

Chapter 1

'The guests said the apple and maple French toast was amazing,' said Skye, sweeping into the kitchen with a tray full of empty breakfast plates.

'Didn't I tell you, Peggy? People love seasonal, and trying something new,' said Emma, taking the tray from Skye so that she could collect the next order from the oak countertop.

'Why anyone wants their breakfast served in a frying pan I'll never know,' said Peggy, casting a dubious eye over the small cast-iron pans containing the pancakes with mushrooms and fried egg on top that she'd cooked on Emma's request.

'It's trendy. Guests love it,' parried Emma, loading the dishwasher by the Belfast sink.

'Do these need parsley?' asked Skye.

'Just a sprinkle,' replied Emma, who loved that Rhona's daughter had the same eye for detail as her mother, though that's where the similarities ended. Where Rhona was known for chatting away to the guests, Skye verged on timid, though she'd come out of herself a little over the six months she'd been working the weekend breakfast shift.

'Whoever heard of parsley on eggs?' tutted Peggy, watching as Skye scattered it from a height. To Emma, she looked like a Botticelli goddess, with her long, wavy blonde hair, cherry lips and milky skin.

Emma laughed. 'Don't worry, Peggy. The guests staying in Rose Hip both want a traditional full Scottish.'

‘Thank goodness for that,’ she said, cracking eggs into the frying pan with ease, and wiping her hand on the frilly apron she wore round her tiny waist. When Peggy first joined the team, after answering an ad in the local paper, Emma had pressed her to wear the dark green apron and white shirt that the waiting staff wore, but Peggy had refused.

‘I’m eighty-one years old,’ she’d told Emma through narrowed blue eyes. ‘I come with my own apron and colourful blouses or not at all.’ And that had put an end to the matter. Emma wasn’t so principled as to lose a precious breakfast chef over a uniform dispute.

‘Oh, I forgot to say,’ said Skye, her hip nudging the kitchen door open, ‘there’s a guest in the living room who wants to talk to you.’

‘Thanks, Skye,’ said Emma, hoping whoever wanted her wasn’t looking to complain. If the last eighteen months had taught Emma anything, it was that guests fell squarely into two categories: those who complain and those who don’t. Thankfully for Emma, the former were few and far between but when she got one, she knew about it. Emma wished she could remember the hundreds of kind guests who passed through her door as well as she could remember the belligerent ones.

Leaving Peggy contentedly making fry-ups up at the range, Emma took off her apron and went to the guest living room, where she found Cyril, Peggy’s husband, sitting by the crackling fire, his neat moustache and silver hair just visible above his morning paper. At the large bay window, the Roebothams, who were staying in the top floor suite, were enjoying a cup of tea, surveying the garden and sea beyond. The berries of the cotoneaster outside the window shone

brilliant red in the sunshine, and the crab apples were a vibrant orange. Every time Emma looked at the colours, a little thrill of contentment crept up her spine.

‘Good morning,’ sang Emma, approaching them, relieved to see that their relaxed body language didn’t suggest a complaint was on the cards. ‘Is everything to your satisfaction?’

‘It’s heavenly,’ answered Frances, a robust sort of woman with ruddy cheeks and an open disposition who wore her greying hair in a bun. ‘Weren’t we just saying, Jim, it’s been a long time since we’ve stayed anywhere that manages to be both stylish *and* comfortable. And feels so welcoming.’

‘That you were,’ said Jim, who was too busy looking out to sea with binoculars to be concerned with making small talk with Emma.

‘How do you do it?’ asked Frances. ‘Everything from the flowers in the garden to the choice of breakfast tea is perfect.’

‘I have a lot of help,’ said Emma, flattered by the compliments. For all the praise and positive reviews she’d received over the last year, they still felt unexpected and delightful when they came. ‘I’m not much of a gardener, a lovely lady from the village takes care of that. Nor am I much of a cook, Peggy is our chef. And the housekeeping is in the hands of my friend, Rhona. I even field out the maintenance to my boyfriend.’

‘What’s left for you to do?’ asked Jim, the binoculars still fixed to his eyes, gazing out to sea. His tone was probably meant to pass as banter but instead came off as a little aggressive, putting Emma on the defensive.

‘I oversee everything, develop the business, come up with ideas,’ she said, pulling at the cuffs of her blouse, wondering if it sounded a bit flimsy.

‘Good management is an underrated skill,’ added Frances with a sharp little nod that told Emma she could tell how much effort went into the place, even if her husband couldn’t.

Emma accepted the praise with a grateful smile. ‘Let me refill your teapot.’

‘I’m surprised you don’t have a lackey to do that for you,’ commented Jim, putting down the binoculars, and Emma laughed, trying not to show how riled she felt. She wanted to tell Jim just how many breakfasts she’d cooked and served, dishwashers she’d loaded, sheets she’d laundered and rooms she’d cleaned over the first twelve months. That actually, she’d learnt her trade, grafted her way to where she was today – the owner of a highly-regarded guesthouse.

‘Perhaps I’ll get one,’ she said, with a playful smile, hoping her eyes were twinkling to conceal her thoughts: *I bet you’ve never made a bed in your life, I bet Frances does everything but clean your arse!*

After delivering a fresh pot of tea to the Roebothams, Emma collected the full Scottish breakfasts from the kitchen and served them to the guests in the dining room, not quite able to shake off Jim’s passive aggressive remark, which still rattled about in her mind like a lottery ball.

‘Good morning,’ she said brightly to the young couple seated at the smaller of the two waxed, wooden tables in the window. ‘Two full Scottish,’ she said, placing them down, making a mental note that the window boxes outside, full of yellow gourds, red chillies and orange chrysanthemums, needed a little maintenance.

‘That looks amazing,’ breathed Niall, and his fiancé, Caitlin opened her eyes wide at the spread in front of her.

‘Hopefully it’ll keep you going until dinner,’ said Emma, who still loved to see her guests’ faces light up when presented with a hearty breakfast.

Leaving Niall and Caitlin to enjoy their food, Emma quickly spruced up the dining room. She tidied the white-painted dresser, sweeping up fallen seeds, repositioning juice bottles, and rearranging the pastries and muffins, while Skye took an order from another set of guests. The dresser attended to, Emma brushed down a sackcloth runner and reset a table, rearranged the hydrangea heads picked from the garden and welcomed two further guests, who chose the remaining table in the window. Handing them their menu, Emma thought, not for the first time, how the dining room felt a little tight now that she had six rooms rather than the three she’d first started with. When she’d expanded to five rooms the dining room had felt comfortable enough, but now, with an additional table for two, she worried it bordered on cramped, rather than cosy.

Oh well, she thought, there’s nothing I can do about the space, and what’s better than a dining room full of chattering guests?

Emma loved to listen to guests making idle chitchat over their granola or porridge, telling each other about their day ahead or reflecting on their adventures from the one before. Even when the management side of things grew tiresome, her guests always brightened her day.

‘Emma, would it be possible to have some more peppermint tea in our room?’

asked Dotty, a lady who’d arrived two nights previously with her friend, Sylvia. Emma had opened the front door to find them both wearing bright yellow raincoats and large, colourful spectacles, which were misted up from the rain. They’d spent at least twenty minutes during check-in telling her how they’d

started visiting Lobster Bay when they were little girls and had been coming every autumn since their husbands died. They looked forward to it all year and staying at the guesthouse was a big part of it. Emma loved hearing these sorts of stories, the ones that a receptionist or a bellboy in a big hotel would never encounter as they processed endless guests.

‘Of course,’ said Emma. ‘I’m sorry if it wasn’t replenished yesterday.’

‘It was, dear,’ said Dotty. ‘We’re just very partial to a peppermint tea.’

‘And maybe a few extra chocolates too,’ said Sylvie, and Emma chuckled. She’d come to learn that ladies of a certain age loved a pillow treat.

Not wanting to forget their requests, Emma ran upstairs to find Rhona in Island, the master bedroom on the middle floor.

‘Should you be doing that?’ Emma asked, rushing over to help her turn the mattress on the super king bed. Seeing Rhona reminded Emma of a day last winter when she and Rhona had been doing a deep-clean, turning mattresses and moving large items of furniture to Hoover behind them. They’d frittered the time away coming up with new names for the bedrooms. In the end, after much deliberation, they’d chosen names drawn from the local landscape and fauna: Rose Hip, Island, Gorse, Lobster and Puffin. It was a small change, but one Emma felt made a big difference.

‘If Paula Radcliffe kept running until the day before she gave birth, I’m sure I can flip mattresses at under twenty-four weeks,’ retorted Rhona, her long, sinewy arms flexing beneath the strain.

‘Isn’t this why we have Zoe?’ asked Emma, looking around for Skye’s friend, who’d been helping out at the weekends since Rhona became pregnant. Rhona could just about manage five rooms before the pregnancy, but five rooms

plus the suite while pregnant felt like a stretch, and Emma had been more than happy to take on some weekend labour to ease the load. Just one night's rent from the smallest room more than covered the cost of both Skye and Zoe's weekly wages – both working six hours every weekend. 'Where is she, anyway?'

'I sent her to the linen cupboard to fetch the stuff for the tea-trays,' said Rhona as they laid the mattress down.

'You know, it might be better for you to do the lighter work and Zoe the heavier. I don't want Finn coming over here and giving me an earful for working you too hard.'

'As if he would,' said Rhona with a laugh, showing her beautiful wide eyes and smile. Together they adjusted the mattress so it was square on the sleigh frame. 'He knows full well that it's me pushing myself, not you.'

'I suppose he does know that by now,' said Emma, who couldn't really imagine laid-back Finn ever giving anyone an earful. Since he'd moved over from Ireland six months ago to live with Rhona, Emma could barely remember a time when he'd been anything other than relaxed. Even when he was working on his golf course designs, he was borderline horizontal. 'Let me go tell Zoe that Sylvie and Dotty need more peppermint tea and chocolates.'

'I noticed one of the radiators in the suite is leaking again – maybe have Aidan take a look?'

'Will do, as soon as he's back from walking Wilbur,' said Emma, going out to the landing. 'Zoe?' she called, opening the linen cupboard door to find Zoe with her back turned.

‘Yeah,’ said Zoe, furtively glancing over her skinny shoulder with her dark eyes. If Skye was a Botticelli, Zoe was more reminiscent of a Klimt – dark, angular and strong.

‘Can you make sure Puffin gets extra peppermint tea and chocolates?’

‘Sure,’ she said, still with her back to Emma.

‘You okay?’

‘Absolutely,’ she said, spinning around, wiping her hand quickly over the corner of her mouth.

‘Remember Rhona needs the tea items for the Island bedroom,’ said Emma, unable to figure out what Zoe was up to, though she sensed it might involve eating pillow chocolates.

‘I know,’ she replied, rapidly gathering the items she needed.

‘I’ll see you downstairs in a bit for the morning meeting,’ said Emma, leaving the cupboard and heading up to the top floor to see which radiator was leaking.

She opened the door to the suite, which had been her living room and bedroom when she’d first moved in, and delighted in the transformation. Casting her eye to the large windows she took in the stunning sea view, which stretched from the harbour right the way round to the east beach and the coastal path beyond. It took her breath away every time she looked at it.

Entering the bathroom, Emma noticed a speck on the mirror. As she rubbed it clean with a tissue, she adjusted an unruly lock of her dark hair and pressed her plump lips together to even out her light lip gloss. Reflected in the mirror was the huge double shower, and she recalled all the work at the start of the year that had gone into creating the luxurious sanctuary, complete with

underfloor heating, sumptuous robes and high-end toiletries. With the mirror clean and her appearance fixed, she went to the lounge area, a space tailor-made for laziness. From the sofa her guests had an uninterrupted view of the sea, and there were plenty of complimentary drinks and snacks in the fridge to keep them going for days.

The radiators in the living area were fine. It was only when Emma reached the wall with the king-size bed that she discovered the problem.

‘Ah,’ she said, kneeling next to the leaking radiator on the wall which adjoined Aidan’s house next door. The room on the other side of the wall was their bedroom, the one they’d shared since she moved in with him when the work started on the suite just after Christmas.

Rhona had placed a folded towel under the leak to prevent a puddle forming on the boards, but it was already saturated. Emma was just about to run downstairs to the laundry room to find the radiator key when her phone rang.

‘Hi Jane,’ she said.

‘What you up to?’ her sister asked, and Emma knew straight away that she was calling for no reason other than the fact that she was at a loose end, with the kids at school and her husband at work.

‘Checking a radiator,’ replied Emma.

‘Exciting,’ said Jane sarcastically. ‘It must be so boring, all that endless maintenance and cleaning up after strangers.’

‘Sometimes it is,’ responded Emma, resisting the temptation to comment that it wasn’t so very different from her sister’s life as a housewife, particularly given that Dan spent most of the week away, leaving her with only the kids for company. But she couldn’t deny that since the house had been finished and she’d

become less hands-on, the guesthouse didn't give her quite the same sense of satisfaction and enjoyment as it had, even though she still loved so many aspects of the job.

'Wouldn't you be better off in London? Don't you miss the opportunities? I'm sure Katherine would be happy to give you your old job back. You must miss the buzz of big design projects and having a real career.'

Emma flinched at her sister's remark. 'I have a real career, it's the house.'

'Come off it, Emma – the house was just an escape, something you needed to help get over the trauma of what happened. But you're better now. Lobster was a crutch, that's all. It's not as if it's home.'

'That's not fair,' said Emma, bruised by her sister's comments, which raised some uncomfortable questions. Despite cherishing so much about her life in Lobster, there were days when she did wonder if it was enough, if its true purpose had been to provide the distraction she needed to move on, after being caught up in a terrorist attack in central London on Christmas Eve, almost two years ago. Now that she was no longer haunted by night terrors and the face of the woman whose death she witnessed, Emma sometimes wondered whether she really belonged in sleepy Lobster.

'I'm not saying it to upset you, Em, but with Mum off on her adventures with Gary, it's down to me to hand out the advice. Sometimes you need to sit back and reflect on what's important, before you get in too deep.'

'I need to get on, Jane,' she said dismissively, reluctant to dwell on her sister's remarks, which felt a little too close to the bone. 'I'll call you soon.'

Emma ran down to the laundry room, trying in vain to shake off the conversation.

‘What you looking for?’ asked Aidan, coming in the back door with Wilbur, whose tongue was hanging out and big, black shoulders drooped, exhausted from his walk.

‘Radiator key,’ she said after kissing Aidan, liking the way his full lips were cold from the wind and his blonde bristles felt rough against her skin. If there was one thing she didn’t question, it was that she loved Aidan.

‘Why?’ He took off Wilbur’s lead and placed a blanket over him as he settled slowly into his huge bed, where he spent much of his time these days. He was a very different creature from the powerful dog Emma had had thrust upon her by the previous owner of the house when she first arrived in Lobster Bay.

‘One of them is leaking in the suite,’ she said, finding what she was looking for in the box of plumbing bits and bobs.

‘Do you want me to take a look?’ he asked, in a tone that implied he already knew the answer.

‘Would you?’

‘It’s what you don’t pay me for, remember?’ he said, his lapis-blue eyes twinkling playfully at Emma. As he took the key, he repositioned another unruly lock of hair that had fallen over her forehead then leant down to steal a kiss.

‘Good point!’ she said, drawing away slowly from his lips, wishing she had time to linger.

She watched as he went through the kitchen past the in-frame stone-coloured cabinets, and eyed up his strong behind, marvelling that even after a year of running the business together she still got a thrill from his body.

‘Stop checking out my arse!’ he said, and Peggy tutted.

'I apologise for my boyfriend's language, Peggy,' said Emma, loudly enough that Aidan, now halfway up the stairs, could hear. 'Talk about uncouth.'

'Cyril used to swear when he was a young man, too,' said Peggy, as if it were something men grew out of. 'Not in front of me, of course, but I'd hear him with his friends. These days you can't turn on the television without hearing someone effing and blinding. It wasn't like that in my day.'

'I know, it's terrible,' agreed Emma, playing along.

'What's terrible?' asked Skye, returning to the kitchen with another tray of dirty dishes from the dining room.

'The way everybody swears these days,' said Emma, putting on the kettle to make Peggy a well-earned pot of tea.

'I don't,' said Skye.

'You were brought up properly,' observed Peggy, taking off her apron and sitting at the large kitchen island, where she took out a vintage compact to powder her cheekbones and fix her thinning, silver hair.

'Who was?' asked Rhona, arriving in the kitchen, her dark green polo-shirt stretched over her bump.

'Skye,' said Emma.

Rhona snorted and ruffled Skye's hair. 'More like dragged through the gutter.'

'Mum!' said Skye, rearranging her locks and joining Peggy at the island.

'What? I've no idea how you turned out so well-mannered and sensible. You didn't learn any of it from me.'

'Your mother has a point. Nobody could accuse Rhona of being sensible,' interjected Emma, making coffees at the machine, enjoying the company of her

friends and feeling fortunate to be surrounded by such a strong group of women. Even at fifteen, Skye showed more maturity than Emma remembered having in her twenties; Rhona, despite being pregnant, was still a ball of energy and humour; and Peggy injected a much-needed dose of decorum, quirky style, wisdom and stoicism.

‘It’s true,’ acknowledged Rhona, fetching shortbread from the larder.

‘Where’s Zoe?’ asked Emma.

‘Top floor, I think,’ said Rhona. ‘She’ll be joining us soon. It’s not like her to miss an opportunity to sit down.’

‘Harsh,’ said Emma.

Rhona raised an eyebrow. ‘Do you dispute it?’

Emma knew she couldn’t. For all she liked having the extra pair of hands, there was no denying that Zoe wasn’t the most disciplined of workers. Over the last six months she’d found pretty much every excuse in the book to take shortcuts, bunk off early or not come in at all. It was a mystery to Emma why she and Skye were such good friends.

‘So, what’s on the agenda, boss?’ asked Rhona, once Emma had handed round the coffees and joined everyone at the island.

‘Christmas!’ she said gleefully, delighted to have a project she could really get her teeth into.

‘Three months today,’ sang Skye.

‘Ninety-one sleeps,’ teased Rhona, and Skye’s cheeks flushed crimson.

‘I only know because Ella’s been doing a hundred-day countdown,’ she protested.

‘Yeah right,’ laughed Rhona, throwing a rolled-up napkin at her. ‘You’re still a kid at heart.’

Skye twisted her lips and wrapped her hands around her coffee mug, mock-scowling at her mother.

‘We need an event, something that entices people to spend Christmas here instead of at home,’ said Emma. ‘And we need to start promoting it fast,’ she continued, aware that she was cutting it a bit fine. She knew a lot of people would have booked their Christmas break on Boxing Day of last year. With only three months to go, Emma couldn’t be certain that she’d fill the rooms.

‘How about one of those all-inclusive Christmas packages?’ suggested Skye. ‘You know, like the one they do at Gleneagles, where you arrive on Christmas Eve to be greeted by a harpist and a glass of mulled wine, and then there’s Christmas lunch and a big ceilidh on Boxing Day.’

Rhona looked at her daughter as if she were an alien. ‘How do you know about that?’

‘I read Condé Nast Traveller,’ she said nonchalantly.

‘I swear you’re not my daughter!’ exclaimed Rhona, sliding down her high-backed stool, her hand on her belly, and dunking shortbread into her tea.

‘Cyril and I spent Christmas on a cruise once,’ announced Peggy, as if she’d just woken from a dream.

‘Where?’ asked Emma.

‘Norway,’ said Peggy, lost in the memory. ‘We were stationed there. I spent the entire time freezing cold and feeling sick.’

‘Sounds terrible,’ said Rhona.

‘It was, dear, we never did it again.’

‘Does everyone think a three-night Christmas package sounds like a good idea? We could really ramp up the Christmassiness.’

‘I like the idea,’ said Rhona.

‘I do too,’ echoed Peggy.

‘Any suggestions as to what we should call it?’

‘Keep it simple,’ said Rhona, reaching for more shortbread. ‘Something like “Christmas at Lobster Bay”?’

‘Christmas at Lobster Bay,’ repeated Emma, liking the sound of it, but wondering if a three-night retreat was too simple. She felt they were capable of more, of doing something that would give her the challenge she needed, but what?

Then, looking round the island she saw her friends’ faces aglow, all of them delighted with the plan, and she couldn’t find it in her heart to disappoint them.

‘Okay,’ she said, despite her reservations. ‘Christmas at Lobster Bay it is – let’s make it one to remember!’

