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THE NO.1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR

What Eden Did Next



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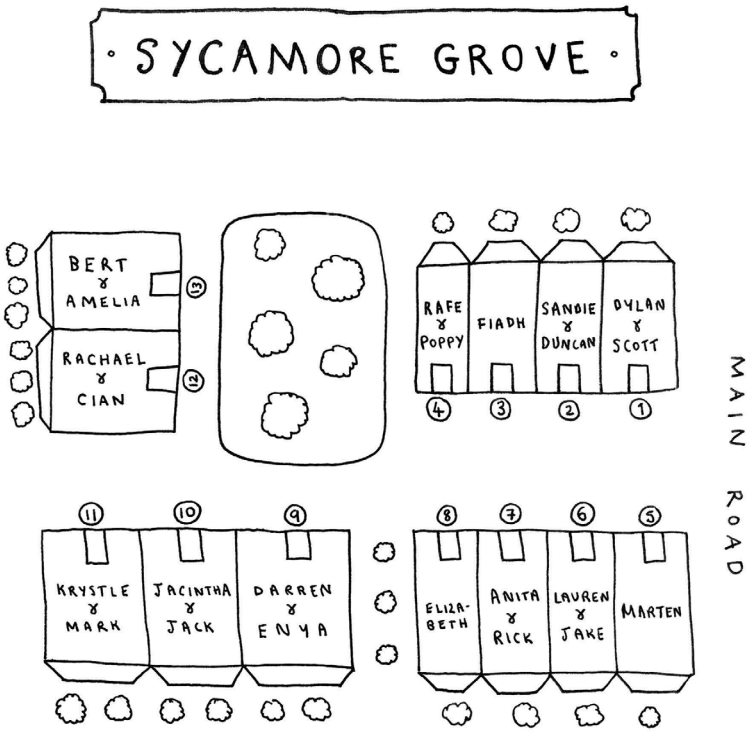
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MARTEN

Chapter 1

Darling You,

I went to the beach before sunrise this morning and stood at the water's edge, allowing the softest of waves to break gently over my feet while I wriggled my toes deeper into the cool, damp sand. When a whisper of breeze kissed the back of my neck, I took a deep breath and stretched my arms as high as I could over my head before exhaling slowly and lowering my arms again.

It was a perfect moment.

And then, as the sun peeked over the horizon, I felt the ache of your absence and I wished you were at my side.

I wanted you to be here, scooping me into your arms and carrying me back to the house as you'd done so many times in the past. I wanted us to be having breakfast together in the garden, or even better, forgetting about breakfast and hurrying to the bedroom instead, locking the door behind us then tumbling onto the bed, laughing at our shamelessness. I wanted to see you smiling at me, to hear you whisper my name. I wanted to feel the touch of your lips on mine. I wanted to hold you and to be held by you.

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I wanted us to be together again, living the life we'd dreamed of.

It was a simple dream.

It should have been possible.

And then, it wasn't.

Lila and I stayed in the house last night, but tonight we'll all be in the new hotel a little further up the coast. It opened last year and you wouldn't believe how upmarket and glamorous it is, with its chandeliers and fountains, marble floors and landscaped gardens.

It's a long way from how things used to be on this stretch of the Wexford coast, when the tourists arrived in battered caravans pulled by asthmatic cars, or rented ancient mobile homes in farmers' fields. Now it's all about the posh hotels and even posher summer houses. To be honest, I'm not sure we could ever have afforded a place of our own here. Sean and Valerie were smart to buy Dunleary when they did. It's an oasis of old-world charm among all the chic new builds.

Anyway, the glam hotel was the perfect setting for Amanda's wedding, which was fittingly glamorous too, as well as great fun. I'm writing this in—

The sharp rap on the bedroom door startled Eden so much that she almost knocked over the open bottle of washable blue ink on the desk in front of her. Conscious that the term 'washable' referred to the colour of the ink and not the ease of cleaning it up, she lunged for the bottle before it could tip its contents onto the floor, then exhaled in relief as she caught it and screwed the lid tightly closed. The tips of her fingers were now a delicate shade of blue,

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but the hotel's beautiful cream carpet remained an ink-free zone.

The rap sounded again.

'Just a second!' She wiped her hands on a tissue, then slid the sheet of paper she'd been writing on beneath the hotel services folder on the desk. She placed the pen beside the folder and opened the door.

The woman standing in the corridor outside was wearing a blue silk dress that almost matched the ink. It exactly matched the blue of her eyes.

'Are you OK?' she asked Eden. 'You disappeared without a word.'

'Of course I'm OK.' Eden beckoned her sister-in-law into the room. 'I was just taking a bit of time out. Relaxing.'

Michelle glanced at the undisturbed counterpane on the bed, then at Eden's still inky fingers, and raised an eyebrow.

'Not sleeping.' Eden rubbed her fingers with a fresh tissue, but it didn't make any difference. 'When the children were taken off to watch cartoons, I used the opportunity to chill out for a while. It's been a long day.'

'And an emotional one.'

'In a nice way,' said Eden as she walked into the bathroom to wash away the worst of the stains. When she returned, Michelle was sitting in the comfortable armchair, her legs curled up beneath her. Eden perched on the edge of the bed and readjusted the floral clips in her artfully messy updo. 'I'm so glad Amanda asked me to write the invitations and the place cards. Can you believe she really did get hitched? And so quickly after meeting someone?'

'It was a surprise,' Michelle agreed. 'For all of her sneering at women falling into the "marriage trap", my little sister

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changed her tune pretty sharpish when Bruno came on the scene.'

'She didn't really call it a marriage trap, did she?' asked Eden.

'Loads of times,' confirmed Michelle. 'When I married Gene, it was all "you're throwing your life away" stuff from her.'

'Oh, well, she was much younger then,' said Eden. 'People change.'

'Not you.' Michelle's voice was warm. 'You're the same person you always were.'

'I'm not sure about that.'

'You are,' said Michelle. 'You've always been the best, Eden.'

'And *you've* been drinking too much champagne.'

'Quite possibly.' She grinned. 'But if you can't knock back the champers on a day like today, when can you? Come on. Let's join in the fun downstairs.'

Eden glanced at her watch. 'I *was* planning on coming back down, you know. I set an alert for when the cartoons ended. There was no need to check up on me, honestly.'

'I guess . . . Well, I know you're fine, I really do. But when I saw you weren't there . . .'

Eden's mobile buzzed and she looked at Michelle as she silenced it. 'The alert. Just like I said.' She dropped the phone into her bag, then slipped her feet into her sequinned shoes.

'I have proper shoe envy looking at those.' Michelle stood up and smoothed down her dress.

'I got them in the sales,' Eden said. 'Forty per cent off.'

'A bargain.'

'I would've paid full price,' she admitted. 'I love sequins.

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They always make me feel as though I've made a proper effort. And it's been so long since I've dressed up; making a proper effort is a real joy.'

'In that case, let's be joyful with the rest of them,' said Michelle as she opened the bedroom door.

Eden followed her, making sure it was firmly closed behind them.

The wedding party was taking place in a series of connected gazebos in the extensive gardens that overlooked the sea. The gardens had been a brave choice, because nobody could be sure that, even in May, it wouldn't be so cold that industrial heaters would be needed to keep the guests warm. But fate had been kind to Amanda and Bruno, and the balmy day had been ideally suited to an outdoor wedding.

'Nearly as good as Portugal,' he'd said in his after-dinner speech, to a bit of good-natured heckling from his own family, who had flown from Lisbon for the event. 'I'm very happy to be marrying Amanda and very lucky to know that she'll be in my life forever.'

Eden's throat had constricted at his words, but she'd kept her eyes firmly on him as she applauded with the rest of the guests.

Now, as she and Michelle walked along the flagstone path towards the party, she fixed a smile on her face. She would've been smiling anyway, but it was important to show everyone how happy she was today.

'Mama.' Lila left a cluster of young children and ran towards her. 'We saw Princess Fiona and we had ice cream.'

'How lucky are you!' Eden scooped her four-year-old daughter into her arms. 'Are you having fun?'

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'Yes.' Lila sounded deeply satisfied. 'I love Princess Fiona.'

'She's a very good princess,' said Eden.

'Am I a princess?'

'You're *my* princess. Look at you with your lovely dress and your new shoes.'

'I want a . . .' Lila was stumped by the word, so she gestured to her head.

'A hat?' asked Eden.

'No!' Lila gave her a look of disgust. 'A . . . a . . . princess hat!'

'A tiara?'

'Yes!'

'Next time we go to a wedding,' promised Eden. 'D'you want to play with your cousins again?'

'No.' Lila buried her head in Eden's shoulder. 'I want to be with you.'

'OK.'

Eden carried her to the round table she'd been sitting at earlier. Tony and Angelina were still there, Angelina's feet propped on Tony's legs while he massaged her toes. It had been considerate of Amanda to include them, Eden thought. They were more Eden's friends than hers.

'I'm suffering for my beauty,' Angelina said as she sat up straight and put on her shoes again. 'Nobody should think that four-inch heels are a good idea.'

'They're not.' Eden grinned. 'They pull your muscles and joints out of alignment and cause back, neck and shoulder pain, as well as excessive knee torque.'

'Stop,' said Angelina. 'That's something I don't need to know.'

'Sorry.'

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'My mum knows stuff,' said Lila.

'She certainly does.'

'And you've grown into a big girl, Lila,' said Tony.

'I'm a princess.' Lila gave him a satisfied look from green-flecked eyes that matched her mother's.

'A smug little madam, more like,' said Eden.

'He'd be so proud of her,' said Tony.

'Yes, he would.'

'I can't believe it's been over four years . . .' His voice trailed off.

Eden said nothing.

'Come on, Lila!' Angelina held out her arms. 'Sit on my lap for a while. Give your mum a break.'

'She doesn't need a break,' protested Lila.

'But I'd like you to sit with me,' said Angelina. 'I don't have a little girl like you to look after me like your mum does. So I'd like to borrow you.'

'Oh, OK.' Lila scrambled from Eden's lap and clambered onto Angelina's instead.

'You two should dance,' said Angelina. 'Go on.'

'Well?' Tony looked at Eden.

'Come on so.' Eden took his hand and followed him to the centre of the floor. 'We were always good for a dance.'

People made some space for them. Tony put his arm around her.

Eden smiled and leaned her head on his chest for a moment before allowing him to lead her around the ballroom floor.

Angelina watched as her husband and Eden glided past. Her arm tightened around Lila, who'd closed her eyes and almost immediately fallen asleep. She could see traces of Eden in

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Lila's face – her high forehead and wide eyes, and the tiny dimple at the corner of her mouth. Lila was pretty in a way that Eden wasn't. But Eden was, and had always been, striking.

Angelina remembered the first time they'd met: the day Tony's best mate, Andy, had brought his new girlfriend to a barbecue on the beach. His saviour, he'd called her, only half joking, because Eden was the nurse who'd tended him when he'd arrived at A&E, his nose bloodied and his eye bruised after a tackle on the rugby pitch that had gone wrong. (Or right, he said afterwards. Brian Sewell had known what he was doing. If he hadn't crashed into him, Andy would surely have scored a try.)

Eden had laughed when he said this, and pushed her Celtic-red curls out of her eyes. She had a rich, throaty laugh that was both infectious and filthy.

'At least he's not perfect now,' she'd told Angelina. 'I'm betting he thought he was before.'

Which wasn't entirely untrue, because Andy Farrelly was a very attractive man. Angelina had fancied him herself for a while. But then she'd started dating Tony, who was on the same firefighting crew as him, while Andy had fallen head over heels with Eden. They'd become close friends, regularly meeting up, double-dating and spending occasional weekends away together. Angelina still considered Eden to be a close friend, although she didn't see her as often these days, because she and Tony had left Dublin a few years previously. It had taken Angelina some time to tell Eden of their plans, because she worried that her friend might feel in some way betrayed by their move to Enniscorthy, a mere thirty-minute drive from the hotel where the wedding was taking place. But Eden

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had smiled, wished them every happiness and said that she'd see them as often as possible.

Their meetings since then had been more virtual than real-life. Eden rarely had time for the almost two-hour journey to Tony and Angelina's new home, and Tony was reluctant to return to Dublin unless absolutely essential. It was a shame, Angelina thought, but it wasn't anyone's fault. It was just the way things had turned out.

Her eyes continued to follow Tony and Eden around the dance floor. Eden was laughing, her eyes full of merriment as she nodded in reply to something he'd said. Her once luxuriantly red hair was now a shining unicorn grey. The appearance of grey hairs had been sudden during her pregnancy, and she'd allowed them to flourish, telling Angelina that a bit of grey was the least of her worries. A few months after Lila was born, she'd gone to her local hairdresser and had the grey enhanced so that rose-gold highlights now mixed with the silver strands. Together with the tiny pastel flowers and clips she'd woven through it, and the pale lilac and pink dress she was wearing, she looked like a kind of woodland sprite. Well, sprite was going too far, Angelina admitted, although with the weight Eden had lost and never properly regained in the last few years, she looked delicate and otherworldly. So it wasn't entirely surprising for Angelina to realise that she herself wasn't the only person watching her. Almost all of the single men, and possibly some of the married ones too, were looking at Eden as she danced with Tony.

The music stopped and they returned to the table.

'Oh, bless.' Eden looked at her daughter. 'She's finally given in to it.'

'It's been a long day,' said Angelina.

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'It has. But a lovely one. Thanks for that, Tony.' Eden looked at her friend's husband. 'Now it's time for you to dance with your wife while I put this one to bed.'

'You'll come down again afterwards?' said Angelina. 'There's a baby monitoring service, isn't there?'

'I might,' said Eden. 'I'm a bit tired myself, to be honest. I haven't been out this late in ages.'

'It's not late,' said Tony.

'It is for me.' She smiled.

'Hopefully we'll see you later,' Angelina said, 'but if not, sleep well.'

'Thanks.' Eden gathered Lila into her arms and carried her back into the hotel. As she waited for the lift, she saw her mother-in-law and waved at her.

'Oh, the pet,' murmured Valerie as she came over. 'She's all in.'

'Totally,' said Eden.

'Are you coming back down?' Valerie echoed Angelina's question.

'I'm not sure,' said Eden.

'Well, if not, I'll see you in the morning,' said Valerie. 'I've a few things to tidy up at Dunleary, and then we're heading back to Dublin. Do you want to drop over for a cup of tea before you go yourself?'

'I'll see how things are,' said Eden. 'Thanks, Valerie. It was a lovely day.'

She stepped into the lift and pressed the button for the second floor, aware that Valerie was standing there watching her until the doors slid closed.

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When she got to her room, Eden undressed Lila, who was too sleepy to even know what was happening. She laid her gently on the second bed, then covered her with a sheet. She took off her own shoes and flexed her toes before sitting at the desk again. Then she called room service and ordered a pot of hot chocolate. It arrived fifteen minutes later: a tall silver jug accompanied by two butter cookies set beside a delicate china mug.

She poured the hot chocolate, and picked up the paper she'd been writing on earlier. She took a sip from the mug, read what she'd written so far and made a face. Honestly, she thought, he doesn't need to hear all that guff about sunrises and sand and jumping into bed together. He just wants to know how the wedding went.

She crumpled the page and dropped it into the bin. Then she took a fresh sheet of paper and used her favourite Nikko G pen to write Darling You in the same elegant, swirling font as before. After that, she put away the calligraphy pen, made sure that the bottle of ink was tightly closed, and chose an ordinary felt-tip to continue in her normal, rounded handwriting.

> We're back in the room after Amanda's wedding. Did you ever think you'd see those two words together? Amanda's wedding? And yet she was happy and radiant today, and she's clearly madly in love with Bruno. I'm sure she'll settle down in Lisbon no problem.
>
> The ceremony was lovely. It was in the hotel gardens and they did a great job with the pergolas and gazebos and everything to make it look stunning. And of course those fabulous views down to the sea were the perfect backdrop for the most romantic afternoon ever.

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You already know I did the invitations and the place cards, and thankfully they looked great. I have to confess, I was really stressed because I wanted it to be absolutely perfect. And even if I sound a bit Boasty McBoastface, I honestly don't think a professional calligrapher would've done any better.

I did wonder if they asked me so's I'd feel more involved. Everyone insists I'm part of the family, but they always go the extra mile so that I feel it too.

The only downside to a great day was that I kept imagining people were looking at me and thinking of us on our wedding day. Which was daft, because all eyes were on the bride, not me. And the bride was beautiful and happy. I was happy for her too. I can be happy for people who are happy themselves. Other things might be hard, but that's not.

Lila had a great time. Amanda wanted her to be a ring-bearer, but she's a bit young for that and you know what she's like, because I've told you a million times – the face of a cherub and the soul of an imp. I wouldn't have trusted her not to run away with the ring. Or swallow it. Or something. Can you imagine!!!!

Tony asked me to dance – at least, Angelina made him dance with me – and all I could think about was the last time you and I danced together and how lovely it was. It was at your mum's sixtieth. Do you remember? Tony's still a great dancer. He's completely over his injury, though he doesn't play rugby any more. Too old for it, he says.

Everyone is so wonderful to me that I feel guilty for thinking it can be a bit overwhelming sometimes. Your mum and dad are amazing. They always look out for me.

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The others have Lila over for sleepovers with her cousins whenever they can. Michelle is forever texting me. She talks about you a lot, which is nice. I don't like it when people avoid using your name. Amanda isn't around much, but she keeps in touch through social media, and, of course, it was really thoughtful to ask me to do the calligraphy work.

Lila is sleeping now and I'm going to go to bed. It's been a tiring day. But a good one.

It would be even better if you were here.

But you are.

In my heart.

Forever yours,
Eden xx

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