



CHERRY PIE ISLAND



The
Great
Allotment
Proposal



JENNY
OLIVER

Welcome to Cherry Pie Island - once you step on to the island, you'll never want to leave!

Socialite Emily Hunter-Brown has just bought the old manor house on Cherry Pie Island - and her friends think she's gone mad! Still, they should have known that wild-child Emily will try anything once...even settling down!

But when Emily discovers she has an allotment to take care of as well as the crumbling mansion, she's unexpectedly flummoxed! It's all very well knowing that you have to swap your high heels for Hunter wellies....but it's quite another actually getting dirt underneath her Chanel Rouge Noir polished nails?

And what is she supposed to do with her bumper crop of courgettes anyway?!

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Cherry Pie Island

Jenny Oliver

CARINA

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wrote her first book on holiday when she was ten years old. Illustrated with cutouts of supermodels from her sister's *Vogue*, it was an epic, sweeping love story not so loosely based on *Dynasty*.

Since then Jenny has gone on to get an English degree and a job in publishing that's taught her what it takes to write a novel (without the help of the supermodels). Follow her on Twitter [@JenOliverBooks](#)

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Chapter One

‘That’s it!’ Emily stood up, both hands raised in an enough-is-enough gesture. ‘This interview is done.’

‘Emily, Emily, sorry, I apologise. It’s just this is what our readers want. I won’t mention Giles again. Sit down, please.’ Faye Starkey, the journalist from *Deluxe* magazine, had half stood up, reaching towards Emily with a calming outstretched hand.

Emily was tired. She’d never walked out of an interview before. But this was the last one of the day. She’d coped with the pile-up of questions about the birth of her ex-fiancé Giles Fox’s third baby, she’d smiled when they’d brought up his recent proposal to Adeline Cooper as he’d accepted his Oscar, she’d laughed at questions about her eternal single status, her broodiness – especially since her brother had recently announced that he and his girlfriend were expecting, her poorly judged flings, her short-lived blue hair, her mother’s remarriage, but then Faye Starkey had leant forward and said, ‘Now, about this house you’ve just bought. Cherry Pie Island, isn’t it? That’s quite a departure for you, Emily. I’m wondering what’s going on.’

Emily had pushed her hair away from her face. The air conditioning in the hotel was broken and sweat was starting to bead on her forehead, outside a helicopter was waiting on the lush grass to take her to an awards ceremony in Cannes. ‘Nothing’s going on, Faye.’

Faye had leant back in her seat, crossed her legs, taken a sip of water. Emily’s water had run out and the jug on the table was empty. ‘I just think, the recent hair changes, the launch of the new signature scent – Cherry Blossom, isn’t it? So hugely nostalgic, Giles having more and more babies, buying up some great houses with far too many bedrooms for a single woman with no expectation of children. Emily, it smacks of a mid-life crisis. However you try and dress it up. I can’t imagine how must it feel; the press have you earmarked as being desperate for marriage and a baby so no eligible man will come within a mile! Surely this house thrown into the mix, will have them running for the hills. I feel for you, I really do. If we’re completely honest, you’re romantically doomed.’

That’s when Emily had stood up to leave. At the mention of the house something inside of her had snapped. It was the best thing that had happened to her in years and somehow they’d already snaked their way inside and put their grubby little stamp on it. ‘Faye.’ Emily turned back and rested her hand on the back of the sofa. ‘This is over. I’m not answering anything else.’

'Oh come on! What happened to the Emily Hunter-Brown that we all know and love? Just give me a little soundbite, tell me who you're shagging and your plan to wreak havoc in the countryside and I can flip the whole focus of the piece.'

Emily ran her tongue along her top lip, watched Faye with her chewed Birchen hovering over her notepad.

Just give her what she wants and she'll go away.

But something made this time different. Something held the quip back about blazing a trail through the sleepy little island. Something Emily couldn't quite pinpoint, but she knew there was only one answer. 'Sorry, Faye, that's private.'

Chapter Two

'I can only apologise, Ms Hunter-Brown, it's a hold up on the other end. It's nothing to do with us,' the estate agent stammered down the phone.

Emily pulled a face at Angus the removals man who was leaning against his van in the door having a cigarette and opening a Lilt.

Emily hadn't had a Lilt for about twenty years. In this glaring sun it looked tantalisingly tempting.

'You want this?' Angus said, holding up the can as he saw her staring at it.

'Really?' she mouthed as the estate agent wittered on about how he didn't see them completing till about two o'clock. 'Thank you,' she whispered as she took the can and reached up to give Angus a peck on the cheek, making his chubby cheeks blush.

'OK, fine, fine, fine, darling - stop, it's fine - just ring me when it's done and we can go in,' Emily said hanging up the phone and taking a sip of the ice-cold Lilt.

'How do you do that?' her friend Annie asked as she stood up from where she had been sunbathing on a patch of grass outside Montmorency Manor.

'What?'

'That - get people to give you things.'

Emily made a face. 'I don't know. They just do. Want some?' she asked, handing the Lilt to Annie who shook her head.

'I don't like Lilt, it has a funny aftertaste.'

'See, that's why no one gives you anything, you turn your nose up at it. Right boys,' she said to the removals guys hanging around the truck, 'I'm starving, can we go and get something to eat?'

'Don't you think, while we're here, we should go to the allotment?' Annie said, dusting off the back of her denim shorts.

'No I absolutely do not. I can't think of anything worse.' Emily rolled her eyes, looking across at the removals men to bring them in on the joke and they all sniggered.

Annie made a face. 'I don't want to go either, but we did promise, Emily.'

Emily scrunched up her face. 'Can't you just go?'

'No.'

‘Pleeeeeease?’

Annie stood with her hands on her hips. ‘Emily, remember I’ve known you since you were fifteen. That crap doesn’t work with me. The whole Emily Hunter-Brown thing – nothing. Doesn’t work.’

‘Actually, Emily,’ Removals Angus stepped forward, ‘I was wondering if you’d sign this...’ He held out one of his company fliers, ‘For my daughter. She just loves your films.’

Emily gave Annie a smug little smile and said, ‘Of course I will, Angus. Do you want Annie to snap a photo of the two of us?’

Annie glanced heavenward, but even she then had to smile as Angus perched up on tiptoe to give a crimson Fred another kiss on the cheek for the camera.

‘Right then,’ Emily said, ‘Shall we go and get bacon sandwiches, I’ll buy.’

‘Emily—’ Annie cut in, ‘The allotment.’

‘Urgghhh, you’re so boring! OK, fine, Fred, here’s a twenty, we’ll be there as soon as we’ve gone to look at plants. Come on then, Annie. Let’s go.’

By the time Annie had realised she’d got her way, Emily was already halfway up the path that ran down the side of the manor to the allotment, her gold wedge sandals crunching on the long grass, and Annie was the one trotting along behind her, trying to keep up.

The Cherry Pie allotment was based on a small patch of land between Moor Manor and the boatyard and studios. The plot Annie and Emily were caretaking was #138 and had once belonged to the late island matriarch Enid and their close friend Holly. Together they’d won a number of trophies every year at the Cherry Pie Show and, this year, as a tribute to Enid, Holly wanted to win at least one of the categories. She’d planted and netted all the seeds, carefully looked after her dahlia tubers over winter, chitted her potatoes and had a variety of seedlings growing in the shed, however she’d then discovered she was pregnant and had moved to France to live with the baby’s father.

Asking Emily and Annie to step in wasn’t an ideal choice – neither of whom knowing the slightest thing about gardening – but Holly’s options were limited as most of the island gardeners were preparing to do battle against her in a bid to snatch up the categories previously dominated by Enid’s horticulture.

Winding through the grassy path, Emily realised that she knew most of the faces from her youth – on her right was Holly’s dad, Martin, constructing a new greenhouse, further up was Barney from the pub, on his knees patting down the soil around his tomatoes and next to him was Annie’s mum and her husband Valter, both in their gardening gloves, arguing over where to plant whatever it was they had in pots on the ground in front of them.

‘Hey, Mum,’ Annie called with a wave.

Her mum looked up and, catching sight of the two of them, pulled her gloves off and came strolling over. ‘Hi, darling,’ she said, giving Annie a quick kiss on the

cheek. 'Emily, lovely to have you back! I do love it when you're around. Always such fun. I hear you're helping Holly with her plot. Not sure that's strictly in the rules,' she laughed.

Emily smiled, noticing the seriousness behind Annie's mum's chuckle and had a vague recollection of Holly's instructions about the competition.

'They all seem nice, Emily, but they're not. It's a front. Like Annie's mum, for example, lovely but when it comes to gardening - ruthless. She's got a cabinet full of trophies and she wants more. I think she's going for a clean sweep. Oh and don't trust Annie's brother, no way, he's just competitive for competitive's sake. I don't even think he likes plants, just wants everything to do what he says. You can't sort of trust my dad but he still wants to win so may give you some duff advice. I'm maybe not though. That might be unfair. Matt and his son River - they're untested. Martha - well, she'll just be watching to see that you don't mess up. Emily, are you listening? This is important.'

Emily leant forward, plucked a bit of blossom out of Annie's mum's hair and said, 'I don't think you've got much to fear, Mrs B. I think we're probably more of a hindrance. But pop by anytime, I'll be the one in the deckchair with the champagne.'

Annie's mum waved her away with a smile, then said, 'Oh and how's the manor? I hear the other couple destroyed the place.'

'I haven't been inside yet.' Emily shrugged. 'Only seen it on a virtual tour, and from what I can tell—' But before she could finish she was interrupted by a man's voice saying, 'Excuse me...' And she turned to see a blond guy in a black vest top and jeans trying to push a wheelbarrow past her.

'Oh, sorry!' Emily stepped back.

'No problem, ma'am,' said the man with a wink and as he walked past added, 'Nice shoes.'

'Thanks,' Emily replied, doing a little pose and then mouthing to Annie and her mum, 'He's nice.'

Annie's mum narrowed her eyes at the retreating figure, 'He must be new, I don't know him.'

'I'll do a bit of digging,' said Emily, smiling at her little pun, and Annie's mum put her hand on her chest and said, 'Oh it's just lovely to have you back.'

'Come on. We're up here,' Annie pointed ahead. 'By that big tree.'

'It's a damson, Annie,' her mum said with a sigh, then added, 'You girls, I don't know.' And went back to Valter and her planting.

All around them people were engrossed in their gardening. Digging, raking and hacking down branches, busying themselves with bonfires and trundling wheelbarrows. In the distance the attractive blond man in a black top was fiddling about in a greenhouse. In the far corner an older woman, Enid's daughter Martha, was lifting the slats out of a beehive with no protective clothing - she was

clearly as tough as old boots. When they got to the damson tree, Emily saw the plot opposite theirs was being tended by a fierce-looking old guy with a black beard, long brown hair and a hat like Crocodile Dundee. His plot was immaculate. Like he'd built it with a set-square and protractor.

All around there were things that just didn't crop up ever in Emily's everyday life. Colourful pinwheels and little gnomes, swing seats and deck chairs. Earth and worms and cages of birds that might be quails.

She pulled a face at Annie, who shrugged as if to say, 'I know!'

The guy with the Crocodile Dundee hat straightened up from where he was digging, wiped some sweat from his face with his gardening glove, staining his skin with mud in the process, and looking Emily's way said, 'All right?'

'Lovely,' Emily replied, shielding her eyes with her hand to try and see him clearer.

'Know what you're doing?'

'Oh yes, absolutely,' Emily nodded. Then looked away, eyebrows raised unsure what to do next.

'We just need to water it,' Annie said. 'That's all she said, try and water it every day.'

'OK then,' Emily nodded, 'Let's water it.' She paused and looked around, 'What with?' As she said it, Annie's annoying brother Jonathan walked past carrying a black plastic bag full rubbish. He cast a look at their wilted plot and said, 'You girls should quit while you're ahead,' and then trundled off with a snigger.

Annie watched him go. 'We have to win something just to wipe the smile off his face,' she said. 'He went on a gardening course last year. Sees himself as regular Alan Titchmarsh.'

'I don't know who that is,' Emily said, leaning against the corner of the dilapidated shed as Annie went to unravel the hose.

'He's on the TV. Mind that shed, Em, it looks a bit wobbly.'

Emily ignored her but then the wood she was leaning against gave a loud creak. She glanced behind her and it wobbled. She went to stand up straight but the shiny sole of her high heel slipped against the mud and she couldn't get purchase. She reached across to the big plastic water butt next to her to try and get more support but that, supported on just a couple of bricks, also swayed under her grasp. 'It's bloody moving, Annie,' she said. 'Help me.'

Annie tried to get back to her from where she had started watering but she got caught up in the knot of hose and shouted instead, 'Just stand up, move away from it.'

'I'm trying,' Emily said, her eyes widening as the wooden planks cracked again and then one wall of the shed caved in.

Annie watched, horrified, as Emily fell back with it. Her hand was still hooked on

the rim of the unstable water butt so, as she fell, it fell with her like a giant bea. ~~Algae-fied rain water sloshed out the top as it rolled along the fallen wooden wa~~ over the top of Emily, and then down to the corner of the shed where it hit the earth and rolled to a stop by a small cherry tree, a stream of green water pouring onto the grass.

'Oh Jesus Christ!' Emily shouted, flattened to a heap on the broken shed.

'Are you OK?' Annie called as she yanked the hose from round her ankles and tried to get over to help her up.

But then suddenly a camera flashed, a shutter clicked maybe a hundred times and a man laughed and said, 'That'll do nicely, Ms Hunter-Brown.'

Emily scrambled her way up to standing as the paparazzo photographer clicked a hundred more shots, his lips hitched up into a smile. She recognised him immediately as the good-looking blond guy with the wheelbarrow. He'd followed her here and been biding his time.

Her hair was dripping with green algae-water, it was in her mouth and her eyes and on her skin. Her ribs felt crushed from the giant water butt, but all she could think was that she didn't want this guy here. She was used to being papped. Used to seeing a photo of herself just about to take a bite of a massive burger or sunbathing in a bikini - the magazine circling her cellulite in red, but she didn't want them here. This was her place.

'Oh god, can you just leave me alone?' she shouted, pushing her soaking hair back from her face.

'Just doing my job, Emily,' he sniggered.

'Well you've got your shot, can you go away now?'

'Come on, Em,' the paparazzo shouted, 'Can't you give us a quick pose? Be a good sport?'

In the past she knew she would have wiped her face clean of the algae, tied her hair up and blown a kiss for the camera, or maybe turned and given them a quick cheeky wink over her shoulder. Anything so they wouldn't be horrible about her. She'd found it was the best way to divert any negative press. Give them what they want and they'd support her. But she just couldn't. She could feel people looking from where they were working on their allotments. She could sense them exchanging looks and thinking about whether to come over. She could almost hear their split-second thoughts - she's back and she's trouble.

'Please?' she said. 'Please just go.'

But the guy shook his head and, lifting up his camera, started snapping again over and over the thrumming sound like a big fat moth caught in a jam jar.

Then, suddenly, there was a hand on the paparazzo's shoulder and the man with the beard and Crocodile Dundee hat from the allotment next door said, 'You've heard the ladies, this is private property. You're trespassing.'

'Get your dirty hands off me,' said the photographer, twitching out his grasp.

Emily couldn't really see the man's face clearly, but she could tell from his arm muscles and the bit of un-muddied skin on his face that he was younger than she first thought.

'I said, this is private property. You have no licence to take photographs on this land.' The man's voice was calm and steady.

'You gonna stop me, cowboy man?'

The man pulled off his gloves and ran his hand across his lips as the paparazzo started firing off more shots in his direction. 'Maybe,' he said.

'You touch me, mate, and I'll get my lawyers on you.'

The man laughed and took another step closer. The paparazzo rolled his eyes as if this bearded gardener wouldn't have the guts. Then, quick as anything, the paparazzo was pinned up against the cherry tree, held in place under the neck by the man's muddy forearm, his legs squirming an inch or two above the ground. The guy tore the paparazzo's camera out of his hand and chucked it into the puddle of water where it slowly sank, then he threw him over his shoulder and walked off in the direction of the river.

Emily watched in fascination. The sun beat down like a beast. Annie stood with an open-mouthed smile while the man strode off like a giant, the paparazzo's legs wagging over his shoulder. Emily looked at Annie. Annie looked back at Emily.

'Who the hell was that?' Emily asked.

'Are you kidding?' Annie said.

Emily looked blank like she had no idea.

'Emily!'

'What?'

'It was Jack Neil,' Annie shook her head as she said it. 'How could you not recognise him? You went out with him for a year!'

Chapter Three

'No way was that Jack Neil!'

The last time Emily had seen Jack was at what was meant to be the inaugural Cherry Pie Island Festival. Jack and her brother, Wilf, had set it up the year they'd finished school. They'd had the best day of their lives until night fell and the island was swamped with over-eager partygoers with counterfeit tickets that the limited security couldn't cope with.

In retrospect, the festival had been the peak of Emily's childhood. They were living at Mont Manor with her mother's fourth husband - Bernard - a campy, eccentric old make-up artist who had clearly only married for the companionship. Bernard had absolutely no interest in anything remotely parent like, threw wild, lavish parties and was often found lounging by the pool with a neat gin and tonne and a cigarette as the sun rose.

It was a well-known fact that Emily's mother had married men in the same way that other people got promoted in their careers. She took them up a notch every marriage in order to give her kids the best start in the life. The problem being that she didn't often see past the money to the character beneath. But Bernard was nothing like the previous stepfathers - he didn't shout at Emily or try and boss her friend or make her sit at the table in silence until she'd eaten everything off her plate, or sit next to her on the sofa a touch too close, or make them all take their shoes off before they came in, or make the dog sleep in a kennel outside, or get rid of the TV, or take her mum out for dinners and events every night so she never saw her. He didn't have children of his own who would make comments under their breath about her mother the gold-digger, nor did he stand up at her mother's birthday party and add something in his speech about how difficult she was to live with, but how most of the men in that room would understand what he was talking about. Instead, Bernard would take whimsical turns around the estate, dressed in a satin smoking jacket while her mother wore white linen and smiled a lot, and Emily would watch from the upstairs bathroom, delighted with her life. These were the years when she'd been expelled from every boarding school in the south and finally been allowed to go to the local comp and live at home in her own bed and wash in her own bath. The bare plaster on the wall and the peeling wallpaper, the Georgian glass windows with the howling draught and the Sellotaped-over cracks were all part of the fairy tale.

And to top that off, there was Jack. Possibly the coolest, most laid-back character on the island. She remembered him lying on a hay bale at the festival with a cigarette in one hand, cider in the other, the hazy light of the summer sun

burning down as he stretched his arm out for her to come and lie next to him. ~~Both of them squeezed onto the warm, sweet-smelling hay, him holding her tight to his side so she didn't fall off, laughing because her hair was tickling his face, the smoke on his breath as he kissed her, the sun blinding them into shutting their eyes.~~

It was perfect. It was as life was meant to be. For Emily it was like the world had paused and said, it'll be OK.

But then the crowds had come. And then the police had come. And then the rain had come. And the festival was over.

As she stood now, alongside Annie, watching as the guy in the hat dropped the paparazzo with a splash into the river and then turned and started walking back, his hands in the pockets of his black combat trousers, his white T-shirt dirty with mud, she said, 'That's not Jack. It can't be Jack. Jack's in Peru or somewhere.'

'Jack was in Peru or somewhere,' said Annie, turning to her and wiping some of the stray algae off Emily's cheek with a tissue. 'Here, use this, you've got loads more still on your face,' she said before looking back towards Jack. 'He's come back. Hasn't been around that long. And, to be honest, I only knew because other people told me. He's living on a fishing boat apparently.'

'What do you mean he's living on a fishing boat? Is he a fisherman? I thought he was an engineer?'

Annie shook her head, 'I have no idea, honestly. I just heard he was living on a fishing boat.'

'Where?' Emily asked.

Annie shrugged.

'You ladies OK?' Jack shouted as he got near.

Emily took a couple of steps closer and peered at him. Then, seeming to finally believe Annie when he took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair, said, 'Why didn't you tell me it was you?'

'You're welcome, Emily,' he said, one side of his mouth tipped up in a half-smile.

'Did you recognise me?' she asked, taking another few steps forward as Jack went back to his allotment and picked up his spade.

'Of course.'

Emily frowned. 'Well you should have said hello rather than acting all mysterious and bearded. It's unfair.'

He laughed. 'You have algae on your face.'

Emily picked up the hem of her T-shirt and wiped her face with it. 'Is it gone?'

Jack glanced up from where he'd started digging, 'No.'

She wiped her face again. 'Gone?'

He looked up and shook his head.

Emily narrowed her eyes and then turned to Annie, who was untangling the hose to finish watering the plot. 'Do I have algae on my face, Annie?' Emily shouted.

Annie peered at her. 'No.'

Emily looked back at Jack who had his head down and was supposed to be concentrating on digging, but she could see the smirk on his lips. She opened her mouth to say something but didn't know what.

No one. No one made her feel like Jack did. No one ever had. Like she was out of balance. Not in control. Even his hair and his beard threw her off. Everything he did, everything he said, seemed to catch her on the wrong foot. It was all too calm, too slow, too all-seeing. He stood up and wiped the sheen of sweat off his forehead, saw her still watching him and leant against his spade to watch her back. 'Does that happen to you often?' he asked, tilting his head towards the river where the paparazzo had been unceremoniously dumped.

'Fairly often,' Emily nodded.

'I don't know how you can live like that,' he said.

She shrugged. 'We don't all want to live on fishing boats.'

He snorted a laugh. 'I need to talk to you about that actually.'

'Why? If it's to ask me to sail away with you,' she said with a half-smile. 'The answer's no.'

As soon as she'd said it, she wished she hadn't. Even in jest she knew it was an awkward, stupid thing to say.

He narrowed his eyes then sort of laughed, shook his head and went back to digging his hole.

'Go on then, why did you want to talk to me about your boat?' Emily said.

The soil cracked under the edge of the spade. 'Because,' he said with a pant as he dug deeper into the earth, 'I'm kind of living on your property. On your mooring.'

'Are you now?'

He stopped digging and looked directly at her, sky-blue eyes on a face dirty with sweat and mud. 'Yeah. I didn't realise the house had been sold.'

'What, so I'm kind of like your landlady?' Emily bit her nail. If she still knew Jack at all she knew that he hated being beholden to anyone. Almost as much as he hated rules and regulations.

'Suppose so.'

'Well I'll have to work out some kind of rent, won't I?' she said.

'Or you could just let me be?' he said with a shrug of his shoulder.

A sly grin stretched over Emily's face. 'And where would the fun be in that?'

Chapter Four

Everything Emily remembered about Montmorency Manor had been destroyed by its previous owners.

When they finally completed, she didn't even need a key to unlock the door, just a code punched into a panel that had been chipped into the Georgian stone.

'Bloody hell.' Annie's boyfriend, Matt, stood in the centre of the hallway and looked all the way around him. 'What have they done to this place?'

Gone was the sweeping wooden staircase that Emily had slid down in a bikini one summer to get Jack's attention as he was talking to Wilf, in its place was a glass-panelled effort with silver handrails and two giant silver statue newel posts. Gone were the flagstones and the huge antique rugs and the marble fireplace next to which the giant Christmas tree had stood as the fire crackled. Now the hallway was carpeted in lime shag-pile and the walls and ceiling were painted black. They'd ripped out the cornicing and spray-painted silver skulls on the walls.

The front door opened and Matt's teenage son, River, sloped in with their pug dog, Buster, and hovered behind Emily and Annie.

'What happened to you?' Matt asked, glancing round Annie to see him.

'Nothing, I was on the phone,' River mumbled. 'Can I go to the loo?'

'Yes,' Emily said, mimicking his grumpy teenage voice, but he didn't find it funny, staring back at her blankly. Pretending to be chastised, she waved her hand in the direction of the bathroom and he slouched off, the dog trotting behind him, the spotlights along the corridor changing colour from red to blue to green as he went.

'What's wrong with him?' Emily asked after he'd gone.

'Girl trouble,' Annie said. 'He won't talk about it.'

'Ah, poor River.' Emily did a sympathetic laugh.

'Poor us, more like!' Matt rolled his eyes as they walked through into the kitchen. 'He's a nightmare to live with.'

'Don't!' Emily bashed him in the chest. 'Young love is really hard.'

Matt just shook his head as if he'd had enough of it all and then whistled when he saw the kitchen. 'Wow!' he said, and went over to prod one of the huge leopard-print high stools bolted to the ground around a white island pod.

Emily put her hands over her eyes. 'I know. It's hideous,' she said, remembering

the open wooden shelves covered in Bernard's paraphernalia from various trips abroad, the white pillar-box tiles, the Aga that they'd taken turns to see how long they could sit on as teenagers, the big wooden table covered with Bernard's make-up equipment - tool-box style boxes filled with tubes of foundation, plastic pots of lipstick and glosses, tubes of mascara and leather pouches for brushes that were stained and marked from use. She remembered the first time he'd done her make up - the flick of the eyeliner, 'Follow the line of the bottom lash and fill in the curl from the top', the Russian Red on her lips, the tiny splodge of colour on the apple of her cheeks, 'You could be in the pictures, my dear.'

She remembered when she started shadowing him on set. How he refused to admit that he needed any help, that it was starting to get a little bit much for him, but when the director of a small-time soap opera spotted Emily and asked her to audition for a role, Bernard was the first to jump in and say she was a make-up artist not an actress. It was only as she stared at this shiny, new kitchen lamenting the loss of the old, that she realised he hadn't perhaps needed her help as much as she had thought, but rather, perhaps he'd known how susceptible she would be to the film industry. The camera took quite a shine to the vivacious young blonde Emily and, of course, if it hadn't nothing would have turned out the way it did.

'They can't have been allowed to do this?' Annie said, pointing to where the original Georgian windows had been replaced by modern folding glass doors that opened out onto the garden.

Emily shook her head, 'No I don't think they were, but who's going to enforce it? It's overlooked by no one, they could do what they like. Wait till you see the bedrooms.'

River stalked back in, drying his hands on his jeans, 'There are speakers in the ceiling of the toilet.'

'There are speakers in the ceiling of every room,' Emily said. 'And the fireplace is now a video screen of a fire that you control on another wall panel. It's ridiculous.' She sashayed over to stand by River, who visibly blushed at the nearness of her and bent down to pick up Buster for protection. 'I hear you're having girl trouble,' she said, scratching the dog's head.

'Emily—' Annie cut in, but Emily waved her away.

River's eyes had gone wide, like he couldn't handle the confrontation. Buster yelped to get down.

'Don't look so terrified, darling,' Emily said, taking the dog from him and plopping him back on the floor. 'I'm just going to say, if it feels worth it don't bloody blow it. Yes? Buy her something that she'll like, apologise and tell her what you did whatever it is you did.'

Matt was standing by the leopard-print stool, Buster at his feet, one hand rubbing his forehead, clearly thinking Emily was making a mistake.

But to all their surprise, River said, 'She won't listen.'

'Of course she won't seem like she's listening,' Emily said. 'But she is listening, trust me.'

'Well she doesn't seem like she's listening.'

'That's because she wants you to try harder,' Emily said, then she paused. 'Actually, I have no idea what I'm talking about. My relationship history is terrible.'

River sniggered.

'But...' she paused. An image of Jack and her on the hay bale flashed into her mind. 'I think women want to be fought for. I think we want to know that we're worth it. But that might just be me,' she laughed, then did a big, dramatic sigh and said, 'Right, people, as much as I want to show you round all the other ghost rooms in this house, I have to love you and leave you. You're welcome to stay and have a nose, but I am needed at a very lavish charity ball at the Dorchester and cannot go looking like this.' She pointed down to her red cotton shorts and bright blue mesh T-shirt.

Half an hour later, as Matt, Annie, River and the pug were exploring the second floor bedrooms - one of which had been turned into a mini-gym and sauna - Emily came flying down the stairs wearing a backless, full-length, slinky turquoise gown. Her hair had been plaited into a complex series of knots, her make-up was so flawless and she looked so beautiful that they were all rendered speechless for a moment.

'OK?' she asked, doing a mini side-to-side twirl.

Annie smiled and nodded as the two men next to her just stared. 'You look amazing,' she said.

Emily did a little clap of excitement, then peered out the window. 'There's my car,' she said. 'See you later. Have a swim in the pool if you like,' she called out behind her. Then she was gone. And the three of them stood there, almost in shock. It was as if, with Emily there, they had been standing an inch above ground and suddenly, with her gone, they were all back down on the floor again.

Chapter Five

It was still light outside when Emily came home. She'd left earlier than she might normally. The paparazzi on the red carpet had put her through the ringer. It was one big club; hurt one and you hurt them all, and they'd given her a vicious verbal beating for the earlier incident at the allotment. Then they'd shouted all sorts of nonsense to get her attention, none of it good. She knew the photos from the event would have her looking startled or purposely caught at odd, unflattering angles. She'd smiled as they snapped but knew it wasn't the right smile – tight and unfocused, lacking her usual control.

She slipped her shoes off as she stood in the hallway of the manor and breathed in the cool silence as the moonlight cast its glow through the high Georgian windows. She was positive the house she once knew was still there, underneath all the layers of paint, graffiti art and feature wallpaper.

But even just resting her hand on the stainless-steel banister, she knew she had a lot of work ahead to find it.

Upstairs, in the fading half-light of late evening, all the removals boxes in the garish master bedroom felt like a mountain looming over her. The spotlights in the ceiling glared out at full beam as she tried and failed to work out the dimmer option on the control panel. In the end she turned them all off in frustration and had to change out of her evening dress in the dark, hanging it carefully in the built-in mirrored wardrobe ready to go back to the designer in the morning. Her pyjamas were folded on her bed but it felt too early to put them on and she was too wired for sleep. So instead she pulled on a pair of grey jeans, a darker grey silk T-shirt and a pair of red leather flip flops and jogged down the stairs and out the house via the big glass kitchen doors.

Outside, the air smelt sweet, of honeysuckle and jasmine with the faint tang of chlorine from the pool. While the previous owners had mosaicked the surround of the pool and made a small trellised patio, which wasn't that bad, they had done very little to the rest of the garden. The wide lawn, the grass yellowing from the harsh sun, still stretched out to the huge lime trees at the back. The Montmorency cherries stood in clusters on the right-hand side of the lawn, pecked to smithereens by the fat pigeons, and behind the pool some flowerbeds that her brother, Wilf, had built still stood, dominated by a massive pink fuchsia and a quince tree that had quadrupled in size.

Emily walked the edge of the garden, pausing once to glance back at the house which, from this angle, looked unchanged. The huge windows looked down at her

unblinking. She walked backwards a few more steps and then turned, knowing suddenly exactly where she was going.

At the end of the garden, where the lime trees towered overhead like skyscrapers, was a dense network of bushes - an elderflower, some big rhododendrons and a huge purple buddleia - now all entwined with some errant brambles. It was overgrown, untended, the branches all meshed together, but Emily knew what she was looking for was there. She clambered in, pushing her way through the thicket, the branches scratching her arms, spiders' webs catching in her hair, until finally her feet touched on the pebbles of the old path and her hands met the little wooden gate, once white, now scratched and grey. It took a couple of shoves to get it open and once through she had to contend with more brambles, an old apple tree and a bank of stinging nettles, but when she was out the other side the smell of the river hit her, tart and sharp. She heard the familiar lapping of water against the bank and the shuffle of startled ducks and she shut her eyes and breathed in.

'Would have been easier to come round the side,' a voice said.

'Please don't ruin my moment,' Emily replied, holding a hand up to stop them saying more as she let the evening sun flicker on her face.

Jack laughed, 'Sorry.'

Emily opened her eyes and looked at the bright fishing boat in front of her. Moored to her jetty that should have been neglected and decrepit but which had been mended, the broken posts re-carved, the white paint gleaming. The boat itself was like a mini-trawler painted various shades of turquoise and cobalt blue with bright-red buoys hung from the sides. Around the edge was a white stripe and on it at the front, written in black, was the name, That Jack Built. The cabin in the centre had been extended almost the full length of the boat and the mast had a white flag that flapped in the gentle breeze.

'Nice boat,' she said, shielding her eyes as she looked up to where he sat, his feet resting on the rail, slicing an apple with his penknife.

'Thanks,' he said, glancing up at her without lifting his head. 'I like it.'

'Are you going to invite me on board?' she asked, head tilted to one side, watching him.

Jack paused mid-slice, then leant forward, his elbows on his knees. 'Em, if you wanna come aboard, you come aboard.'

She felt her face smile as she watched him, all mellow nonchalance and laid-back cool.

He glanced up again. 'Are you just going to stand there?'

'No.' She shook her head, a smile still playing on her lips. 'No, I'm coming on board.'

As Jack stood to give her a hand up she felt his palm, all rough with blisters and hard skin. When she was on deck, instead of letting go, she held onto his wrist.

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