



ALEX
BROWN

The Great
Summer
Sewing
Bee

'Warm,
wonderful'
SARAH
MORGAN



Alex Brown

The Great Summer Sewing Bee

«HarperCollins»

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Can the perfect village save the perfect wedding? INCLUDES EXCLUSIVE EXTRACT FROM A POSTCARD FROM ITALY Cher, the landlady of the Duck & Puddle pub in the picturesque village of Tindledale is getting married to her fiancé, Clive, aka Sonny. When disaster strikes, threatening to ruin Cher's wedding, her best friend, Sybil comes up with a plan. Can the villagers and the sew solid crew from Hettie's House of Haberdashery and their Singer sewing machines save the big day to give Cher her perfect, country wedding?

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The Great Summer Sewing Bee
ALEX BROWN



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Dedication

For QT – I got you babe!

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Chapter One

Cher, the landlady of the Duck & Puddle pub, loved this time of day. Early in the morning, as the sun was rising over the valley of undulating fields surrounding the village of Tindledale; before anyone else was up and preparations for another busy day began, pulling pints and serving the hungry villagers hearty, homemade meals. Today's special was roast beef, sourced from Pete's farm two fields over, with all the trimmings, followed by a giant wedge of lemon meringue pie. And so, with a mug of tea and a plate piled high with toast and marmalade, Cher settled on the bench at the back of the pub garden, tilted her face up to bask in the already warm rays and inhaled a huge lungful of fresh country air. Sighing, she smiled and gazed across the fields dotted with springy lambs cavorting without a care in the world. A rainbow of wild flowers as tall as the fence swaying in the warm, gentle breeze. A collection of cabbage white butterflies fluttering all around. Tindledale, the village where she lived now, really was idyllic and a million miles away from the concrete jungle of the East London estate where she had grown up.

'You OK, love?' It was Clive, aka Sonny, on account of him being Cher's boyfriend, wandering across the grass towards her in his chef whites. When they had first arrived in Tindledale to manage the village pub a few years ago, one of the regulars had said it for a laugh, as in, 'so if our new landlady is called Cher and you're her fella, then you must be Sonny' before belting out a line from the iconic duo's song, "*I Got You Babe*". And it had been that way ever since. Now everyone in Tindledale called him Sonny.

'Yes,' she smiled up at him. 'I was just admiring the view and thinking what a marvelous place it is and that I'll never, ever grow tired of living here.' And she put her mug down on the grass before sweeping an appreciative hand across the glorious vista in front of them.

'Well, you'll never have to leave,' he nodded, sitting on the bench beside her and pulling her in for a hug. We can grow old together here now that we've bought the pub from the brewery. I still can't believe it's actually ours and we're no longer tenants.'

'Thanks to your savings. And my dad, of course.' Cher twiddled with a stray strand of hair that had escaped from her treacle-coloured beehive. It was a year ago that her dad, Bill, had died. He had been in his eighties and lived a lovely, long, happy life before slipping away peacefully one night in his sleep. Keen for his daughter to have security in these volatile times, Bill had left Cher enough of an inheritance so that with Sonny's savings, and some money that she had also put by, they could buy the pub. Originally built in 1706 as a coaching inn, it had all the charm and whimsy of a traditional English pub with Tudor beams and a large Inglenook fireplace where a real log fire crackled away during the winter months, radiating a cosy glow through the mullioned windows. 'Such a shame he had to go. I always thought he was invincible.'

'I know, darling,' Sonny soothed as he kissed her cheek and rubbed the palm of his hand up and down her arm, 'he was a good'un.'

'I guess I should be over it by now, but I do miss him so much. I went to call him earlier to tell him a joke that I overheard in the pub last night. You know how he loved a good joke. It's daft really, that I sometimes totally forget he isn't here'

'No, love, it's not daft at all,' Sonny cut in, 'your dad was an amazing man, larger than life. You're bound to miss him' He reached down to the grass to retrieve her mug before handing it to her. 'And you can still talk to him, you know. He's all around us. I bet he's even earwigging right now.' He laughed, shaking his head.

'Thanks,' she took the mug and drank the last of her tea. 'And yes, you're right. Dad always did love being nosy. People watching he called it,' Cher smiled before tucking in to a slice of toast, licking her lips to savour the tangy sweet marmalade. 'Fancy a slice?' she offered the plate of toast to Sonny.

‘Oh, yes please. Can’t beat Kitty’s marmalade,’ he beamed, biting in to a slice, ‘which reminds me, I must pop over to the Spotted Pig Café and ask her to make two of her strawberry jam roly-polys for the lunchtime crowd. Sybil and her Tindledale Tappers are coming in for their monthly knit off meeting and you know how they love a wedge of roly-poly smothered in custard after they’ve knitted a mountain of those baby hats for the maternity unit at the hospital.’

‘Ah yes, we must make sure the knitters are kept amply fuelled with jam roly-poly,’ Cher laughed, thinking what a fantastic job her best friend, Sybs, did, not only running the haberdashery shop in the village, but all the knitting and sewing classes she organised too. And with toddler twins as well – and married to the local GP which seemed to involve her being routinely stopped in the village square by people keen to show her various injuries or discuss ailments ahead of their appointment with Dr Ben, she was a very busy woman indeed. ‘I’ll put it on the specials board in that case. We don’t want the prem babies going without their little woolly hats,’ she added, in between polishing off the last slice of toast.

‘Good idea,’ Sonny confirmed, then added, ‘so, what’s brought on the quiet mood this morning? You’ve not talked about your dad for a little while now, love.’

‘I’m not really sure, to be honest. I was feeling fairly peaceful about him not being here anymore ... you know, that I could smile at the memories and chat to him in my head about the daft stuff we used to laugh about when I was growing up. I just wasn’t feeling as sad ... in fact, I’d been feeling very upbeat and excited about our wedding. I know it’s going to be such a fantastic day, it’s just that ...’ she left her voice tail off.

‘Oh, sweetheart, so that’s what has brought this on. It’s the wedding. Bound to be. It’s stirring things up for you, and understandably. It’s only a fortnight away ... and not having your dad here on the best day of our lives,’ Sonny gave her a squeeze and another kiss on the cheek.

‘I guess so,’ Cher leaned her head on his shoulder. ‘And he would have loved it. A real knees-up, here in the pub, with your special seafood platters and all the fancy hors d’oeuvres you’re making. And the cupcake tower. Dad loved a cupcake.’

‘And don’t forget the actual wedding cake. Those three fruit cake tiers are brewing so nicely, I’ve been feeding them cups of sherry to keep them moist. I might start the icing soon too,’ Sonny said, enthusiastically.

‘Ah, I can’t wait to see your finished masterpiece, I’m so glad we went with family tradition and chose the same cake design as my parents had on their big day. It’s nice that they kept the figurines from the top of their cake and now we can use them too – it’s those little touches that are going to make our day so special.’

‘Yes, do you remember? Your Dad was over the moon when you told him you planned on doing this.’

‘Ah, he always was a big, sentimental, softy. Talking of which, do you remember how thrilled he was when you went all traditional and asked him if you could marry me?’ Cher smiled.

‘Sure do. He was properly made up. Did me an enormous favour too, when he produced your granny’s engagement ring, they don’t make Bobby Dazzlers like that these days. Saved me an arm and a leg your dad did. Very decent of him!’ And he lifted her left hand up and gave her a cheeky grin. Cher smiled at the tender memory of Sonny’s proposal on the village green. It was at the end of a glorious summer day, at the Tindledale Great Village Show. The sun was dipping down on the horizon, the waft of sweet candy floss still floating on the warm breeze and everyone had clapped, their friends all delighted for them when Sonny went down on one knee in the long grass by the disco marquee after asking the DJ to play “*I Got You Babe*” – their song. Cher glanced down at the beautifully cut square diamond on her ring finger, catching the sunlight as if Dad was twinkling at her and spurring her on to grab life with both hands, as he always had. And he had been a big fan of Cher, the singing superstar, even naming his only daughter after her, and so had been delighted when he heard the song that Sonny had thoughtfully organised for such a special moment. Then, on

realising what Sonny was implying about not having to buy the ring himself, she playfully batted her hand into his chest.

‘Oi, cheapskate.’

‘Well, back then I was still trying to save so we could buy the pub, not to mention paying for the actual wedding – I was never going to let your dad foot the bill for that. No way. Asking for your hand in marriage is as traditional as I can go And good job one of us was on the ball as this wedding is ending up costing us a small fortune. We’ll have no money left at all at this rate. Who knew wedding dresses could cost so much, not to mention the grey and navy pinstripe number you want me to wear.’ He shook his head.

‘Oh, shush,’ Cher teased, gently. ‘You only get married once. Hopefully.’

‘Exactly! So why spend nearly all our budget on what you are wearing for just one day? It baffles me, love, as you could have a whole new wardrobe, that you could wear for years, for the same amount of money you’ve spent on your wedding dress.’

‘It’s not really the same though. Maybe I’m just being an old-fashioned, sentimental twit, but I love the idea of keeping my wedding dress for ever and maybe one day having a daughter that could wear it as well if she wants to.’

‘Hmm, good point. That would be nice, wouldn’t it,’ he said, seemingly mulling it all over. ‘So when will your wedding dress be ready?’

‘This week, hopefully. I’ve had the final fitting, the bridesmaids have too, and so the woman in the wedding dress shop in Market Briar is going to deliver the dresses any day now as soon as she’s made the final adjustments. She knows how busy it’s getting behind the bar. I’m rushed off my feet most days. We both are. Not that I’m complaining ... it’s great that our lovely boozier is so popular, but it does make getting out to do other things a bit tricky sometimes ... like collect my own wedding dress,’ she laughed.

‘Sure does. It’s kind of her to bring the dresses to you, we must give her a drink on the house when she arrives.’

‘Yes, I’m so excited and happy. I can’t wait to see the finished gown and try it all on at home with the shoes and everything. Sybs and the rest of the bridesmaids are looking forward to trying on their dresses too.’

‘Then it’s worth every penny to have you happy and excited, love.’

‘Thanks, and so no more grumbling about the cost. Besides, I didn’t hear you complaining when I told you about the sexy, silk underwear I’ll be wearing on the day ... I’ve gone traditional on that too and got the garter and frilly-topped stockings to go with it all.’ She nudged him in the ribs and winked saucily.

‘Wow. And I am only joking, love. Honestly, it’s going to be brilliant, and I really want you to have your dream day. Although I’d marry you in whatever you decide to wear, you’re gorgeous just as you are ... without stockings and garters and all that palaver.’ He nudged her back.

‘Ah, you’re a big softy too. And I do love you for it. It’s just a shame we opted for a long engagement, if we had got a move on Dad could have given me away,’ she sighed.

‘But your mum will do a fantastic job of it, I’m sure, love.’

‘Yes, you’re right. And she’s very excited too. I talked to her on the phone last night and she was gabbling on so fast about hats and flowers for the button holes and would I mind if she wore a lovely cream suit she’s spotted in the window of a shop in town and could she add her new friend, Sheila, to the guest list because she loves a good wedding and ... on and on she went, barely drawing breath. At this rate, it’ll be a wonder if she doesn’t pop with joy before the big day.’

Sonny laughed, checking his watch and standing up. ‘Well, until then it’s business as usual. I’ve got Barry from the hardware store coming by in a bit so I need to get back into the pub.’

‘Oh, it’s early for him. What’s he coming for?’

‘He’s desperate for storage space after his cellar flooded. I said he could use our beer cellar. It’s nice and dry down there. And temperature controlled. You don’t mind, do you?’

‘Of course not,’ she smiled, feeling much brighter now after their heart-to-heart, the excitement bubbling even more at the prospect of having her dream wedding dress soon, not to mention the gorgeous gowns she had picked out for her seven bridesmaids. But then she remembered the wedding cake that was brewing in the temperature controlled cellar. The best place for it in this super hot summer they were having. ‘As long as whatever it is Barry needs storing isn’t going to spoil our wedding cake.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, doesn’t he do key cutting and tool hire too in his shop? It could be smelly old lawn mowers he wants storing. He’ll have to use the old barn if that’s the case ...’

‘Lawn mowers?’ Sonny creased his forehead. ‘They don’t smell.’

‘Petrol ones do. And I’d hate for our wedding guests to bite into a slice of cake and be hit with a horrible petrol taste.’

‘Ah, I see what you mean now. Don’t worry, I’ll tell him all the smelly old lawn mowers will have to go in the barn,’ Sonny assured her, shaking his head and laughing.

‘Good! In that case, I’m always happy to help out if I can,’ she beamed, not wanting anything at all to spoil their big day.

‘And that’s another reason why I can’t wait to marry you. You are the loveliest, most kind-hearted, generous, thoughtful person I know, Cher Hughes.’ And he bent down to kiss the bridge of her nose before ambling back towards the pub.

Chapter Two

A week later, and Cher had woken up convinced she could smell smoke. She nudged Sonny before sitting up and pushing the duvet back. It was nearly three o'clock in the morning according to the clock on the bedside table.

'No, I can't smell smoke. Go back to sleep, love,' murmured Sonny, only half awake.

'I'm going to check. I'm sure I can smell it – I bet there's someone outside smoking. It smells like cigarette smoke wafting in through the open window,' she sighed.

Standing up she found her dressing gown, slipped it on over her nightie and went to the open window to look outside. Their bedroom was to the side of the pub where the car park was and it wouldn't be the first time she had caught groups of lads from Stoneley, the next village, hanging out on their mopeds and sharing cans of lager.

'Oh come on, Cher, it's the middle of the night. I'm exhausted and you must be too.'

'I can't see anyone in the car park,' she said, ignoring him.

'There you go. Maybe you were dreaming. Come on, snuggle up next to me. Let's have a cuddle and we'll both be fast asleep in no time.'

'No, I can't sleep now that I'm wide awake. I'm going to make a cup of chamomile tea and see if that helps me get back to sleep. Fancy one?'

'Err, no! I was actually already asleep until a few minutes ago.' And he turned over and gave his pillows a dramatic thwack as if to emphasise his disgruntlement at being woken up so abruptly.

'Sorry love, I didn't mean to wake you up. Go back to sleep. I'll sit downstairs where it's cooler.' And she tiptoed out of the room.

BANG. BANG. BANG. Cher blinked and opened her eyes before going to roll over, only realising at the last minute that she wasn't in her bed. She was snuggled up on one of the big squishy sofas in the snug. Sitting up sharply and gathering herself, she realised that the chamomile tea must have had the desired effect and that she had nodded off briefly after drinking it. She glanced at the empty mug beside her on the table. *What time is it? And what is that noise?* The banging started again. It was coming from outside the pub so she left the comfort of the sofa and went to open the door, fully intending on giving whoever it was that had woken her up, a piece of her mind. Surely they didn't think the pub was still open? But then she realised that the lights in the snug were on. Perhaps the person banging on the door thought there was a lock-in. She knew that Sonny sometimes let a few of the well-behaved regulars from the village stay on after normal closing time on the proviso they were quiet and sensible and didn't wake up Mark, the village police officer who lived in the police house on the opposite side of the village green, on their way home. This usually happened when she was away visiting her mum or on a training course at the brewery, as late night drinking sessions really weren't her thing. She liked to feel fresh and alert the next day, not weary after an extra late night.

There it was again.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

The noise was deafening and quite urgent.

They were rattling the door now as if trying to get in.

'OK, I'm coming,' Cher said, feeling irritable and tired from nodding off and now being woken up. She knew it couldn't be one of the locals as they would never make such a racket at this time of night.

'Cher? Sonny? Are you in there?'

Dr Ben?

She recognised the voice, his Dublin accent was very distinctive. But what was he doing making such a commotion at this time of night? And then a dart of fear shot through her, maybe something had happened to Sybs, or the twins? And there was that acrid smell again, stronger this time?

After reaching a hand up to slide the bolt across, the door burst open, almost knocking her over as Dr Ben came charging into the bar with a panicked look on his face.

‘Come on. You need to get out of here. Where’s Sonny?’ And Dr Ben darted off towards the door behind the bar that led to the stairs up to their private home.

‘Hey, what’s going on? Is everything OK?’ Cher called after him.

‘I’m not sure,’ he called out over his shoulder. ‘There’s smoke coming from the wooden drop doors outside. I spotted it as I was walking past after doing a home visit. There could be a fire in the cellar.’

‘A *fire*?’ Panicking, Cher went to run past him to get Sonny. But just as they jostled each other to get through the tiny doorway, an almighty popping sound, followed by an even louder whooshing noise, made them both freeze. Momentarily stunned, they stared at each other before Cher yelled, ‘What on earth was that? We need the fire brigade!’

‘I’ve already made the call,’ Dr Ben said, hurriedly, before mounting the stairs two at a time, shouting for Sonny to wake up and get out. Cher hurtled after him, ignoring protests from Dr Ben about it not being safe. There was no way she was leaving the pub without the man she loved and was going to marry in two weeks time.

Moments later, and Sonny was out of bed and tearing down the stairs after Dr Ben and Cher. On reaching the back door, Sonny grabbed Cher’s hand and they ran out into the pub garden together, closely followed by Dr Ben. Mark, the village police officer appeared, running across the garden towards them in shorts and a T-shirt.

‘Get out. The fire engine is moments away. Quickly. Follow me.’ And he herded Sonny, Cher and Dr Ben to safety through the pub garden, over the fence, across the car park and on to the village green.

Later, and shivering with shock, Cher wrapped her arms around herself and gawped at her lovely pub that was now shrouded in thick black smoke billowing out of the beer cellar’s wooden drop hatch in the pavement. Seconds after they had got outside, two fire engines, lights ablaze and sirens wailing, had pulled up in front of the pub just as an enormous flame appeared to whoosh from the hatch and roar towards them. Fortunately, the fire fighters had managed to put the fire out very quickly, but had told her the whole pub might need renovating due to the smoke damage. It was impossible to tell until daylight and the expert investigators had been in to take a proper look.

‘Cher!’ It was Sybs, wearing pajamas and wellies with her red curls flailing out behind her as she came running across the village green. ‘Sorry I didn’t get here sooner. I had to wait for April to come and sit with the twins, and the road from Orchard Cottage was closed off to let the fire engines and ambulance through and so she had to go the long way around via Stoneley. Are you OK?’

‘I honestly don’t know,’ Cher cried, falling into her best friend’s arms before letting out an almighty sob.

Chapter Three

By six o'clock in the morning, they were all sitting in stunned silence in The Spotted Pig café. Kitty had woken up on hearing the commotion with the fire engines arriving and a police car moments later and so had opened up the café earlier than usual and invited them all in for cups of tea and big breakfast bacon butties.

Sonny and Cher were sitting in a booth with Sybs and Dr Ben. Molly, the butcher's wife had arrived too and was giving Kitty a hand to make enough trays of tea and butties for all the fire fighters and police officers who had arrived. Plus a big group of villagers who had come to see if they could help out.

'There you go, my love,' Molly said warmly as she placed a large mug of tea in Cher's shaking hands, gently helping her to clasp it securely when it looked like Cher might drop the mug. 'Oh dear, you've had such almighty shock. And is it any wonder. It's not every night you have to evacuate your own home, thank God. But we are all here for you and Sonny. And our lovely village pub, we'll get it all sorted out in no time, you'll see,' she reassured, even though Cher still didn't know exactly what had happened. 'In the meantime, Lawrence who runs the B&B is having you and Sonny to stay as his guests.'

'That's so kind of him, but we can't impose at such short notice. And certainly not for free-.'

'No buts, my love. It's all sorted out. Lawrence insists and is getting a nice room ready for you both as we speak, that's why he isn't here. He's coming to fetch you in a bit. I imagine you'll be wanting a nice shower and some sleep.' And after giving Cher's shoulder a motherly pat, she bustled back off to the kitchen to make more teas.

'So have they told you what caused the fire yet?' Sybs asked gently.

'No,' Cher sniffed, 'they have to investigate, the fire department and someone from our insurance company has to come and look too ... I have no idea how or why this has happened but one thing I do know is that our wedding is ruined ... we can't even go inside the pub because the smoke damage is everywhere, let alone use the bar for the party after the church ceremony. And how are we going to feed everyone when we can't use the kitchen? The Chief Fire officer has seen the damage inside and has already told Sonny that the pub could be out of use for weeks, maybe months as it's all covered in black soot from the smoke in the cellar and so we are never going to get everything fixed in time before the wedding'

'Oh Cher, I'm so sorry.'

'And that's not all. I know it sounds trivial in the grand scheme of things, seeing as we should just be grateful to be alive' Cher stopped talking to take a sip of her tea, not wanting to catastrophise or think about what might have been if she hadn't woken up, or if Dr Ben hadn't spotted the smoke.

'Go on,' Sybs prompted.

'Our wedding cake was in the beer cellar. Sonny had been feeding it sherry for weeks to make it taste amazing on the big day. But now it'll just be a charred mess and not fit for human consumption.' And she sniffed before blowing her nose into a tissue which Sonny quickly handed to her across the table.

'I'll make another cake, love,' Sonny soothed.

'You can't without a kitchen to use, it all has to be properly cleaned and the insurance company will need to investigate first, and ... oh, it's just so blooming awful,' she said, working herself up now as she realised how bad the situation really was. 'Our whole livelihood has been destroyed.' She dropped her head into her hands.

'But it will get sorted out. That's why we have the insurance. And I'll just buy a cake if I have to,' Sonny assured her.

‘No need for that,’ Kitty appeared. ‘You can use my kitchen here in the café. Or I’d love to make a beautiful wedding cake for you. A wedding gift from me,’ she added with a consolatory smile.

‘Thank you, Kitty. You’re so kind and I know you mean well, but I really can’t see how the wedding can possibly go ahead now’ Cher replied, trying not to cry again, then after Kitty had gone to see to another table, she leaned across to Sonny and said softly,

‘It really wouldn’t be the same, the figurines from my mum and dad’s cake were in a little box beside the bottle of sherry, they’ll be ruined too. I put them there for ... safekeeping,’ and she couldn’t hold the tears in any longer.

‘Oh, love, please don’t cry. We’ll fix this mess, I promise. Come on, we don’t have to let what’s happened stop us from getting married,’ Sonny tried, but then, ‘Oh God-.’ He stopped abruptly and placed both hands on the table.

‘What is it?’ Dr Ben asked. Sonny bowed his head, seeming to have the weight of the world on his shoulders when he looked up and opened his mouth again to speak. Closing his mouth, he stared intently at the table as if weighing up whether to say anything more or not.

‘Come on, Sonny, whatever it is I’m sure we can sort it out.’ It was Sybs who spoke next, looking across the table and giving Sonny a reassuring smile.

‘I’ve just realised!’ Sonny inhaled sharply before letting out a long sigh.

‘Please, just tell me,’ Cher pleaded, putting down her mug of tea.

‘It wasn’t just the figurines that were in the cellar’ He started hesitantly.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Love, I’m so sorry. I really am,’ he shook his head and closed his eyes momentarily. ‘We left your wedding dress and the bridesmaids dresses in the cellar too.’

Silence followed.

Cher swallowed and blinked as she struggled to process what he was saying.

Sybs gulped.

And Dr Ben pushed his glasses back further on his nose.

‘Cher, please, don’t go ... ,’ Sybs said quietly when Cher stood up, her face crumpling and her shoulders dropping in despair as she went to walk away. ‘We really can sort this out, your insurance company will cover all your losses and you’ll be able to get a new dress,’ she added, swiftly, but Cher wasn’t listening. Instead she rounded on Sonny and after placing both palms on the table top she stared at him for a few seconds before saying,

‘You said it would be OK. You promised we would bring the dresses back upstairs as soon as the rush had died down!’

‘I know, love, and I’m really sorry we didn’t,’ he pleaded. ‘We were both so busy, I was trying to get Barry sorted out, you were holding the fort in the bar and then that coach party arrived at exactly the same time as the woman from the wedding dress shop’ He paused and shook his head. ‘It was only supposed to be for a short while’ Then looking at Sybs and Dr Ben as if to explain, he added, ‘There’s a smaller room off the main beer cellar and the dresses were all in protective covers zipped up safely so we knew they wouldn’t end up smelling of beer, not in such a short time. We unloaded the dresses from the woman’s car right outside the cellar door and were going to move the dresses upstairs to the spare bedroom as soon as the lunchtime rush was over, but must have got distracted and ... ,’ he paused to look down at his hands clasped together on the table before going to stand up to comfort Cher, but it was too late as she turned on her heel and ran from the café.

Chapter Four

A few days later and Cher's best friend, Sybs, was in the haberdashery shop with a team of her regular sewing bee members, knitters and crafters all gathered around on the big squishy sofas and armchairs.

'So what do you reckon?' Sybs asked, inwardly hoping they would be up for such a mammoth task. To make a wedding dress and seven bridesmaids dresses in less than a week! Plus, create lengths of bunting and hopefully some flower arrangements tied up with string in jam jars. Since the pub fire, when her best friend's wedding dreams had literally vanished overnight in a big puff of smoke, Sybs had been thinking about the best way to help her out and had come up with a plan.

Silence followed as the group all looked at each other and then at Sybs as if she had lost her mind.

'Piece of cake!' It was Ruby, the owner of the vintage dress shop in the High Street, who spoke first, clapping her hands together and standing up. 'Come on, ladies,' she enthused, then paused and after smiling at Leo, added, 'and gents,' before nodding. 'You can do this. Remember that great Christmas knit off when you knitted a trillion wacky festive jumpers in record time for that theme park in Tokyo?'

'Yes, bu-.' Taylor, the youngest member of the group went to protest but Ruby was having none of it.

'Well then ...' Ruby was on a roll now with her hands on her hips, 'we can't let Cher, or indeed Sonny down, not when they've helped all of us out with something or another ... how many times have you sat at the bar in The Duck & Puddle and poured your heart out while Cher has patiently listened and then shared some sage advice alongside a drink on the house? Or how about Sonny's lock-ins that you've all enjoyed? Not to mention his big Christmas party every year for the regulars with the free buffet and DJ? And his delicious pub lunches ... his Sunday roasts are legendary.'

'I'm in!' Molly lifted her hand in the air and leaned forward. 'Cooper and I are partial to a lock-in, and a Sunday roast, and besides, we all love a good knees-up. Sonny and Cher's wedding party was set to be the highlight of the summer, so come on everyone, lets get cracking. What do you need us to do, Sybs?'

'That's the spirit,' Hettie, the elderly owner of the haberdashery shop appeared with a plate piled high with scones smothered in cream and jam. 'We'll get the tea urn out and the biscuit tin too to keep us all going and it will be just like during the war with everyone rallying around doing their bit. And just like our great Christmas knit off, we'll have a great summer sewing bee!'

'And I have an idea of how we could save some time on the making of the actual wedding dress, because less than a week to design and stitch a gorgeous gown really is pushing it a bit,' Ruby said as she helped herself to a scone, took a bite and then declared, 'mmm, this is absolutely delicious, thanks Hettie.'

'Go on,' Sybs prompted, keen to hear Ruby's plan because even with her experienced sewing skills it was a tall order to make a wedding dress beautiful enough to replace the one Cher had her heart set on in such little time.

'Well, I have the most exquisite wedding gown in my shop. It's a vintage 1920's fitted dress with a beautiful lace train and beading all over the bodice. I thought you might be able to alter it to fit Cher as it's probably a size up from what she'd wear. But I might be wrong, I'd have to measure her properly to be sure,' she said knowledgably. 'And maybe you could make a lovely veil to match?'

'It sounds amazing, and it certainly would save loads of time as we wouldn't be starting from scratch. And I'm sure we can make a veil, no problem,' Sybs grinned, feeling relieved. She knew that Cher would like a vintage gown as the one that got ruined in the beer cellar had been inspired by one she saw in an old copy of Vogue she had found online. But then Sybs quickly realised, 'Cher

is on such a tight budget though! I know she won't mind me telling you that all the money she and Sonny had saved to pay for the wedding has now got to be spent on replenishing the ruined beer barrels and making good the smoke damage in the cellar and the bar area above it. It's essential if they are not to miss out on trade during the summer months, it's their busiest time of year so they can't afford to wait around for the insurance company to decide if they are going to pay out.' She shook her head remembering how devastated Cher had been yesterday after talking to the loss adjuster at the insurance company. It turns out there was an electric fault in the beer cellar, it was just one of those things. But there was also an old paraffin camping stove at the bottom of one of the boxes that Barry had brought around – he had completely forgotten it was there and felt dreadful about it all. His insurance company were now talking to Sonny and Cher's insurance company who were dragging their heels and sending another person to take a look. It could take ages for an agreement to be reached and for one of the companies to actually pay out. In the meantime Cher and Sonny, and of course Barry plus a group of builders, labourers, painters and decorators from the village were all working round the clock to get the pub restored and fully operational again in lieu of payment that they all hoped would happen in due course. The Duck & Puddle really was at the heart of the village and so everyone was keen to see it open again very soon. They all missed the community meeting point, the social centre of Tindledale, not to mention Sonny's Sunday roasts and lock-ins. 'And Cher had already paid for her original dress and so there really isn't the money for another vintage gown,' Sybs continued. 'I imagine it would be very expensive.'

'Ah, but I have a plan,' Ruby said, 'I have a friend who works for an online wedding magazine and he has agreed to come and take some photos on the big day. He'll credit the vintage couture dress to my shop, get some glorious images for the idyllic country wedding for his website, *and* Cher will have a ready-made wedding album. Everyone is a winner.' She clapped her hands together. 'As long as you're up for altering the dress that is. And Cher is happy with the plan too, of course.' They all nodded. 'Great. I'll help out with making the jam jar flower arrangements in return.'

'And we have lots of patterns to choose from for the bridesmaids dresses,' Hettie said, pointing to a rack near the window display. 'There are rolls of the sheerest and softest tulle in the stockroom too that Cher can choose from for the veil.'

'But what about the venue?' Leo piped up in between mouthfuls of scone. 'It's all well and good us running up some bridesmaids dresses but if the actual pub isn't going to be ready to use on the big day then where will the party be?'

'Pete's hoping to take care of that.' It was April from Orchard Cottage who spoke next. She had come along to the meeting to let Sybs know she was donating crates of her homemade peach, pear and apple cider made with fruit from her orchards for the wedding party, and to see if there was anything else she could do to help out. 'I saw Pete earlier and he said the prize for the winner of this year's annual ploughing competition is free hire of a magnificent marquee complete with wood flooring and a disco ball. Perfect for hosting a wedding party. Pete has told Sonny about it and said he's going to try to win it for them to use for the wedding, but please, not a word about any of this to Cher as Sonny really wants it all to be a big surprise. You know how much he wants Cher to still have her dream day to remember always.'

'Not a word!' they all chorused.

'Fantastic,' Sybs beamed. It was all coming together nicely now. She knew from Sonny that he was going to take Kitty up on her offer to use her kitchen in the Spotted Pig café to make another wedding cake, and Yasmin and Ash from the Indian restaurant had offered to do a hot food buffet of different scrumptious curries and rice and all the extras after the wedding ceremony. Cooper, the butcher, was going to do a hog roast in the evening and April's husband, Dan, had said he'd bring his food truck along to serve ice creams and candy floss for the children. It was going to be a marvelous day, a really wonderful wedding ... if she could get Cher to agree to a replacement dress and a

trimmed down version of the day with just the church service part in lieu of the big surprise wedding party after the ceremony. And there was only one way to find out, Sybs was going to see her now.

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