

# Chapter 1

A tiny bead of perspiration rolled along Steffie's eyebrow, gathering momentum as it slid down her cheek before landing with a plop on the enormous cardboard box she was carrying. She used the top of her shoulder to wipe her face as she walked gingerly towards her ancient blue Citroën C3, and sighed with relief as she finally placed the box on the passenger seat. As far as she was concerned, the thirty-second journey from the bakery to her car couldn't have been more nerve-racking if she'd been carrying a box of gelignite. And the consequences of dropping it would have been equally explosive.

She pushed a damp wisp of cinnamon-gold hair from her forehead, and shuddered as she imagined Roisin's reaction to the loss of their parents' anniversary cake. A missing cake would have been a major disruption to the Master Plan, and Roisin didn't allow her plans to be disrupted by anyone or anything. Secure in the knowledge that for once she hadn't fallen short of her older sister's high expectations, Steffie eased into the driver's seat and rolled down the car windows. Then she turned the fan up as high as possible in an effort to combat the unexpected end-of-summer heatwave. During the last fortnight the media had happily replaced gloomy reports on the wettest

August on record with daily guides to staying cool, as forecasters pointed out that Dublin, Ireland was currently as warm as Dublin, Ohio, and hotter than Madrid, Paris or Rome. Which would be wonderful, Steffie thought, as a weak stream of tepid air finally began to flow from the vents in front of her, if Irish houses had air conditioning and outdoor swimming pools instead of central heating and double-glazing.

A swimming pool in the garden of Aranbeg, her parents' home in Wexford, would have been something to look forward to this afternoon. But even if they could have afforded it, Pascal and Jenny weren't the sort of people who'd install something that would be used approximately one summer in five. Steffie, and the rest of the day's guests, would simply have to cool off with lots of chilled drinks at the fortieth wedding anniversary party instead.

She exhaled slowly as she thought of the surprise they were about to spring on their parents, who were in blissful ignorance of the fact that they'd be arriving home to a party later. She still wasn't entirely convinced that surprising them was a good idea, but Roisin had been adamant and Steffie knew from long experience that when her sister's mind was made up, changing it was pretty much a lost cause. All the same, she muttered darkly to herself, the next time she rings me with one of her covert plans in which she gives all the instructions and I'm left with the donkey work, I'll do what I keep promising myself and say that I'm too busy to get involved. I'll remind her that I keep proper working hours even if my office is Davey's old bedroom. I'll take a stand and be strong, firm and businesslike and I won't allow her to railroad me into anything because she's twelve years older than me and she thinks that entitles her to boss me around.

She luxuriated for a few minutes in the fantasy of telling Roisin to sod off and then allowed herself a wry smile. It was never going to happen because Steffie knew that in the face of the force of nature that was Roisin in full organisational mode, there was nothing she could say to stop her. Besides, it isn't only me she bosses around, she acknowledged. She's the same with everyone and we all accept it because Roisin is a born leader, methodical and organised, and the rest of us, maybe with the exception of Dad, are too lazy to bother. Which makes it all the more surprising, she muttered to herself as the Citroën surprised her by getting up enough speed to pass a plodding Fiesta, that I'm the one with my own business and Roisin is a full-time mother. Even as the thought crossed her mind, she conceded that the reality of their situations was quite different from appearances. Roisin had been a high-flyer in the insurance company where she worked, only deciding that she needed to devote more time to her family after the birth of Dougie, her third child. And describing herself, as she did, as a full-time mother was disingenuous. Roisin still did occasional contract work for various insurers, while being an active member of the parents' council at the local school, and currently running a summer sports camp for under-tens. Every second of her day was managed and accounted for and she frequently remarked that she was busier now than she'd ever been. Steffie, on the other hand, had set up Butterfly Creative in her brother's old bedroom because she hadn't been able to find a job as a graphic artist anywhere else, and justified the time she frittered away on social media sites as important networking opportunities to get her brand noticed.

She liked to think that working for herself suited her free-spirited nature, but she was uncomfortably aware that her

current status as the owner of a company where she was the sole employee had more to do with her lack of corporate solidarity than her entrepreneurial skills. Her previous job, with a design studio on the far side of the city, had come to an abrupt end after she'd refused to work on a campaign where they wanted to use images of semi-naked women to promote a line of jewellery.

Both her parents had been totally supportive of her stance (although she'd had to apologise profusely to her dad, who'd lent her the money to buy the Citroën and whom she couldn't immediately repay), but Roisin hadn't been able to hide her exasperation with her younger sister when she heard the news.

'Are you out of your mind?' she asked, before launching into a diatribe about there not being room for principles when you needed a job. 'You've got to roll with the punches, Steffie.'

'You can't possibly mean that,' retorted Steffie when Roisin finally paused for breath. 'Not when those punches are blatantly sexist. If you can't have principles about your work, then what's the point?'

Roisin said it was all about being pragmatic and realising what was important.

'My principles are very important to me,' said Steffie.

'Oh, grow up. You're in the real world now,' said Roisin. 'You're like all those girls who scream harassment every time a co-worker passes a remark about how they look. You're letting yourself be offended.'

'It depends on the remark, don't you think?' said Steffie. 'But in any event, nobody has ever passed one about how I look.'

‘Seriously?’ Roisin was so astonished she forgot to keep haranguing her.

Her astonishment was due to the fact that Steffie was the sort of person people tended to notice. She was tall and willowy, her open face framed by a tumble of burnished curls. Roisin made no secret of the fact that she felt the looks genes had been unfairly distributed between them, because she herself had inherited their father’s darker colouring and stockier frame, which meant she was locked in a constant battle to keep her figure in the kind of shape that Steffie didn’t even have to think about. That battle was the only one she’d never quite succeeded in winning, despite her enthusiastic embracing of various diets and workouts, and it infuriated her. Steffie would tell her that willowy implied you could sort of glide into rooms looking cool and sophisticated whereas she was all arms and legs and falling over herself. On the other hand, when Roisin walked into a room everyone knew she was there thanks to the force of her personality, not because she’d tripped over her own two feet.

‘But I’d like to tower,’ said Roisin. ‘It’d give me a greater presence.’

‘You wouldn’t really,’ Steffie told her. ‘It’s not always comfortable. Besides, you don’t need a greater presence. Everyone does what you tell them anyway.’

‘That’s because I’m always right,’ said Roisin. ‘And I’m right about this work thing too. You need to grow up, Steffie. Get out there, work hard and prove yourself.’

Which by setting up her own company she thought she had, even if the decision had been forced on her by a continuing failure to find a full-time job following the jewellery debacle. She wondered if she’d been blacklisted from the

graphic artist community – if there was such a thing – because she'd never gone through such a job drought before. In the end she'd got her break by designing some flyers for a friend who owned a café on the nearby industrial estate. The flyers were noticed by a marketing manager at one of the estate's manufacturing companies and they'd asked her to be involved in a packaging design for them.

When she got the business she was elated, even though she knew in all likelihood it was because she'd quoted such a ridiculously low price for the job that they couldn't turn it down. Her parents were happy to see her busy, and even happier when she got more work from other companies in the area. They suggested that instead of having the laptop in a corner of the living room, she use Davey's bedroom as a work zone. After he'd moved out a number of years earlier they'd kept it as a guest room, but as they hardly ever had guests it didn't matter if she took it over. So she bought some office furniture from IKEA (which Pascal assembled for her), registered her business and hoped she hadn't made a terrible mistake.

It hadn't been a mistake, but it continued to be a rocky road. She'd built up a small number of regular clients and she occasionally landed more complicated and interesting projects. Nevertheless, her income was erratic and she wouldn't have been able to keep going if it wasn't for the fact that she was living practically rent-free in the house.

Shortly after Command Central, as Roisin called it, was moved to Davey's bedroom, their father took an early retirement package from his job at the Revenue Commissioners, and he and Jenny moved to Aranbeg, the Wexford house where they'd spent every summer for the past thirty-five years, leaving Steffie to live in the Dublin house alone.

'It's your corporate headquarters now,' her father had joked the day they loaded up the car. 'We're only in the way.'

'I hope you don't think I'm forcing you out.' She looked at them anxiously.

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Steffie, it's a joke.' Pascal, a good two inches shorter than her, had to reach up to squeeze her shoulders. 'I hope you'll be very successful.'

'So successful that you'll be moving into bigger and better premises in no time,' added Jenny.

That had been a year ago. So far there was no danger of her needing to look for anywhere bigger. But she lived in hope. Not because she didn't like the fact that her daily commute was a matter of walking from one room to another, or because she could work in her PJs if she felt so inclined, though she tended not to, feeling more creative when she was properly dressed, but because she wanted to believe that she could support herself and not have to rely on the generosity and good nature of her parents to keep her going.

She fiddled with the Citroën's air vents again. Thinking about her work always made her hot and bothered, as if the whole party thing hadn't got her hot and bothered already. When Roisin had phoned to say that they should surprise Jenny and Pascal with a celebration of their forty years of marriage and invite all their family and friends to Aranbeg, Steffie hadn't voiced her own opinion, which was that she hated surprise parties and she wasn't sure they'd be their mum and dad's cup of tea either, because Roisin was already well into her stride and telling her what had to be done. Nor did Steffie say that she was too busy to do all the things that Roisin had already designated as her responsibility. Roisin wouldn't have believed her, because Roisin didn't really think that

Butterfly Creative was a proper job at all. And even though she really was occupied with a proposal that could turn out to be her most profitable contract yet, Steffie was simply unable to resist the unstoppable force that was her sister in full flow.

‘We’ll do it the Saturday before their actual anniversary to properly surprise them. Aranbeg is the ideal place too. So many of us used to gather there when we were younger. It must be years since it was full of people, and Mum loved it so much like that,’ Roisin informed her.

That was true. During their childhood years, aunts, uncles and cousins from both sides of the family regularly descended on Aranbeg, turning it into a buzzing hub of social activity. These days Steffie only saw her cousins at family gatherings, where she always felt as though she’d let Jenny and Pascal down by not being as successful as everyone else.

‘Obviously there are logistical issues to think about given that Mum and Dad are actually living there now,’ continued Roisin. ‘However, I have a plan to get them out while you sort things. They’ll stay overnight with me and you can nip down and get it all organised. I’m too busy with the summer camp to do it. But you can take time out whenever you like. One of the big perks of working from home.’

Which was true, Steffie agreed, but what Roisin didn’t seem to grasp was that if she took time out during the day to do everything her sister wanted, she’d have to make it up later. Whenever she allowed herself to get distracted from her work by looking at cute kittens on YouTube, or playing games on Facebook, she reminded herself that it was her own time she was wasting. It didn’t stop her but it did mean that she often ended up working in the middle of the night. It would be the same with party planing. Roisin simply didn’t get it. She never



would. And she wasn't taking any excuses from Steffie this time either. Steffie had listened as Roisin listed her instructions, which included buying balloons and other decorations for the house, designing the invitations and keeping on top of the guest list. The invitations should be child's play to her, Roisin pointed out, they wouldn't take any time at all. And as far as the guest list was concerned, it was easy for Steffie to co-ordinate that if she was sending off the invitations. As for the decorations – well, she was the creative one, wasn't she, so Roisin would leave it all up to her, but she'd send her a link to a wonderful website that did the most amazing stuff. It was a US site, she pointed out, and Steffie probably wouldn't be able to order in time for the party, but it would give her ideas. Not that you need them, of course, Roisin added. You're the designer, you probably know loads of great sites. And you can probably get a discount too. Steffie's head was reeling when Roisin finally stopped giving orders, and instead of telling her sister that she'd certainly design the invitations but she didn't have time to do everything else, she meekly asked if Roisin had thought about plates and cutlery.

'Of course I have,' Roisin replied. 'I got the most fabulous disposable plates with the cutest little hearts on them from a shop in Blanchardstown. Totally appropriate. Mum will love them. And I've got disposable cutlery too, decent stuff, not horrible bendy plastic.'

'Sounds good,' was all Steffie said. So now, as she hurtled towards Aranbeg with the precious cargo of the cake (chocolate sponge with a ruby-red frosting, for which Roisin herself had taken total responsibility), she had to admit that it was entirely her own fault that she'd been landed with the role of invitation designer, guest-list co-ordinator and home

decorator. All she hoped was that it would all have been worthwhile. Despite her personal misgivings about the surprise element of the party, she had to accept that everyone who'd been invited thought it was a brilliant idea and they were all looking forward to it immensely. Roisin had told her to count on a twenty per cent refusal rate, but hardly anyone had turned down the invitation, which meant that they'd be dealing with close to seventy people turning up at Aranbeg to surprise her mother and father.

She supposed the phenomenal acceptance rate had a lot to do with Jenny and Pascal's popularity, and because Aranbeg was actually a fantastic venue for a summer party. Set in a secluded location close to the small village of Castlemoran, it was far enough from Dublin city to be rural and yet near enough to Wexford town not to feel completely isolated. Most of the non-local guests had managed to book rooms in nearby bed and breakfast accommodation and some had opted to stay an extra day to make a weekend trip of it. Fortunately they'd booked before the heatwave had broken out and everyone in the capital had decided to try to take a break near the sea, because there wasn't a room to be had anywhere near the coast now. The traffic was heavy on the main road and Steffie knew that it would take her longer than usual to reach Aranbeg. She hoped that all the guests would take the traffic situation into account. It would be a total nightmare if Jenny and Pascal arrived before the people who were going to surprise them. Roisin would have a fit. And that was something that would make everyone very hot and bothered indeed.