

It's going to be the
biggest day of her life...

Gypsy

WEDDING

kate lace

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About the Book

Vicky has been engaged to the gorgeous Liam for nearly two years, and, now that she's seventeen - high time for a traveller girl to settle down - everyone is planning for the big day. Everyone, that is, except Vicky. She's got other things on her mind; like persuading her father and Liam to let her go to college to learn dressmaking.

Her father's not pleased, but Liam wants to make her happy, so she's given one year, just enough time for her to make her own bridesmaids' dresses.

But a lot can happen in a year, and as the final fitting for her spectacular dress approaches, Vicky no longer knows what she wants. If only she'd listened to her father and stayed at home. Maybe then she wouldn't have fallen in love with someone else...

It's starting to look as if the wedding dress will never be worn...

About the Author

Kate Lace met her husband while they were both serving in the army. She left after eight years and had three children. She has written 13 books under several different names, but this is her eighth as Kate Lace.

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arrow books

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To Ian, Penny, Victoria and Tim, with love.

PROLOGUE

Vicky O'Rourke looked across the short grass at the front of her family's trailer to where Liam was standing. *Bless him*, she thought as she watched him being almost swamped by her father's huge hug. Mind you, her father, Johnnie, would swamp anyone. He was a massive bear of a man who still kept himself in shape even though his days as a prizefighter were long past, while Liam was just - well, ordinary. Lovely, fit, gorgeous but when it came to size, he was definitely ordinary. She felt a warm glow of love sweep through her as she looked at the two men in her life: her father who treated her like a princess, and her fiancé who, as he had slipped the big diamond on her finger, had told her that he loved her and would never let her want for anything.

For the millionth time she glanced down at the ring, admiring the sparkling diamond in its white-gold setting. 'Betrothed,' she whispered to herself. 'Really, *really* betrothed.' And to Liam. She could still hardly believe it. She was so lucky that, out of all the boys on the trailer park, Liam had asked her, *her*, to marry him. Her parents, and his, had always assumed they would end up together, but just because they'd known each other from birth didn't mean that it was a done deal. Being friends was a long way from being man and wife. Besides Liam was so good-looking he could have had his pick from any of the girls. And it wasn't as if the other girls of marriageable age hadn't made it obvious that they wouldn't have said no to getting grabbed by him.

She looked back across at him where, now released from his future father-in-law's embrace, he was drinking from a can of lager. She felt her insides go all fluttery again. What wasn't there to love about him? Not only was he hot, with a smile to die for and a naturally buff body, he was also kind, funny and a brilliant carpenter. Liam and his dad Jimmy had a shed on the trailer park where they turned out all sorts of wonderful stuff. Most of their bread-and-butter work was for the building trade - hanging doors, fitting skirting boards and the like - but when business was slow, especially in the winter months, they would turn their hands to more skilled joinery, making pieces of furniture for their fellow travellers or repairing traditional bow-topped wagons.

Vicky just knew that their babies would be beautiful - both Liam and her had the colouring of the Black Irish: dark hair and skin that tanned with the first rays of sun. She could see his biceps bulging under his white shirt and there wasn't an ounce of fat on him; she knew that from watching him when he was out and about with his shirt off, as he often was in the summer months, loading up his father's van with timber, sawing wood on the workbench outside their shed or just playing football with the lads.

Vicky shoved her dark curls back behind her ears and flashed a smile at her fiancé, pushing her shoulders back as she did so to give him the full benefit of her curvy figure. His blue eyes sparked back at her and he gave her a slow sexy smile in return. Vicky licked her lips and then ran her tongue over her gleaming teeth as she looked coyly at him from under her thick black lashes, a look she'd practised a number of times in the mirror in her bedroom, often while slathering on the mascara. Not that Liam needed mascara to have lashes to rival hers. She giggled to herself at the thought of Liam using mascara.

'What are you laughing at?' said her sister, suddenly appearing by her elbow.

Vicky turned to look at thirteen-year-old Shania, already a beauty with her copper-coloured hair and milky skin, a younger version of their mother, Mary-Rose. Shania had classic Irish colouring, so different from Vicky herself, who favoured her father's side of the family with her dramatic mane of luxurious curls and olive skin. In fact, if you didn't know the family it was hard to believe the pair were sisters, they were so different: Vicky looked not unlike Cheryl Cole while Shania had been compared to Doctor Who's new assistant, Amy Pond.

'I'm just happy,' said Vicky.

'As you should be, getting engaged to the gorgeous Liam. God, you're so lucky. Still,' said Shania, flicking her auburn ponytail over her shoulder, 'it'll be me next.'

'And why not? Have you got anyone in mind?'

'Maybe,' said Shania, a blush reddening her cheeks. And although her younger sister didn't give a name Vicky noticed the way her sister shot a glance to Liam's cousin Michael. Not that he noticed, he was busy admiring the new Beemer that Liam's dad had recently bought.

Which was a shame, thought Vicky, as her little sister was looking especially hot in a minuscule outfit of pillar-box red, which made her pale skin almost translucent. Most of the girls at the party, also dressed in brilliant colours which showed off their young bodies to their best advantage, were dancing in the huge tent Johnnie had put up for the occasion. The DJ, hired especially, was playing a Shakira track and her friends were all gyrating madly, swinging their hips and throwing sexy glances at the group of boys standing on the sidelines. The boys were transfixed, tongues virtually hanging to their knees. Vicky reckoned that if the music stopped suddenly, all you would hear would be a desperate panting and slavering coming from the edges of the dance floor. *They're like a pack of horny dogs*, she thought with a grin. And not one of them would get more than a kiss, and only that if they were lucky. The

boys were nudging each other and obviously discussing among themselves who they fancied - when they weren't being distracted by new cars.

Vicky herself was dressed in a long gown of brilliant turquoise silk, which showed off her colouring to perfection. It had a big net underskirt that puffed the dress out and made her waist look tiny. Vicky had slaved over it for days to get it finished in time although her mother had insisted that she didn't have to make her own dress.

'Your daddy'll buy you one,' Mary-Rose had said repeatedly in her heavy Irish brogue, as Vicky sat hunched over her whirring sewing machine.

'But I want it to be special. If I make it myself I can be sure that no one else will ever have one quite like mine.'

'If that's what you want we can get it made for you.'

'I want to do it myself. Truly, Mammy, I'm happy to do it. I want it to be perfect and if I make it myself it will be.'

Her mother had stood and watched her in silence for a while as she pushed the fabric under the darting needle. After a few seconds she said thoughtfully, 'But you'll have your wedding dress made by a proper dressmaker, won't you?'

Vicky took her foot off the treadle of her old machine and looked at her mother, seeing the worry in her eyes. She knew that making her own dress for *that* occasion would be a step too far. 'Yes, Mammy, but I'm going to make the bridesmaids' dresses. Is that a deal? I know exactly what I want and I know I can do it. Please, Mammy.'

'If it'll make you happy,' Mary-Rose conceded, but there was still an uncertain note to her voice.

'I *know* I can do it. And I'll have time. It isn't as if we're setting the date for tomorrow.'

'If you're sure then that's okay with me. I'll tell your dad. I'll get him at a good moment. You know what he can be like.'

Vicky nodded. Her dad was a lovely man but he had a temper on him and once he'd made up his mind about something nothing would shift him. They all knew he'd never hit them but they were terrified of his rages all the same. 'Now leave me be, Mammy. This dress won't make itself.'

Now Vicky looked down at the finished product with pride. The work and effort and pricked fingers had been worth it: it was beautiful. Everyone had admired it and she knew that Liam had been blown away by it.

'I can't believe how clever you are,' he'd said when she'd emerged from the trailer earlier that evening, looking stunning.

'Then that's both of us with a real skill, Liam. You with your woodworking and me with my needle.'

'We'll be the envy of everyone on the park when we're married.'

And I'm the envy of everyone right now, thought Vicky as her gaze once more fell on Liam.

'I'm off for a dance,' said Shania, interrupting her sister's reverie. 'Coming?'

Vicky shook her head. 'I'm going to sit this one out.' Besides, she had no need to try and attract a boy any more. She'd caught the biggest and best prize of all: her Liam.

Around them the warm evening air was filled with noise, laughter and music and the space around their trailer was crowded with a colourful swirl of people who were making the most of celebrating Liam and Vicky's engagement. Not that they needed much of an excuse. They'd party at the drop of a hat but a betrothal, a christening or any major milestone in a gypsy's life had to be marked with a full-on shindig, and given the status of Vicky's family as Johnnie was one of the elders, travellers from far and wide had come to join them. And the party exactly reflected their friends who were attending: raucous, brash and fun. Everyone was having a wonderful time.

The marquee was right in the middle of the site, just by the trailer that the O'Rourkes lived in, and the party was being enjoyed by babies and grandparents and every age in between. The menfolk dressed in clean shirts and slacks or jeans but the girls - the girls were something to behold. Traveller girls liked to look their best at a gathering like this and they all wore their favourite or newest dresses, which were all in the brightest fabrics. There were reds and oranges, yellows and lime greens, purples and pinks; every shade of the rainbow was on display and every dress was either made from satin or Lurex or sparkled with sequins or crystals. The disco lights bounced off the dresses in the same way it reflected off the revolving glitter ball above their heads. And, just like Shania, most of the girls were exposing as much of their bodies as they could in order to attract the attention of the lads. Even the youngest of the girls knew how to pout and pucker and use her body to maximum effect. Poor lads, thought Vicky as she watched. They were never going to stand a chance if a girl set her heart on one of them.

She wandered over to her mum, who was sitting on a garden chair by the door to their trailer, a glass of champagne in her hand, chatting to Liam's mother Bridget and some of their other neighbours.

Vicky bent down and gave her mother a kiss.

'Thanks for the party, Mammy.'

'Get away with you,' said Mary-Rose. 'And why wouldn't a mother give her daughter a party to celebrate her engagement? You and Liam will make us proud, isn't that so, Bridget?' She turned to Liam's mother, who was nodding in agreement. 'And just think, in a year or two we'll be celebrating your wedding day.' Mary-Rose's face was lit up with the excitement of the thought. 'I've been waiting for this day ever since you were born. My own daughter getting wed!' She hauled herself out of her chair. 'Give us a hug, darlin'.'

She put her arms around Vicky and pulled her to her big squashy bosom. As she enveloped Vicky, her daughter breathed in her mother's scent: freshly washed clothes, the soap she used and Devon violets, her mother's favourite perfume. This smell had been a part of Vicky's life for all of her fifteen years. It was the smell that meant love and warmth and kindness. It was the smell that filled their trailer.

Suddenly Vicky realised that when she married Liam she would have to leave her family trailer for ever and live apart from her mammy. She buried her face against her mother's neck. She wanted to get married, she truly did, but she couldn't help feeling scared at what it meant to her life, and how much everything would change.

There was no going back now. She'd taken the first step towards getting married and the wedding now had to be the focus of her life. It was certainly going to be the focus of her mother's.

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Two years later ...

Baby Kylie, the most recent addition to the family and a little sister for Vicky and Shania, had woken from her nap and was grizzling. Now eighteen months old she was more than capable of letting her family know if she was happy or miserable, or grumpy like she was at this moment.

'I'll get her,' said Shania, jumping up from the rug she'd spread on the grass beside the trailer so she could sunbathe. 'I expect she'll need changing,' she said as she adjusted the straps of her tiny bikini top.

'Thanks,' said Vicky, rolling over and reaching for her bottle of sunscreen. As the oldest sister it was really her job to look after Kylie but since Shania loved doing it so much it seemed a shame to deny her the pleasure. *She'll make a wonderful mother*, thought Vicky. She caught sight of her sister's shoulders as she disappeared into the shade of the trailer. 'And when you come out again I need to put some lotion on your back. You look as if you're beginning to burn. You don't want to go to that wedding at the weekend looking like a lobster.'

'I certainly don't,' Shania called out of the open door. There came sounds of rustling and then the baby stopped crying. All she needed was a bit of a cuddle and she was as happy as Larry. Such a placid child.

Vicky finished topping up the protection on her shoulders and lay back on the rug and let the peace of a perfect August afternoon wash over her. She could hear an insect buzzing nearby. It was probably on the big tubs of flowering plants her mother had placed either side of the entrance to their trailer. In the distance was the muted roar of the dual carriageway. There was a field between their trailer park and the road but the sound easily carried across the grass. The rumble of the traffic was so much a part of the soundtrack of the park that it was rare that she noticed it. Above her, out of sight in the flawless expanse of clear periwinkle blue sky, a lark was singing his heart out. She squinted her eyes to try to spot it but gave up after a few seconds as the sun was just too bright. Somewhere the lads were having a kick-about and she could hear the yells of triumph and disappointment as the game ebbed and flowed. She imagined that her two much younger brothers, Billy and Jon-Boy, would be right in the thick of it. They'd been going stir-crazy all week with the weather being rubbish so they'd been off out with their mates as soon as they'd grabbed their breakfast that morning. With them out of the way she and Shania had got their caravan cleaned in double-quick time, which was why the two girls now had time to laze about, soaking up the rays.

However, being idle was niggling at Vicky's conscience. She should really be getting on with the dresses she was making for her mother and her sister for a friend's wedding they were going to at the weekend but this weather was too good to waste. It was the first decent day in an age. Still, the weather forecast was set fair for the weekend, which would be nice for the prospective bride. *It should be the law, thought Vicky, that the bride should always have the sun shine on her on her big day.*

Vicky sat up. No, this wasn't getting those dresses finished. She jumped up off the rug and followed Shania into the relative cool of the trailer. Baby Kylie was on the

bench seat by the door, kicking her chubby legs in the air while Shania changed her nappy.

'Who's a good girl, then?' cooed Shania. Kylie gave her a smile in response as Shania pressed down the sticky tabs, and then straightened the pretty pink smocked dress, all flounces and frills - another one of Vicky's creations. With ease she swung the baby up off the changing mat and onto her hip.

'I can't wait to get married and have babies of my own,' she said. 'I think I'd like more than five.'

Vicky wasn't surprised. If there was anyone on this planet who was born to be a mother, it was Shania. 'I think Mammy would have liked more too but she always said that she didn't fall pregnant easily.' Vicky opened a cupboard and got out her sewing box and one of the two dresses she was working on.

'I hope that doesn't happen to me. I want ten.'

'Oh my God, ten! You'll be needing a big trailer with all them.'

'What about you and Liam? How many kids are you going to have?'

Vicky took her sewing box from the kitchen counter. 'Shan! I'm not even married yet. That's putting the cart before the horse.'

Shania grabbed a feeder cup off the table with one hand and handed it to Kylie, who began sucking on the spout contentedly. She stowed the changing mat away, disposed of the dirty nappy, made sure she'd tidied up properly, then moved to the door. Vicky followed her.

'When are you going to set a date?' Shania said over her shoulder. 'You're almost seventeen.'

'That's hardly ancient.'

'I want to be married when I'm sixteen.'

Shania put the baby on the rug where she sat placidly still drinking her juice and then plumped down beside her sister. Vicky sat on the aluminium step by the door, her

open sewing box at her feet, the lime-green dress she was making for Shania draped over her knees.

Shania stretched luxuriously on the rug and then said in an artificially casual way, 'I reckon Michael's going to grab me at the wedding.'

'You reckon?'

'Sure of it. He keeps looking at me.'

'You could do worse.' Vicky concentrated on threading a needle

'I know. He's lovely.' Shania sighed, wistfully.

'You mustn't look too keen, though. You've got to put up a fight if he does grab you.'

'Oh, I will. It wouldn't be proper to give in to a kiss right away. I'd look a right slapper if I did that. And think what Dad would say.'

Vicky, who'd started hemming the sleeve, put down her sewing as she contemplated just how angry he would be. No, her dad's temper wasn't a happy thought on a day like today. She smiled at her sister, pleased that she'd got her eye on a good man and even more pleased that her sister knew how to behave. She caught sight of her sister's reddening shoulders. 'Hey,' she said. 'You've forgotten about the sunscreen. You'll be burnt to a crisp if we don't get that on your back and then no one, not even the sainted Michael, will want you.'

She dumped her sewing onto her sewing box and moved over to the rug where she could help Shania slather on the factor twenty.

'It's so unfair,' said Shania. 'Why don't I tan like you?'

'Because you've got beautiful Irish skin like Mammy's.'

'But I always look as if I've just crawled out from under a rock,' wailed Shania.

'You so don't,' said Vicky. 'You're a beauty, you're pale and interesting whereas me? I'm so dark after the summer I look like I could be related to that guy Jordan.'

'Jordan?'

'Yeah, you know him. In my year, hangs around with that bitch Chloe.'

'Oh, him. He's well fit.'

'Yeah, but his dad is from somewhere in Africa.'

'Can you imagine if we married a black man?' said Shania.

The girls giggled at the enormity of the idea.

'Can you imagine if one of us married a gorgio?' said Vicky, going one step further. The idea of marrying a non-traveller was so unthinkable that they both shrieked. 'Oh my God,' yelped Vicky. 'Dad would go ballistic.'

'Mental,' agreed Shania.

The family car drew up in front of the trailer; their parents were back from a shopping trip to the local superstore. Mary-Rose waved at her daughters and then heaved her bulk out of the white saloon. Their father got out of the driver's seat.

'Give your mammy a hand with the shopping,' he said, although the girls didn't need telling. They were already on their way over to help bring the groceries into their home.

Mary-Rose settled down in a plastic garden chair outside and pulled Kylie onto her lap while the girls ferried all the carrier bags inside and got busy stowing away the food in the fridge and the larder cupboards. They switched the kettle on as they worked and took their mother a cup of tea. Their father had decided to slake his thirst with a can of beer he'd liberated from one of the carriers as the girls had passed him by.

'Oh, that's grand,' she said, accepting the steaming mug with a grateful smile. 'I'm that parched.'

When the girls had finished Vicky went back to her dress, neatly sewing the hem on the sleeve and then nipping off the thread with her teeth.

'Go and try this on, will you, Shania?' she said as she handed the frock over.

Shania retreated to the tiny space that was the room she shared with her big sister. A few minutes later she emerged clad in the skimpy creation.

'Oh, what a picture,' said Mary-Rose, clapping her hands. 'I love it. Give us a twirl.' Shania pirouetted. 'That colour's lovely with your hair. Do you think it needs more sequins?'

Vicky put her head on one side as she considered her mother's suggestion. 'I've got plenty left. We could put some around here.' She pointed to the bottom of the short bodice top that left most of Shania's midriff bare.

'Yeah, I'd like that,' said Shania. 'If it's not too much trouble.'

'Of course it's not. Nothing is too much trouble for my sister. And not if it means she catches a certain someone's eye.' She gave Shania a nudge. 'Now go and take it off - I don't want to accidentally sew a sequin onto you!'

Her sister disappeared to change once again.

'Daddy,' said Vicky.

'Yes, my angel.' The sunshine and the chilled lager had made her dad mellow and content with his lot.

'Are you still all right to give me a lift into school tomorrow?'

Johnnie gave his daughter a quizzical look and then he remembered. 'Oh yes. It's your results day, isn't it? What time have you got to be there?'

'Any time after nine. It *is* okay, isn't it?'

'No bother.'

'Just think,' said Mary-Rose, shaking her head. 'One of our kids with GCSEs.'

The tone of her voice made Vicky smile; pride and bewilderment in equal measure. 'I haven't got them yet. For all we know I might have failed everything.'

'You won't,' said her mother with a smile. 'But I still can't work out why for the life of me you bothered with them. None of your cousins has got a qualification to their

name. In fact, I don't think most of them can even read. And what does it matter - all this book learning? Will it make you a better wife or mother? To be sure it won't.'

Shania emerged back in her bikini and gave her nearly finished dress back to her sister.

'I can't see why on earth you think staying on at school is going to do you any good. I'm glad I left last year,' she announced. 'What's the use of book learning when I'm keeping a house? In fact, if you hurried up and tied the knot with Liam, I could think about marrying too.'

'Well, you can't,' said her mother firmly. 'Not just yet. I want Vicky settled before we think about you.'

'You can't stop me getting engaged,' said Shania, defiantly. 'If the right boy asks me I shall say yes as soon as blinking. And if Vicky doesn't get a move on I don't care if it wouldn't look right; I'll get married before her.'

'That's enough,' barked her father, who didn't like to hear his family bickering. 'Vicky will marry next year and you can be wed the year after and that's an end to it.'

'Next year,' said Vicky, appalled. 'But ... but ...'

'But nothing.'

'But I've got plans,' she muttered.

'Plans? What plans?'

'Plans like what Mrs Truman suggested,' she admitted slowly.

'You mean that nonsense about going to college,' said her father.

'It's not nonsense.'

'Yes it is. College is no place for our kind. It's just a waste of time.'

'But it wouldn't be,' pleaded Vicky. 'I'd learn a real skill, a useful skill.'

Johnnie narrowed his eyes. 'I'm not going to discuss this, Vicky. You won't need no dressmaking qualification when you're married to Liam. Jesus, can't you already make lovely dresses? What could college teach you that you don't

already know? It would just be a waste of time. Time that would be better spent planning your big day and, once that is out of the way, starting a family.'

Vicky felt her eyes filling with tears. Dad didn't understand. She could make dresses just fine but she always had to buy paper patterns for the designs and finding anything that was suitable was almost impossible. If she went to college she'd learn to pattern cut and how to design her own garments. Ever since she'd been tiny she'd been dressing her Barbie dolls in her own creations and more than anything she wanted to learn how to do it properly. Professionally.

She knew full well that she wouldn't be allowed to do it as a *job* once she was married. It would bring disgrace to Liam if she earned money. Earning money would be his role, just as her role would be that of wife and mother, but she could make outfits for her friends and family. She'd help people choose the fabric and then she'd make it up. There couldn't be anything wrong in that, providing she didn't ask for more than the money to cover the costs. Just like Shania could think of nothing but keeping house and having babies, Vicky's head was filled with ideas for lovely dresses and outfits. It was her passion. But her dad refused to listen to any of her ideas. As far as he was concerned she was out of order.

Rather than cry in front of her mother and upset her too, Vicky put down her sewing and took off. She wandered aimlessly down the main road that led through the centre of the park. It was so *unfair*. And her dad didn't get it. It wasn't as if she wanted to do anything *wrong*. It was only dressmaking, when all was said and done.

Walking and the warm sunshine calmed her slowly and she let her feet carry her to Liam's shed. Well, it was his dad's shed really, but it would be Liam's one day. As she approached it the pine-scented tang of wood shavings drifted on the slight breeze accompanied by the rhythmic

rasp of the sound of sawing. She leaned against the doorjamb and watched her fiancé working. He'd stopped sawing and was holding up the piece of wood he was working on, caressing the grain with his long, tanned fingers, almost as if he were playing an instrument. Her annoyance and frustration with her family was swept aside by a big surge of love for her fiancé. Her Liam really was one of the best. *I am so lucky, she told herself, to have him.*

'So what's that going to be?' she said softly.

Liam jumped and put the wood down, almost guiltily. 'And what are you doing creeping up on me like that?' But his words held no anger and his smile was one of pure pleasure at seeing her.

Vicky ignored the question and moved across the floor of the shed to his workbench. 'What are you making?'

'Never you mind.'

'It's nice wood. Pretty colour.'

'It's cherry.'

'That sounds lovely.'

'It is. It's a grand wood. One of the best.' Liam picked up the plank and took it over to the side of the shed where he put it with some similar timbers. Vicky, used to seeing the component pieces of a garment laid out before she put them together, could see that Liam was working in the same methodical way. He obviously had a commission to make something more complex than a simple cupboard.

'You nervous?' he said, returning to her side.

'Nervous?' Vicky shook her head. What was Liam on about? 'Why should I be nervous?'

'Big day tomorrow - your results.'

Vicky's feelings of frustration barrelled back. 'Oh, them,' she snorted. 'Yeah, well, it's not going to matter now whether I pass or fail ...' She shrugged.

'Of course it matters. And it matters to me. I want to be able to boast I've got the cleverest wife in all the world.'

'Liam, a few GCSEs doesn't make me a brainbox.'

'It does to me. Anyway, why don't your results matter all of a sudden? That wasn't what you thought when you were working for them.'

'Daddy says I can't go to college. He says I've got to get married.'

Liam frowned. 'But ...' Now he was confused. 'But you still *do* want to get married, don't you?'

'Oh Liam, of course I do. It's just ... it's just ...'

'You want everything,' he finished for her.

She nodded. 'Is that so wrong?'

'Darlin' girl, as far as I am concerned you can have whatever you want. If I can make it or buy it for you, it's yours.'

But, thought Vicky sadly, going to college doesn't fall into either of those categories.

Liam went over to the corner of the shed where there was a fridge and a sink and where the kettle lived. He picked it up and waved it at her. 'Tea?'

She nodded. 'Let me,' she said, moving over to join him. She took the mugs off the shelf and a pint of milk from the little fridge and busied herself, filling the kettle from the tap.

'What if ...' said Liam. He paused, clearly thinking through what he was about to suggest.

'Yes?'

'What if,' he said slowly, 'you told your father that you need to go to college to make sure the bridesmaids' dresses are perfect? I mean, I'm right that he's only said he's unhappy with you going to college. He hasn't said you can't make those dresses, has he? He's still okay about that, isn't he?'

'Yes, but—'

'Couldn't you tell him you need the sort of machines they'll have at college to work with. I mean,' Liam gestured around him, 'Dad and I need all sorts of special tools to do what we do. People think chippies just need a hammer and

a saw but to do a proper job you need all sorts. You've only got a sewing machine.' He laughed and added, 'Not that I know anything about dressmaking, but isn't your machine a bit basic for the sort of dresses you girls like at your weddings? I need all sorts for the different jobs I do. Isn't that the same for you?'

Vicky nodded. At school in the textiles department she had a whole range of machines from overlockers to ones that did computer-aided embroidery. The one she had in the trailer was really old-fashioned and just stitched in a straight line. It didn't even zigzag. Anything fiddly she had to finish by hand, which took time.

And,' he added, 'if I told your dad that I don't mind you going if it means making you happy, means you can make those dresses you've set your heart on ... well, it can't do any harm, can it?'

'You'd talk to my dad? Really?'

'I'll talk to him, but that's no guarantee he'll change his mind.'

'No, but ...' But it was a ray of hope.

Johnnie O'Rourke sat by the barbecue checking on the meat he was cooking. The girls were in the trailer getting the rest of the food ready. On the next plot their neighbour, Jimmy Connelly, Liam's father, was doing the same and the men chatted across the space as they sipped their beers and turned the meat. Liam, fresh from the shower block, came across to join them, pulling on a clean shirt as he walked towards them.

'Hello, Uncle Johnnie,' he called.

The O'Rourkes and the Connellys weren't related by blood, but it almost felt as if they were, having been neighbours since before Liam had been born.

'Evening, Liam. Would you like a beer?'

'You're all right, I'm good, thanks. But I'd like a word.'

'A word, eh? Would it be about the wedding? When are you going to get my daughter to set a date? Neither of you is getting any younger and Mary-Rose is desperate for grandchildren.'

'My ma's the same, to be sure. In fact it's funny you should mention it as me and Vicky were talking about the subject only this afternoon. Which is why we need to talk.'

'Praise be,' said Johnnie with feeling. 'So she's scrapped that stupid notion of going to college, then.'

'Well, not exactly.'

Johnnie stopped attending to the steaks on the barbecue and turned to look at his future son-in-law. 'Not *exactly*? How does that work?'

'You know she's set her heart on making her bridesmaids' dresses.'

'Yes.' Johnnie said slowly, narrowing his eyes.

'And you agreed that she could do it.'

'Yes.' Johnnie was sounding increasingly wary.

'Well, Vicky's worried about it.'

'Then I'll pay for her to have them made.'

'I know you would, and so does she, but she wants to do it herself. You know what women are like when they get a notion in their heads.'

Johnnie did, only too well. Mary-Rose was always getting ideas for things to do to the trailer - 'improvements' - as if it wasn't perfect already. And she was never happy until he'd forked out for her latest whim. However, in Johnnie's world, he found that most problems could be solved by throwing a bit of money at them. 'So, either she can make these fucking dresses or she can't. If she can't, I'll pay, if she can, what's the problem?'

'The problem is she *can* make them, but she'll need specialist machines.'

'Then I'll buy the fucking machines.' Johnnie was beginning to get irritated.

'I don't think it's as simple as that. She'll need to be taught how to use them.'

Johnnie gave Liam a long stare. 'So what you're trying to tell me is that she's convinced you that she ought to go to college just so as she can make some dresses that by rights I should be paying a proper dressmaker to make.'

'Well ... yes, that's the size of it. But it'd make her so happy to do it herself. And you did say she could.' Liam leaned forwards and looked earnestly at Johnnie. 'And isn't her happiness what we both want for her? It'd only be until June, then we'd get married, promise. She'd be happy, the wedding won't be delayed more than a few months ...' Liam shrugged. 'So, Uncle Johnnie, what do you say?'

'To be sure I want her happiness too but I worry about this college business. School is one thing but college?' Johnnie sighed. 'At school there were kids from here with her. Safety in numbers and all that, but she'll be alone at college. I don't like that idea at all.'

'But Vicky always said that no one really realised that she's a traveller, especially when she stayed on to take her GCSEs. She said she was very careful to keep a low profile.'

'I don't know.' A big frown creased Johnnie's forehead.

'In fact, I reckon she'd be safer. Let's face it,' said Liam. 'No kid from here has ever gone to college. It's the last place they'd expect a traveller to show up.' He could see Johnnie was wavering and decided to try to press home his advantage. 'And you could take her in the car each morning and pick her up in the afternoon.'

'I don't know. I'm not happy with the idea, not at all. If she doesn't go, she'll get over it.'

'Okay, Uncle Johnnie. I just promised myself that I'd ask you. I just hate to see her miserable and it'd break my heart if I didn't think I'd done everything in my power to make things perfect for her.'

He got up and left, leaving Johnnie with his barbecue.

Night was falling by the time the O'Rourkes had finished gorging themselves on the mounds of food they'd prepared. Kylie had long since been bathed and put to bed. The boys were playing with a swingball set, Johnnie and Mary-Rose were sitting by the still-glowing coals sipping cold beers and the two older girls were doing the washing up and tidying up the trailer at the end of the day.

Across the park were the sounds of kids playing, people laughing, music coming from someone's trailer - the sounds of happy people enjoying a balmy summer evening.

'Young Liam had a talk with me earlier,' said Johnnie.

'And?'

'He says that our Vicky will be unhappy if we don't let her go to college.'

Mary-Rose tutted. 'She'll get over it. There's lots of worse things that can happen in life than not going to college.'

'He says she mightn't be able to make those dresses like she'd planned.'

'What's Liam doing worrying about the dresses?' Mary-Rose was outraged. 'That's women's business. How would he like it if I started on about carpentry?'

'He wasn't talking about the actual dresses themselves, just the making of them. He says Vicky'll need special equipment.'

'Then she'll have to manage without.'

'I know. But Liam's right: she's set her heart on doing it.'

'Then she can *unset* it.'

'That's what I thought, Mammy, but now I don't know. Liam said that they could get married this time next year so she could go to college, get the dresses made, she'd be happy, he'd be happy ...'

'But college?'

'Our Vicky's a good girl.'

Mary-Rose nodded in agreement.