

LBRIS

We know
books

THIS
SUMMER
WILL BE
DIFFERENT

Carley Fortune



PENGUIN BOOKS

"I think so?" I read the address again. "Why? Do you know it?" His eyes darted around my face. "You're Bridget's friend," Felix said. "I thought you were coming next week."

I opened my mouth to reply, but then I spotted the green ceramic toad next to the sliding door. My stomach dropped, fast and hard, like an anvil from a cliff's edge.

"Oh my god."

Bridget gave me just three rules for the trip.

Number 1. Eat your weight in oysters.

"You're Bee," Felix said.

I was shaking my head, even though he was right. I was Bee.

Number 2. Leave the city behind.

I tore my sight from the toad, under which I knew was a set of keys.

"You're Wolf," I murmured. "You're Bridget's . . ." The nausea hit me with such dizzying force, I couldn't finish the sentence. I covered my mouth with an unsteady hand.

And *Number 3. Don't fall in love with my brother.*

"Yeah," Felix said. "Bridget's my sister."

1

Now

Nine Days Until Bridget's Wedding

I study the illustration on the table in front of me, frowning. It's more detailed than my typical sketches. Sometimes, just to show off, I'll whip up a simple line drawing while a client watches. But I've been working with flowers for more than five years, and I don't need to mock up the archways and chuppahs anymore. This time, though, I've carefully rendered each leaf and petal, shaded them in greens and blues and whites. But it's still not right. Floral archways are my specialty, and this one has to be spectacular. Breathtaking. Perfect. Because this is the arch Bridget will stand beneath when she and Miles promise to love and cherish each other, forever, in front of their friends and family. It's where they will share their first kiss as a married couple. Bridget's dad is walking her down the aisle, but I feel like I'm giving her away, too. My best friend, soon to be married.

"I think something's missing. It needs more drama," I say to Farah. She's my second in command at In Bloom and has worked here almost as long as I have. She's a poet with an impeccable eye and a creative soul that was catnip to my aunt. Farah says arranging flowers helps her art. She likes her eyeliner smudgy and black and her clothing bright. Today it's neon orange bike shorts.

I spin in my stool to face her. "What do you think?"

She hums, then shuffles the papers so that all my sketches of Bridget's flowers—the centerpieces, bouquets, boutonnieres, swags, and various other arrangements—are lined up together. "You've got so much plant material here, there may not be room for the guests."

Farah has a manner that oscillates between indifference and disdain. It took months of working together before I saw her full smile, the cute gap between her front teeth, and months after that to learn the attitude is mostly bluster. Farah brings her black Lab, Sylvia, to work with her, and she's a doting dog mom. Sylvia's sleeping under the table now, her nose on my foot.

"You think it's too much?" I ask.

She slits her espresso eyes my way. "You don't usually overthink the design like this."

It's true. Aunt Stacy showed me how to properly care for flowers, both in the garden and the vase, and she delighted in handing down her tricks. But my sense of balance, of color and form—that's innate. And once I'm flowing, the way my hands take over for my brain is magic. The quick snip of shears against stem is my favorite sound.

"You have an eye, my darling," my aunt used to say. "A gift that cannot be taught." Stacy was an actor before she was a florist. Her claim to fame was a recurring role as a busybody Italian relative on the Canadian teen drama *Ready or Not* and three seasons with the Stratford Festival. She was full of proclamations, and she doled them out with grandeur.

"I know," I say to Farah. "But . . ." I drift off.

"It's Bridget," she finishes.

"Yeah. It's Bridget."

My best friend has the mouth of a sailor, the heart of a mother

lion, and a frightening passion for lists, label makers, and spreadsheets. And in true Bridget fashion, she's overseen wedding planning with surgical precision. There's a color-coded binder and a shared Google calendar for the myriad appointments—both her fiancé, Miles, and I have access to it, as well as her files with vendor and bridal party contacts, a day-of schedule, and ceremony musical selections.

The flowers are the only thing she's abdicated control of. She's given Farah and me free rein, and we've spent hours scheming about how to make the Gardiner Museum look like the most magnificent greenhouse. Peonies and roses, lilies and ranunculus, trailing ivy and asparagus fern and magnolia leaves.

Bridget will love whatever I do. She's my most vocal advocate, my loudest cheerleader. My only cheerleader now that my aunt is gone. She's the one person in my life whose love and support come freely and without conditions. She believes in me more than I believe in myself. Her wedding day flowers are a chance to say thank you, to pay her back for everything she's done for me. They will surpass anything I've ever done. They're my gift to her. And I want my gift to make her cry.

I give my forehead a gentle, frustrated *bonk* on the table, startling Sylvia. I offer her a scratch behind her ear, and she settles back down.

The bell over the door chimes, and I bolt upright, smiling at the young man who's just walked in. He's dressed nicely and looks nervous. A first date, I'm guessing. Maybe it's an important date. A proposal? I have a nose for this sort of thing, and Farah and I run an unspoken contest to see who guesses right. Maybe he's asking his partner to move in with him?

"Hello," I say. "Can we help you with anything in particular?"

"Yeah. I want to get some flowers."

I can feel Farah resisting an eye roll.

"Well, you're in the right place. Is it a special occasion? Who are you shopping for?"

"They're for my boyfriend's mom. I don't know what she likes."

"Meeting the parents?" Farah asks.

"Yeah."

She looks at me, smug. I was close.

"We have a reservation at six at a restaurant down the street," he says. "I saw your sign and realized that I should probably bring her something."

I glance at the clock. It's five forty. That's odd. Bridget should be here by now. She's supposed to meet me in five minutes, but she's usually early. Her final gown fitting is this evening, at a boutique a block west. We're walking there together, getting the dress, then grabbing dinner.

"Let me help you," Farah says, standing. She speaks to the customers with a tone that manages to sound both resigned and wise. I could never pull it off the way she does. I'm bubbly, my smile full of teeth.

She leads him to our hand-tied bouquets. There are only three left, but he's lucky he has any to choose from. We're often sold out at the end of the day.

As she helps him pick, I go back to the drawing. I squint one eye, imagining Bridget in ivory, Miles in his suit. Her dress is elegant, simple. It's one of the reasons I feel the archway should make more of a statement. If her gown were extravagant, I would make sure the flowers didn't undermine it. The dress is stunning, but there's not a flourish on it. There's not even a train.

A train.

I pick up my pencil and begin a rough sketch of an archway that cascades to the floor in a waterfall, extending over the ground. It will be a river of flora. A train of flowers.

I don't notice Farah standing over my shoulder until I hear her say, "Elaborate."

"Perfect."

"Perfect," she agrees.

The next step is figuring out what I need to order, but I've got time. The flower auction, where I do the bulk of my buying every week, is first thing Tuesday morning so I still have five days to decide. And now that I have the archway design nailed, I can turn my attention to tomorrow. I chew on my lip.

As if reading my mind, Farah asks, "Is there anything you want to go over before your meeting?"

I'm having breakfast with Lillian, the events manager of Cena, one of Toronto's poshest hospitality groups. She'd read about the shop in the newspaper and has asked In Bloom to take on florals for all of Cena's restaurants. There are eight of them, one of which is inside the swanky hotel where we're meeting. My Friday will begin with a thirty-dollar omelet and a contract that could change my life.

"I think I'm good," I tell Farah.

I'm certain I'll be signing that piece of paper tomorrow, but I can't deny it makes me uneasy. I'm not sure if I'm having second thoughts because corporate orders don't fill me up—dozens of uniform vases, uninventive, impersonal. Or if I'm worried that I won't be able to handle the increase in volume. Right now, I have Farah and two part-timers, but if I go ahead with Cena, I'll need two or three full-time staffers. And while I love arranging flowers, I do not love being a manager. I find difficult conversations

difficult. But if self-doubt and fear are holding me back—it's more reason to jump in headfirst. That and taking the contract mean I can give Farah the massive raise she deserves.

"I'm excited," I tell Farah. "I'm also tired. I haven't slept well in weeks." I've been overthinking when I should be sleeping.

"Maybe if you took a day off . . ."

"You know I can't do that." We're already running at full tilt. She growls. "Then don't stay out late tonight. You're trash when you don't get enough rest."

Farah moves toward the front door and turns the deadbolt. I glance at the clock, surprised to find that it's already six. Bridget is ten minutes late. Bridget is never late. She's the most reliable person I know.

We've been best friends for seven years, and in all that time, she's been late precisely once. That first trip. The time that counted.

"That's strange," I say, trying to keep fear from seeping into my voice. Bridget's fine. She has to be.

"She must have got caught in rush hour," Farah says. But I can hear the uncertainty in her voice.

"Maybe."

Bridget works as the VP of publicity at Sunnybrook Hospital, and she was going to leave right at five so she had plenty of time even if traffic was heinous, which it usually is.

I send her a text, but she doesn't reply.

At ten after six, panic sets in. I unlock the front door and step into the muggy August evening. I look up and down Queen Street East, searching for a head of white-gold corkscrews. I fell in love with Bridget's hair, staring at the back of her head in a company all-staff before we ever spoke. She's dyed it platinum

for the wedding, but I prefer her natural, softer shade. It reminds me of late summer haystacks.

Like the rest of Toronto, Leslieville flexes its charm on hot nights. I see three red streetcars traveling west in a row, an elderly basset hound in a stroller, and a toddler holding a melting ice cream cone, his face and hands coated in glossy green mint chip. But I don't see Bridget.

When I step back inside, Farah is counting the arrangements for tomorrow's delivery, so I grab the broom from the back and begin sweeping the leaves and flowers and scraps of ribbon.

Farah points a long finger in my direction, its sharp nail tipped with a stripe of acid yellow. "Stop what you're doing. I don't need your help."

"I know you don't, but I'm here . . ." And I need a distraction.

"Sit. Relax for thirty whole seconds. Your stress stresses me out."

I look at the clock again. Six eighteen. My heart is pounding. Bridget wouldn't miss something as monumental as her last gown fitting. "We were supposed to be at the store at six."

I call the boutique. Maybe we got our wires crossed, and I was supposed to meet Bridget there? But no, the aggrieved salesperson who answers the phone tells me, Bridget isn't there. In fact, she is twenty minutes late, they close at seven, and it's a very busy time of year, don't I know? I apologize, assuring her we'll be there soon.

I finish sweeping and pull out a stool. I send Bridget another text, fingers beginning to shake, then check CP24, searching for news of accidents on her route.

"Lucy," Farah chides. I don't like the softness in her tone, either.

I've already lost my aunt. I can't lose Bridget, too.

Something is very wrong.

I stand again. Begin to pace. Sylvia watches for a moment, then leaves her spot under the table to walk beside me.

The longest five minutes of my life pass, and then my phone vibrates in my palm. The sound that leaves my throat when I see Bridget's name on the screen is guttural, somewhere between a sob and a gasp of relief.

"Bridget, where are you?" I say. "Are you okay?"

Her voice cuts in and out, barely audible over the wind blowing into the microphone.

"I can't hear you. Can you hear me?"

"Bee?"

The line crackles. I hear the *whoosh* of a sliding door, and then the blowing stops.

"Bee?" My best friend's voice comes clear through the other end, but it doesn't sound right. It sounds broken. Small.

"What's going on? Where are you? We were supposed to be at your fitting half an hour ago."

"I'm home," she says. "I'm at Summer Wind."

It takes a second for her words to make sense. "You're . . . what?" My pulse has become a jackhammer in my ears. "Is your family okay? Your parents? Is—" I stop myself from using the wrong name. "Is Wolf okay?"

I hear her sniff, and I hold my breath. "Yeah. They're fine. But I thought they'd be here. They didn't tell me."

"I'm not following, Bridge. They didn't tell you what?"

"They decided to drive to Toronto for the wedding. They're making some kind of vacation out of it," she says, her voice pitching upward. "You know how they are."

I do know how they are. Bridget's parents are spontaneous,

the opposite of their daughter. It drives her bonkers. Which is why it's not just highly unusual that Bridget has up and left for the island. It's deeply troubling.

"Okay. But, Bridget, why are *you* in PEI? Your wedding is in less than two weeks."

There's the fitting tonight. I'm supposed to go over to her condo tomorrow. Miles was going to make a fancy dinner while I helped Bridget finalize the seating chart and a shot list for the photographer. I'm throwing the bachelorette party this weekend.

"I know. I know. I know. But I needed to get away, Bee. I needed to come home." She's speaking in staccato bursts, fast enough that I almost miss what comes next. "And I need you here with me."

"You need me *there*? On Prince Edward Island?"

Farah's eyebrows reach to her hairline.

"I really, really do. Please come," she says. Another sniff. "There's a flight leaving tomorrow that still has seats. I'm looking at the website now."

"You want me to come to PEI *tomorrow*?" I gape at Farah. Sylvia sits next to her, head cocked.

"Please, Bee. Please come out. I need you."

The list of excuses I have for staying is long. There's the Cena meeting tomorrow. The flower auction Tuesday. I don't know if our part-timers will be able to pick up extra shifts. There's also Bridget's wedding to prep for.

But Bridget never asks for help. She's never had to. She loves me to Neptune and back, but she doesn't need me the way I need her. Until now. I'd travel anywhere if she asked for my help. Saying no isn't an option.