

From jingle bells
to wedding bells?

Married by Christmas



Scarlett Bailey

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About the Book

All she wants is a perfect Christmas Eve wedding...

It's been on Anna's wish-list since she was a little girl, dreaming of a far happier family life than she'd ever experienced.

Only now - two weeks before her big day - her perfect husband-to-be drops a bombshell...

But nothing's going to stop Anna's plans - not even the pesky inconvenience of discovering her groom already has a wife!

About the Author

Scarlett Bailey has loved writing stories since childhood. Before writing her debut novel, *The Night Before Christmas*, she worked as a waitress, cinema usherette and bookseller.

Passionate about old movies, Scarlett loves nothing more than spending a wet Sunday afternoon watching her favourite films back-to-back with large quantities of chocolate. Currently she lives in Hertfordshire with her dog and very large collection of beautiful shoes.

Also by Scarlett Bailey:

The Night Before Christmas

Married by Christmas

Scarlett Bailey



EBURY
PRESS

For Adam, with much love from me.

The Proposal

The sun was just about setting as Anna Carter and her boyfriend Tom Collins finally reached the summit of Ivanhoe Beacon, the tallest point of the Chilterns. Tom's parents' overly enthusiastic Labradors charged around their legs in a series of haphazard circles before Napoleon caught the scent of a rabbit, and Nelson chased after him, both of them barking so loudly that any chance of actually catching one was obliterated by the din.

'I'm worried about that jumper I got your gran, now,' Anna said, her breath misting in the cold air, as she looked out over the stunning view of the Buckinghamshire valley, bathed in coppery gold, which stretched out below them. It was a perfect Christmas scene – snow globe worthy – of the village, gilt-edged with snow, the spire of the tiny jewel of a church sparkling in the crook of the hill. 'I mean yes, pastel pink is a good colour for a lady of a certain age, and it will go so nicely with her hair and her eyes, but what if she thinks I'm being patronising, what if she thinks that *I* think that all old ladies wear pink, and that I don't see her as person, just as a walking – tastefully dressed for her age – corpse?'

'A what?' Tom exclaimed, laughing, as he rubbed his frozen hands together, then checking his pockets once again, probably for his gloves, Anna assumed, although he still neglected to put them on. 'Granny may be eighty-nine, but the very last thing she is is a walking corpse! She was challenging Dad to a drinking game when we left to walk the dogs. She will certainly outlive us all, and she *loves* pink. You worry too much, Anna. She will adore your gift, just as much as she adores you. And if she doesn't she will

say she does and exchange it in the New Year like most sensible people do. Everything will be fine.'

'But it won't be fine, will it?' Anna protested, looking at Tom, who in the dying golden light, his reddish hair shining and his cheeks ruddy from the cold, looked like a particularly handsome fallen angel, a person who was born to be good, but couldn't quite help getting into the occasional spot of trouble. 'This is our first Christmas together, my first Christmas getting to know your family. I want them to like me, and to know how much thought I've put into their gifts and that I've got it exactly right, so that they ... you know, like me and don't secretly discuss why on earth *you* are going out with *me* whenever I'm not in the room. It's Christmas, it's *got* to be perfect.'

'Why do people put so much pressure on themselves at this time of year?' Tom asked her, shaking his head, genuinely bewildered by all the fuss. 'It's just another day, another big dinner and a load of money down the drain. Really, it's no big deal.' His grin faded as he watched Anna's face fall. 'What? What have I said? I was trying to make you feel better!'

'It's just ...' Anna hesitated, as she struggled to find the right words. 'Look, I know it's silly, and frivolous, but to me ... when I was a little kid, Christmas was the one time of year when everything seemed shiny and ... exciting and magical and just for those one or two days everything was fine. And I suppose I'll always feel that way. This is my favourite time of year and I don't want that to change because I've killed your family with salmonella or offended your granny with the wrong jumper. This is the time of year when good things are meant to happen.'

'It is?' Tom put his arms around Anna and pulled her into a slightly awkward hug. Given that she was wearing his mother's ski jacket, which was made for someone a good deal taller and rounder than she was, at that moment, she most precisely resembled a duvet. 'Because as far as

I'm concerned the good thing has happened already when I met you. And besides, my family already love you. How could they not? You arrived laden down with colour co-ordinated gifts, each wrapped in a different paper for every guest, you've volunteered to cook Christmas lunch for fourteen, a job my mother hates, as it very much interferes with her sherry drinking, *and* you've made my mother's only son a very happy and altogether much more organised man, who no longer forgets everyone's birthday, not even the dogs'.'

Anna looked up into his eyes apologetically. 'I know I'm a nightmare. I'm controlling and overanxious and constantly organising everything that moves. I'm sorry.'

'You're not a nightmare.' Tom grinned fondly at her, touching her rose-frosted cheek with the back of his frozen hand. 'You're extremely high maintenance, but you are not a nightmare.'

'It's just ... it's just ...' Anna gazed out across the valley, the twinkle of faraway headlights dipping and disappearing between hedgerows, as the whole world went home to be with loved ones on Christmas Eve.

'It's just, you're the sort of girl who likes things the way you like them,' Tom spoke for her. 'And I sort of like that about you, even though you do colour co-ordinate my pants.'

'I just think you know where you are with colour co-ordination. Particularly when it comes to scheduling when to do laundry, you get to cerise and you know it's time to put a wash on ...' Anna began, before she broke into a chuckle. 'Sorry again.'

'You are *my* perfect girl, Anna, any time of the year,' Tom told her fondly, with more than a touch of pride. 'Even your imperfections are perfect.'

'Thank you.' Anna leaned her cheek into his hand. 'It is so nice that you get me ... What imperfections?'

Tom laughed, tossing his head back so that the very last remnants of the sun bathed his face in amber light.

‘Oh you know: the endless list making, the constant diary co-ordination, the way you break into my phone and put reminders in my planner for me ...’

‘I don’t break into your phone! You don’t have a password on your phone. I keep telling you to get one. I even made a list of difficult-to-hack passwords and set a reminder for you to look at it on your ...phone.’

The two burst into laughter. Anna playfully pushed Tom away and found herself backing into one of the dogs, who for some reason had made it his business to be tangled up in every available pair of legs he came across; Tom’s grandmother said she was convinced he was dead set on getting her a hip replacement.

‘Dog!’ Anna yelled, giggling. ‘Don’t stand about, run!’

Tom grinned as Anna took off through the snow, Nelson barking and leaping excitedly at her heels, eventually bringing her to the ground in a good-natured tackle, which quickly became rather amorous on the part of the dog.

‘Tom!’ Anna shrieked and giggled at once as, pinioned to the ground, she suffered Nelson’s enthusiastic attempts at a French kiss. ‘Come here and defend my honour!’

Tom hauled the sizeable animal off Anna and threw an imaginary stick for him to chase – a ruse Nelson almost always fell for, even though he was now almost five. Tom knelt down in the snow next to Anna, who looked happier and more relaxed than he’d ever seen her, with her blonde hair fanned out around her, her eyes sparkling with mirth.

‘I love you, Anna,’ he said, rather more seriously than he had ever said it before, which was a total of thirty-nine times since the first time six months ago, Anna happened to know. (And had made a note in her diary in case she should ever forget.)

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked, suddenly anxious as he helped pull her up out of the snow and on to her feet, just

in time before Nelson got back from his ill-fated mission. The dog fixed his eyes on Tom, his tail wagging crazily until he threw another stick.

‘Nothing,’ Tom said. ‘It’s just, just then I realised that it’s really true. I really do love you.’ He smiled happily, but Anna frowned.

‘So before then, before that moment all the other thirtimes that you said you loved me you weren’t really sure?’

‘Yes. No. Oh God, Anna!’ Tom rolled his eyes. ‘Stop analysing everything I say, I’m trying to be romantic here!’

‘Sorry.’ Anna was contrite. ‘Proceed.’

Tom took a breath. ‘Well, I can’t just be romantic on command, that’s not something you set a reminder for in my diary, is it?’

Shaking her head, Anna made a mental note to delete the reminder she’d set for 13 February at the first available opportunity.

‘I love you too,’ she said, testing the words on her tongue. Tom was the very first man she had ever said them to, and they still felt unfamiliar and a little alien, like they weren’t words that were ever meant for her.

‘Do you?’ Tom asked her, taking her hands in his and looking into her eyes. Anna was surprised to see her confident self-assured boyfriend looking suddenly nervous and uncertain.

‘Of course I do,’ Anna said gently, smiling at him. ‘How could I not? Have you met you?’

‘You’re not that forthcoming with the romance yourself, you know,’ Tom said. ‘Most girls I’ve known have been so needy and “I love you, do you love me”, but not you.’

‘Really?’ Anna was genuinely surprised, but then again she supposed she hadn’t needed to make a list for how many times she said the three little words in question. ‘Well, I do. I do love you Tom. It’s just that I’ve never had anybody to say it to before, so I suppose I’m not familiar with the etiquette.’

‘That’s so you.’ Tom smiled. “Not familiar with the etiquette”.’

‘Oh, sorry again—’

Tom stopped Anna before she could say more. ‘Stop saying sorry for the things I love about you, otherwise I might have to change my mind.’

‘Your mind about what?’ Anna asked him, intrigued and then alarmed.

‘I’ve been trying to tell you something since we got up here,’ Tom said, pleased that he finally had Anna’s full attention.

‘Why?’ she asked him anxiously. ‘Because all I’m saying is if you were planning to dump me you should have done it before I arrived at your parents’ house for Christmas. I bought a goose, Tom, a goose. There is a dead goose the size of a whale in the chest freezer in your garage. It would be exceptionally rude of you to dump a girl who’s preparing to feed your family for the next month—’

‘Were you there when I was talking about how much I love you?’ Tom interrupted her. ‘You know, about five seconds ago. Stop it, Anna! I’m not dumping you!’

‘What then?’ Anna asked him. ‘Have you got a sexually transmitted disease?’

‘What!’ Tom shook his head in despair. ‘You know what, I’m just going to do this.’

Anna stood watching as Tom fumbled in his pockets again, this time producing a small box, which he opened to reveal a respectably sized diamond ring, of at least a carat, glowing faintly in the dying winter sunlight.

‘Oh!’ Anna said, clapping her hands over her mouth.

‘Good.’ Tom nodded at her self-imposed gag. ‘Now keep your hands there until I’ve finished.’

Wide-eyed, Anna nodded as Tom dropped to his knees.

‘Anna Carter, the moment I saw you when you opened the door at our friend Liv’s birthday party eight months ago, the moment I set eyes on you, I knew you were the one

for me. You are the funniest, kindest, most beautiful, sweetest, most compulsively obsessive and overanxious person I know. And, as previously mentioned, I love you. And even though I am certain that Anna Carter organising a wedding is going to be one of the single most terrifying things I have ever witnessed – or experienced – and may in fact bring about the end of the world as we know it, I am prepared to risk it. Which is why I want to ask you, will you marry me?’

Anna stared at him, her hands still clamped over her mouth.

‘Now is the time when you say something,’ Tom prompted her, ‘especially as I’ve got a horrible feeling I’ve knelt in sheep’s poo.’

‘A full year before my deadline too,’ Anna said, happily releasing her hands and gasping in a breath of icy air.

‘Pardon?’ Tom asked her.

‘My life plan,’ Anna explained, referring to the wine-red ring-bound notebook of mostly lists that she kept constantly at her side. She wrote in it every night, ticking off the things she had done, adding the things she needed to do. It included at its very back her life plan. Tom was familiar with it; he was one of the few people she had ever felt brave enough to show it to, a couple of months into their relationship when he still thought her controlling and obsessive traits were kooky and cute. And although it had made him scratch his head and look confused, he had not run, half naked, out of the door when he’d read her plan for a fairy-tale Christmas wedding, complete with an illustration of the dress, which she’d done aged nine. The plan was simple: married by age thirty-one, two children by thirty-five and a million-pound house in Chiswick to go with them. Which had been reason enough for Anna to decide to be in love with him then and there.

‘Oh yes,’ Tom said, clearly a little disappointed, if not surprised by her reaction. ‘So that’s a good thing, right?’

‘Totally brilliant,’ Anna said, looking at the ring some more, not quite able to bring herself to touch it. ‘Completely wonderful in every way, Tom.’

‘So you are going to say yes?’ Tom asked. ‘And I am going to be able to get up out of the sheep’s poo, before the dogs come back and Nelson tries to have sex with me?’

‘Oh yes!’ Anna laughed, her eyes glittering with tears of joy. ‘Yes, I say yes. Yes, Tom Collins, I will marry you.’

‘Thank God for that,’ Tom said, clambering to his feet, just as the Labradors skidded cheerfully to a halt at his heels. He added proudly, ‘Try it on, I stole one of your dress rings when you were in the bath and traced round it.’

Anna slipped the ring on, where it sat, perfectly at home. Perhaps it was a fraction too big, but it was a neat square-cut diamond, in a simple platinum setting – exactly her taste.

‘What are you thinking?’ Tom asked, slipping an arm around her thickly padded waist and kissing her on the ear.

‘I’m thinking there’s an awful lot I’ve got to do if we’re going to be married by next Christmas,’ Anna said.

Almost One Year Later

Chapter One

SOMETHING WAS NOT quite right, Liv thought, as she watched Tom squirming in his pale gold upholstered Queen Anne chair while Anna fretted. Anna was dressed as immaculately as ever, her blonde hair tied in a chignon at the nape of her neck, her taupe patent leather heels exactly the same shade as her skirt suit. Liv thought – as she often did – that Anna looked like a cross between Grace Kelly and Marilyn Monroe, though she had been as careful as ever to attempt to hide her bombshell curves behind sophisticated clothes. Anna always worried that people would think she was nothing more than a dumb blonde, but it was a foolish person indeed that made the assumption.

Liv glanced down at her own pair of grubby Converse and wondered, not for the first time in her life, how it was Anna always managed to look like a princess in waiting, no matter what the occasion, while Liv always looked – as her mother had persisted in telling her fondly, since she was about five years old – like she had been dragged through a hedge backwards. Really it should have been the other way around. Anna was the one who had turned up at school halfway through the autumn term, aged nine, having been taken into care and placed in a local kids' home. While Liv's family was like one out of a storybook: her parents owned a large detached house with a big garden, were kind and loving and would do anything for her. Liv had grown up with the sure and certain knowledge that she would almost always get whatever she asked Santa for (except for the pet python – she never did get that).

Liv still remembered vividly the day that Anna had arrived. Before the new girl had been brought into the

class, their teacher had given them a long speech about sparrows. It had been something to do with a flock of brown sparrows, who one day were joined by a single white sparrow, who, because it was a bit different and not brown, they eventually pecked to death, for reasons that were decidedly unclear. Neither Liv nor any of her other classmates could work out what this possibly had to do with them, until eventually their weary and sparrow-pecked teacher came straight out with the news that Anna was living in a children's home. Thirty nine-year-olds had all but rubbed their hands together with glee as they anticipated the arrival of their new disenfranchised victim, who was bound to be a target for torment if ever there was one. But when Anna arrived she hadn't been anything like what they were expecting, even then, fresh from all she had been through.

Yes, her uniform was worn out and second-hand, and her shoes had clearly been bought from a supermarket, but with her long golden hair rippling down her back, Anna had stood tall and proud before them, as Miss Healy introduced her, radiating a mixture of sadness and dignity that had made all the boys fall in love with her at once and all the girls want to be her best friend. Why Anna had picked Liv for the latter position, Liv still didn't know. Liv had never looked like a storybook princess. At age nine, her thick, unruly dark-brown hair had been cut short and spiky like a boy's by her own stubby nail-bitten hands, after deciding she no longer wished to brush her hair. Her school uniform was always awry and her expensive shoes always scuffed two minutes out of the box. Yet she would be eternally glad that Anna had chosen her to be her friend. That morning at break the two of them had formed an instant and indestructible bond, which had lasted their whole lives since, eventually resulting in them becoming more like sisters. Chalk and cheese they might be, but Liv knew Anna would do anything for her, and she would do the same for

her friend, no matter what it cost her. Which was why Tom's strange and distinctly un-Tom like behaviour today worried her deeply. The wedding was imminent. If anything were to go wrong now, well, Liv was sure that Anna would never recover.

As Anna waited, tapping one perfectly manicured forefinger on the arm of her chair, for the venue's flower arranger to present her with her vision for the table arrangements, Liv knew that Tom's discomfort wouldn't have escaped her notice. And that as they sat here, in the very room where in a little over a week's time they would all be toasting Anna and Tom's union, she was more than aware that Tom looked restless, anxious, like he had somewhere much more important to be. Which didn't make sense, Liv thought, uneasily. Tom adored Anna. He had done since the moment he'd set eyes on her, around eighteen months ago when Liv had invited her new friend from her kick-boxing class to her birthday party. And it was hardly surprising - most men, when first confronted with Anna's mass of thick golden hair, her curvy figure and long legs, were usually blown away. Then when they got to know her they'd find she had intellect and humour in equal abundance. But then soon after that, that she was obsessively organised and a little bit controlling. Actually extremely controlling. Not that it was Anna's fault really. It was her way of adjusting to the chaos of her childhood, Liv understood that, but until Tom there had never been a man in Anna's life who got it.

Tom though had stuck around, and the more he had gotten to know Anna, the more he liked her. Anna's lists, her plans, her constant striving for perfection and her need to control almost everything around her, frightened most men off within weeks, despite how beautiful she was. And if she'd been asked to put money on it, Liv would have thought that sporty, but super easy-going and relaxed Tom would have been running a mile from her obsessive

compulsive friend within weeks. Instead, he'd seemed intrigued by her, in turn fascinated and amused. Gradually, Liv had watched her new friend fall in love with her oldest and best friend. Aware that their lives were about to change for ever, Liv had done her best to conceal her mixed emotions as Anna and Tom grew ever closer, knowing that if anyone deserved a man like Tom, it was Anna. They were so good together, everybody thought so. So why did Tom now seem so distracted so near the wedding?

'So,' Jean the florist was telling Anna, as she opened a rather dog-eared and aged-looking photo album. 'For a Christmas wedding, my brides usually love this combination of holly, ivy and mistletoe displayed in this fishbowl vase. It looks very very festive and yet modern and chic.'

It was Liv's turn to squirm as she watched Anna stare blankly at a photograph of someone else's wedding.

'I don't think,' Anna said very slowly and sweetly, 'that flowers in fishbowls are *quite* for me, not that they are not lovely for some people. It's just that if you remember my email, sent to you on the eighteenth of November at fifteen forty-eight, you'll recall that I asked for roses? Big fat red roses?' Anna unleashed her best smile, reserved for the people that were testing her compulsive need to have everything exactly the way she wanted it the very most. 'Here, let me give you a copy, because sometimes those pesky little emails just wander off and go missing, don't they?' Anna produced her wedding folder, an orange highlighter pen from her special highlighter-pen pocket in her bag, and retrieved a copy of said email from the dated files marked 'Correspondence (Venue)' which she passed to Jean. 'So let's just go through this, shall we? As you can see, it's composed in easy-to-read bullet points ...'

Jean blinked at Anna, and closed her photo album with a distinct slap, clearly offended that her trademark 'festive plants in fishbowls' weren't considered to be up to

standard. This was her fault, Liv thought, momentarily distracted from Tom's odd behaviour by Anna's anxiety. Not that Anna's face wasn't a picture of serenity. But Liv knew the signs and knew the murderous thoughts that were almost certainly running through Anna's head. She should have made her delegate more.

'You can't try and do everything,' Liv had told her the day Anna had broken the news of the wedding. It was last New Year's Eve. Liv had got back to the flat first, glad to have escaped her lovely, but energy-zapping family, and to finally be back home with a precious week off work to do nothing but watch bad TV and eat the poor quality junk food that she would never in a million years dream of admitting she loved. She'd just put the kettle on, and lined up a family-sized bag of Wotsits, when Anna let herself in the door. For once she had been without Tom.

'Happy New Year!' Anna had said, bounding into the kitchen. 'How's the family, did they miss me? I missed them. Tom's family is lovely, but it's an awful chore having to be on my best behaviour for all those days and not reorganise the kitchen or colour code their airing cupboard.' Liv had been about to respond when Anna had hugged her literally off her feet and spun her round. 'Why am I wittering on, Liv ... this is going to be the best year ever because ... Oh Liv! I'm getting married! To Tom! He asked me to marry him and it wasn't a joke or anything, he meant it and everything and I said yes!'

'Wow!' Liv had said, her eyes widening as the news slowly sunk in and she got a breath back. 'Wow, Anna. Wow.'

'Are you pleased?' Anna had asked her, not able to fail to notice the distinct lack of enthusiasm in her 'wows.'

'I am, of course I am,' Liv said, willing herself to catch up with the news. 'It's just ... Oh that's amazing news. I'm so happy for you. You're going to be married! To Tom!'

The two women had hugged again, and the second time Liv put on a much better show of being pleased, because this was Anna, and she wanted to be pleased for Anna.

‘I know,’ Anna had said, skipping a tiny bit. ‘And there is so much to do! Think of the lists! And the pie charts, and I’m certainly going to need a spreadsheet and maybe a PowerPoint presentation!’ She rubbed her hands together in glee. ‘I’m going to need millions of Post-it notes, all the colours!’

Immediately, Anna set about making lists, sitting on the living-room floor of the flat they shared, with a newly bought bound notebook and a set of coloured biros, which she must have picked up on the way home for just this purpose.

‘We’re supposed to be going out, remember? Dancing? Bringing in the New Year? Not making lists that can easily wait until tomorrow,’ Liv had said, a touch petulantly. ‘Especially as this will be our last *ever* single girl New Year, Anna.’

‘I know, and we will, I promise. But just let me make a pre-list. A list of lists, please, Liv. You know how excited I get by a new notebook.’

Sighing, Liv had sat down on the floor next to her friend, crossing her legs, noticing a hole in the seam on the inside thigh of her leggings, and tugging at it to make it a bit bigger.

‘I’m really pleased for you and everything,’ she’d said, despite the heavy weight that was descending steadily downwards in her chest.

‘But?’ Anna looked up at her, her pen hovering mid-air.

‘But what?’ Liv asked.

‘That sentence was definitely going to end in a “but”,’ Anna said. ‘“I’m really pleased for you and everything but ...” But what? Please, please, don’t say you’re not happy for me and you don’t love Tom, because if you don’t approve

you realise I can't marry him, don't you? Your disapproval could seriously ruin my life, here.'

Liv had sighed, picking up the blue biro and slotting the lid of the green one onto it, just because she knew it would drive Anna mad.

Honestly, she couldn't quite make sense of her own feelings at that moment, and although Anna was quite right, there was a 'but', a massive huge 'but', it wasn't exactly one that she could communicate then, or indeed ever now that Anna and Tom were forever. Because you didn't do that, you didn't tell your best friend moments after they told you they were getting married that you were really pleased for them and everything BUT you'd been secretly in love with their fiancé since the first moment you'd set eyes on him, weeks before he'd even met Anna. Or that you'd only invited him to your birthday party, and made a fool of yourself by wearing an actual dress, because you'd rather hoped that it would be you he'd be kissing passionately on the sofa at ten to two the next morning, and not your flatmate and best friend. (And the person who had always best fitted the description of soulmate.) No, you definitely did not add that particular 'but' to the end of that particular sentence in response to that particular announcement. Not unless you were OK for life as you knew it to end for ever and ever less than sixty seconds later.

Liv really had done her best to get rid of her feelings for Tom as he became more and more of an integral part of Anna's life, really she had. She had told herself it was just another silly futile crush in a long line of silly futile crushes, exactly like the time she'd decided she was in love with Marcus upstairs, even though Marcus upstairs was living very happily and very monogamously with his life partner, Brian. But the truth was the more Liv got to know Tom, the deeper and more hopeless her affections became.

And now it felt like she was losing both the people she most cared about in the world for ever and there was nothing for it but to keep her chin up, have a stiff upper lip, be the kind of best friend that Anna always was to her and continue to let Tom treat her like one of the blokes down the pub, even ever so occasionally giving her short dark hair an affectionate ruffle, like she was his kid brother. There really was nothing else for it but to ride it out until the ache in her heart finally faded, only it was now almost a year on and Liv still felt exactly the same.

‘But ...’ Liv had said heavily last New Year’s Eve. ‘If you take on organising every aspect of your own wedding with the same crazy controlling freakery you do everything else, you *will* literally explode. Take it as read that I’ll help you. You just need to concentrate on the things that really matter. Like getting drunk with your oldest friend in about an hour’s time?’

‘It *all* matters!’ Anna had said, distracted. ‘Right, blue for the dress, green for the venue, red for flowers, black for catering, or do you think pink for the dress?’

‘Er, we are caterers,’ Liv reminded her. ‘I’ll cater your wedding. I might even give you a discount.’

‘But you are the chief bridesmaid!’ Anna had exclaimed. ‘You can’t be cooking in puffed sleeves and an Empire line dress!’

‘Firstly,’ Liv had said, ‘thank you for asking me, I’m honoured, and, secondly, over my dead body will there be puffed sleeves and, thirdly, I will plan your menus, I will pay for it, I will prep it and then we can let our loyal staff cook it for you, and come to the evening do. It can be the Simple Pleasures wedding gift to you, after all, without all your hard work I’d still be doing Sunday roasts in a pub.’

‘Nonsense,’ Anna said. ‘You are a cooking genius. It’s only a matter of time before the world truly recognises your talent.’

‘Which is why you’d be a fool not to let me at least take catering off your hands. Who else in the world knows you like I do?’

Anna had crawled across the floor and hugged her. ‘Thank you. I’m so happy,’ she’d said, beaming. ‘I’m not used to being this happy. Normally when I’m happy something always goes wrong. Sometimes I think it’s better not to be happy, and then you are never disappointed. Oh God, what if everything goes wrong?’

‘Anna! Nothing will go wrong,’ Liv had reassured her. ‘Tom is one of the good guys. And he really loves you, anyone can see that. Now please put away your pens and your lists and let’s go out and have some fun! For one thing I’ve only got twelve months to find a date to your wedding.’

‘OK,’ Anna had relented. ‘But re the catering, could you do me a menu by the end of the week, and can we have monthly updates to check on progress?’

‘Anna, it’s not even January ...’ Liv began, knowing it was pointless to argue.

‘I know, but can we?’ Anna asked her.

‘Yes, we can. And for God’s sakes, get a florist to do your flowers. What the hell do you know about flower arranging?’

Famous for being one of the few people in the world that Anna listened to, Liv had made her concede control of the reception flowers to the venue florist, saying she might as well make full use of the services she was paying for. And so this moment of supreme awkwardness was in fact all Liv’s fault.

‘So as you can see,’ Anna said, ever so politely, biting her lip, ‘I want roses, deep, dark red roses, fat ones, old-fashioned fat roses, with dark green glossy leaves, a hand-tied natural-looking bunch of those every three seating places and, in between, petals scattered across the table, and candles, exactly the same colour red, alternating with

the flowers. So that's not a problem, is it? To have it like that, *exactly* like that?'

'Give the woman a break,' Tom said, shaking his head, getting up suddenly and pacing to the full-length window, where he looked out across the grounds. Liv winced as Anna's head snapped round to watch him, her blue eyes full of concern. That's what all this nonsense to do with the flowers was about. She was trying to get Tom interested, to get him to take part. But for the last week or so he'd been anything but, all his apparent joy in his forthcoming nuptials seemingly seeping away. And Anna being Anna didn't know how to ask him what was wrong, so instead she went into crazy Anna overdrive.

'Look,' Liv said, leaning forwards and smiling pleasantly at Jean, 'you can get the fat roses, can't you? In that shade of red, and the candles, can't you? That's easy these days, right?'

'Yes, I can. I was just offering an alternative,' Jean said, clearly still a little wounded. 'That's what I'm here for, to offer ideas ...'

'I know.' Liv smiled warmly. She leaned forwards and added with a conspiratorial air, 'And your alternatives *are* lovely, just not what Anna has in mind. Anna has had her table arrangements in mind since nineteen ninety-one. And you, of all people, know what brides are like, right? Mental.'

Jean said nothing, but her expression indicated that she'd seen more than one Bridezilla in her time.

'Also about the specific type of ribbo—' Anna began to interrupt, but Liv held her hand up to stop her, the only person in the entire world who could get away with doing that.

'The thing that is so brilliant about you Jean, is that you do know more about this than anyone, so who better for Anna to trust her table-setting dreams to than you?' Jean thought for a moment, and seemed unable to come up with

any names. 'So, we know we can leave you to do everything as per the email, down to the last letter, and everything will be just fine. It will be more than fine, it will be a dream come true. A dream that *you* made come true.' Jean nodded and smiled, her hurt feelings instantly healed by a little of Liv's diplomacy. 'Great, now I need to have a look at your kitchens, and have a chat to your chef about your equipment, see if there's anything I need to bring with us for the day. OK?'

'Perfectly fine,' Jean said pleasantly, smiling at Anna, whose eyes were fixed on the back of Tom's shoulders. 'I must warn you that Chef is not thrilled at being ousted from his own kitchen for the wedding.'

'Well,' Liv said as she got up, touching Anna briefly on the arm. 'Chef can comfort himself with the knowledge that not catering this particular wedding will almost certainly extend his life by at least ten years.'

Liv paused, leaning close to her friend.

'Anna,' she said, 'just try to relax, darling. If you don't, all these months and years of planning will have been for nothing. It will all go by in a flash and you won't have noticed any of it, not even the reindeer-pulled sleigh that's taking you to the church, which you somehow managed to get Whipsnade Zoo to lend you for the morning.'

'It wasn't that hard. They don't open on Christmas Eve, I gave a considerable amount of money to the Save the Tiger fund and I'm paying the reindeer keeper an extra bonus. Everyone is happy, even the reindeer, who get more of their favourite feed. And I know, that's what everyone says, about it all flying past, but it won't for me. I've made a list of times when I have to pause and take stock: just before the ceremony, during the vows, speeches, photos, first dance etc. I'll be making mental memories!'

'Are there any other kind?' Liv asked her fondly.

Anna smiled at Jean. 'Thank you. I don't mean to be so demanding. It's the nerves, you know. And I always expect

the worst, it's a bad habit of mine.' Anna glanced anxiously at Tom.

'Hey, Tom!' Liv succeeded in getting him to turn back from the window. 'Restrain your bride while I go and check out the kitchen, OK?' she said. She met and held his gaze for several seconds, attempting to psychically add the message *And at least look like you're having a good time* to the end of it, but Tom only stared at her blankly. It was clear that his mind had been elsewhere, somewhere very different from talking about wedding flowers. But where, or with whom and why?

That was the question that worried Liv.

Later that evening, after a long bath, and a large glass of red, Anna looked at Tom as he lay on his bed staring at the spot on the wall just above the TV. He'd said he had to go back to his place tonight, he had a big meeting in the morning, and Anna had accompanied him, unthinking. But now she was getting the distinct impression that he hadn't really wanted her to come.

'Hello,' she said pleasantly as she buttoned up her cream linen pyjamas and got into bed. 'Hello there? Anyone in?'

Tom smiled, albeit half-heartedly, and held out his right arm to her, which Anna gratefully scrambled into, resting her head against his chest and listening to the steady beat of his heart under his white T-shirt for a few moments.

For a while they had always gone to bed naked, or started out with clothes on, which during the course of their progress to bed would be discarded across the flat. Later, when Tom had drifted off, Anna would get up, pick up the clothes, hang, fold and pop them in the laundry as required, seeing it as a triumph of nature over nurture that she was able to be spontaneous even to that extent. But recently – was it recently? – a few months ago perhaps, they had started going to bed in nightclothes. And one

night they had gone to bed without even kissing each other goodnight. Anna, who, before Tom, had limited experience of relationships that lasted longer than the seven days it normally took her to do some poor man's head in, wasn't sure if this was a normal thing, this cooling-off period, this calming down of passion. She would have asked Liv, but Liv had made her swear, soon after she started seeing Tom, not to tell her about anything she and Tom got up to in the bedroom.

'Why not?' Anna asked her, bemused. 'Finally, I have something to tell you and you don't want to hear it, why?'

'Because ...' Liv had squirmed, looking like a restless little girl. 'Because it's been two years since I've had a proper boyfriend and, happy as I am for you, one of the main reasons I like you is because you always had a worse sex life than me. Now you have somehow lucked into a really great one, I don't need to further heighten my personal inadequacies by hearing about it!'

'That's not the main reason you like me!' Anna protested. 'We met when we were nine! The main reason you like me is because I do all your laundry and pair your socks. Oh please, Liv. Who am I going to ask about sex if not you?'

'Um.' Liv bit her lip, her dark eyes narrowing. 'You could try Mum? Call her. She's constantly trying to talk to *me* about sex. "How much sex have you had, Olivia?" "Are you having any sex, Olivia?" "Are you sure you aren't gay, Olivia? You know we wouldn't mind at all. Ask your brother, he's completely gay and Daddy and I love him just as much, Olivia!" You know, all the things that mums are not supposed to ask their daughters unless they want to mentally damage them for life. Give Mum a call, she adores *you*. *You* are her favourite.'

'I think I know why you haven't had a boyfriend for two years,' Anna had said, gently. 'Not because you aren't beautiful. With those massive brown eyes, and incredible