucester Cathedral next Tuesday.'

Scarlet's brain whirled. They couldn't start work on the gown until they had an idea of Lilac's exact measurements. 'Sophie is currently taking a short sabbatical to finalise her late aunt's affairs. Her aunt passed away recently and left a haberdashery shop in the Cotswolds to Sophie. I'll call her to tell her the fantastic news. I'm sure she can come back down to London this week to see Lilac before she leaves the country.'

'But Lilac isn't in London. She's filming in the Outer Hebrides. When that's in the can, she's being flown by helicopter to Bristol airport for the meeting at the cathedral, and then she's flying straight out again. Did you say the shop was in the Cotswolds?'

'Yes, Somersby.'

'Right. I'll arrange to collect Lilac in Gloucester when she's through with the arrangements and drive her over to the Cotswolds branch of Sophie-Louise. Shouldn't be too difficult.'

'Oh, it's not a branch...' Scarlet caught the meaning in Nikki's stare. *'Yes, I'm sure the Cotswolds branch of Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture will be ready to receive Miss Verbois whenever she is available.'*

'Right. Can I ask you to do one last thing?'

'Of course.'

'Miss Verbois has said she would like to congratulate the winner in person. Could you keep this a secret for a couple of days? So that Lilac can inform Sophie-Louise herself?'

'What? Not tell Sophie?' Scarlet gasped, exchanging a glance with Flora. *'Oh, I'm not sure I—'*

'It's one of the conditions of the competition.'

'Really?'

'Yes, I can show you the terms and conditions if you like?'

'No, no, that's no necessary.'

'Great. I'll be in touch... oh, and many congratulations.'

'I think we should stay and celebrate!' announced Tish, grabbing another flute from Flora's tray.

Flora smiled and joined her, tears of joy – but mostly of relief – trickling down her cheeks. She'd just got away with almost losing the most prestigious order Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture was ever likely to get, by the skin of her teeth. To say she looked relieved was an understatement.

Nikki glanced at the two girls knocking back the champagne and then at Scarlet. She shrugged her shoulders. Perhaps she did deserve a glass. Hadn't she just pulled the proverbial rabbit out of the hat?

Chapter Nineteen

The following Tuesday, Sophie flicked the sign on the door of Gingerberry Yarns to *Closed* at precisely five o'clock. The pearly sheen of condensation on the front window masked the hive of activity within like a bride's veil. There were so many things to organise before everyone arrived at seven o'clock, and she and Delia had worked in tandem to clear the area around the huge mahogany table, dispersing chintz cushions for those with delicate bottoms.

Seb and Dominic had helped, and they had performed miracles. They had blown in on Saturday teatime as the shop closed for the weekend, armed with litres of paint, which they assured Sophie had been wallowing for years in their mother's garage. However, as it was the exact same shade of pale rose Sophie had agonised over for the walls, and the identical pale peppermint she'd selected from the Dulux paint chart for the shelving and wicker baskets, she doubted it. She suspected either Nessa or Delia's hand in its production and was immensely grateful.

With the sustenance but not the precision offered by a dozen bottles of hand-crafted ale donated by the Fox & Hounds pub, coupled with a late-night Indian takeaway and an eclectic selection of music, Sophie, Delia, Nessa, Seb and Dominic had decorated and gossiped until the early hours of Sunday morning. The gang, minus Delia, then broke for a couple of hours' kip on the floor of the flat upstairs, before returning to the task the next morning.

It was trite, but true; many hands did make light work.

By six o'clock on Sunday evening, with aching limbs and weakened muscles (apart from Nessa and Seb), they stood back to admire Gingerberry Yarns' transformation from serene old lady to energised princess. Sophie had to brush away a tear

when Marcia appeared and produced a string of hand-embroidered bunting, each pastel-green polka-dot flag stitched with a letter spelling out the word “Gingerberry”, as she performed the rebirthing ceremony by draping the garland over the front of the glass counter.

Now all Sophie had to do was display the new stock that had arrived that morning in the hope they could make some sales at their inaugural crafting session that evening. They’d had seven confirmations – three ladies from the knitting club of the local WI, two of Delia’s Friday night posse, and Nessa was bringing two teacher friends from St Hilda’s. So, with herself, Delia, Marcia and Iris, it would make a very respectable twelve. But, as the clock edged towards seven p.m., Sophie’s confidence began to wobble, and she regretted the misdirected impulse to do this.

No one would come, she was certain of it, and she struggled to quell her rising panic.

This time, far from being an irritant, the tinkle of the door chime was a welcome relief. Sophie wiped her hands on a tea towel, shot a nervous glance across to Delia, and rushed down the stairs to welcome in the first student.

But it wasn’t a student, it was Tom, weighed down with a large silver salver of assorted confectionary, and his offerings would not have disgraced a chic Parisian soirée.

‘Wow, Tom, these look awesome. I expected a batch of cupcakes!’

In keeping with the theme, Tom had produced rose and pistachio macarons nestled next to vanilla cream and peppermint jam *millefeuille*, and a selection of kiwi and raspberry glazed tartlets finished with curls of dark chocolate.

‘I’m grateful for the chance to practise, Sophie. I can’t afford the time to bake these every day and the risk of them not selling makes them financially unviable. So I thought, well... I’m sure the ladies coming tonight all possess discerning taste and I really need your venture to be a success.’

Tom thrust the tray of culinary gems into Sophie's hands, his reddening face clashing unattractively with his shock of ginger hair.

'Stay and have a coffee, Tom,' Sophie offered, desperate to detain him in the empty shop. It was ten past seven and still no one had arrived. What if no one turned up? A helix of nerves began to wind its way through her abdomen, but she gave herself a shake – that path of thought was an idiot's journey and one which she had no intention of travelling down that evening.

'Oh, no, I'm not staying here!'

Horror replaced the embarrassment on Tom's face, now a vivid puce. Before Sophie could say anything else, he rotated on his heels to make a swift exit, only to end up bumping chests with Marc who had arrived weighed down by a profusion of pink Stargazer lilies.

Marc smirked at Tom's rapid retreat and mortified apology before turning to Sophie.

'Darling! I brought you these. They will be Gingerberry's crowning glory and their fragrance is divine.' He landed a kiss on each of Sophie's cheeks before turning to greet Tom, who had beat a hasty path to the door.

Sensing Tom's discomfort, Sophie stepped into the breach when she noticed Marc's black eyes glinting with mischief. 'Why don't you help me pop these in water, Marc? They are gorgeous, thank you.'

'Oh, and what are these scrumptious little delights? Mmm... flowers, sweet treats, and gossip! Now that the holy grail of female delights has been established, the evening is bound to be a dazzling success!'

Marc reached over to select a pale pink macaron, but Sophie slapped his hand away.

'Not yet, Marc! This tray is just as much a work of art as your magnificent bouquet.'

'Of course, but us artisans can't be too precious about our creations, can we, Tom? They are but temporary offerings for

our patrons' delectation. Well, where is everyone?' He swung his gaze around the refurbished shop, his arms flounced in theatrical style. 'Oh, I love what you've done with the place, Sophie; pink sorbet and peppermint are two of my favourite shades. I'm so pleased I chose those lilies – they're just perfection. The icing on the cupcake, if you will!'

Delia appeared in the shop. She greeted Tom and Marc and fussed around the flowers.

'You know, Tom,' said Marc, 'you should really have submitted a proposal to be appointed as Lilac Verbois's wedding cake supplier. You would have definitely been shortlisted. Ms Verbois is known to have the most exquisite taste.'

Marc's dark eyes met Sophie's and his hand shot to his mouth. 'Oh, I didn't mean...'

'It's okay, Marc, but thanks for the motivational direction. And yes, Lilac does have an eye for exquisite design.' She squeezed a smile into her eyes for Marc and then looked across at Tom who lurked like a frightened lamb caught in a wolf's lair over by the door. 'Are you sure I can't persuade you to stay?'

'Erm, no thanks,' and Tom disappeared through the door in a flash.

'Oh, don't worry, I'm staying right here. I wouldn't miss this party for all the tulips in Amsterdam. Joseph is out celebrating with his tennis gang tonight, but I demurred and promised to meet up with him for cocktails when we're done here.'

Marc strode over to inspect the new merchandise that had been crammed into the freshly painted cubes of shelving and piled artistically into the dipped bamboo baskets. He selected a soft-spun natural lamb's wool yarn and held it to his cheek, appreciating its texture.

'Oh, I'm thinking a cream and peach Fair Isle sweater, Sophie. Have you been watching those Danish detective shows? Perhaps I could knit one for Joseph for Christmas? Or

maybe I should go for one with a picture of Rudolph on the front? I simply adore the annual craze for festive knits!

‘Marc, I think we should begin our sessions with something a little more basic, don’t you? But as it looks like it will just be me, you and Delia tonight, perhaps we can...’

Chapter Twenty

When the tinkle of the brass doorbell reverberated through the shop, Sophie was so relieved she resolved there and then never to be annoyed by its cacophony of chimes again.

‘Hi, Sophie. Hi, Delia. Sorry we’re a little tardy, love, but Grace had to wait for her daughter to arrive to sit with Arthur.’

The WI sisterhood of yarn bustled into the shop, shrugging off their coats and hanging them on the gold hooks Seb had attached to the wall behind a bamboo screen at the back of the shop for just this purpose. Delia had reported how anxious they had been to lend their support so their sanctuary would survive, even if its proprietor sadly had not. The three women fussed over the sweet-smelling floral display, swooned over the cakes, and then dragged out the seats at the table with the cushions, chattering the whole time.

They were just settling in for the session when Delia’s Friday night friends arrived, pink-cheeked and breathless, followed swiftly by the giggling trio of teachers from the school, which included Nessa, who had clearly been at the wine.

‘Hi, Sophie,’ they chorused. ‘Wow, did *you* make these?’

‘No, of course not. Tom Wallington brought the cakes and Marc Bairstow from Buds & Bows donated the floral display.’

She indicated Marc who waved a fingertip greeting whilst dissecting the girls’ choice of attire as though possessed of laser-vision. He stepped into the melee to receive their enthusiastic praise, clearly in his element with so many women surrounding him, before claiming the seat at the head of the table, poised to learn his first stitch on the way to the promised Christmas sweater.

‘I think we should begin, Sophie,’ Delia said.

Sophie pressed the tightened coil of nerves to the back of her mind. She suspected she might be about to explain to her aunt's WI friends how to suck eggs, but hey, in for a penny...

'Can I first of all thank each and every one of you for coming here tonight. As this is our first session and we have a diverse range of talents here, I think we should begin with the basics and those who are more experienced can help the beginners before we break for coffee and some of these delicious cakes and a gossip?'

'Sounds like fun!' said Marc.

'What I'd really like us all to do is work on two different projects. For the first part of the session, I'd like everyone to concentrate on a six-inch knitted square that can be practised on at home and brought to the next meeting. We can make use of the acrylic and man-made yarns Gingerberry used to stock. I hoped we could create a blanket from the samples we make, which could then be donated to the hospice in Cranbury in memory of Aunt Claire?'

She glanced across to Delia for her approval and saw a sparkle at the corners of her pale eyes as she nodded her agreement.

'I am grateful to the ladies from the WI who together knitted this gorgeous navy and cream Aran-style sweater for us to display in Gingerberry's window. Our new stock arrived this morning and I have to admit, it's gorgeous.'

Sophie passed around the sweater for the group to inspect, followed by balls of soft-spun angora and cashmere to appreciative oohs and ahhs.

'This yarn is gorgeous!' said Marc.

'I truly believe that if we are to spend our time in any artisan pursuit, then we should produce a garment worthy of our labour, in natural and not man-made yarns. Not only do we now stock cashmere, but also mohair, pure organic cotton in four-ply, a selection of bamboo yarns, which produces a lovely drape when knitted up, and organic lamb's wool sourced from a sheep farm in Devon.'

Sophie held up a photograph she had printed from the internet of a Nordic-patterned sweater. ‘These hand-knit sweaters are flying off the shelves at Selfridges and Liberty’s. And they sell for over six hundred and fifty pounds apiece.’

‘Six hundred and fifty pounds? That’s ridiculous!’ exclaimed Iris. ‘Who would pay that sort of money when you can knit one yourself?’

‘That’s just the point, Iris. People are either too busy to make their own garments or have never acquired the skills to knit, and believe me, these sweaters have been carefully designed by the fashion houses that produce them. Then, there are the one-off pieces of couture. In fact, this one I’m showing you here’ – Sophie held up a photograph from *LuxeLife* magazine of a blonde Scandinavian woman sporting navy-blue, calf-length flares and a hand-knit cropped sweater fashioned in white angora with crystal detailing around the yoke and the cuffs – ‘this one retails at twelve hundred pounds.’

‘That’s stunning!’ gasped Julia, one of Nessa’s friends from school.

‘Well, there’s no reason why you couldn’t have a go at that, Julia.’

‘Where do I start!’ she exclaimed, grabbing a pair of needles from the centre of the table, slotting them under her arms and making a clicking noise.

‘With the basics,’ Sophie laughed.

‘What is the second project you have in mind, Sophie?’ asked Nessa.

‘Well, as you all know, I own a small bridal boutique in London.’ Murmurs of acknowledgement looped around the room. Sophie saw the expressions of sympathy on a couple of the WI women’s faces and pressed on. ‘Aunt Claire has amassed a cornucopia of pretty embellishments over the years – seed pearls, tiny crystals, sequins, beads, ribbon, lace – in every colour imaginable. I thought we could use some of it to make bridal lingerie.’

Sophie bent down and extracted the bolt of ivory silk that Scarlet had FedExed up from Sophie-Louise that just happened to be the leftover fabric from the ill-fated Lilac Verbois wedding gown. Scarlet had also emailed her the lingerie sketches she had worked on at college and not had time to develop. Sophie handed round the designs she had photocopied.

‘Wow, these are beautiful, really beautiful. Oh, look at this garter, I love it. Shame they are only worn for weddings nowadays,’ declared one of the WI women. ‘And I adore this nightwear. What’s it called?’

‘That’s called a baby doll and that one’s called a teddy, Kath. I thought we could have a go at stitching a few samples and see if they’ll sell at Sophie-Louise. The salon only stocks silk in cream, ivory and white, but I could maybe source some fabric in peach, pink, even scarlet?’

‘Sounds wonderful,’ declared Kath and a ripple of excitement spread around the table.

‘Okay, let’s get started.’

They spent the next thirty minutes learning how to cast stitches onto a needle using the thumb method, as Delia insisted this technique produced a neater edge. Kath and her friends helped Nessa’s friends to keep the stitches on the needles to much hilarity and giggling. At the end of their first hour the WI women had finished two squares each and Nessa’s friends had managed five lines filled with holes, but new friendships had been forged.

For the second part of the class, they moved on to sewing and embroidery. Sophie rolled out the silk and Delia helped her to pin out the paper patterns for the lingerie onto the fabric before the group took it in turns to carefully cut out the pieces. They then selected spools of ribbon and lace from the shelves and draped each of them over the silk, admiring the effect and offering suggestions.

‘Okay, I think we should break for coffee now,’ Sophie called above the hum of contented chatter.

Yarn and needles were stowed away and the silk pieces placed gently in a leather trunk lined with Liberty print. The remaining paraphernalia was cleared from the table and replaced by the huge brown teapot and a cafetière, along with the silver platter that everyone had been drooling over since they arrived.

‘Hey, don’t you think our meetings should have a name?’ said Nessa as she poked her tongue around her crumb-laden lips. ‘I vote for “The Knitting Ninjas”! What do you think?’

‘Great idea!’ Delia laughed, ‘but we are sewing bees, too!’

‘What about “Cupcakes & Couture”?’ suggested Marcia to a chorus of approval.

The doorbell jingled, causing everyone to swing their scrutiny to the unexpected intrusion.

‘Hi, I hope we’re not too late to join in the fun? Oooh, what fabulous little cakes!’

‘Girls!’ Nessa shot up from her seat to greet the trio of teenagers from St Hilda’s, her auburn hair swinging in a ponytail, her school mistress’s hat firmly on. ‘You’ve totally missed the lesson. We’ve moved on to the coffee, treats, and gossip part of the evening!’

‘Eh? Thought it was an eight o’clock start, Miss?’

‘No, seven, and anyway it’s eight forty-five!’ Nessa assumed her best “patient teacher’s” voice as she rolled her eyes at Alicia, Polly and Megan, the gang who adored their crafting sessions at school.

‘Oh, well, Megan’s dad’s dropped us off and adjourned to the pub so we’ll just have to stay for the coffee, cakes and gossip bit then.’ Alicia looked anything but regretful.

After introductions, the girls dropped into chairs at the table, and proceeded to swoon over the melt-in-the-mouth delicacies, then finger the ivory silk and drool over the lingerie photos. They laughingly placed orders of their own for the teddies, suggesting leopard-print and tiger-print satin, and joined in with the gossip as though old friends.

As darkness crept up unnoticed and the amber glow of the streetlamps suffused the gathering with a golden sheen, Sophie sank down into the seat next to Delia and took a moment to survey the scene. The room had come alive that evening with the swirl of chatter and laughter that wrapped a cloak of comfort and serenity around the group. The shop shone with the promise of a bright future, and several friendships had been forged that would never otherwise have been contemplated. For the first time in months, Sophie experienced a boost to her flagging spirits and the anvil-heavy weight that had clutched at her chest began to crumble.

This night had been for her aunt and, as she head-counted the participants, she knew it had been a great success. She had made no money as she had donated the acrylic yarn for the hospice project and the ivory silk from Sophie-Louise. However, the silk would hopefully be turned into items she could sell under the Sophie-Louise brand and the money would be shared between the ladies who decided after this evening to take part in the new enterprise. Delia had in any event signed up every attendee – including Alicia, Polly and Megan – for the next session of Cupcakes & Couture.

‘Okay, okay, it’s time to wrap up, and before you go, I’d like to thank each and every one of you for showing your support this evening. Delia and I truly appreciate it.’

Sophie was shocked to find her throat had choked up. She struggled to swallow down her rising emotions and was relieved when Delia pressed her palm gently on her forearm and stood up to continue on her behalf.

‘Many of you here tonight knew Claire as more than the proprietor of Gingerberry Yarns. She was a loyal and supportive friend endowed with a warm, welcoming smile and a listening ear for all our highs and lows as we pass along life’s treacherous journey. I, and I’m sure you all, miss her dreadfully, but I hope that our little haberdashery shop can continue to move forward into the future. I know you’ve all enjoyed this evening and learnt something new. Cupcakes & Couture will return in a week’s time, and I hope everyone will

come back with renewed vigour for the world of Gingerberry. Thanks, everyone.'

Sophie swiped away a tear on the cuff of her black polo sweater and began to gather the discarded crockery as the class scraped back their chairs and prepared to leave with shouts of thanks and promises to finish their homework squares.

At last, the bell became silent.

'Delia, I... I...'

'It's okay, dear. I know Claire was with us this evening and was bursting with pride at what you've achieved. I know I am. Oh, here's Seb. I thought he'd promised to drop in.'

'Wow, look at this place. What a wonderful transformation. Gingerberry is definitely going to remain a thrumming hub of creativity and chatter. What, no cakes left?' Seb hugged Sophie to him. Before drawing away to greet Delia, he whispered in Sophie's ear, 'Hope you don't mind – I brought a friend with me.'

Still retaining her welcoming smile, Sophie brushed her now almost shoulder-length hair from her cheeks to behind her ears and focused her tear-reddened eyes on Seb's companion. Without warning her heart shot like a stone down a well into her stomach and bounced back up again, causing her knees to weaken under the sudden onslaught of emotion.

Noah!

Chapter Twenty One

‘Hi, Soph, can we talk?’ Noah asked.

Sophie nodded, snatched her jacket from the hook behind the bamboo screen, and followed Noah out of the shop, leaving Seb and Delia watching them like a pair of gobsmacked goldfish.

It was a mild night for early May. Shards of ivory moonlight glanced against the shop fronts and lit up their path as they sauntered down Somersby high street together, a soft breeze lifting Sophie’s overlong fringe from her eyelashes and tickling the leaves of the trees that framed the village green.

Neither spoke. Sophie was relieved because her throat was so tightly constricted that any reply would have come out as a squeak worthy of Tweetie Pie. Noah’s proximity had sent her heart into a frenzy of unfathomable emotions, and she had to use all her energy and focus to rein it in. They reached the churchyard and paused at the lychgate where the clematis wound its sinewy stems up the wooden posts to the slated roof and sent a waft of floral perfume into the air.

‘Remember when we used to frighten ourselves stupid playing hide-and-seek in the graveyard?’ said Noah.

‘I do.’

‘Remember when Seb dressed up as a ghost and you threw a rock at him? He’s still got that scar in the middle of his forehead.’

‘Served him right,’ Sophie smirked, chancing a glance from beneath her lashes at Noah before asking the question that had been on her mind for a while. ‘Have you been pruning the rose bush we planted for Mum and Dad?’

Noah nodded, staring through the darkness towards the plot where Sophie's parents were laid to rest.

'Thanks.'

'We loved them, too, Sophie. Seb, Dominic, me. It was the least I could do whilst you were... away.'

'I should have come back more often. I should have spent more time with Aunt Claire before she...'

Noah lifted Sophie up onto the moss-covered stone wall and jumped up next to her, studying his fingernails.

'I told her it was my fault. If she had to blame anyone then it had to be me.'

'It wasn't your fault, Noah. If anything, it was me who jumped to hasty conclusions. Always reacting before thinking, that's what Aunt Claire used to say. She was right. Why do things have to be so difficult?' she said softly, tears sliding down her cheeks.

'They don't have to be, Soph. You could come back home, run Gingerberry...'

'I can't. I love my life in London. I adore the buzz, the nightlife, the people, even the traffic! And I love my boutique. It's the culmination of all my dreams from as far back as I can remember, you know that, Noah. You were there. But now I'm back here... well, it feels like this is where my heart truly is.'

Sophie couldn't look at Noah but she knew he was staring at her. It felt like the last four years had slipped into oblivion; that they had simply been apart for the weekend and were now back together. They had so much shared history, so many mutual friends and experiences.

'A girl can't have everything, though.'

Noah nodded. 'Even when I'm on stage playing to thousands of fans, all screaming my name, asking for one more song, you know what I'm thinking? When can I jump on that plane and fly back home to Somersby? Mum and Dad despair of ever getting rid of me. They've even taken to leaving estate agents' sales particulars lying around the house

where I can find them. But do you know what? Every one of those glossy brochures is for houses within a ten-mile radius of home.

‘This is where my heart is, Soph, where it will always be. No matter how far I travel, or how successful the band becomes, I will always come back home. And I think you feel the same way. You’ve just been in denial these last four years.’

Sophie met Noah’s eyes at last and almost fell from her perch on the wall. Her breath quickened and longing flashed through her veins and spiralled out to her fingertips. This was her Noah, the man she had given her heart to when she was a teenager and who had refused to let her have it back. He was the first boy she’d kissed and, she realised with a smile, his picture was still sellotaped on that ridiculous wedding scrap box she and Nessa had made all those years ago. She still had it, hidden under her bed in London. She wondered if Nessa had kept hers and whether Seb’s picture was still pasted on the lid, or whether a new photo had taken its place.

‘Look...’ Noah jumped down from the wall and turned to look Sophie in the eyes. He reached into the inside pocket of his black denim jacket and produced a pair of tickets. ‘I’ve brought you these. They’re tickets for a gig The Razorclaws are doing in London. It’s the last one before Finn’s wedding reception over at Somersby Manor Hotel so it’s more of a rehearsal, really. Just a few members of the official fan club, and friends and family members of the band and our management team. Come, please. Bring a friend?’

Noah’s silver eyes held a question but she looked away.

‘We’re expecting about two hundred people. Tickets are like gold dust. I want you there this time, Sophie. I want to see your face in the audience. I need to hear your feedback on one of the songs I’ve written. It’s actually the forerunner of the song I’ve composed for Finn and Lilac’s wedding celebrations and it’ll be the first time it’s been performed in public, even though I wrote the lyrics years ago. I think you’ll like it.’

Noah pressed the tickets into her palm and curled his fingers around hers. She looked down at their entwined hands.

It felt so easy and natural to be this close to Noah. She knew every contour of his handsome face, every curve of his muscular, slender body. She had to fight the urge to run her fingers through his spiky sandy hair. Her nostrils prickled as a whiff of his familiar cologne rose up and sent her emotions zooming back to her past.

‘Did you ever wonder what would have happened if you hadn’t run out that night?’

‘I had to get away, Noah,’ she whispered. ‘The image of you with that girl draped across your lap, her arms wound round your neck like a lioness protecting her cub, has remained branded on my soul ever since.’

Noah looked like he was going to say something straight back but he refrained.

‘You’ve done so well. Sophie-Louise is a fabulous success. I’m proud of you, Soph. I’m sorry that this happened to us. If I could turn back the clock...’

‘I know.’

Noah’s mouth was inches away now, his eyes locked on hers.

‘Can’t we...’

He lowered his head, his breath warm on her cheek. Ripples of desire flooded her veins and heat surged through her body as his lips brushed hers and then touched at her ear lobe. She closed her eyes, allowing every one of her senses to sparkle with pleasure. His mouth moved back towards hers and their lips almost joined.

‘No, sorry, Noah, I can’t do this!’

Sophie leapt down from the wall, grazing her knuckles on the stone. What on earth was she doing? Nothing had changed. Noah was still the lead singer in one of the most famous bands of the moment and she had a boutique to run in London. Why was she even considering opening up old wounds that had taken so long to heal, if indeed they ever had? Hadn’t she been hurt enough? Did she really want to put herself through that agony for a second time?

She stepped away but held his eyes, pausing long enough to see the confusion and hurt reflected deep within. Then she ran, ran as if her life depended on it, tears flowing down her cheeks, her heart breaking in two all over again.

Chapter Twenty Two

Sophie sat at the mahogany table practising the new stitch that she would be demonstrating to the Cupcakes & Couture ladies at their next Tuesday night session in an hour's time. She had also laid out three sample garments of the baby doll and teddy lingerie that she'd put the finishing touches to the previous night for them to inspect.

Under normal circumstances, she would have been honoured that so many people were prepared to hear her ideas, but since her wedding gown design hadn't won the competition, she was upset to find that she struggled with creating new designs. It was the reason she'd asked Scarlet to email her old lingerie designs for the Cupcakes & Couture ladies to work on instead of sketching new ones.

For Sophie, who had been dressing her Barbies in her own wacky designs since the age of four, the withering of her passion for fashion had surprised her. A persistent lethargy had invaded her creative dexterity so that even putting pencil to sketch pad had been a tremendous effort which produced nothing of merit.

What was the point? Lilac Verbois's wedding dress had been one of the most inspirational creations of her career and yet it had been rejected; she had been banished from the salon, even if it *was* only temporarily; and now she found herself skulking in the Cotswolds, compelled to manage an unprofitable business until it could be sold – an act of extreme hostility towards the community that had taken her to their hearts.

Her head reminded her that grief was a personal journey, an unnavigable maze impossible to share with even the closest confidante. Until the barrage of sorrow abated, she knew she could not recover her equilibrium or her flair for design.

But there was a glimmer of light on the horizon.

The lingerie she had made was exquisite, and she was certain there would be a market for it in her boutique in Wimbledon, as well as hand-sewn garters, basques and silk bra and knicker sets. If she could inspire the Cupcakes & Couture ladies to turn their skills to embroidery and lacemaking, it could be the start of an exciting cottage industry. There was already an established outlet with a readily available clientele and whilst the cost of a hand-made piece of lingerie would have been baulked at by those who frequented Gingerberry Yarns, residents of the capital had deeper pockets. She could perhaps even run the businesses side-by-side, each feeding from and into the other.

But was it too little, too late?

Despite having restocked the shelves with modern yarn and updating the window display, the shop's income did not cover expenses. The fee for that evening's Cupcakes & Couture class barely covered the cost of a coffee and a selection from the tray of Parisian marvels Tom had dropped by earlier.

Tom's words of warning floated back to her. Should she have bolted whilst she'd had the chance to leave without a backward glance or a slice of guilt? Should she really be spinning a fantasy of false hope to these lovely people? Wouldn't it have been less painful for everyone if she'd just kept Gingerberry closed after her aunt's death and told everyone she was sorry, but her life was in London now and the continued operation of a tiny shop a hundred miles away was not a viable proposition?

Why was she doing this? Her aunt, bless her, would never know what her niece had done with her beloved shop. She'd never had the opportunity to note down her wishes. But who was she trying to kid? Her aunt would have wanted her to keep Gingerberry, probably just as it was.

Her ricocheting thoughts alighted on Delia whom it seemed was enjoying a new lease of life. With a jolt, Sophie realised that she, like her aunt before her, had grown to love Delia and her trendy haircut, her leopard-print-clad bosom, her

bejewelled spectacles swinging in rhythm to the sway of her ample hips as she teased the newbies' stitches into something presentable. This was why she was still here in Somersby; the community and their unerring support of her and of Gingerberry Yarns.

The bell jangled and Sophie raised her eyes to the door.

Nessa.

After chatting for a few minutes, Sophie realised that her friend had only arrived early to commence a one-woman crusade to reboot Sophie's love life, conveniently brushing aside her arguments that she wasn't interested as she was only back in Somersby temporarily.

'Look, Nessa, stop nagging, will you?'

'Sophie, I've spoken to Seb, and Archie confirms it, too. Noah is not involved in a relationship at the moment. You really need to get over that one mistake when he—'

'How do you know it was once, Nessa? Don't you think it's stretching coincidence that his one-time lapse in loyalty just so happened to be when I walked in that night and caught him?'

'Things are different in the music scene—'

'You don't have to lecture me on the quirks of the music industry. I dated Noah for years until... Well, I'm not in the slightest bit interested in what Noah chooses to do with his life. Stop matchmaking! Please! And anyway' – Sophie decided attack was the best form of defence where Nessa was concerned – 'people who inhabit glass houses! Who are you dating at the moment?'

Nessa flicked the sides of her hair behind her ears, a gleeful smile lingering on her apricot lips. 'Well, there's this professional at the golf club; firm abs, taut butt, great swing, sends delicious ripples of desire around my—'

'Okay, okay, sorry I asked.'

'Soph, I know I don't have to tell you this, but life is short, and there's a goody bag of guys out there with whom to share the journey. Come on, why not let Dom set you up with his

friend Fraser? He's single, and he lives in Paris. What better place for a fashion designer to call her base?'

'Nessa...' Sophie paused in her task of laying out the bamboo knitting needles and colourful yarn on the gargantuan table to fix Nessa with what she hoped was her most fearsome expression. 'I'm... not... interested! I've got enough to think about at the moment with sorting out Gingerberry and then getting it on the market.'

'So, you are still selling up, then?' asked Nessa softly.

Sophie sank her lanky frame into the scruffy second-hand leather sofa she had purchased after last week's success of Cupcakes & Couture and draped with a pink throw to match the shop's new décor. Her anguish over her prevarication about Gingerberry's future had risen slowly like a creeping, ceaseless tide, but a decision had to be made.

'I don't think I have any choice, Nessa. I can't split my time between two businesses so far apart. But I have to accept that I've been putting it off, arguing that it'll be more attractive to potential buyers if I just spruce up the paintwork, maybe improve and replenish the stock, revamp the window display, increase the income, run crafting sessions. But none of this will make any difference if the person who buys Gingerberry intends to turn it into a holiday let, will it? So I'm wasting my time and my money.'

Nessa opened her mouth to add her own soliloquy of criticism of the property developers who had taken over Somersby and many of the surrounding villages, but Sophie was saved from hearing it by the jingle of the front door bell and the next session of Cupcakes & Couture getting under way.

Ten minutes later the room was crammed with enthusiastic participants. The ranks were swelled by a married couple from the next village and two girls from Marcia's reading group. Every one of the dedicated crafters from the previous session had arrived armed with their completed square of knitting, revealing varying degrees of competence. As a comfortable swirl of cheerful banter wove around the shop, two of the

more experienced WI women proudly displayed an intricately knitted Fair Isle sweater that they had collaborated on to a great deal of murmured appreciation.

‘As good, if not better, than anything you can get in any of your fancy London stores, eh, Sophie?’

‘Absolutely gorgeous, Kath. I love the peaches and cream colour palette you’ve chosen. Could you hold it up whilst I take a picture of it to email to my friend Scarlet? Be prepared to get your first order!’

After she had sent the photo to Scarlet, Sophie took a moment to surreptitiously survey the diverse but happy gathering.

First Nessa, arched over the glass counter with her friend Julia as they spread out and pinned the woolly squares, ready to sew together for the hospice blanket project. Then there were the students from St Hilda’s, Alicia, Polly, and Megan, giggling as they ducked under the table to retrieve their burnt-orange yarn like the naughty schoolgirls they were.

But it was in contemplation of Marcia that Sophie stalled. Whilst her tawny hair remained long and unstyled, she had ditched her mother’s reading glasses and her face glowed as she patiently guided Marc’s hand through each stitch until, with a whoop of delight, he completed a row of moss stitch. A smile turned the corners of her lips as she exchanged a silent glance with Iris. When the class broke for their coffee and patisserie treats, Sophie continued her study of the shy young girl and realised the change was not merely physical. Sophie had never seen Marcia so content.

‘Those girls from St Hilda’s are a hoot, aren’t they?’ Delia said as she curled her fingers around a mug of coffee. ‘I’m delighted to see that youngsters are rediscovering the crafting bug. Polly said three more of their friends will be along next time. At this rate, as long as you stop giving away these delicious pastries and coffee and start charging proper prices for them, we might just manage to turn this place around.’

‘Oh, I hope so!’ Marcia interjected. ‘It’s shocking what’s happening to the high street, just shocking. Mum didn’t want

me to say anything before the meeting, Sophie, but this morning we received notification from the council about another application for planning permission, this one for the petrol station on the corner of our street. You know, Hargreaves & Sons that closed down eighteen months ago? Well, no prizes for what's being proposed – a block of eight executive apartments.

‘All the houses round there are Victorian, stone-built terraces and semis, and they want to throw up a four-storey, brick-built monstrosity! Well, if it has anything to do with me, it will *not* happen.’ Marcia emphasised the last four words, her cheeks burning as she lowered her lashes. She twiddled with the hand-knit scarf around her neck before continuing more calmly. ‘I’ve drafted a written objection to the council setting out the reasons for our objection, but with all the businesses closing it creates a circle of collapse. The properties are renovated into housing that only city dwellers can afford as weekend retreats which perpetuates the problem of dwindling resident numbers and lack of daily trade.’

‘You are absolutely right, Marcia,’ Sophie nodded; then, wrestling with her conscience, she decided to add her own submission of persuasion to the conversation. ‘Marcia, I hope you don’t mind but I read one of your short stories the other night. It was excellent, absorbing, I adored Lance, fell in love with him actually, and I loved the twist at the end. Could I just make a suggestion?’

Marcia raised her chin and met Sophie’s eyes. She nodded, awaiting her pronouncement without a smidgeon of nerves. And why should she be nervous? After all, she was a published author with a national magazine.

‘Have you ever thought of extending the story into a full-length novel? I can see you are an accomplished writer of short stories for the women’s magazine market, but I firmly believe that if you submitted your work to a book publisher, they would snap you up in a millisecond. Why don’t you give it a try? What have you got to lose? You already have an army of fans, me included!’

‘Thanks, Sophie. I’ll think about it.’

Before anyone else could comment, the doorbell rang and all eyes swung to check out the new arrival.

‘Oh, hi, Tom, come on in.’ Sophie swooped across to the coffee machine, anxious to thank him for the tray of baked goodies and offer payment. ‘Cappuccino?’

‘Thanks, Sophie. I just popped by for the tray. It’s from my window display and I need it for tomorrow morning. You can keep the cupcake pyramid until later in the week, though.’ His green eyes spotted Marcia and swiftly averted their gaze to fix on Sophie as a crimson blush seeped across his unshaven cheeks. ‘Erm, how was your evening? What’s your team of knitters and sewers called again?’

‘Cupcakes & Couture!’ Sophie laughed. ‘So I actually have you to thank for half of it. We’ve had five new students join the ranks tonight, although I suspect it was your culinary delights that brought them here rather than my knitting and dressmaking skills.’

Sophie smiled at Tom but he was studying his feet so she glanced across to Marcia. She realised immediately what was happening and why Marcia had seemed to exude an uncharacteristic glow that evening. As it looked like no one else intended to aid the path of conversation, Sophie ploughed on.

‘Any news from St Hilda’s about the after-school-club cookery lessons, Tom?’

‘Not yet, but Marcia did an awesome job writing down the recipes and the instructions as well as designing the lesson plans. I’m just not convinced my skills are what the school is looking for and, anyway, every bit of my time is already taken up with running the shop, visiting Dad, doing the books...’

‘Tom, you’re exactly what the school needs,’ said Nessa. ‘I’ll have a word with the head tomorrow and get back to you. She’s been deluged with paperwork for the forthcoming OFSTED inspection.’

‘Thanks, Nessa,’ said Marcia, flashing a triumphant smile in the direction of Tom.

‘Come on now, everyone, we need to get back to work,’ urged Sophie. She unfolded a sheet of acid-free tissue paper to display her lingerie samples. ‘I’ve finished the silk teddies I showed you photos of last week. What do you think?’

Ooohs and aaahs rippled through the room as the class stroked the silk and marvelled at the workmanship.

‘These are just beautiful, Sophie. Is this the sort of thing you have in mind for your shop in London?’ asked one of the WI women.

‘Yes, as well as a selection of hand-sewn silk garters, bustiers, and basques, and embroidered bra and knicker sets. Every penny that is made will be filtered back to those members of Cupcakes & Couture that wish to contribute.’

‘I’m in.’

‘Me, too.’

‘You can count on me, too.’

‘And I’m going to be your first customer, Sophie. I have to have that teddy, it’s just gorgeous,’ said Julia. ‘And can I order one in bronze for my sister?’

‘Sure,’ Sophie smiled.

A wave of appreciation washed over her. Perhaps her love of all things fashion hadn’t deserted her after all. She flopped down onto the couch and tilted her head against its back, twisting to her left as a sudden movement at the shop window caught her eye.

What the...

Chapter Twenty Three

'Is this it?' asked Lilac. 'The Cotswolds branch of Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture?'

Nikki and Tish stood on each side of Lilac as they peered into Gingerberry Yarns. The plate-glass window had steamed up and trickles of condensation ran in parallel lines from top to bottom, collecting in tiny pools on the windowsill.

'I'm not sure what I'm seeing exactly, but it looks like a bunch of old ladies sitting around a table, knitting. What do you see, Nikki?'

Nikki groaned inwardly. For the first time, she found herself cursing her ever-present need for efficiency. She'd anticipated the meeting with the bishop would take a lot longer than it actually had – it seemed he had an even more punishing schedule than a BAFTA-winning actress. When they'd emerged from the cathedral, she'd called their limousine service and they'd dashed across to Somersby. She'd thought that Sophie could probably utilise the extra time with Lilac after she'd made the announcement. She checked her watch. Eight-thirty. Clearly Sophie was busy doing something else.

'Do you think those ladies are her assistants?' asked Tish, her mouth gaping as she watched a lady in a wheelchair roll over to the table by the door and help herself to a selection of cupcakes from a giant pyramid to take back to the gathering.

'Maybe,' replied Nikki, her hand over her eyes as she strained to understand what was going on inside. 'I think some of them are sewing.'

'It looks like lingerie,' murmured Lilac.

'Oh, God!' spluttered Tish.

'What?'

'No, nothing,'

'What?' Lilac tucked her wavy bob, the colour of liquid caramel, behind her ears and placed her hands on her hips. 'You've forgotten to order my lingerie, haven't you, Tish?'

'Yes.' Tish scrunched up her shoulders and creases appeared across her brow as she waited for the blow to fall. *'Sorry.'*

'Doesn't matter; I'll sort it. Now, are we going to risk being labelled a trio of sad voyeurs or are we going inside?'

'I think we should go back to the car and wait until this, erm, this meeting has finished,' suggested Nikki striding back towards the sleek limo with blacked-out windows and the most handsome driver she'd set eyes on. *It was probably the uniform that did it, though... it was one of her weaknesses that she was working hard on eradicating. Or maybe it was the spicy cologne, or his broad muscular shoulders, or his...*

'Oh, good grief, let me through.' Lilac pushed past Tish and Nikki and opened the door. The bell tinkled above her head. *'Quaint!'*

The chatter ceased and all heads swung in unison to look at the elegant, six-foot-tall movie star who had stumbled into their world from another planet.

'Oh, this is completely adorable.' Lilac stepped into Gingerberry Yarns and was immediately enveloped by a sense of calm and comfort. *'You must be Sophie-Louise? I love your shop! Are you having a party? Oh wow, these cakes! Do you import your pastries from Paris?'*

Sophie rose from her place at the gigantic mahogany table and took a couple of steps forward. *'Yes, I'm Sophie-Louise. What can I... What are you... Why?'*

She watched as the extremely glamorous woman drew herself to her full height, straightened her shoulders, and cleared her throat. Then, in a rich melodic voice she said, *'I'm Lilac Verbois, and I'm here to announce that Sophie-Louise*

Bridal Couture has won the Lilac Verbois Wedding Gown Competition! Congratulations!

There was a moment's silence. Sophie gasped, and her hand flew to her mouth in disbelief, but Nessa was quicker off the mark. 'Oh, my God! That's awesome!' she shrieked, and the room exploded into noisy chatter, only now it was a full octave higher than before the announcement.

Nessa and Delia gathered a stunned, silent Sophie into their arms and kissed her. 'Well done, Sophie!'

It took half an hour for the ladies to calm down and have a variety of items autographed, by which time their Cupcakes & Couture session had ended and they had to start packing away.

'So, Cupcakes & Couture,' mused Lilac, who had been given the Throne of Honour at the head of the table where she was being shown the various finished products of the group's toil. 'I love this bridal lingerie. I think you might have just saved someone's skin, ladies.' Lilac smirked as she shot a look across at Tish who was loitering next to the cake table, her hand held under her chin to catch the crumbs from the fifth pistachio macaron she'd indulged in. 'Are they silk?'

'Yes, it's organic silk. I source it for the salon in London from a small women's collective in India. Everything has been hand-sewn and embellished by the Cupcakes & Couture ladies.'

'I particularly like this ivory teddy. I'd like to order seven, please, in different shades, one for each night of our honeymoon. And could you design me a bridal basque in this fabric please, and matching knickers?'

'Erm, yes, of course.'

'Don't tell me you make these delectable little cakes yourself as well, Sophie?' Lilac bit into a cupcake topped with the palest pink icing and sprinkled with edible glitter. 'Absolutely heavenly. How are the macarons, Tish?' Lilac giggled at the look on her wedding planner's face when she realised she'd been caught in the act.

‘Delicious,’ Tish mumbled through a mouthful of buttercream, ‘and these peppermint millefeuille are to die for, if a little difficult to eat.’

‘Oh, no, Miss Verbois. These are supplied exclusively for our Cupcakes & Couture evenings by internationally trained pastry chef, Tom Wallington,’ announced Marcia. It was the first time she’d spoken since Lilac and her entourage had arrived, but the pride in her eyes on Tom’s behalf caused Sophie’s heart to flutter.

‘Wow, you do have some fabulously talented people in this village, don’t you? I have my five-tier wedding cake ordered already.’ Lilac raised her eyebrows at Tish, just to check, but she was teasing her. ‘Do you think it would be possible for your supplier to prepare, say, twenty-five of these cupcake pyramids? The children that we’ve invited to the wedding will adore them – it’s a much better option than stodgy fruit cake. Oh, I’m so excited!’

Lilac kicked off her shoes and sat back in her chair, casting her eyes around the women. ‘You know, I really do miss all this female camaraderie. Getting together with a group of friends to spend the evening gossiping, swapping secrets, asking for advice. You’re lucky, Sophie. Now I understand why you have a branch of Sophie-Louise in the Cotswolds. It’s your home; these are your friends who are willing to support you through life’s ups and downs. I was born in the Cotswolds, too, but sadly I don’t have a bunch of friends to come home to.’

Sophie smiled at Lilac, but tears prickled at her eyes.

Why had it taken such a devastating loss for her to realise how fortunate she was that she still had roots in her home town? That there were friends here who loved her no matter how long she’d been away? Nessa, Seb, Dominic, Archie – even Noah, if she let him. It was time she started to appreciate her good fortune and gave something of herself back. However, she shoved her guilt at her recent behaviour into the far crevices of her mind for later dissection. Tonight was an evening of celebration, and it was the best night she’d had for years.

She made a decision.

As she would now have to return to London to start working on Lilac's wedding gown, she would accept Noah's invitation to attend The Razorclaws' rehearsal concert and take Nessa as a thank you for being her best friend.

Chapter Twenty Four

Sophie stood on the driveway in front of Somersby Manor Hotel and Spa, taking in its elegant beauty and the magnificent sweep of its pristine lawns edged with flowerbeds bursting with a riot of colour. As a long-time resident of Somersby, she was aware of its presence on the outskirts of the village, but as it only opened its doors to the public from May to September – and it was extremely expensive to eat, stay or indulge in a beauty treatment there – she had never been fortunate to do anything other than stare at it from her car window as she drove to and from Cranbury.

‘Wow, look at this place. It’s magnificent! I really can’t decide whether to faint at the architectural splendour of it all or drool with envy. Like everything else about this wedding, it’s *the* perfect venue for an actress and rock star to hold their fairy-tale summer wedding, don’t you think?’ Scarlet clutched her chest and performed a theatrical swoon.

‘Stop it.’ Sophie giggled. ‘You’re reminding me of Tish.’

‘In that case, our very own twenty-first-century Cinderella would have ordered the Georgian sandstone façade to be bedecked with a cornucopia of pink ribbon and lily of the valley wreaths, and the coats of the prancing ponies welcoming us out front would have to be dyed to match the bridesmaids’ dresses.’

‘Oooh, that sounds *so* romantic, Scarlet,’ sighed Flora before she executed a wide yawn in Sophie’s face.

Sophie rolled her eyes at her assistant. Flora had complained the whole journey from Paddington station to Cheltenham about missing out on her requisite nine hours of sleep, and how early mornings played havoc with her delicate body clock. Sadly, her psychic had not seen fit, or indeed been

seen at all, to warn Flora of the unexpected last-minute dash up to the Cotswolds.

The previous day, she had received a call from Nikki to inform her that Lilac and Finn were visiting with the chef at Somersby Manor the following afternoon for a tasting session of the menu they'd chosen for their wedding breakfast, and if Sophie could get up there in the morning, Lilac could squeeze her in for an extra dress fitting. It was an opportunity Sophie couldn't afford to refuse and it also meant she could call in and see how Delia was getting on at Gingerberry Yarns.

Since Lilac's announcement that she'd won the wedding gown competition, Sophie had been bouncing between Somersby and London, trying to keep all the plates in her life spinning in unison. But mostly she'd been spending her time holed up in her workshop with Scarlet by her side as they made numerous tweaks to the dress in accordance with Lilac's wishes. It was shaping up to be the most complicated design brief she had ever had, but she was definitely up to the challenge.

There was a real buzz about the salon which they'd struggled to keep under wraps for fear of giving the secret away and finding the paparazzi camped out on their doorstep. Unsurprisingly, Flora was the weakest link. She really was the worst secret keeper ever. Apart from that morning when she'd been deprived of her beauty sleep, she tended to spend her days smiling and humming to herself. One of their newest bridal clients had even asked if she had won the lottery or scored a coveted Taylor Swift ticket.

'Come on, we don't want to be late.'

Feeling a little nervous, Sophie led them across the lawn and up a flight of worn stone steps to the impressive oak front door and, after a brief pause to gather her breath, she stepped into the entrance hall that also served as the hotel's foyer.

She took a moment to survey the polished parquet flooring, the ornate cornices and ceiling rose, and the handsome Chesterfield sofas that bracketed the enormous fireplace and couldn't prevent her jaw from dropping at the splendour. She

almost swooned when she saw the sweep of the mahogany staircase, until her dream of sliding down the banister was rudely interrupted by the appearance of a thirty-something man who was jogging down the stairs to greet her.

‘Hi, you must be Sophie-Louise Henshaw?’

‘Yes, yes, I am, and this is Scarlet Webb and Flora Bainbridge.’

‘Great. Okay, if you follow me, I’ll show you up to Lilac’s suite. Tish and Nikki are already there. There’s been a bit of a hitch, I’m afraid, but I’m going to let them tell you about it. Oh, I’m Craig Carver, by the way – Lilac and Finn’s wedding photographer and videographer. Come this way.’

Craig smiled at them, displaying perfectly even teeth, and his gentle chestnut eyes crinkled attractively at the corners. With his stocky build and broad shoulders Sophie suspected that in his spare time he played prop forward for the local rugby team. As they followed Craig back up the staircase, Sophie’s theory that he was probably more comfortable on a sports pitch than in a stately home, herding recalcitrant wedding guests into group photos was confirmed. His physique was impressive, and the fact that his muscular legs took the stairs two at a time only served to enhance the tautness of his buttocks.

‘Do you think we’d be allowed to slide down the banister after we’ve seen Lilac?’ asked Flora, running her hand along the smooth mahogany wood.

‘I hope so,’ giggled Sophie.

A few moments later, Craig stopped outside a pair of double doors. ‘Here we are. Erm... before you go in there, I feel I should warn you – Nikki Coates is not a happy PA bunny. If you see her with anything in her hand, you might want to duck. Maybe I’ll see you for a drink in the bar before you leave?’ Craig suggested, his eyes lingering on Flora. ‘Good luck!’

He cracked open the right-hand door and fled.

Sophie exchanged a glance with Scarlet who simply shrugged her shoulders. Not knowing what else she could do, she pushed the door wider and took a tentative step inside the suite, with Scarlet and Flora close behind.

‘Hello?’ said Sophie, the word dying on her lips. ‘Oh, where’s Lilac?’

‘Upstairs puking in the en suite bathroom,’ snarled Nikki.

‘Oh, erm, poor Lilac. That’s awful.’

‘Yes, yes, it is. But it’s her own fault.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I told her we should have stuck with the manor’s own chef – he’s a TV celebrity, for god’s sake, even has his own cookery book published – but oh, no, Lilac knows best, and she demanded we booked someone she calls her “favourite chef” and his very extensive entourage. We made it absolutely clear when we engaged him that Lilac had an intolerance to shellfish. It was even included as a term in the contract. And what did the moron offer on the tasting menu?’

‘I don’t—’

‘Mini Thai fishcakes! She’d popped one in her mouth before we realised, and now she’s throwing up for England. But that’s not the worst of it – you should see her lips; “bee-sting swollen” doesn’t even cover it! Looks like she’s indulged in a course of extreme Botox, and you know what Lilac’s position is on chemical enhancements.’

‘Oh, that’s awful,’ Scarlet muttered.

‘Finn’s with her and he’s absolutely fuming. And she’s had to cancel her flight across to Croatia tonight, which has set the filming schedule back. Needless to say, the producer’s having a hissy fit, screaming about budget, timescales, the changing light, you name it. And, of course, the chef’s stormed off screaming and swearing that no one told him about any dietary issues, so Tish has another item on her already infinite to-do list – finding a replacement chef who can coordinate the catering for one hundred and fifty discerning guests from the

movie and music business in just two weeks. Talk about Mission Impossible!’

Sophie cast a glance over to the full-height windows overlooking the gardens where Tish stood with her phone clutched to her ear, her voice wobbling as she pleaded with the person on the other end to help her. The poor girl looked exhausted and had certainly lost weight since the last time Sophie had seen her. She wondered if this wedding would be the one to finally cure Tish of her hearts-and-flowers obsession.

‘You should have been here when the chef left. It’s been a long time since I heard such a tirade of vibrant language during the working day. The air almost thrummed with verbal electricity, I tell you. Gordon Ramsay, eat your heart out! But Tish stood her ground marvellously. It was a masterclass on how-to-keep-your-temper-when-all-around-you-are-crumbling. She was amazing. To be honest, I didn’t think she had it in her.’

‘What about the hotel’s chef? Can’t he step in?’

‘Unfortunately not.’ Nikki sighed. ‘He’s flown over to the States with his wife for her birthday. Apparently they’re visiting her family over there, then heading to New York to see old friends, before taking a vacation in Hawaii as a belated honeymoon.’

‘I see, so—’

‘I’m sorry to interrupt, are you Sophie-Louise?’

Sophie turned to the door of the suite where the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes on had appeared, scratching at his short, trendy beard. His eyes were so startlingly blue they seemed to draw her towards him and she couldn’t help staring, her jaw gaping unattractively.

‘Yes, that’s me,’ she stuttered.

‘Hi, I’m Finn, it’s good to meet you at last. Lilac’s asked me to come down and fetch you. She’s still tinged with an attractive hue of green, I’m afraid, but she says she’s feeling well enough to stand up in her wedding gown. She wants

everything to be just perfect. If you ask me, though, I still say we should've grabbed that jet out to Barbados. I know her mother would have killed her, but now it seems her "favourite chef" has got there first.'

'No problem.'

Sophie scrambled from her chair and dispatched Scarlet to fetch the dress, then followed Finn up to the bedroom suite with Flora scampering in her wake. It was the swiftest and quietest wedding dress fitting Sophie had ever performed, but she was grateful to Lilac for making the effort. She did not look very well at all as she took occasional sips from a glass of tepid water and forced a weak smile onto her swollen lips. They left her to rest as soon as the fitting was done.

'Let's hit the bar,' Scarlet suggested.

'God, yes, please,' said Flora, skipping ahead of them down the corridor, clearly keen to reacquaint herself with the hunky photographer. She wrenched open a pair of double doors to the right of the foyer with a flourish. 'Oops, not in here. Looks like a ballroom.'

The girls peered inside the room. Two men clad in black jeans and Black Sabbath tee-shirts were busy unravelling coils of cable as they worked on setting up what looked like a stage for a disco that evening. A third man was fiddling with the dry-ice machine, sending bulbous clouds of white vapour floating out onto the polished dance floor.

Eventually they found the bar.

Tish gave them a distracted wave of acknowledgement as she hunched over a corner table, her phone still glued to her ear. A huge glass of white wine – more a goldfish bowl, really – rested on a pile of box files in front of her. Nikki was sitting at the bar, laughing at something the wedding photographer was saying. He looked so incongruous sitting amongst the antiques and the Chippendale chairs in his khaki flak jacket, the pockets hopefully filled with a variety of camera lenses rather than grenades.

‘Can I get you ladies a drink?’ Craig offered, standing up to greet them.

‘Oh, yes, please,’ Flora breathed, concentrating her attention on the optics behind the bar before turning to the barman. ‘I’d like a Mai Tai, please. Do you have any of those cute little umbrellas?’

The sides of Craig’s lips twitched, but he said nothing. He raised his eyebrows at Sophie and Scarlet.

‘White wine would be great. We’ll share a bottle of Pinot Grigio.’

‘Coming right up.’

‘I’ll be back in a minute,’ said Sophie, giving Scarlet’s arm a squeeze.

She made her way across the room to where Tish had just finished her telephone conversation and was running her fingers distractedly through her curls as she scribbled notes on a jotter in front of her.

‘Oh, hi, Sophie. I don’t suppose you have a best friend who is a Michelin-starred chef who has nothing else to do with his time but drop everything to cater for a hundred and fifty celebrity guests, do you? No, I thought not. Ignore me.’

‘Actually, Tish, that’s what I wanted to tell you. Whilst I don’t think he has a Michelin star, I do have a friend who has trained in the kitchens of a five-star Parisian hotel. Would you like me to introduce you?’

‘Oh, my God! Yes! Give me his number and save a girl’s life – or her sanity at least!’

‘Here. His name is Tom Wallington and he’s already supplying the wedding with the most magnificent cupcake tins for the younger guests. Just tell him you got his number from me.’

‘Thank you, Sophie, thank you.’

Tish was already keying in his number and Sophie left her to it. She settled down in a seat at an elegant glass table overlooking the gardens with Scarlet, Flora, Nikki and Craig

and, as the wine flowed, she finally allowed herself to relax until an ear-splitting electronic screech sliced through the air, causing goosebumps to ripple across her arms.

‘Oh, God, what was that awful noise?’

Chapter Twenty Five

‘Don’t worry. They’re only testing the sound system in the ballroom. The crew have been there all day.’ Craig explained, reaching out to top up Sophie and Scarlet’s wine glasses before turning his full attention towards Flora. ‘So, has this whole food-poisoning fiasco with Lilac put you off weddings for good?’

‘Only weddings like this one. If it was me getting married, it would be a tiny church in the country with a handful of special friends, or maybe we’d elope to somewhere far-flung and hot, hot, hot!’

‘At last, a girl after my own heart.’

‘What do you mean?’ Sophie smiled. ‘You’re a wedding photographer, for heaven’s sake! Surely, you must adore all this romance stuff. Capturing that perfect, dreamy “look of love” between the bride and groom with your camera lens for all eternity.’

‘You’d think so, but no. Actually, I’d much rather be out on an assignment in Syria or Iraq, recording the facts as they happen, and informing the world about the desperate scenes of terror that are unfolding out there. I was a war photographer before... well, before I got injured in the line of duty, so to speak.’

‘Wow, like a soldier?’ Flora’s eyes widened.

Craig laughed. ‘No, those guys are the real heroes. I’m nowhere near as brave as they are. But I have seen my fair share of action. Anyway, enough about me.’ Craig paused to take a sip of his drink, then smiled at Flora. ‘You must have a fantastic life being a bridal fashion designer in the bright lights of London?’

As Sophie sipped at her wine, she had the strangest feeling she was intruding. Something about the way Craig's eyes held Flora's for a second longer than necessary, the way his body language screamed attraction. She wasn't sure whether Flora herself had realised it yet, but he was certainly besotted, so she decided to grant them some alone time.

'Scarlet, Nikki, come on. Let's check everything we brought with us has found its way safely back into the hire car.'

'Soph, I haven't finished my...' Scarlet began. 'Oh, yes, right, okay.'

Sophie headed out of the bar with Scarlet and Nikki following in her wake, but Flora and Craig barely noticed. As she reached the door, she heard Craig say, 'As Lilac is incapacitated, would you mind helping me out by posing as a stand-in for a few shots in the gardens out front? I need to check the variety of backdrops that are available. I could give you a tour of the house and grounds afterwards, if you like. The gardens are beautiful, designed by Capability Brown...'

'I'm starving. Do you think they do afternoon tea here?' asked Scarlet.

'I'm sure they do,' said Nikki. 'Sophie?'

'I'm not hungry. You two go ahead. I'll go check the car and be with you shortly.'

Sophie jogged out of the manor and into the carpark where she paused to take in the view from a different perspective. Over to her right, a large ornamental pond glimmered like a piece of tin foil reflecting the clear blue sky above, and to her left was the Italianate-style gardens she'd heard Delia talk so effusively about after a trip to the hotel's spa for a birthday treat. In the distance, she could just about pick out the rooftops of the cottages on the outskirts of Somersby, some tiled, some thatched, but a canopy of trees concealed the buildings that gathered around the village green.

She exhaled a sigh. It really was a stunningly romantic setting for an English country wedding, and for the first time

in years, her surroundings made her wish she had someone to share this day with. Someone she could link arms with and saunter around the estate, exclaiming at the blossoming flowers, marvelling at the works of art dotted around the gardens, and pointing out the various landmarks. Preferably Mr Darcy, if he was available – well, there was a pond, and maybe he could...

She shook herself from her reverie and returned to the manor to seek out the bathroom. All that wine had clearly gone to her head, and she could do with splashing her face with cold water and retouching her make-up. She'd not had any spare time lately for personal grooming. Her hair had grown longer than she'd worn it since she was fifteen years old, and she'd simply taken to wearing it pinned up. And Scarlet, the undisputed queen of waxing, would have palpitations if she could have seen the state of her legs.

She was surprised that there was still no one on duty behind the reception desk, so she mounted the stairs, smiling to herself as she envisioned Flora whizzing down the sweeping banister, her hair flying behind her as she whooped for joy. When she reached the top, she paused at the vast window overlooking the pristine gardens to once again drink in the view out over the gently undulating fields of the Cotswolds, and her heart ballooned.

How could she have stayed away from her spiritual home for so long?

How could she have been content to live amongst the urban sprawl and toxic smog of pollution in London?

Her gaze snagged on Flora and Craig in the gardens below the window. She couldn't help smiling when she saw that Flora was standing on a stone bench, giggling as she twirled left then right in a variety of increasingly comedic poses whilst Craig scampered around in front of her shouting directions and clicking his camera. A few minutes later, he reached up to help her down and pointed towards the driveway, lined on both sides with black wrought-iron lampposts, and they continued their perambulation along its length, with Craig pausing every so often to take Flora's photograph.

It was the first time in months she'd seen Flora relaxed and having fun. The smile on the young girl's face as she swung around one of the lampposts, her hair flying high in the air, was a joy to witness. A rush of pleasure surged through Sophie's veins. She hoped that when this circus of a wedding was over, she could resume her easy-going friendship with her ditzy trainee who professed to be vegetarian but whom she'd seen devouring a chicken tikka salad on more than one occasion, not to mention the illicit bacon sandwiches dripping with brown sauce.

As she turned away from the window, she tried to think back to the last time she'd had fun. A wave of melancholy swept over her, but she shoved it from her mind with a grimace of irritation. She had no time to indulge in such self-focused introspection today. After searching the corridor for anything that looked vaguely like it could be a bathroom and finding nothing, she headed back down the stairs. In desperation, she pushed open the first door she came to and immediately found herself enveloped in a cloud of swirling fog.

What was going on?

To her horror, the door swung shut behind her and clicked. She peered to her left and then her right, trying to see through the murkiness.

'Hello?'

'Sorry,' called out a voice. 'The ice machine has gone haywire. Just give us a couple of minutes, darling. We've opened the windows and it should clear shortly.'

She recognised the room now. It was the ballroom where the tech guys had been setting up a sound stage. She was reaching for the brass doorknob when her eye caught on a figure emerging from the smoke like a ghostly apparition alighting from a steam train; six-foot-two, slender, his hair tufted into familiar spikes, a grin stretching his cheeks, those dimples evidencing the delight he experienced at seeing her.

'Sophie! I thought it was you I saw on the steps earlier. What are you doing here?'

‘I could ask you the same question.’

Her heart hammered a concerto of pleasure against her ribcage and her mouth had suddenly become dry.

‘We’ve been given permission to set up the stage and do a sound-check. Finn’s here with Lilac so I thought I’d drop in and we could have a beer and a catch up before I hotfoot it over to my gig in Bristol tonight. He’s not had time to sort out a stag night, so it’ll be the last opportunity we have before the wedding.’

Noah was standing so close to her she could feel his breath on her cheek. He hadn’t touched her – no welcoming peck on the cheek, no grabbing her hand to guide her from the room. He simply stood in front of her, his steel-grey eyes fixed on hers, his lips parted slightly, waiting.

Sophie’s thoughts ricocheted around her brain. She had no idea what to do, but she knew Noah was waiting for her to make the first move. She could smile and make small talk about Lilac’s predicament. She could ask about his family, his band, the concert in London next week; tell him she’d invited Nessa and they were both excited.

But if she was completely honest with herself, in that precise moment, she had no interest in his answers. Throughout her life, her head had always ruled her heart. Was now the time to experiment with allowing her heart a chance to star in the decision-making show instead? Would that lead to a happier existence? How would she know until she tried it?

Before she had time to talk herself out of it, she inhaled a deep breath, clenched her fists, and took a tiny step forward. She sought his lips with hers and when they met, she experienced a crash of such pure happiness her knees weakened. She grabbed Noah’s forearms and leaned into his chest, desperate to prolong their kiss as sparks of desire shot out to her extremities and sent tingles to her fingertips. Their bodies still melded together perfectly, their embrace as familiar as ever, and she felt as though the last four years had evaporated with the dry ice and they were still together, still in love, still a couple.

Sophie and Noah. Noah and Sophie.

She broke away for a second to scour his face, picking out the blemishes, the freckles, the tiny scar on his left temple, to reassure herself that this was still her Noah. She was surprised but relieved to see that nothing had changed. A feeling of total security enveloped her, as if all her troubles had been snuffed out simply by Noah's presence; that the safety net which had been whipped from under her by her aunt's death had been rolled back out by Noah.

'Noah, we're late. We need to get... Oh, sorry, I thought...'

'Sophie, we have to talk before we...'

'I know.'

'I have to go. I've got my gig in Bristol. Can I call you? Or were you thinking of coming to the concert in London next week?'

Sophie nodded. She didn't trust herself to speak. It took all her willpower, such as it was, to keep the lid on her emotions and not crumble into an embarrassing heap of tears in front of Noah and his crew, who stood in a line only six feet away, staring expectantly at him.

'Then perhaps I can take you out to dinner afterwards?'

'Great.'

Sophie watched Noah turn, slap one of the tech guys on his back, and stride from the ballroom. Was her heart, which had been an enemy for so long as far as Noah was concerned, now her friend? If the warm feelings swirling around her chest were any kind of barometer, then it was.

But there was one thing she knew now with absolute certainty. She still loved Noah. Always had. He was the first person she'd kissed all those years ago and, no matter what had happened in between, she still wanted him to be the last.

Chapter Twenty Six

‘Are you sure you don’t need me to model one of these for you again, Sophie?’

Tish ran her fingertips over the delicate embroidery of a pale lilac bustier that hung on a rail in Sophie’s workshop alongside a selection of bridal lingerie that had just been delivered to the Sophie-Louise store in Wimbledon from its Somersby branch.

Sophie couldn’t help grinning. Every piece was perfect. The women of the Cupcakes & Couture sewing group had proved to be true maestros with a needle and thread, and they had followed her intricate designs to the letter. The resulting garments were beautiful, and she was not surprised Tish couldn’t resist the urge to touch them. She hoped others would feel the same way, too, as she had surrendered to Scarlet and Flora’s nagging and agreed to deliver a selection of the corsets, bodysuits, and bralettes to one of the luxury lingerie boutiques in Knightsbridge. If they liked them, then the future of Gingerberry would be secure.

Did this mean she intended to keep it?

She glanced across at Tish. Despite the dark smudges under her cobalt eyes, she still possessed an inexhaustible vigour for the wedding arrangements which had now moved on to the “final frenzy” stage. Panic had set in, and she had taken to zooming around the streets of London on a second-hand moped, checking that every order was on schedule, every detail had been adhered to, right down to the individual sugarcraft flowers on the wedding cake, which had caused a near catastrophe when the lilac blossoms had not been the right shade of purple and looked like bunches of over-ripe grapes.

Sophie experienced a sudden surge of sympathy for the young girl.

Tish had told her that, out of necessity, she had to eat, sleep, and breathe Lilac's wedding. She'd even had to turn down a date with a potential Prince Charming, despite being so keen to find "the one" and star in her own dream ceremony. There wasn't a bridal supplier in the capital she hadn't scoured for inspiration. She had even taken to emulating Nikki's penchant for extreme list-making and made copious notes that grew longer by the day. But despite her frantic schedule she had still found the time to call in to see Sophie and shop for her future wedding lingerie.

'No thanks, Tish. It's kind of you to offer but Lilac's trousseau has been finalised. It's just the dress that needs a last fitting. But if you pop next door to my office, you might find something to put a smile back on your face,' teased Sophie.

Tish screwed up her nose questioningly but obediently trotted off into the office.

Scarlet smiled at Sophie as she adjusted one of the most expensive diamanté tiaras Sophie-Louise had to offer and inspected her appearance in the mirror. The headpiece looked amazing nestled in her halo of auburn curls. 'Don't you think Marco is a millinery genius? This is his most fabulous artistic creation to date.'

'Scarlet, do I detect...'

Before Sophie could finish her question, a squeal of delight erupted from the room next door and Tish came running back into the workshop holding aloft a gorgeous satin teddy fashioned from the same pattern as Lilac's but in a delicate blush pink – Tish's favourite colour.

'Oh, my God, thank you, thank you so much. That's another item I can strike off my "must-have" list. I love it! I'm trying it on now!' And she disappeared into the changing room.

Sophie exchanged a smirk with Scarlet and Flora as they waited for her to reappear. When she did, tears were trickling down her pale cheeks.

‘It’s gorgeous, Sophie. You are so talented. Thank you a thousand times.’

‘Oh, don’t thank me – thank the ladies from Gingerberry who made it up for you.’

Tish rushed forward and flung her arms around each of the girls in turn as the door to the boutique swung open with a gust of warm summer air and a dense waft of expensive Italian cologne.

‘What? Another hugfest? What is it with you women? Can’t you get through a day without succumbing to a bout of excessive physical contact?’ Marco Gallieri rolled his eyes but then fixed them on Tish’s svelte figure and gave an appreciative whistle. ‘And I don’t just mean the millinery masterpiece!’

The girls giggled and Tish shot from the room to get dressed.

‘Are you planning to wear that tiara anywhere special?’ Marco enquired, experimenting with a nonchalant look but failing to pull it off.

‘No,’ said Scarlet, gently removing the headpiece from her hair.

‘Why do you ask, Marco?’ said Sophie, a mischievous glint in her eye.

‘No reason, I just...’

Sophie laughed. It had been a long time since she’d seen the handsome Marco blush.

Tish appeared fully clothed and ready to leave. She reached for her handbag and waited whilst Sophie slotted the lingerie into one of the Sophie-Louise peppermint-and-gold bags and tied the ribbons into a bow.

‘Thanks again, Sophie.’

‘You’re welcome, Tish. I’ll see you in just over a week’s time at the hotel in Gloucester on the morning of the wedding.’

‘Sure. Bye.’

‘Hey, Scarlet, seeing as you like that tiara so much, why don’t you permit me to escort you round the corner to my humble establishment and talk you through some of my other designs for the more budget-conscious consumer of all things sparkling? It would be my pleasure.’

‘Oh, yes, please!’

‘Your wish is my command.’

The expression on Scarlet’s face as Marco raised her fingers to his lips told Sophie that Scarlet might just have found her prince.

Chapter Twenty Seven

July was Sophie's favourite month, not least because it included her birthday. The day of the concert, from its first breath of crystal light bursting through the blinds of her flat above her studio in Wimbledon, promised warmth and exhilaration. As if directed by the concert's organisers, a cerulean sky, dotted with wisps of spun cotton clouds, had appeared arched over the London rooftops, casting angular shadows over the streets and pavements and lifting its residents' mood.

But the best thing of all was that Nessa had travelled down from Somersby and they had spent the whole day together, drinking coffee, eating sushi, and exploring the many boutiques and shops in Covent Garden. They hadn't stopped talking for even a minute, laughing and reminiscing about a wide range of subjects, including previous Razorclaws gigs they'd been to in a variety of venues, and now they were on their way to the most exclusive gig and venue of all to see the band that they had both been fans of from its inception.

'Hey, girls!' A bearded stranger leapt out from a shop doorway into their path.

'Argh!' Nessa let out a cry of alarm and reached out to grasp hold of Sophie's arm.

'Bet you've got tickets for The Razorclaws' gig tonight, haven't you? Want to sell them? I can go up to seven hundred quid. You won't get a better deal from anyone else!'

'No, thanks,' Sophie said, not daring to meet the man's eye. She tucked Nessa's arm through hers, guided her across the road, and then down the narrow alleyway to the stage door of the West End theatre where Noah had assured her their names would be on the backstage guest list.

Sophie checked her watch, unsurprised to see that time had slipped away from them and they were twenty minutes later than she had hoped. She fished in her handbag for their coveted tickets, grateful that she hadn't known their value beforehand otherwise she would never have been able to relax and enjoy her day with Nessa. She smiled when she thought of how jealous Flora and Lizzie had been when they'd found out she had special backstage passes, and Flora had asked if she would sneak her in under her coat.

'Ready?'

Nessa straightened the hem of her dress and nodded. 'Ready.'

A black-suited doorman squinted at them like a hunched vulture eyeing his lunch having forgone breakfast. He took an inordinate amount of time scrutinising their tickets before reluctantly waving them through. A surge of excitement coiled through Sophie's veins as memories of all the concerts she'd attended with Noah and the band came screaming back. But those gigs in the backrooms and basements of pubs and social clubs around Gloucester and Bristol had been nothing like this.

Sophie glanced down the carpeted corridor to her right, hoping for a glimpse of Noah. She knew he would be waiting in the wings and, despite the awkwardness when she'd spoken to him on the phone the previous night to arrange dinner, she wanted to wish him luck. After their meeting at Somersby Manor, she had spent a lot of time wondering if forgiveness of Noah's actions would be the route to salvaging some kind of relationship. Hope had been an elusive friend these last few months, but she still retained her belief in its restorative power.

A sudden explosion of music ricocheted around the theatre's walls, and a group of guys in black tee-shirts pushed past Sophie and Nessa and jumped onto the stage to a resounding roar of approval from the excited audience. The place was so crammed with screaming girls that the wired security team were already prowling the area muttering about fire regulations and ticket fraud. Backstage buzzed with technicians, backing musicians, even a TV crew, and a

sprinkling of dignitaries and hangers-on anxious to be seen where the action was.

Sophie spotted a door she assumed was Noah and his friends' dressing room because someone had attached a huge poster of The Razorclaws to the front. She smiled and turned towards Nessa.

'Shall we...'

'I'm sorry, ladies, this is a sterile area. No one goes in, not even the band's mothers. You'd better go find your seats. Late arrivals will be locked out,' the guy threatened with a soupçon of glee.

'But I—'

'Come on, Soph. Let's grab a drink in the bar whilst the support band's playing.'

They made their way from the backstage area to the lobby and up the majestic staircase swathed in plush claret-and-gold carpet, to the Grand Circle bar where they ordered two glasses of prosecco rosé, which were the most expensive glasses of prosecco Sophie had ever purchased.

'Hey, Nessa? Is that you?'

A gloriously handsome man in his late twenties with bouffant blond hair and startlingly blue eyes strode over to where the girls were perched on bar stools sipping their drinks. He held his palm outstretched to greet Nessa who smirked at Sophie's raised eyebrows.

'Harvey! What are you doing here?'

'Oh, God, I'm in desperate need of an alcoholic injection of strength to endure the privations of the next hour. I'm here with my niece and two of her schoolfriends. My brother took out a mortgage to pay for the tickets for them to see The Razorclaws and it turns out he's away on business in Germany tonight so he couldn't come. I suspect foul play.' Harvey smiled and tiny dimples appeared in his cheeks like commas around his plump pink lips. 'I have to admit, I'm surprised to see *you* here, though. A sporting event at Wembley or Twickenham or Lord's, yes, but not at a rock gig filled with

screaming adolescents! Don't you see enough of them at school?'

'Oh, Sophie and I grew up with a couple of the band members. Sorry, Harvey, this is my best friend, Sophie. Sophie, this is Harvey Adams. He was a drama teacher at St Hilda's before fame came calling and he scooted off to the bright lights of Bristol and beyond.'

'I'm delighted to meet you, Sophie.' Harvey lifted her fingers to his lips. 'Yes, I'm now an actor.'

'I'm delighted to meet you, too, Harvey.'

Harvey flicked his floppy blond fringe from those bright blue eyes and graced them with his bleached smile. Sophie felt Nessa stiffen at her elbow, knowing she was stifling a chuckle.

'You may have seen me in *Death on the Severn* – the gritty detective series set in Bristol?'

'Oh, yes, I have,' Nessa said, much to Harvey's blatant delight. 'On BBC4? What part did you play again?' She scrunched up her nose as she tried to recall the series.

'I played the murder victim. A difficult and challenging role to get right, but of course I managed to nail it. I'm nothing if not professional. The director told me I have a bright future playing the dead and dying,' Harvey boasted without a hint of irony, 'and those scenes are often pivotal to the plot, I find. If you're interested, Nessa, perhaps you'll allow me to talk you through my last role as a firefighter who fell to his death whilst tackling a blazing clock tower. The demands on the actor can be strenuous, but fame and celebrity must be secondary to the sense of pride at having contributed to the whole ensemble.'

Sophie sucked her lips between her teeth to prevent her mouth from twitching as she felt Nessa shaking with an onslaught of barely repressed giggling.

'Can I offer you ladies a drink? You know, I have some promotional photographs I could autograph for you. One never knows when one might be recognised and it's prudent to be prepared. Wouldn't wish to let a fan down. Fame is an onerous

burden, but us actors must bear our responsibilities with stoic fortitude.’

Harvey flashed his pearly whites again at a nonplussed Nessa, who’d been rendered temporarily speechless.

‘Erm, thanks, Harvey, but I think we need to go and find our seats.’

‘Toodle-loo, then. Have fun. Maybe we can catch up later?’

Inside the airless auditorium, the noise was incredible. Every perch was occupied; every gilt-framed box had been pressed into service. The crowd was made up of ninety per cent teenage girls and ten per cent concerned parents who’d been unwilling to allow their offspring to attend the concert unchaperoned and who wore expressions of reluctant stoicism.

‘I think you’ve made a friend.’

‘You mean Harvey?’

‘Yes. He’s very attractive, if a little overconfident. I think he might wear coloured contact lenses, too, but I saw the way his eyes lingered on yours. And you already know each other.’

Nessa gifted her best friend with a roll of her eyes as she pushed her way along the third row to take her seat.

‘I’m so excited,’ she squeaked in Sophie’s ear. ‘This is the first time I’ve been in a West End theatre. Do you remember that pantomime we staged in Year Ten? What was it? Oh, yes, *Peter Pan*, remember? You were a full-blown pirate, and I was a lowly deckhand. We had a blast!’

‘You had a blast, Nessa,’ Sophie corrected her. She’d hated every minute of being on the stage. ‘I’m not blessed with the same bare-faced confidence you are. Never again! But I tell you who *was* excellent and a huge surprise. That girl who played Captain Hook from Year Nine? What was her name again?’

‘Lillian Greenwood?’

‘Yes, I’d never noticed her before. I always thought she was one of those geeks who kept herself to herself and preferred the more cerebral pursuits. Nose always stuck in a literary

classic. She certainly never ventured onto the sports field, unlike you, Nessa – the girl who’s won every trophy, medal, and rosette going.’

Nessa giggled. ‘Remember when we made Mr Barringer walk the plank for a laugh at the end of the show?’

‘I do, and I’d be prepared to bet my last pound that the experience will live on in his nightmares until the day he leaves the earth. That was a nasty ankle sprain.’ And the girls doubled over in fits of laughter.

‘I couldn’t do what Noah and Archie do, though,’ said Nessa, indicating the stage in front of them. ‘I couldn’t stand up there in front of all these people and sing my heart out. I’m not sure which is the most terrifying – performing to an arena full of avid, all-forgiving fans or to a more discerning audience at a celebrity wedding where the groom himself is a world-famous musician. Both are gut-wrenchingly scary!’

‘Totally agree. All *I* had to do was deliver my wedding gown creation along with a little piece of my soul, wrapped in tissue paper in a cardboard trunk, and then sit back and await the devastating rejection of my talents, not parade it live in front of a room full of music industry professionals.’ Sophie indulged in an involuntary squirm of sympathy.

‘But your design wasn’t rejected, was it?’

‘No, but for a time I thought it had been. It’s a painful experience that I have no wish to repeat any time soon.’

As the noise reached maximum decibel level, a beanpole-thin guy clutching a clipboard like a shield, decked out in the black uniform of all stage and screen crew, his microphone strapped to his cheek with a Band-Aid, stepped onto the stage and proceeded to ask for quiet.

Immediate silence ensued.

‘Okay, ladies and gents, as you know this is The Razorclaws’ rehearsal gig for the wedding of the decade between Finn Marchant and Lilac Verbois, which will take place up in the Cotswolds in two weeks’ time.’ A huge roar of approval rolled out of the stalls and reverberated around the

room. 'You are about to hear a selection of the band's bestselling songs and, I'm excited to announce, a ballad that is being debuted this evening, written by their lead singer, Noah Drake!

'Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you... The Razorclaws!'

Chapter Twenty Eight

A tsunami of screams roared into the auditorium coupled with whistling and foot-stomping. Sophie exchanged a glance with Nessa, and they joined the throng in leaping from their seats and applauding. A surprise swirl of nausea assaulted Sophie's throat and chest. Her heart pounded and her stomach muscles clenched with a mixture of excitement and nerves, and something else she was reluctant to name. She attempted to stretch her lips into a smile but failed. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled as the crystal-clear notes of a bass guitar seared through the air.

But it was when Noah, her Noah, strode onto the stage, grabbed the microphone from the stand and stared out into the crowd that her knees crumbled from under her. As he launched into a rendition of their most recent hit, she sank down onto the burgundy velvet seat, drawing in huge gulps of oxygen to steady her rampaging emotions, annoyed with her reaction to seeing him up on the stage after four long years apart.

For God's sake, she had seen him perform with The Razorclaws hundreds of times when they were at school and university. Okay, she didn't know much about his new material and had had no idea what to expect that evening. But the years rolled back, and he looked exactly the same as when she'd fallen in love with him, with his eyes that sparkled like silver buttons and his quirky personality, not to mention his spiky, honey-blond hair and honed, muscular body.

As she peered between the breaks in the crowd, she drank in his onstage presence. He exuded an almost ferocious magnetism. That night, he'd chosen to wear black designer jeans and a matching shirt, open at the neck to reveal not only a glimpse of golden chest hair, but also a glint of silver that caught Sophie's eye and whipped her breath away. There,

poking from the folds of his shirt, was that stupid St Christopher chain she had bought him for his eighteenth birthday and which he had sworn to her he would never remove.

Sophie leant towards her knees, her forearms clenched into her stomach.

‘What’s up, Sophie?’

‘Oh, erm...’

Nessa sat down next to her. ‘I know, darling, I know. You still love him, don’t you?’

‘No, no, I...’

‘Come on, stand up or you won’t be able to see anything.’ Nessa linked her arm through Sophie’s reluctant one and dragged her back to standing.

The next forty minutes flashed by like a dream. Sophie was swept away on a tidal wave of memories stretching back fifteen years to the first time Noah had held her hand in the playground at their primary school. The music playing tonight was the accompanying score to every important event of her life; something she had found solace in when she’d cried herself to sleep on the days when the loss of her parents was the most acute, like on their wedding anniversary or at Christmas or on her birthday.

She’d made a half-hearted attempt not to follow Noah’s most recent success, as reading about him in magazine or newspaper articles only brought the pain of losing him flooding back. But she was a masochistic fool and had downloaded a selection of his older music, listening to the lyrics endlessly to dissect their meaning until her brain was fried and the pain once again became ragged and raw.

She was jolted back to reality as she realised the auditorium had quietened.

‘Thank you, everyone. Have you all had fun tonight?’ Noah’s familiar voice boomed over the sound system.

A roar of approval rippled over the crowd.

‘Okay, this is our final song. It’s a ballad I wrote several years ago, but every word is still valid today. I hope you like it.’

Noah nodded across to Archie who struck the first chord. He smiled at his childhood friend and then flicked his eyes along the length of the third row until he’d picked out Sophie’s face.

She tried to avert her eyes, but the music demanded her attention with a mesmeric force. She stood motionless, captivated by the powerful rock ballad Noah was belting out right at her. Goosebumps spread the length of her body and the roots of her hair prickled against her scalp. As she listened to the poetic lyrics, she wondered whether each word was really directed at her. She was tempted to discard the thought as egotistical nonsense. Since they’d split, Noah had no doubt had his pick of attractive and available girls, she knew that. Even though he frequented her dreams, it did not mean she still inhabited his.

As the final notes of the song died away, there was a brief pause before a burst of thunderous applause erupted into the auditorium and the crowd surged forward with whoops and whistles. The Razorclaws stalked from the stage and the audience continued to scream, clap, and stamp their feet as they demanded an encore. It took a full ten minutes for Clipboard Man to restore calm and ask everyone to leave the theatre in an orderly fashion.

Sophie’s emotions boiled over. She could no longer hold back the tears of joy for the magic Noah had created on stage. The lyrics he’d sung spoke of the intensity of love, the cauldron of emotions its many guises stirred, and the agony of its loss. In that moment, she knew he had suffered just as much as she had during their separation, and she could hold back her true feelings no longer.

If nothing else, she needed Noah’s friendship in her life.

Immediately, her heart escaped from its prison of misery and loneliness and her spirits soared. She felt jubilant at The Razorclaws’ success that evening and about the forthcoming

honour of playing at Lilac and Finn's wedding reception. And she would be there to see them perform, she promised herself. It was time to make amends with Noah. This night would go down as one of the best of her life.

'That was amazing! Thank you for bringing me, Soph.'

'Thank you for coming with me. Oh, Ness, I'm so happy for the guys. They deserve all their success, especially Noah. I think it's time I made my peace with him, don't you?' Tears smarted at Sophie's eyes as she sought her friend's reassurance.

'Oh my God, at last! Come on. Let's use those backstage passes!'

Nessa took hold of Sophie's hand and all-but dragged her against the flow of the departing throng to the corridor that led to the rear of the stage. They flashed their privilege passes at the surly security guard and rushed to the door of the band's dressing room. Someone had added five huge golden stars to its glossy exterior on which the band members' names had been scrawled with green glitter pen – Noah, Archie, Rick, Danny and Serge.

'Ready?'

Sophie hesitated, her heart hammering out a rock anthem of its own. She was so nervous her thoughts began to spiral away from her, and it took a supreme effort to bring them back under control. The first thing she planned on doing was congratulating the whole band on a fantastic performance, but a close second would be delivering a heartfelt apology to Noah for her inexcusable absence from his life over the last few years. She also wanted to slide into the conversation a question about his inspiration for the ballad he'd performed for the first time that night.

'Ready!'

She inhaled a steadying breath, plastered a smile on her lips, and mustered every last ounce of her courage she had, then pushed open the door.

The dressing room was packed wall-to-wall with a congratulatory swarm. Men in designer suits and dark glasses, a bunch of wardrobe and make-up girls, and the guy they'd seen on stage holding the clipboard had all crammed into the room to offer their individual congratulations. There was also a coterie of giggling fans, who'd been lucky enough to win tickets to meet their idols after the show, pressing their lithe bodies around the band members.

She could see Rick and Serge lounging on a pair of leather swivel chairs, holding bottles of champagne to their lips as a crowd hustled them for an autograph. Archie had been backed into a corner by a group of girls handing over cellophane-wrapped roses and teddy bears clutching red hearts.

'Any sign of Noah?' whispered Nessa, twisting from left to right on her tiptoes as she tried to see over the heads of the crowd in front of her, unable to make any headway into the room.

'If it's Noah Drake you're after, girls, you'll have to take your place in the queue,' smirked one of the entourage, shoving his thumb over his shoulder. 'It's like this all the time, especially for Noah. Crazy, but, well, he *is* the lead singer. I suppose he has to get special treatment. And anyway, he loves it!'

Sophie's joyful smile melted from her lips to be replaced by a grimace of dismay. Through the tightly packed throng she could just glimpse Noah lounging in his own swivel chair, his snakeskin boots propped up on the dressing table with a bottle of Moet in one hand and a red rose clasped between his teeth as he signed a fan's autograph book with a flourish. She watched as he drew in a mouthful of the bubbles, swallowed, and ran the tip of his tongue over his lips in a familiar, yet for Sophie shockingly intimate, gesture.

She endured a wave of nausea so strong she felt it breach the back of her throat. A concrete block took up residence in her chest and her heart rate quickened. She felt threatened. The mass of warm, undulating bodies packed so tightly together made her feel light-headed.

Could she do this? Could she stand by and watch Noah become the object of such adulation night after night? Loitering in the background like a spare part, an object of pity, the discarded girlfriend hanging on to her boyfriend for dear life? Or worse, battling against the assumption that she was simply following in his wake in the hope that a little of his stardust would fall onto her shoulders?

Had she made the right choice in coming to the concert tonight?

Clearly she had been naive at the very least in her anticipation that Noah would be waiting for her – and her alone – in his dressing room. Heat filled her cheeks when she acknowledged that she had hoped, after their kiss in the ballroom at Somersby Manor, that tonight would be the first step on the journey to rekindling their relationship.

How could she have been so foolish?

Nothing had changed – nothing at all – so why did she think this time around things would be different? Noah was even more successful now than he had been when they split, with thousands more fans demanding a slice of his attention. She still craved success for Sophie-Louise and was even running an additional branch of the shop! They both had more demands on their time than they had ever had before. It was almost inevitable that if they pursued a long-distance relationship, just like before, it would end in betrayal as they sought solace in other avenues.

She couldn't put herself through that pain again.

She turned to Nessa, parted her lips to say something, but no words arrived. She slipped back into the dimly lit corridor, annoyed by the intensity of the spasm of jealousy the tableau in the dressing room had aroused in her. Her head told her that leaving was the right decision, despite the vehement objections raised by her heart. In fact, if she thought about it, she had so little time for socialising right now that it wouldn't be fair to expect Noah to be happy with whatever crumbs she could spare him. She wasn't in a position to prioritise a relationship at the moment.

What on earth had she been thinking? The past was simply repeating itself – and their inevitable separation would be her fault once again.

As tears gathered along her lashes, she was determined to make as swift an exit as possible. But it was not to be. She chanced a final backward glance over her shoulder and caught Noah's steel-grey eyes boring into hers. She saw him leap from his chair and plough his way through the crowd, almost knocking Archie to the ground in his determination to stall her escape and prevent a repeat of what had happened before.

‘Sophie, wait!’

Noah caught up with her at the exit door of the theatre. He hooked his arm through hers and spun her round to face him. He nodded to the burly security guy who cracked open the door, checked their route was clear, and guided the two of them into the empty tour bus that was parked at the back of the venue. Sophie fell into one of the front seats and Noah dropped into the one opposite her, their presence obscured by blacked-out windows, while the security man stood guard at the door, nonchalantly smoking a cigarette.

‘Sophie, I’m so sorry, that was a bit manic. It’s not always as bad as that. It’s this wedding fever that’s got everyone overexcited. Just let me finish signing autographs and posing for selfies, and we can share one of those bottles of champagne.’

‘Noah, I’m not sure...’

She decided not to add that she had thought he’d promised to take her to dinner so they could talk, but their reservation had expired an hour ago. She stood and took a step towards the exit, but Noah grabbed her by the waist and dragged her back into his arms, holding her tight to prevent her from walking away. His eyes delved into hers and she was surprised to see his lower lashes sparkling with tears.

‘Sophie, you know that I’ve loved you since we were kids. I still love you. And there’s never been anyone else – you are all I care about. This distance between us is agony. Please,

please, give me another chance to prove how much you mean to me.'

'Noah...'

'I wrote that song for you, you know that, don't you? Every word, every syllable was crafted with the image of you firmly centre stage. I've reworked a few of the lyrics for Finn's wedding, but it's a homily of love from a man who prays every day that he can be reconciled with his one true love. Can we, Sophie? Can we start again? I know you feel the same way I do.' Noah's eyes held a heartbreaking plea.

'Noah...'

She felt her tears slide down her cheeks. Noah reached up, cupped her face with his palms and brushed them away with his thumbs. 'I met my soulmate when I was thirteen years old, and I've never stopped loving her since.' His eyes scoured the crevices of her soul and she could feel his breath on her lashes, but she needed to be honest with him.

'How can we start again, Noah? Nothing has changed. We're both still concentrating all our efforts on our careers. The demands on our time are heavy. It's for the best, Noah – for both of us. I know how hard it is to walk away, but believe me it's the right thing to do.'

'It's *not* the right thing to do! I know you; this is not what you want – what you really want. I can see it in your heart, feel it in your veins. Why are you always running away from your true feelings and forcing your head to rule over all of your decisions? Let your heart have a chance for once!'

Sophie decided to let that scorchingly delivered home truth pass.

'We're just not in the right place for a relationship to work right now, Noah. Sophie-Louise will be busier than ever after the wedding, and The Razorclaws will be booked for gigs all over Europe. I can't bear to think of another girl winding her arms round the neck of my boyfriend whenever he's away touring. It breaks my heart, but—'

‘Then come with me, Soph! Tour with the band. You know them almost as well as you know me, and they love you. The fans will always be around. Whether I like it or not, they’re part of the tapestry of life as a musician. But they don’t mean anything. I’ve not had a date since we split, not a proper one, not one where all I wanted to do was kiss her until we were chucked out of the Fox & Hounds. You were the first person I ever kissed Soph, and no one else has ever come near to inducing the feelings I have for you.’

Sophie held Noah’s gaze, in no doubt as to the sincerity of his words. His mouth was inches from hers, tantalisingly close, and seconds later he lowered his head and brushed her lips with his, just as he had before.

‘Noah, I can’t—’

‘Noah! There you are. Put her down and get your butt out here for an interview with the Channel 4 reporter. He’s been waiting for half an hour already. Where have you been? Noah?’

‘Okay, Martin, I’m on my way. Soph, I have to go. I’m sorry I can’t do dinner. I forgot that the band’s flying back to Germany tonight. Can we meet up for a drink before the wedding?’

‘Noah, I’m not sure it’s a good idea—’

‘Noah, darling, you’re needed.’ A blonde PR girl appeared at the door and hooked her arm proprietorially through his. ‘Come on. Everyone’s waiting.’

‘I’ll ring you.’

Noah made the sign of a phone with his fist as he was led away, and Sophie was finally able to make good her escape. As she searched for Nessa in the theatre foyer she realised Noah was right – it had always been, and would always be, thus in the music industry. But that knowledge didn’t insulate her from the feelings of insecurity and mistrust it instilled in her. She knew she would never be able to get used to sharing Noah with a throng of screaming girls who would stop at

nothing to get to their hero, nor did she want to. It hurt too much.

Anyway, that wasn't the life she had worked so hard to achieve for herself. She had carved out her own successful career that she adored. How could Noah be so incredibly selfish as to ask her to give it all up so she could go on tour with him?

No, sadly their lives were on diverging trajectories that it was too late to alter.

She would just have to redouble her resolve and harden her traitorous heart to the potent effect Noah Drake had on her. She had no intention of meeting him for a drink and a "talk" before the wedding. She acknowledged her decision was the coward's route, but all her spare time and energy now had to be lavished on Sophie-Louise and finalising the most spectacular gown possible for the wedding of the year. It was time to concentrate on her career dreams and spend some time at her boutique in Wimbledon. Scarlet and Flora were doing an admirable job, but the shop was her responsibility.

She also had to work on forgetting Noah and moving on – and the only way she knew she could do that was by dating other people. She would start by asking Scarlet to set her up with the cousin she'd mentioned numerous times as an ideal date.

'Nessa!'

She waved to her friend who was chatting animatedly to Harvey on the burgundy-carpeted steps. She smiled in response to Nessa's raised eyebrows and resolved there and then that she would put her head down and focus on her enduring passion for all things couture, not Noah.

Chapter Twenty Nine

The Cotswolds still possessed the power to lift Sophie's spirits and for that she was grateful. Warmth flooded her cheeks when she recalled the look of scepticism on Scarlet's face when she'd made a feeble attempt at an excuse about checking stock levels at Gingerberry, jumped into her Mini Cooper, and driven home to Somersby. She was desperate to put as much distance between herself and Noah as she could to garner the headspace – or more truthfully, the heart-space – she needed to process the aftermath of the Noah debacle.

Flora and Scarlet had rallied round, suggesting trips to the theatre, visits to the local wine bar, even a day out at the Warner Bros. Studios in an effort to divert her attention away from dwelling on Noah. She couldn't even begin to come to terms with her resolution to move on until the wedding was out of the way and Lilac was safely on her honeymoon. Then she would think about dating. She'd seen a photo of Scarlet's cousin on Instagram and, although he wasn't really her type, she had to start somewhere. Anyway, she knew no one was going to be a perfect match because they weren't Noah.

But he was in her past and she had to make sure he stayed there.

Unfortunately, it was proving a lot more difficult than she had expected. After the success of the concert, photographs of the band seemed to be appearing everywhere – even in the broadsheets. She struggled to focus on anything that did not relate to the battlefield her private life had become. So, the only alternative was to seek out a change of scenery and what better way than to go back to Somersby. This trip was exactly what she needed to put her life into perspective. Delia would regale her with her own brand of down-to-earth advice on the

unpredictable ways of the world, and Iris would no doubt add her two pennies' worth.

She parked her car next to the village green and leaned her chin on the steering wheel. There was Gingerberry Yarns, the pretty bunting Marcia had hand-stitched draped across the window and the display festooned with samples of trendy knitwear in rich, bold colours. A knot tightened in her stomach. She loved this village, but she loved Gingerberry Yarns more. Not just the shop – although that was sporting its Sunday best now – but the people who made it what it was. The place was a mixture of the foundations her mother and Aunt Claire had built and what she, Delia and Marcia, and all the Cupcakes & Couture ladies had subsequently added to bring it roaring into the twenty-first century.

She knew in that moment with absolute certainty that there was no way she could contemplate letting it go. It was a part of her, of her life, of her roots. Selling it to someone else or, heaven forbid, closing it down, was unthinkable.

She would just have to promote Delia to manager and shuttle between the two shops, working 24/7 to make it work. Maybe Flora could help out, too? Perhaps she would even jump at the chance if it meant she could spend some quality time with Craig who had already driven down to London twice to take Flora to the ballet, and he'd enjoyed a flight on the London Eye and a trip to the National Portrait Gallery in return. The pair were clearly smitten with each other and relocating Flora to Somersby was the perfect solution.

As Sophie lifted her head from the steering wheel, she caught a burst of light out of the corner of her eye. She squinted through the fly-splattered windscreen, searching for its source. She ran her eyes along the row of shops that included the village store, Wallington's bakery, and Gingerberry Yarns. She was about to put it down to a car wing mirror flashing in the evening sunshine until she saw a second flash from the doorway of Marietta's Hair Salon, which had closed for the day.

It was a camera bulb.

It took a few further seconds of concentration before she distinguished that the long lens of the camera was directed at the shop window of Gingerberry. Her first assumption was that a holidaymaker was entranced by the beauty of the rural village of Somersby and wanted to preserve his memory of a happy holiday away from the daily grind. However, it wasn't long before a second sceptical, but more accurate, thought arrived. The owner of the camera was dressed head-to-toe in black and wasn't just sheltering in the shop doorway – he was *lurking*.

What the...

Then it hit her. Oh, my God! No!

She restarted the engine, shoved the car in gear and cannoned to the high street. She leapt out of the car, her hair swinging around her cheeks, and strode towards the cameraman. Or should she say paparazzo? A flash of blinding light erupted in her face, and she screwed her eyes tightly.

'Hey, what do think you're doing?!'

The man smirked, gathered his holdall, and sprinted off down the street.

Mmm, perhaps approaching him all guns blazing hadn't been one of her smartest ideas. If she had taken the time to think it through, she realised, she would have played it differently. Now he had a photograph of her reacting angrily, which was tantamount to admitting she was the designer of Lilac's wedding gown. Why else would she have been so suspicious of a man with a camera in an idyllic country village in rural Gloucestershire?

Chastising herself for her stupidity, she returned to her car, dragged her overnight bag from the back seat and hoisted the handles over her shoulder. She really should have been more prepared. If, as she hoped, business at Sophie-Louise and Gingerberry took off after the publicity of the wedding, then she would have to start thinking of a strategy to deal with such scenarios. She did hope to attract more celebrity interest and she couldn't have inquisitive photographers camping out on the doorstep of Gingerberry every day!

As she reached for the door handle a burble of conversation trickled from within and, with a jolt of guilt, she remembered that it was Tuesday night. She had left London in such a hurry that she'd overlooked telephoning Delia to tell her she was on her way. She had even forgotten that the Cupcakes & Couture session would be well underway by the time she arrived.

The familiar tinkle of the brass bell welcomed her and for the first time in days she felt the leaden weight on her chest shift and the corners of her lips curl upwards. She took a step forward and Gingerberry wrapped its comfort blanket around her shoulders and all her troubles seemed to melt away. She briefly closed her eyes and drew in a strengthening breath. She loved it here.

'Hi, everyone!'

'Sophie! Hi!' came a chorus of welcome.

'Sophie! What are you doing here? Why didn't you call?' Delia dashed towards her followed by Marcia, and Sophie had to fight an urge to crumble into tears, she was so relieved to be home.

'Oh, it was just a spur of the moment decision. I really wanted to attend the last Cupcakes & Couture session before the wedding. I've brought a few samples of organic silk from Sophie-Louise that arrived last week and wanted to know what you all thought.' Delia's grey eyes narrowed and Sophie knew she didn't believe her. 'I'll just drop my bag upstairs. I could really murder one of your cappuccinos, Marcia? Oh, and I see Tom has been here, too! I want you to dish all the gossip about his catering for the wedding of the decade at Somersby Manor. Be down in a minute.'

Sophie trotted up the stairs, feeling Delia and Marcia's eyes scorching holes in her back, but the ripple of chatter resumed as the ladies got back to their chosen projects. She was delighted to see that the ranks of the Cupcakes & Couture sessions had swollen even further. She'd performed a swift headcount, which had told her there were seventeen women and five men, including Marc and his partner who were in the throes of knitting their longed-for Fair Isle jumper on the

scruffy chesterfield. She released a sigh of relief. Now she had made the decision she was definitely keeping Gingerberry, these sessions would not only pay for themselves but would add a decent profit.

She dropped her holdall onto the sofa and, as she turned to go back downstairs, her eyes landed on a pile of mail on the kitchen table awaiting her attention. She grabbed it and skipped back to the shop, anxious to catch up with everyone. She resolved not to mention the appearance of a lone photographer with a long lens trained on Gingerberry's window. She knew he would be gone by now. She only hoped that Lilac would not be too upset – after all, it wasn't as though she was carrying her wedding dress!

'So, how was The Razorclaws concert?' asked Marcia, her eyes scrutinising Sophie's reaction as she handed her a mug of coffee and one of Tom's chocolate eclairs on a decorated china plate.

'Fabulous! Awesome! Nessa had a great time, too. She even met an old teacher friend, Harvey, at the gig. He was there with his niece and her friends and...' She knew she was gabbling. It was one of her well-known tactics for avoiding difficult conversations, but she wasn't fooling Marcia who nevertheless had the grace not to press her on it.

She shuffled the letters addressed to Gingerberry Yarns in her palms, deciding which of the invoices to open first. There was only one envelope that wasn't an ominous buff colour.

'Come and see the hospice blanket, Sophie,' called one of Nessa's high-school students. 'It's almost finished. We're planning on presenting it to the residents at the Cranbury summer fayre next week. Will you be there with Nessa?'

'Of course, I will, Alicia! I wouldn't miss... Oh, my God!'

A flash of shock reverberated through her veins sending painful sparks out to her fingertips. Her knees gave way from under her, and she slumped onto the Chesterfield next to Marc, the letter she was holding fluttering to the floor.

‘What is it, sweetie? What’s happened? Are you okay? You’re not going to faint on us, are you? Stick your head between your knees! Would someone bring Sophie a glass of water, please?’

‘I’m fine, I’m fine. Oh, thanks, Marcia, thanks.’

She took a gulp of the cool water, letting it trickle down her throat as she waited to regain her equilibrium. When her heartrate had finished its ferocious symphony, she bent down to retrieve the letter and reread it slowly, carefully, savouring every word. It was only when she had read the words “With Warmest Wishes” that she realised a cloak of silence had descended as the Cupcakes & Couture attendees waited for an explanation of her strange behaviour.

A wide smile split her face as she surveyed the gathering. Whilst she was overjoyed at the news she held in her hand, she knew it was not hers to keep. It was for everyone.

‘In fact, Marc, I’m more than fine! I’m ecstatic, euphoric, over the moon!’

‘So come on – spill the beans, my dear! Don’t keep us all in suspense!’

Sophie stood up from the sofa and turned to face the people who had come to be like her family.

‘Delia, Marcia, could you join me?’

Sophie gestured to the huge mahogany table where Delia presided over the finalising of a beautiful pair of leopard-print silk cami-knickers. She stuck her needle and thread into the pin cushion she wore around her wrist and, along with Marcia, came to stand next to Sophie.

‘Before I read out the contents of this letter’ – Sophie shook the thick sheet of luxury cream writing paper – ‘I want to announce that Gingerberry Yarns will remain an integral part of the Somersby community for the foreseeable future. I know some of you were concerned about what would happen, especially after a number of shops have closed, but this will not happen at Gingerberry whilst I have any say in it.’

‘Yay!’ chorused Alicia and her friends.

Sophie smiled. ‘And from today, if she agrees, Delia will become Gingerberry’s manager, ably assisted on a part-time basis by Marcia and potentially one of my colleagues from Sophie-Louise Bridal Couture, Flora, whom I suspect will be delighted to spend more time here due to her blossoming interest in a certain young photographer she met at Somersby Manor last time we were here.’

‘That’s fabulous news, Sophie, but I can hardly bear the suspense. What’s in that letter?’ Marc clapped his hands and scooted to the edge of the sofa.

‘Before I read it out, I also want to say a heartfelt thank you to each and every one of you for the support you have given to my aunt over the years and also to me when I needed it most. These Cupcakes & Couture sessions have not only revitalised Gingerberry, but have also given me a new perspective on life. But not only that! You already know that orders for Sophie-Louise bridal lingerie have been increasing over the last few weeks and I’m getting fantastic feedback. I hope you are all spending your share of the profits wisely!’ There was a tinkle of laughter. ‘And here is the icing on the cupcake, so to speak!’

Sophie waggled the letter in the air and ostentatiously cleared her throat.

‘Sophie!’

‘Okay, okay.’

“*Dear Ms Henshaw,*

I am grateful for the opportunity you gave us to consider your new product line for inclusion in our Autumn/Winter Collection. Our buyer loved the hand-knitted sample sweater you provided and even more so the story behind its production. We pride ourselves on having a discerning clientele whom we believe would appreciate not only the beauty of the design, but the local origins of the natural fibres and dyes used in the final product and the fact that each item is hand-crafted and therefore unique.

I wonder if initially we could discuss the supply of the Fair Isle sweater in a palette of colours to be agreed upon in consultation with yourselves and our designers. If our collaboration is successful, we would be looking to move on to working with you on the design of other hand-crafted items, such as Aran sweaters, matching hats and scarves, and even Christmas-themed jumpers as you suggested.

Congratulations, Ms Henshaw. Perhaps you could contact our Mr Gallagher to arrange for him to visit one your Cupcakes & Couture classes and maybe even take part.

With Warmest Wishes,

George Gallagher

Head of Collaborations”

Sophie raised her eyes from the precious piece of parchment in her hands that secured the future of Gingerberry, maybe even of Sophie-Louise, for years to come. But the reaction from her audience was muted, with none of the celebratory whoops she had expected. The sea of faces in front of her wore a blank, confused expression and her elation at making the announcement seeped from her veins.

‘What?’

‘Well, that’s lovely, dear,’ offered Iris, scooting her wheelchair forward to give Sophie a hug.

‘But...’

Marc swung his head from left to right, squeezed Joseph’s hand and then stood up from the sofa. He drew Sophie into his cologne-infused embrace before twisting the letter from her fingers and quickly scanning its contents.

‘Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Oh, my God! What Sophie has neglected to tell you, peeps, is that this letter is from Liberty’s – only *the* most wonderful department store in the whole of the UK! Wow! Congratulations, everyone! Joseph – get those knitting needles clicking. We are about to become internationally renowned crafters for Liberty’s!’

And finally the room erupted into cries of delight, interspersed with a few tears of joy. After hugging everyone, twice, Sophie managed to slip out of the shop and call Scarlet, the instigator of the whole project.

‘Wow, Sophie, that’s fabulous news! I’m thrilled for Gingerberry. Maybe I should put my order in now for my emerald and cream one before your prices skyrocket!’

‘It’ll be my treat, Scarlet. If it hadn’t been for you and your jumper...’

‘This is your project, Soph. Yours and the Cupcakes & Couture gang’s! Enjoy it! And I thought my news would be what got the champagne corks popping today!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Just had a call, not five minutes ago, from Bianca Fratelli. She loved the hand-sewn silk lingerie you sent over last month. Wants to talk to you about supplying our Sophie-Louise Bridal lingerie via her luxury boutique in Knightsbridge.’

‘Oh, my God, I don’t think my heart can take any more!’ Sophie’s throat tightened around a lump the size of a golf ball.

‘When are you coming back to Wimbledon? It’s just that... well, Marco has tickets for *Mamma Mia!* and he’s asked if I’d like to go with him and I thought...’

Sophie laughed. She knew something was developing between the two of them. She was relieved as it made her next few words much easier.

‘Scarlet, how would you feel about becoming my partner? I’ve decided to keep Gingerberry which means I’ll be shuttling between London and the Cotswolds for the foreseeable future. I need someone I can trust implicitly in the driving seat at Sophie-Louise. What do you say?’

‘What do I say? I... Oh, Sophie, yes, yes, yes!’

‘Before you make any commitment, I want you to know that I’m thinking of asking Flora to help me out with Gingerberry, so she’ll be away from Sophie-Louise a fair bit.’

Scarlet laughed. 'You know she'll jump at the chance to spend more time in Somersby with a certain handsome former war photographer! You are the most thoughtful, considerate friend I have ever had the pleasure of knowing, Sophie. Thank you.'

'See you tomorrow. Let's get this dress of the decade finished!'

Chapter Thirty

The excitement at Sophie-Louise Bridal had reached fever pitch. Even Marco had joined in with the gossip, speculating on what type of headpiece *he* would have designed for Lilac if he'd been commissioned, adamant that he wasn't in the slightest bit jealous of Sophie, Scarlet and Flora, not one smidgeon.

The constant frenzy of finalising Lilac's wedding gown, as well as her honeymoon lingerie, kept Sophie's inner turmoil at bay. The gown was being collected that afternoon to be transported to the hotel in Gloucester and she was hanging on to lucidity by her fingertips. She was exhausted, physically and emotionally. As usual, she was constantly stalked by the spectre of insomnia and only able to drift off to sleep when slumped on the sofa in her apartment above Sophie-Louise in the welcoming arms of her old friends Jack and Daniel, and even then, she was never granted oblivion for more than five hours each night.

Her skin had taken on a flaky texture. Her lips were dry and cracked. Her diet consisted mainly of sporadic injections of caffeine and the occasional round of buttered toast that Scarlet forced on her when it looked like she was going to faint. If she hadn't had the wedding to distract her, she knew she'd have been looking at her sanity in the rear-view mirror.

Delia and the Cupcakes & Couture gang had done her proud. Under Delia's astute direction they had not only completed every part of Lilac's lingerie order to perfection but had also almost finished the blanket they intended to donate to the Cranbury hospice in memory of Claire. Sophie had promised to drive straight from the wedding ceremony to Somersby so they could do this final task as a group over a

few bottles of Prosecco and a feast of Tom's wedding-inspired cupcakes.

Tom had insisted they accept his generous gift after he'd received the good news that he was to be engaged to deliver a "Cool Cupcake Cooks" after-school club at St Hilda's starting in September. Enthusiasm for his new venture exuded from his pores and his usually self-deprecating demeanour had gone into hiding.

And Tom wasn't the only one to have undergone a personality change over the last couple of months. If Sophie had been surprised to see the transformation in Tom, it was nothing compared to her reaction to Martha's metamorphosis from the shy, blushing caterpillar she had first met to the vibrant, confident butterfly she had turned into. She had invested in a pair of tortoiseshell glasses and taken to wearing her hair piled on the crown of her head, teased into a mini beehive – courtesy of Marietta's ultra-trendy hand.

But it was the phone call she had received that morning from Marcia that had blown her away. She hadn't known whether to indulge in tears of pride or descend into a maelstrom of hilarity, and she smiled as she recalled their conversation.

'The letter arrived this morning, Sophie. I can't believe it's real and not a dream! I never thought anyone would be passionate enough about my writing to take me on. Me, Marcia Jane Brown, or should I say, Clementine Johnson?' Marcia had giggled and the sound had lightened Sophie's heart. 'It's all thanks to you, Sophie. You persuaded me to submit. You had confidence in my writing when I didn't.'

'Well, come on – read it out, then.' Sophie had broken off from squinting at the ragged hem of one of the wedding garters Scarlet had rejected and leaned back against her worktable as she waited to hear Marcia's most fabulous, but well-deserved news.

'Dear Miss Brown,

Re: "The Lustful Lancelot" by Clementine Johnson.

Thank you for your recent submission of the full-length manuscript of the above novel. You have a unique voice, and your writing style held my attention from the very first line. The plot line gripped me and the passion bursts from the pages as the story progresses. The characters are well rounded and sympathetically drawn and I am confident the novel, despite being your first in the erotic romance genre, will find commercial success.

I would therefore like to offer you a three-book deal with Entraped Erotica Press, the subsequent two perhaps as sequels to your first. Entraped is a new imprint for us, but one which is finding popularity with our readers, and your novels would enhance our current catalogue.

We suggest you ask your agent to contact us so we can further our negotiations and agree an acceptable advance.

Congratulations, Miss Brown. We look forward to a long and fruitful working relationship with Clementine Johnson.

Yours sincerely,

Jasper Smithson'

Sophie's heart ballooned at the pleasure and exuberance that had filtered down the telephone line from Marcia that day.

'Sophie? Sophie? Call for you. It's Noah Drake. Again!' called Flora, waving the office phone at Sophie from across the studio.

Scarlet flashed Flora a scorching look. 'Flora, didn't you hear Sophie when she—'

'It's okay, Scarlet, it's not Flora's fault,' sighed Sophie as she sat back on her heels and wriggled her aching shoulders and stretched her neck muscles. She tucked her grown-out bob behind her ears and turned to face the youngest member of their team. 'Flora, please just tell him that I'm busy with a client.'

'But,' Flora covered the mouthpiece with her palm, 'he begged me to put you on. He says he's calling from Germany. And, well, it's Noah Drake... of The Razorclaws!'

Sophie couldn't prevent a wan smile from breaching her lips. When she'd explained to Flora, after avoiding three calls in one day, that she did not want to speak to Noah, Flora's expression had been a picture of confusion.

'But why not? He's gorgeous!' she blurted.

'Yes, he is, Flora. But he wants me to meet him for a drink and I don't have time.'

'But I don't understand. Why can't you speak to him and tell him that yourself?'

Sophie had shot a glance at Scarlet who had come to her rescue. She'd gently led Flora away to explain in as few words as possible that Sophie did not want to see Noah, nor did she want to speak to him. So, whenever he rang, she was to say, as convincingly as she could, that Sophie was busy with a client and couldn't be disturbed. Sadly, Flora would never win any theatrical accolades for lead role in a mystery drama, as each time Noah rang the salon she had stuttered and stammered an increasingly bizarre list of excuses.

After listening to Flora stumble through another one of her epic deliveries and hang up the receiver, Scarlet turned to Sophie.

'Why don't you just speak to him, Soph?' she urged. 'You don't have to see him, but the guy sure is keen to speak to you. I thought you said you wanted to be friends?'

'There's no point. I've explored every possible scenario until my brain cells disintegrate and my head is ready to explode. I can't put myself through the torture of seeing Noah enveloped in the arms of some stranger who's managed to wangle her way into his dressing room or hotel room. And how can I go touring with him? Not only do I have a business to run here, which I might add is going to get so much busier after Saturday, but there's Gingerberry, too.'

'Delia has managed okay these last few months, and didn't you say that Marcia is helping out part-time, too?'

'Yes, they are both amazing, but I'm not sure the situation will work long-term. Marcia has a publishing contract now.'

And did I tell you she and Tom have been out on a date? I can't commute between Wimbledon and Somersby and then disappear off on tour with the band whenever it suits! Delia is going to need more than just a part-time helper if the lingerie side of things takes off after the wedding.'

'Then employ someone to help her full-time. I could maybe do the occasional trip.'

'You are the best right-hand woman a fashion designer could wish for, Scarlet. You've been fantastic. You are also one of my most treasured friends,' Sophie said, collecting Scarlet into a hug. 'I know you think I should give Noah a chance, but I also know that if I did agree to meet him, even just for a drink, all the memories would come flooding back and lessen my resolve. I can't allow that, I can't. I've worked too hard and suffered too much pain these last few years to risk a repeat. And whilst we're on the subject, I've made a decision. I want you to set me up on a date with that cousin of yours after the wedding is out of the way. I have to move on.'

Scarlet studied Sophie. 'Well, okay, if you're sure.'

'I am.' Sophie turned away from her friend's scrutiny, laced as it was with a soupçon of suspicion. She knew she didn't believe her, but she didn't care. 'Okay, no mistakes this time. The courier is due in twenty minutes and I'll sign the paperwork myself.'

It was Friday afternoon. As soon as the gown had been safely dispatched, she was heading over to Paddington with Scarlet to catch the train up to Gloucester. They'd been booked into the same five-star hotel as Lilac and her entourage, and she intended to carry out any final tweaks that evening and then grab an early night. They would be needed at six a.m. the following morning to dress Lilac.

'You're still adamant you're not going to the reception at Somersby Manor?'

'Yep, but you have to go, Scarlet. It'll be some party! A hundred and fifty guests, most of them celebrities from the film and music industry. There's even a rumour that Colin Firth might be there with his wife. You can't miss it.'

‘Neither can you.’

‘I can’t go, Scarlet. I don’t want to chance bumping into Noah.’

‘But you won’t. He’s performing. He’ll be backstage. You can stay upstairs if you really want to. Or hide out in the pantry under the stairs.’

‘I’ve made up my mind.’

‘Oh, God, not the classic Sophie-Louise chin thrust. That stubborn streak is something you really need to work on, Soph. Why can’t you just make friends with Noah. Okay, I get why you don’t want to get back together with him romantically, but it might make things easier if you agreed to stay friends? Instead of carrying all this hurt and sadness around in your handbag – just offload it, be friends and move on.’

‘Like he has?’

‘Soph, we’ve been through this. And Noah’s explained it himself. He’s a rock singer, in a famous band. There are going to be times when girls throw themselves at him. If you weren’t so in love with him, you’d be able to understand this.’

‘I’m not in love with him.’

‘Oh, please. Anyone can see that you are.’

Two hours later Sophie found herself staring out of the grimy train window at the fields of wheat and yellow rapeseed, punctuated by the occasional squat farmhouse and barn. Just one more day to get through and then she could return to her normal life. She gritted her teeth and prayed that her personal guardian angel had returned to her customary position – after four months’ unauthorised sabbatical – to make sure Lilac agreed to Scarlet assisting with her dress before she made her grand entrance down the sweeping staircase at her reception at Somersby Manor, so she could grab the next train back to the anonymity of London.

That night, as the coppery hue of the sky sank over the horizon like a flickering flame in the nub of a candle, and darkness pressed its velvety veil against the windows of the

luxury city hotel, Sophie drifted gratefully into the arms of oblivion that sleep offered. As Noah's familiar features swam across a tableau of reminiscences and dreams, she knew for certain that, despite the passage of time, she would always love him, and tears dripped down her nose and onto the five-hundred thread count cotton pillowcase.

But her final thoughts were reserved for sending up a soft prayer that her mum, and Aunt Claire, would have been proud of what their daughter and niece had achieved.

Chapter Thirty One

It was a magnificent day for a wedding.

The sky displayed a panorama of uninterrupted cerulean blue, and a light breeze tickled along the rooftops carrying with it the scent of summer warmth and excitement. Shafts of multicoloured light spun through the spectacular stained-glass windows of Gloucester Cathedral, sending a dancing kaleidoscope of colour around the wooden pews. It was as though the celestial angels had decided to join in the ceremony, too.

A whole battalion of street vendors had lined the city's ancient thoroughfares selling flags, china mugs and printed tea towels. Everyone and their uncle had taken the celebration of Lilac Verbois and Finn Marchant's union to their hearts.

Lilac had been overwhelmed with excitement whilst being dressed that morning by Sophie and Scarlet. Her mother had dabbed at the corners of her eyes with a tiny lace handkerchief as she drew her famous daughter in her arms and hugged her tightly. As Sophie and Scarlet put the final touches to her fairy-tale gown, Lilac took a sip from a flute of Dom Pérignon and giggled.

'Would you believe I'm nervous? The cathedral is a much scarier arena than any film set or theatre stage I've been on. It's even worse than first-night nerves. The butterflies in my stomach are doing a happy dance, though. You know, I adore my dress, Sophie. This day is the culmination of all my dreams. I love my acting career, but I love Finn more, and this is going to be the best day of my life when I finally get to hear him say "I will" at the altar of my perfect wedding venue.'

If Lilac was nervous, it was nothing compared to how Tish was clearly feeling. She had been buzzing around like a hyperactive wasp since five-thirty that morning. Her sting was

pretty painful, too. But everything was on track, scrupulously organised thanks to the myriad lists she and Nikki had worked on together. She whizzed between the hotel's luxuriously appointed suites, a clipboard clutched to her chest as she directed operations like a debutante film director. So far, every aspect of the morning had been beautifully choreographed.

Sophie excused herself from the bridal preparations and returned to the suite reserved for the Sophie-Louise entourage with a circular box in the signature navy-blue-and-gold stripes of the Marco Gallieri Millinery Emporium, which she presented to Scarlet along with a hug.

‘Scarlet, I think now is the right time to give you this.’

‘What is it?’

‘Open it and see!’ Sophie smiled.

Scarlet took the box and stared down at it.

‘Oo, oo, yes, open it,’ clapped Flora.

Scarlet pulled at the gold organza ribbon and twisted the lid off the hat box.

‘Oh, my God! Wow!’ She reached in both hands and gently lifted out the most exquisite fascinator. ‘It’s gorgeous, but why have you...’

‘Nothing to do with me,’ Sophie smirked, exchanging a glance with Flora who had also been in on the secret. ‘This has been sent to you with the most sincere wishes of our genius milliner, Marco Gallieri, and his express instructions that you wear it to the wedding.’

Sophie had quashed her initial uncharitable thought that the gift might have been a ploy by Marco to get a sample of his work on the TV. When she had seen the look on his face as he handed the box over to her, a suspicion of dampness on his lower lashes, she knew the hat was more than just something beautiful for Scarlet to wear on Lilac’s wedding day.

‘Thank you. It’s the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen. Help me put it on! Oh, thank you so much.’ Scarlet grabbed

each girl in turn before standing still to allow Sophie to affix the headpiece.

‘Don’t thank me. This was all Marco’s idea and hard work. I’m sure you’ll have the chance to thank him personally.’

‘Oh, I...’ Scarlet’s cheeks coloured.

Sophie and Flora smiled. ‘You look stunning. Be careful not to overshadow the bride!’

‘Oh, you know there’s no chance of that. Lilac’s wedding gown is a true work of art. We are officially the royal trio of seed-pearl princesses!’

There was a knock on the door and Flora trotted across the suite to answer it.

‘Oh, hi. Come in.’

Sophie heard the surprise in Flora’s voice. She twisted round from fixing Scarlet’s fascinator, hair pins sticking out from her mouth, to see who had interrupted them.

‘Hi, Craig.’

‘Just wanted to say “break a leg”, if that’s the correct saying for a wedding such as this? And would you mind if I get a few shots of you all getting ready to leave?’

‘Sure!’

Sophie gathered up the skirt of the silk summer dress in a delicate aquamarine that she had designed and embroidered herself for the wedding. Marco had also gone to town on the hat he had designed for her. She almost felt like she was the bride! Indeed, if she were really honest, she would have preferred to get married in *her* outfit, rather than the intricate gown Lilac had wanted, stunning piece of artistry though it was.

Sophie, Scarlet, and Flora grouped together and screamed “Cheese!” whilst Craig ducked and dived and clicked away until the girls crumbled into hysterical giggles. It was the ideal way to dispel the rising tension. Sophie suspected this had probably been the precise purpose of Craig’s mission – or maybe not, as she saw his eyes constantly seeking out Flora’s

and the couple exchanging covert signals like a pair of forbidden lovers.

‘Fancy a drink later on when you get a break from all this?’

A grin split Flora’s face and her cheeks coloured with pleasure.

‘I’d love to.’

‘I’ve got those photos I took of you in the garden at Somersby Manor. There are a couple I think you’ll love,’ he smirked. ‘Particularly the one with you swimming in the fountain!’

‘You swam in the fountain?’ spluttered Scarlet.

Flora giggled, her expression radiant. ‘I think paddled might be a better word.’

A snake of limousines, their windows tinted against the sun and prying camera lenses, coiled along the hotel’s short driveway waiting to transport the bride and her entourage the half mile to the cathedral. Sophie and Scarlet helped Lilac climb into the first car, along with her mother who was walking her down the aisle in the absence of her father whom, she had assured them, was with her in spirit on her wedding day; that was why the sun was bleaching down from a clear blue sky.

When the first limo had headed off, the girls piled into the next one, urging the driver to make sure they arrived at the cathedral first so they’d be on hand to straighten out the dress on Lilac’s arrival.

Everything went according to plan. The bride’s journey down the aisle towards her handsome prince was a smooth glide of pure elegance and style. The floor-length veil could not disguise the glow of joy emanating from Lilac’s slender silhouette as she exposed her adoration for her soon-to-be-husband to the watching world. Her wedding gown was exquisite, regal even, under the soaring arches of the church; the perfect length, with a short train in ivory silk, the skirt split by a dart from waist to toe into which swathes of Swarovski crystals and seed pearls had been sewn, shaped like cascading

flowers, which, when studied carefully, were miniature blossoms of lilac.

The neckline was demure, respectful of the place of majesty that would bless their union. Hidden beneath the veil was the most magnificent tiara Sophie had laid eyes on, and she'd seen her share of celebrity weddings. No diamanté or paste in sight – these were real diamonds, edged in pale lilac amethysts, on loan from Tiffany's. The tiara had its own security detail in addition to the strategically placed personal protection officers for Finn and Lilac.

As the last crystal-clear note of the angelic ballad drifted up to the vaulted ceiling high above the awestruck congregation, Sophie stood on her tiptoes to watch Lilac and Finn Marchant beam for the wedding photographer and videographer whilst they signed the register. All of a sudden, her mind was invaded by a sense of gratitude that, together, her little team had pulled off the most glorious feat in the fashion world that week, if not that month. Lilac looked every inch the film star she was. There were no creases or wardrobe panics that could have spoiled the day.

Sophie smiled as she covertly surveyed the packed congregation, keen to commit every detail to her memory for future extraction over the promised bottle of chilled Prosecco with Nessa and Delia later that day. Everyone exuded an aura of joy and delight at the ceremony they had been honoured to witness in the most grandiose splendour, but mostly of happiness at the sheer bliss that blazed from the happy couple. It was clear to all how much they loved each other, and Sophie sent up a prayer to the director of their fates that the marriage would be blessed with longevity and good fortune. She added a postscript to her prayer to include her parents and her Aunt Claire and swallowed down hard on her emotions. It wouldn't do to cry so early on in the proceedings.

As she lowered her eyes from the soaring arches of the ceiling, her heart jolted sharply upwards into her mouth. There, standing a head taller than most of the wedding party, was Noah, looking spectacular in his immaculate grey morning suit and lilac cravat. The shock of seeing him spliced

down through her chest, sending shock waves out to her fingertips.

Why hadn't she realised he'd be here?

He and Finn had been at uni together and, eight years later, they were still such firm friends that Finn had chosen him as an usher for his wedding. It made perfect sense, but it had still come as a complete shock.

She offered him a smile and he nodded an acknowledgement, his lips twitching to produce those familiar dimples she loved. Wow, he was gorgeous. She held his eyes and a moment of crystal-clear clarity struck. Having just watched Lilac and Finn declare their love to each other and exchange their emotional vows in the presence of their closest family and friends, she realised she could never imagine standing at the altar of any church, large or small, with anyone else but Noah by her side.

Who was she kidding?

She loved the guy, adored him. There had never been anyone else for her. She'd handed her heart to him a long time ago and he'd never given it back. And yet she was grateful for the time they had spent apart. She had been able to use those years to apply herself single-mindedly to pursuing her dreams, to securing Sophie-Louise Bridal's future, to learning who she was and understanding her place in the world. She had neglected her relationship with Noah, underestimated the importance of spending quality time together in order to fan the flames of their partnership – was it any wonder he'd succumbed to the comfort of an embrace from a willing fan after a few bottles of champagne?

She looked away, her thoughts cascading through their joint history. She knew everything about Noah, and he knew everything about her. Every childhood memory was in some way tied up with him – and his band The Razorclaws. Noah, Archie, Serge, Rick and Danny – she loved them all – but mostly she loved Noah, and she had to tell him that.

The church organist chose that moment to launch into an exuberant rendition of the wedding recessional. Sophie tipped

her head back to prevent her tears from falling, but also to say thank you directly to those who were absent from her life through no fault of her own.

She had to allow her heart to take centre stage for once.

It was time to stop running from her feelings and embrace them instead.

Chapter Thirty Two

‘Oh, my God, my feet are killing me,’ Scarlet announced, removing her ivory silk stilettos and massaging her toes as they strolled round the manicured gardens of Somersby Manor to grab a breath of fresh air.

The reception was over and, as expected, the speeches had entertained the wedding party for over an hour, with howls of laughter and ahh’s of delight as the happy couple’s family and friends celebrated their union with crystal flutes of champagne and chorused their congratulations every five minutes.

Tom and a specially selected team of his friends and former colleagues from Betty’s had worked miracles with the food, slaving in the kitchens for the last week to produce an exquisite gastronomic feast with a Gloucestershire twist that would have impressed the judges of *MasterChef*. Of course, there had been locally sourced organic vegetables to accompany the heart-shaped Chateaubriand, but the guests were a little bemused by the tower of tiny Bath buns oozing cream and raspberry jus.

However, as predicted by Lilac, the cupcake pyramids were sparkling masterpieces of culinary artistry that put the expensive five-tier wedding cake to the back of the class. It wasn’t just the children who were licking the icing and edible glitter from their lips and fingertips.

Sophie plonked her aching bones onto a stone bench in the Italianate-style garden and allowed her shoulders to sag. ‘Did I tell you Tom and Marcia are officially an item?’

‘You didn’t have to – it’s obvious.’

Sophie smiled as she recalled her brief visit to the kitchen to offer Tom her congratulations on pulling off the best wedding breakfast she’d ever had. Marcia had, of course, been

there organising and directing operations with the assistance of her arch-lever file crammed with laminated recipe cards and lists of instructions and timings.

‘Tom’s arranged afternoon tea at Betty’s as a treat for helping out!’ Marcia had said, flushed with pleasure. ‘He’s promised the best table in the house for me, Mum and Delia. Oooo, I’ve always wanted to do a proper “afternoon tea”. I’m so pleased for him, Sophie, and it’s all thanks to you. When he got that call from Tish, well, I think he’s still coming to terms with the shock, but he’s ecstatic – look at him, he’s in his element with all his friends around him again. He’s thinking of asking one of them to help him out at the bakery so he can go back to Betty’s part-time in a development role. He has so many ideas for new products – the creativity is bursting from him! I know he’ll be a small cog in a huge wheel there, but it’s what he’s dreamed of for years! Even his dad approves, he’s so proud of him being in charge of the catering for a celebrity wedding. He and all the residents of Cranbury Care Home promised to be glued to the TV today. Tom even delivered one of his cupcake pyramids to them at five this morning.’

‘He deserves this opportunity, Marcia,’ Sophie said. ‘He’s a talented chef.’

‘I’ve volunteered to lend a hand in the bakery, too. Not on the baking side, of course, but serving behind the counter so Tom can concentrate his afternoons on the experiments and designs. I’ve taken a photograph of every cupcake on that pyramid, and I intend to print it out and file it along with the recipe in a binder – that way his assistant can easily replicate the technique.’

Sophie smiled – Marcia’s dedication to organisation knew no bounds.

‘My favourites are the mango and mint julep pyramids and the lavender-infused macarons topped with a tiny lilac flower made from angelica.’ She paused, shot a glance to the other end of the kitchen where Tom was laughing with one of his chef friends looking relaxed and content, and lowered her voice. ‘Tom asked me to be with him when the fireworks start later on. He says he has something important to ask me.’

Happiness infused Sophie's heart at the burgeoning spirit and confidence exhibited by Marcia as well as her developing relationship with Tom, who, as far as Sophie knew, was her first serious boyfriend. The first kindling of a new love was a joy to see. She was so pleased for them both.

Sophie smiled at Scarlet who was still rubbing her toes, the spectacular fascinator Marco had made for her bobbling precariously on her head. She was relieved that her job here at the manor was now done. She had tried to make a discreet exit after the ceremony, but Lilac had seen her heading for her car and had insisted she wanted both her *and* Scarlet to be at the manor to make sure her gown looked fabulous in the photographs Craig was anxious to take in the opulently furnished rooms of the stately home. However, in return, Lilac had agreed that, if they didn't want to stay for the evening reception, they had her blessing to leave after the speeches. Scarlet had looked scandalised at such a suggestion.

'Come on, we'd better get back.' Scarlet linked her arm firmly through Sophie's. 'You'll thank me later, but I'm not letting you leave. I can't allow you to miss hearing Noah's performance of the song he's written especially for Lilac and Finn's wedding. It's going to be something to tell your grandchildren about when you're in your bath chair!'

Sophie knew her objections would be wasted so she plastered a smile on her face and went willingly with Scarlet to the ballroom. The Razorclaws played to an ecstatic audience already sated by good food and vintage champagne. The roof was nearly raised from its rafters when Finn stepped onto the makeshift stage and joined Noah at the microphone to perform the ballad as a duet. Whilst Finn sang every heartfelt lyric to his new bride, Noah was looking in a different direction as he sang every word straight from his heart.

Immediately after the brief musical interlude, as the temperature rose to sweltering, the whole of the wedding party retired to the terrace outside to await Lilac and Finn's appearance on the carved stone balcony overlooking Somersby Manor's formal gardens. They greeted the crowd of family and friends with waves and shared kisses as a storm of flashbulbs

erupted from a coterie of amateur photographers jostling for the gift of *the* photograph that might possibly grace the front pages and glossy magazine covers for months to come.

Lilac had discarded her veil and tiara. Her hair, the colour of liquid caramel, tumbled in loose waves to her shoulders and her eyes sparkled as she giggled with her new husband in front of the cheering crowd. To complete her evening outfit, she had draped an ice white, knitted angora bolero jacket around her shoulders, and under the rose-tinted floodlights the tiny crystals sewn into the yarn shimmered and glistened.

‘That’s your bolero, isn’t it?’ Scarlet squealed to Sophie. ‘The one you designed last year and knitted with the Cupcakes & Couture ladies? It looks stunning!’ And she flung her arms around Sophie for what seemed like the hundredth time that day.

Sophie smiled. So, Lilac had chosen to wear it – was that the reason she’d wanted her to stay on after the reception? Scarlet was right. The little jacket did look stunning. It twinkled with sparkles and, against the majestic backdrop of the stone manor house, it seemed almost to take on the quality of ermine, appropriate attire for the theatrical royalty Lilac so clearly was.

‘As soon as the fashion press ferret out the origins of that shrug, Gingerberry will be inundated with orders, you know that, don’t you?’ Scarlet warned. ‘And I reckon that Liberty’s will be expanding their wish list, too.’

Sophie nodded. As Lilac and Finn disappeared to get ready to leave for their honeymoon in the Maldives, she stared into her future. She was saddened that she would not be resuming the easy camaraderie she had shared these last hectic weeks with Scarlet, Flora, and Lizzie when they had paused only to snatch a couple of hours’ sleep on the sofa in the office and regular infusions of caffeine.

But Scarlet would still be there, and Flora would be at Gingerberry with Delia, so things wouldn’t be too different. She didn’t need to base herself at Sophie-Louise in London or at Gingerberry when she had such trusted friends to hold the

fort. She could design fabulous bridal couture and lingerie anywhere. When she had informed Scarlet that she was handing over the reins of the Wimbledon branch to her, that she intended to split her time between the Cotswolds and London, there had been a deluge of tears, but it was the right decision.

The Cupcakes & Couture ladies would also be an integral part of Gingerberry's secure and stylish future. They would offer hip and up-to-the-minute knitted designs and fabulous luxury lingerie items with weekly crafting sessions thrown in for good measure. Delia, her newly appointed partner and co-owner of Gingerberry, along with a loved-up Flora, would be available to guide the "cosiest little haberdashery shop in the Cotswolds" to greatness on a daily basis. She would be present for consultation purposes whenever they needed her input.

Somersby was her home; it was where she had her roots and where she was surrounded by people who loved her and whom she loved in return.

Except one.

'Hey! Sophie, Scarlet, hi. I'm glad you decided to stay!' called Archie, striding down the steps towards them. 'You both look stunning, by the way. Love the... erm, the hat or whatever you call it, Scarlet. Come on, I'm gagging for a cold beer. I think a summer storm must be on its way – it's so muggy. Let's hotfoot it down to the marquee before the hordes descend.' And without waiting for their response, he linked his arms through theirs to drag them off towards the overblown tent crouched on the lawn like a squashed meringue.

'It really is the perfect setting for a summer wedding celebration, isn't it?' Sophie sighed. 'I can totally understand why Lilac and Finn were adamant in their choice of venue for their reception. It's such a picturesque backdrop.'

'Yes, that and the fact that Lilac grew up here,' said Archie.

'Nikki, Lilac's PA, said that, too. I'm surprised none of us knew her – she's only a couple years younger than me and Nessa.'

‘But Sophie, you did know her!’

‘What? No, I didn’t. I think I’d have remembered if I’d met Lilac Verbois before, Archie.’ She smiled as she gratefully accepted an ice-filled Pimm’s from an exhausted waiter and took a sip.

‘Well, not as Lilac Verbois – that’s her professional name. I was chatting to her mother before we performed our serenade to the couple of the day. Lilac was a pupil at St Hilda’s, just like you and Nessa...’

‘No, Archie, she couldn’t have been.’

Archie’s eyes crinkled at the corners with the very obvious pleasure of being able to deliver this juicy piece of information. ‘Remember Lillian Greenwood? The scrawny kid who loved drama – played lead roles in the school pantomime?’

‘Ye...e...s.’

Sophie stared at him, her jaw gaping as it slowly dawned on her why this whole wedding fiasco had been so focused on their little corner of heaven in the Cotswolds. Despite her fame and fortune, it was Lilac’s heaven, too.

It was home!

Chapter Thirty Three

Having dropped his bombshell, Archie wandered off to find his fellow bandmates and Sophie and Scarlet perched their buttocks on a worn stone bench overlooking the pond with undulating fields of Gloucestershire as a picture-postcard backdrop. However, the sky to her right was no longer a clear cerulean blue but had turned into a bruised grey, and a summer downpour threatened at any moment.

‘It’s been a beautiful day, hasn’t it?’ Sophie murmured.

‘It has. Are you still planning to leave, Sophie? You really should stay for the fireworks, you know. Lilac and Finn both made it clear you were a special guest.’ Scarlet paused, clearly wrestling with the content of her next sentence. She lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘I saw Noah sing those lyrics to you. It was the most romantic gesture I’ve ever seen. Why don’t you talk to him, Sophie? It’s the perfect time to clear the air between you. If you don’t do it now, here, when will you get the chance again?’

Sophie looked at her friend. It was exactly the same thing Nessa had said to her when she’d called to wish her luck the previous evening. They were right. Everything that had happened over the last few months had taught her that Noah was the only person who made her feel whole. No wonder her dates in the capital had never worked out. How could they when she was in love with someone else?

‘You’re right.’

‘I am?’

‘Yes.’ Sophie stood up and massaged her numb bottom. The bench was cold and hard. ‘Come on. Help me find him.’

Scarlet’s eyes widened and a smile lit up her features. ‘With absolute pleasure.’ She hugged Sophie to her as a splodge of

rain landed on the tip of her nose. She screwed up her face and wiped it away.

‘Quick!’

They dashed back to the house and into the ballroom where the white, linen-covered tables were being cleared away to make room for a dance floor for the evening entertainment.

‘Hey, Archie. Where’s Noah?’

Archie paused in his task setting up one of the huge amplifiers with Serge and Rick. ‘He wanted to get some air before the gig tonight. Said he was going for a walk around the garden, I think.’

‘Thanks, Arch.’

Sophie spun on her heels and, with Scarlet in her wake, she sprinted back down the sweeping staircase and made for the front terrace. In the short time they had been inside the house the rain had escalated into a full-on summer downpour. Needles of rain bounced onto the balustrades and the flagstones, but the temperature seemed to have climbed even further.

‘We’ll have to wait until he gets back,’ said Scarlet, casting a grimace up to the leaden sky.

‘No way. I’m doing this now before I change my mind and chicken out again.’

‘But Soph...’

Sophie skipped away from Scarlet, down the steps to the formal gardens and along a meandering path that she knew led to the pond where Craig had photographed Flora. Within minutes she was soaked to her skin, but she didn’t care. She was on a mission. If she didn’t talk to Noah now, she knew the moment they had shared in the cathedral would be forgotten and consigned to their past along with everything else. This time she was adamant she wasn’t going to allow that to happen.

The surface of the pond undulated gently as the raindrops battered its surface. She wiped her dripping fringe from her

eyes and squinted towards the ornate marble fountain next to it where a cascade of water flowed from the fluted bowl held aloft by a cavorting nymph.

And there was Noah, sitting on the edge of the fountain, his back hunched against the downpour, his head buried deep into the hood of his coat, his hands thrust in the pockets of his jeans and elbows stuck out at right angles. She would have recognised his silhouette in a football stadium. She headed towards him.

‘Noah?’

He turned his head and met her gaze briefly, then he looked away, staring at the patterns of concentric circles the rain was making in the wide basin at the base of the fountain.

‘What are you doing here, Soph?’

‘I saw you in church, I... It was a beautiful wedding, don’t you think?’

‘If you like that sort of thing. You know me, never been one for expressions of overblown extravagance. A simple service at the local parish church would do me fine. Don’t need all that pomp and ceremony to tell the world you love someone.’

‘You’re right.’

In fact, for the first time, Sophie realised she had never once imagined her wedding day without Noah by her side. Silence expanded around them. Sophie glanced over her shoulder. They were alone. Just her and Noah. Together again, sitting beside each other like they’d always been, like they should still be – she realised that now with absolute clarity.

‘Why didn’t you tell me you came down to London?’

‘I saw you’d moved on. Made a success of your fashion business, like I knew you would. I was going to ask you to have a drink, but I saw you leave the shop with a guy – a rugby-player type who had his arm slung around your shoulder. I hadn’t expected that to hurt so much, and I understood what it must have been like for you.’

‘That was Andrew, the guy desperate to settle down and produce offspring – the Broody Paediatrician, Scarlet called him.’ Sophie smiled but Noah didn’t.

The rain had lessened but rivulets trickled down her cheeks and dripped from her nose. She knew she must look a mess, but she didn’t care. She needed to tell Noah how she felt, and this was the time she had to do it. If she had to be soaked through to the skin, then so be it. She moved her hand over to his. ‘Noah, there’s only ever been one person I wanted to settle down with ever since I could dress my Barbie in a home-made wedding gown.’

‘What is it with you, Soph? One minute I’m a cheating ogre, the next I’m your soulmate?’

‘You’ve always been my soulmate, Noah, even when we were fighting.’

At last Noah turned his head to look at her. He shook his head slightly and pushed himself to standing, still maintaining eye contact. ‘What do you want, Sophie? Do you even know? I can’t spend my life second-guessing you.’

‘I know what I want. What I’ve always wanted. What’s always been there, buried beneath the hurt and the jealousy of seeing you with your fans, waiting to emerge when the time was right. The time is right. And if you’ll have me, I intend to become The Razorclaws’ number-one groupie. Whenever you’re on tour, I’ll be right by your side. I love you, Noah. You are the first boy I kissed, and I want you to be the next, and the one after that, and the one after that, and the one... well, you get what I mean.’

Sophie leapt up and faced Noah. She took a step forward, placed her hand on his cheek and moved her lips towards his. Noah curled his arm around her shoulders and dragged her body into his. A perfect fit. Their lips met and Sophie gave herself up to a crescendo of emotions; the ecstasy of being in his arms, of being kissed by the one person she was meant to be with. It felt as though she had been waiting her whole life for their paths to converge on that one moment, that one point in time when their destinies aligned.

‘Hey! What are you...’

Sophie shrieked as Noah broke away from their embrace and lifted her into the air, swinging her round and round and round until she begged him to stop. As he set her back down, she giggled, the happiest she had been for, oh, four years. She felt grateful, blessed that at last fate had seen fit to bind them.

‘Careful. We might end up in the fountain!’

‘Can’t get any wetter!’

‘I think my dress is ruined.’

‘You look stunning to me.’

‘So do you.’

‘I reckon we should get back to the house, don’t you? We have a party to attend!’ Noah lowered his lips to her ear and whispered, ‘I love you, Sophie-Louise Henshaw.’

‘And I love you, too, Noah Dalton Drake.’

Chapter Thirty Four

Ten months later

‘Nervous, darling?’ Delia asked.

‘No way. I’m excited.’

‘Seb’s downstairs. He looks so handsome in his grey morning suit. Nessa’s just helping him with his cravat and then she’ll be right up. I think there might be a spark of something there.’ Delia’s eyes twinkled.

‘You might be right. He did frequent her teenage dreams on more than one occasion,’ Sophie giggled.

‘I think we should start getting you into your dress, Soph,’ said Scarlet, who looked stunning in her peppermint-and-gold bridesmaid’s dress. There had been no hesitation by Sophie on the choice of colour scheme for her wedding, but the shade really did work well with Scarlet and Nessa’s almost identical colouring. ‘Ah, Nessa, there you are. Come on – don’t forget we’re walking to the church.’

‘It’s less than a hundred yards!’ said Nessa, bustling into the room in matching peppermint and gold. It was the first time she had worn a dress since toddlerhood, and it really suited her. ‘You can see St Peter’s Church from the window! Doesn’t it look amazing? The ivory roses around the lychgate are just perfect. Tish was right – it really is the prettiest little church in the Cotswolds.’

‘Okay, off with your robe!’ ordered Scarlet.

‘Before you do,’ said Delia, stepping forward and holding out a package wrapped in tissue paper, her hand trembling slightly, her eyes glistening with emotion. ‘I want to give you this – from all the Cupcakes & Couture ladies.’

The three young women settled down on the bed in the bride's temporary boudoir above Gingerberry Yarns while Delia looked on, as proud and tearful as any mother of the bride. Sophie placed the gift on her lap and looked at her three best friends in the world.

'Thank you so much,' she whispered. 'For everything.'

'Open it!' cried Scarlet, clapping her hands together with excitement.

Sophie slid her finger under the flap and drew out a slither of ivory silk and lace. The garter had been embroidered with peppermint thread and decorated with golden bows, but as Sophie looked more closely, she saw the words that had been worked into the fabric – *Congratulations on your wedding day – your Cupcakes & Couture ladies*. The letters 'SLH' and 'NDD' had been intertwined in exactly the same logo as the carving Noah had made on the old oak tree in the back garden of Gingerberry Yarns all those years ago.

She held the lingerie in her hands, fingering the stitching, and the strength of her emotions caused their tethers to fray. She stood up and flung her arms around Delia, tears trickling down her cheeks.

'Thank you, it means such a lot...'

'I know, darling, I know.'

Sophie pressed a smile through her tears and turned to envelop Scarlet and Nessa in a hug.

'I'm so lucky to have you as my friends. Thank you for everything.'

'Okay. So now we definitely need to get you into that dress,' said Nessa, wiping a stray tear from her own eye.

Scarlet and Nessa held the gown, a sheath of ivory silk, and Sophie stepped in, enjoying the feeling of exhilaration as the fabric slithered over her curves. Being six foot tall in her stockinged feet, the dress was the perfect design for her, as well as adhering to her personal taste for simple, yet exquisite, silhouette and drape. She had enjoyed every second she'd

spent designing and sewing the gown with the help of Scarlet and Flora.

‘Keep still and breathe in.’

‘I am,’ giggled Sophie.

‘It’s a beautiful dress, Soph, but why in the name of all things bridal did you have to design your wedding dress with so many buttons down the back?’

‘If there’s anyone who should know the answer to that question, Ness, it’s you. Look!’ Sophie pointed across to something nestled in the folds of her crumpled duvet.

‘Oh, my God! You kept it!’

Nessa abandoned the fiddly job of helping Sophie into her dress to Scarlet and Delia and dived onto Sophie’s wedding scrap box that lay open on the bed. She riffled through the paraphernalia of magazine snippets, pressed flowers, a scattering of pearls and beads, and pulled out the glossy photograph of the dress Sophie had adored from the very first moment she set her eyes on it all those years ago when she had a teenage crush on Noah. ‘Wow, every detail is exactly the same. Oh, Sophie, I’m so happy for you.’

Nessa reached out to replace the lid and this time tears flowed freely down her cheeks. She ran her fingers over the picture that had been glued on the top of Sophie’s wedding scrap box for ever.

‘Noah was the first person you fell in love with, wasn’t he, Sophie?’

‘Yes.’

‘And, unlike me, you’ve never once changed this photo, have you?’

Sophie walked over to Nessa and cast her eyes over the blurry photo of a seventeen-year-old Noah.

‘No, I haven’t,’ she murmured. ‘He’s always been my soulmate.’

‘And you’re his, Sophie.’

It was true, Noah was her soulmate, and she couldn't wait another second to be his wife.

Life had a way of delivering surprises; some happy, some sad, some exciting, some comedic, some heartbreaking, and some heartwarming, but as long as the person you loved was standing by your side, sharing those ups and downs, the journey was so much easier to navigate. She loved Noah more than anything else in the world, and she intended to make sure she told him that every single day for the rest of her life.

The End

Did you enjoy reading *The Perfect Summer Wedding*? If so, you might like to take a look at the first book in the **Living the Dream** series, *The Runaway Bridesmaid*, which follows the story of Rosie and Charlie as they bake up a storm in the Cotswolds countryside. You can find your copy here:

UK: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/B0CSK7MSMJ>

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UK: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/B08Z4B93HL>

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Author's Note

Thank you so much for reading *The Perfect Summer Wedding*. I really hope you've enjoyed spending time with Sophie, Noah, Scarlet, Nessa and Delia in the beautiful village of Somersby in the Cotswolds.

As always, I would love to hear your comments. Do you love holidaying in the Cotswolds? Have you enjoyed a spa day at one of the luxury hotels? I was fortunate enough to spend a few days sauntering around the gorgeous city of Bath last year while visiting my son and I would love to go back.

If you have enjoyed Sophie's story, I'd really love it if you'd consider leaving a short review – one line is fine! I truly appreciate every single one, as well as every blog post, every retweet, and every Like on my Facebook and Instagram pages. You can also contact me via my brand-new website at www.daisyjames.co.uk where you can also sign up for my monthly newsletter – *Notes from a Cookie Jar*. Your reviews and encouraging comments are why I keep writing (as well as getting to taste-test all the foodie treats that my characters create – only in the interests of authenticity, you understand).

Much love,

Daisy

XXX

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