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The Surprise Party

Written by Sue Welfare

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SUE WELFARE

The Surprise Party

A V O N

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the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
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This book is dedicated to my new husband, my old children and my faithful dog, along with my fabulous friends – you know who you are.

CHAPTER ONE

‘If you could just take the balloons and the rest of your equipment round to the back, please. We don’t want anything to give the game away, do we?’ Suzie said, pointing the way to the young man who was standing on the front lawn of her parents’ house with a helium cylinder and a large cardboard box on a trolley. ‘And then if you could just move your van?’

The young man was wearing spotless navy blue overalls and a baseball cap emblazoned with the legend: ‘Danny from Cheryl’s Party Paradiso – we help you live your fantasy’. His van was topped with big glass-fibre balloons and a trail of lurid candyfloss pink and silver stars.

If acne was your fantasy, Danny was your man. He didn’t move.

‘It’s meant to be a surprise,’ Suzie said as brightly as she could manage. It had been a long, long day, and there were still lots of things to do, but there didn’t appear to be so much as a flicker of comprehension from Danny.

‘For my parents? Rose and Jack? It’s their ruby wedding anniversary – it’s written on the balloons? We’re having a party. Round the back?’ she said in desperation.

Still nothing.

‘You really can’t miss it, there’s a great big marquee in the garden.’

Finally Danny smiled. Suzie couldn't help wondering if he had been sniffing the contents of the gas cylinder in his spare time.

'Is that that woman off the telly?' he said, pointing towards the front door.

'Ah,' said Suzie, groaning inwardly. 'Yes it is. She's my sister.'

'No!' said Danny, eyes wide with amazement. 'Wow, really? That's awesome.'

Suzie stared at him and sighed.

Lizzie was standing on the doorstep of their parents' cottage, perfectly framed by a mass of pink roses climbing up over the porch. She was wearing something artfully casual and horribly expensive and was apparently just taking in the view. She had arrived about half an hour earlier and, to the untrained observer, it might look as if she was standing in the porch by accident, but a lifetime of having Lizzie as a little sister had taught Suzie that she was standing there waiting to be noticed.

Danny reddened as Lizzie apparently noticed *them*. She flicked her hair over her shoulder, beamed in their direction and did one of those little show-bizzy fingertip waves before sashaying over.

'Well, hello there,' she purred, taking in the logo on the young man's overalls as she extended her hand towards him. 'Lovely to see you. You must be Danny.'

The boy, all embarrassment and eagerness, looked as if he might explode. 'That's me,' he said, as they shook hands. 'Danny.'

'And how are you, *Danny*?'

'Oh right, I'm fine – yeah, really great – thank you,' he spluttered.

'Good, now would you mind awfully taking all this lot round

the back of the house and getting rid of the van? This is supposed to be a surprise party and it's a bit of a giveaway.'

'I've already told him that,' Suzie began; not that the boy was listening.

'Right-oh,' he said to Lizzie. 'Course, not a problem. I watch you all the time on *Starmaker*, you know.'

'Really?' Lizzie smiled. 'Well, thank you, Danny, that is so good to know. And you've been enjoying the new series, have you?'

'Oh God, yeah, this last lot was the best one yet – and that Kenny – I mean, who would have thought he'd a won? I was thinking Cassandra . . .' Danny stopped and reddened up a touch. 'I don't suppose I could have your autograph, could I?' he said, thrusting his clipboard out towards her. 'Only my girlfriend is never going to believe me when I tell her that I've met you. She really likes you as well.'

Lizzie's smile warmed a few degrees more. 'Of course you can, Danny.' She took the pen from between his fingers. 'What would you like me to put?'

'Oh I dunno. I can't think . . .' he said.

Now there's an understatement, thought Suzie grimly.

Lizzie pressed the pen to her lips, apparently deep in thought. 'How about "To Danny, thank you for making my party so very special, lots of love, Lizzie Bingham, kiss, kiss, kiss"?' She purred, barely breaking eye contact as she scribbled across what looked like it might be their delivery note. 'Would you like me to put, "You're the star, that's what you are?"'

It was the *Starmaker* reality show's catchphrase, but on Lizzie's lips it sounded positively erotic.

Danny giggled and blushed the colour of cherryade. 'Oh my God, right, well yeah, that'd be lovely, thanks,' he blustered,

waiting to take back the clipboard. Making an effort to compose himself, he said, 'So are there going to be a lot of famous people here tonight then?'

All smiles, Lizzie tipped her head to one side, implying her lips were sealed, while managing to suggest that anything was possible. 'We're just glad that you're here,' she said after a second or two.

Suzie shook her head in disbelief; the woman was a complete master class in innuendo and manipulation. Poor little Danny was putty in Liz's perfectly manicured hands.

'Righty-oh,' said the boy, coming over all macho and protective. 'Well in that case best I'd get a move on then, hadn't I? Get these balloons sorted.'

'Thank you, that would be great. Hope to catch you later,' Lizzie said, all teeth and legs and long, long eyelashes.

'Oh, for God's sake, put him down,' said Suzie under her breath as Danny strode away like John Wayne, dragging his gas bottle behind him. 'Do you have to do that?'

'Oh, come on,' said Lizzie, switching off the glamour like a light bulb. 'You're just jealous and I was listening, remember – you weren't getting anywhere with him. Besides, he loved it. Did you see his face? It's made his day, probably his decade. You know you always have to remember the little people, darling,' she said in a mock-starry voice, with a big grin. 'They're the ones who can make you or break you; although I have to say it really pisses me off that after ten years of a career in serious journalism, it's two series of that bloody reality TV show that's finally put me on Joe Public's GPS.'

'Come off it, Lizzie, if you're looking for sympathy you've come to the wrong place. You told me you hated roughing

it – living out of a knapsack with no toilets, constant helmet hair, and how being embedded with the troops played hell with your skin.’

‘Well it does – just look at Kate Adie and that Irish woman – have they never heard of moisturiser?’ Lizzie peered myopically at her watch. ‘What time did you say Mum and Dad are due back?’

‘Still not wearing your glasses?’

‘Oh please. It’s fine if you’re Kate Silverton, all feline and serious, the thinking man’s love bunny, but trust me it really hasn’t worked in light entertainment since Eric Morecambe.’

‘What about contacts—’

‘Darling, I’ve got more contacts than you could wave a wet stick at,’ Liz said slyly with a wolfish grin.

‘You know what I mean, and don’t come over all starry with me, kiddo. Remember I was there with you when you were in your jarmies interviewing Billy the guinea pig and Flopsy rabbit with a hairbrush.’

Liz laughed. ‘I’d forgotten all about that.’

‘Well, don’t worry, I haven’t. Anyway, Aunt Fleur says she’ll try and keep Mum and Dad out till six if she can.’ Suzie checked her own watch. ‘She’s going to give us a ring when they’re on their way back. So that’s just on two hours, I reckon, if we’re lucky. So can you come and give us a hand? We’ve got to put out the tables, get the chairs sorted out, then there’s the flowers, the banners to be hung, the red carpet, the balloons. After that we need to get the cake sorted, check on the glasses and then there’s the fireworks . . . God, actually there’s loads more to do, so which do you fancy doing?’

Lizzie pulled a face. ‘You know, sweetie, I’m useless at all

that sort of thing. I've got some calls to make and I need to get ready. It sounds like you've got it all covered. You won't really be needing me, will you?

At which point Sam, Suzie's husband, appeared from around the corner of the garage wheeling a great pile of chairs. 'Oh there you are. For God's sake you two, we haven't got time for a girlie chat,' he said, talking and walking and heading for the back garden. 'It's total chaos round the back there. Can you catch up later and get round there and give us a hand?'

Suzie glared at his retreating back: as if she hadn't been working like a dog since the instant her mum and dad pulled out of the drive. Not to mention all the planning and hiring and booking and worrying about whether the party would all come together.

'So what's up with Mr Happy?' asked Lizzie.

'Don't take any notice, he's just a bit stressed, that's all,' Suzie said, wondering why on earth she felt the need to defend him. 'Work and things, and the girls are a bit of handful at the moment – well, Hannah is. Teenagers, you know how it is.'

Lizzie wrinkled her nose. 'Fortunately I don't and to be honest the man's got no idea what real pressure is.'

No, thought Suzie, *but I certainly do*.

The last few months had been a mass of subterfuge, stealth and planning, culminating in today's big event for Jack and Rose's fortieth wedding anniversary – *forty years*. Given Sam's current frustrated and grumpy mood, Suzie was beginning to think that another forty minutes together was starting to look close to impossible.

The wedding anniversary party had grown out of a chance conversation they'd had when Liz came to stay with them for a few days over Christmas, after a trip to the Caribbean

with the guy she had been dating had fallen through at the last minute.

One dark winter afternoon, they had all been sitting around in front of the fire, looking through the family photo albums in the sentimental way you do when everyone gets together, and along the way Suzie had realised their parents' fortieth anniversary was approaching. Somewhere between the wine and breaking out the Baileys they had come up with the idea of throwing a party, which had somehow transformed into a surprise party and then snowballed from a small family get-together to a blow-by-blow recreation of their mum and dad's wedding reception.

'It'll be absolutely brilliant,' Liz had said, topping up her glass. 'I can see it now. Masses of flowers, wedding cake, photographer – I know this brilliant guy. And maybe we could sort out a second honeymoon for them? What do you think? Where did they go first time around?'

'Devon, I think,' said Suzie.

'Perfect. I know this lovely little hotel. Do you think there's any way we can get hold of the original guest list?'

At which point Suzie had turned over a group photo that her mum had given one of her daughters for a family history project and said, 'Actually I think quite a lot of the names are on the back here.'

Liz had grinned. 'Fantastic, that's a start and I'm sure between us we can come up with the rest of them. Maybe you could email Aunt Fleur? Wasn't she Mum's chief bridesmaid? The woman's got a memory like an elephant; she's bound to remember. Hang on, I'll grab my diary.' Liz leant over the arm of the sofa and, grabbing it from her bag, had started thumbing through the pages. 'Okay, so their actual

anniversary is on the Thursday but that weekend is free – how about we tell Mum and Dad that we're taking everyone out to dinner at Rocco's on the Saturday evening – my treat?

'You're saying we can't afford to take everyone to Rocco's?' asked Suzie.

'No, no, of course I'm not, what I'm saying is that we want to make them think we're taking them somewhere really special just in case they come up with a better idea.'

'They don't usually make a lot of fuss about their anniversary,' Suzie pointed out.

'Well, it's high time they did,' said Liz. 'Forty years has got to be worth celebrating. Right, so, now guests . . .' she said. 'Have you got a piece of paper there? What do you think, a hundred? Hundred and fifty?'

Suzie shrugged.

'Let's say a hundred and fifty to be on the safe side,' Liz said, sliding the photo album she had been looking through over onto Suzie's lap. 'We could have their original wedding cake copied and those table settings don't look like they'd take much and all this bunting. I mean, we've all got the photos, haven't we? It wouldn't be that hard to do. It would be lovely. Mum would love it.'

Suzie turned the album pages and looked down at a picture of the bride and groom outside the church looking impossibly young and happy. Someone had glued a piece of paper to the front and written 'Mr and Mrs Jack and Rose Bingham' on it in a rounded, bubbly hand. The handwriting looked very much like her mum's, bringing tears to Suzie's eyes. All those years ago, all that joy and hope – a life crammed full of possibilities and plans, their gaze fixed on the future they had together.

‘We could easily do Mum’s bouquet. I mean, looking at these—’ Suzie said, infected by Liz’s enthusiasm. ‘Red roses and gypsophila, it’s not exactly rocket science.’

Liz pulled a *whatever* face. ‘If you say so. Let’s face it, flowers are really your thing, not mine.’

‘Actually, if you want to be accurate, *vegetables* are my thing and Mum’s not going to be too chuffed if she ended up with a bouquet of radicchio and curly endive.’

‘Well, you know what I’m saying here,’ said Liz, waving the words away. ‘You can sort that out. You’re the family gardener.’

‘And you’re the family star?’ said Suzie, raising her eyebrows.

‘Well, if the cap fits . . .’ said Liz with a wry grin.

Suzie struggled to bite her tongue. Five days of Liz’s ego, of her hogging the bathroom, taking all the hot water and constantly being on her phone even during dinner, had worn Suzie’s Christmas spirit right down to the canvas, particularly as Liz had invited herself. Her idea of mucking in was – in her own words – to *stay out of the way* when there was any sign of work, whether it was washing up or anything else that might risk chipping her nail polish. Her Christmas present to them all had been tickets to a show in London, which Suzie knew damn well Liz had been given as comps, and which would cost them a mint in train fares to actually use.

‘Play nicely, you two,’ Sam had said, mellowed by a couple of glasses of Christmas cheer. ‘And tell me again how come we didn’t throw a big party for Jack and Rose’s twenty-fifth?’ Up until the party plan had emerged, Sam had been sitting on the sidelines drinking margaritas and watching *Wallace and Gromit*.

‘I don’t know really,’ said Suzie. ‘Mum and Dad have really never made that much of a fuss about wedding

anniversaries. You know what they're like – no fuss, no frills – and for their twenty-fifth we were probably too young to organise anything.'

'Or to care, come to that,' said Lizzie. 'I must have been at uni and you two were all loved up and getting married.'

'For their thirtieth they went to Rome, I think,' said Suzie, flicking back through the album. 'And our girls were little then and it was Mum's fiftieth the same year. I think their anniversary just got forgotten in the rush. So actually you're right, a big party is well overdue. The only downside if we really do want to recreate their wedding reception from scratch is that the church hall where they held it burnt down years ago.'

'Don't worry about that. It's the spirit of it that counts. I was thinking maybe we could hire a marquee,' said Liz. 'Stick it up in the garden behind their cottage. There's plenty of room on the lawn.'

Suzie raised her eyebrows. 'Have you got any idea how much those things cost?'

'No, but it'll be my treat, instead of picking up the tab at Rocco's,' said Liz.

'Probably work out about the same if you pair have a dessert there,' Sam had said wryly.

And so here they were, six months, many phone calls, a lot of Googling and a complete logistical nightmare later.

Suzie took another look at her watch. 'I've told the guests to be here by 5:45 p.m. at the latest.

'And they're all going to hide in the cottage?' asked Liz incredulously.

'No, we've asked everyone to go round the back into the marquee so we can keep them in one place. I've also asked

people to park down on the recreation ground so we don't give the game away.'

Liz nodded. 'Right, in that case I'm just going to go upstairs and grab the bathroom before everyone else arrives. Grant will probably be getting here at around six. I know he's just dying to meet you all and I'm sure you'll love him. Anyway, I really need to go and get ready. I don't want him to think that I've let myself go just because we're out in the sticks,' she said cheerily.

'Lizzie, wait—' Suzie began, but too late, her little sister was already heading for the house. 'You've only just arrived and you've been on the bloody phone ever since you got here,' she mumbled.

'Where the hell's she going now?' said Sam in exasperation as he rounded the corner on his way back from the marquee with a chair trolley.

'Apparently she's just going to get ready,' said Suzie as casually as she could manage. 'I'm sure she won't be long.'

Sam stared at her. 'Well, that'll be a first. Just bloody great, isn't it? Why on earth did you let her go? There are loads of things still to do and we could really do with another pair of hands. Oh, and while I'm on the subject of helping hands, I can't find either of our dear daughters either,' he said, his voice heavy with sarcasm. 'The band have rung up to say they can't find us, the caterers can't find anywhere to plug in their equipment without blowing all the fuses, Liz's fancy photographer just texted to say he's running late and the fireworks have only just shown up. And you know what? I'm getting fed up of being the one who is supposed to have all the answers. We never agreed that we'd do all this on our own, Suzie, and so far it looks to me like we've done the

lion's share. I thought madam there said she'd arrive early and give us a hand?'

'I know, you're right – and we have, but Lizzie has paid for a lot of it,' said Suzie, caught in the badlands between agreeing with Sam (which she secretly did) and defending Liz (which she felt some irrational instinctive urge to do), all the while thinking that being caught in the middle was no place to be.

'I know, but that still doesn't mean she can just swan off when we need her. We're not the hired help here, you know – and she was the one who offered, nobody twisted her arm, although I'm sure Lady Bountiful isn't going to let us forget who signed the cheques in a hurry.'

'Please don't be so snappy, Sam, it's not like you. She said she needed to get ready, what could I say?' Suzie said lamely.

'Oh, come off it. Liz always looks like she's just stepped off the front cover of a magazine,' said Sam. 'Never a hair out of place . . .'

He didn't add, 'unlike you,' although Suzie suspected she could hear it in his voice. She glanced down at her outfit – faded, world-weary jeans and an equally faded long sleeve tee-shirt worn with a pair of cowboy boots that had seen far better days. Suzie knew without looking in a mirror that her hair was a bird's nest and there hadn't been time to put on so much as a lick of make-up because the whole day had been manic since the moment she'd opened her eyes.

'To be honest, I don't know how she does it,' Sam said, his gaze fixed on the front door through which Lizzie had so recently vanished.

Suzie stared at him and laughed. 'You *are* joking, aren't you? A professional stylist, twice weekly trips to the beautician,

the manicurist and the hairdresser, a personal trainer, Botox and a grooming budget that would make your eyes water. Not to mention the fact that she hasn't got a husband, two children, two dogs, two cats, a rabbit and a business to run, which probably gives her a *bit* of a head start,' growled Suzie sarcastically, snatching up the boxes of table decorations that she had been taking to the marquee before life got in the way.

'Do I detect a modicum of jealousy there?' Sam said as he headed off back towards the car.

Suzie swung round to say something but he was too quick for her.

Jealous of Liz? *As if*, although even as she thought it, Suzie knew that the thought came too quickly to ring completely true. There were days when Liz's life looked like a total breeze in contrast to her own.

CHAPTER TWO

‘My feet are absolutely killing me,’ said Rose with a groan, prising off her shoes and wriggling unhappy toes. She and Jack had managed to find a table outside the café in the shade and Rose had no plans to walk a step further. ‘That is just so much better,’ she sighed, stretching her feet. ‘I don’t think I can walk another step. What do you think Fleur’s up to?’

‘She said that she was going to get a pot of tea and some cake,’ said Jack, glancing towards the dark interior of the tearooms.

Rose looked at him and laughed. ‘That isn’t what I meant and you know it,’ she said. ‘All this—’ she waved a hand to encompass the day – ‘out by ten, slap-up breakfast on the way here, God knows how many hours spent trudging around a stately home and gardens. This from a woman who usually wants to stay put and be waited on hand and foot while she’s staying with us. Can you remember the fuss she made last time she was over and we suggested a day out at the seaside?’

‘Maybe she’s had a change of heart.’

Rose sniffed. ‘Fleur’s never had a heart, Jack, she’s got a calculator.’

Jack raised his eyebrows. ‘Play nicely. You have to admit she’s been all right while she’s been over here this time. Maybe she’s mellowing in her old age. Maybe she’s beginning

to realise what she's missing. And like she said, she's only over here for a couple of weeks this time around and the gardens are only open to the public for a month every year.'

'Fleur hates gardening.'

'Yes, but she knows that *you* like it,' said Jack.

Rose looked sceptical. 'That's exactly what I mean. When was the last time Fleur thought about anyone but herself? When she gets back I'm going to ask her what she's done with my sister.'

Jack laughed and then, changing the subject, said, 'Actually it's been a really nice day all round, hasn't it? I'm really looking forward to a pot of tea and some cake.'

'And that's another thing – buying us tea and cakes,' said Rose. 'Fleur's purse is usually welded shut. So far she's insisted on paying for us to get in and fought like a tiger when we offered to buy her lunch.' As she spoke Rose counted the things off on her fingers. 'And now she's gone trotting off to go and get the teas. I don't understand it at all. There's something up. You don't think she's ill, do you?'

'What?'

'There's bound to be something more to this. I've been trying to work it out all day. Maybe she's softening us up so she can break the bad news.'

'What bad news?' asked Jack anxiously.

'Well, I don't know, do I? Maybe she's coming home for good. Maybe she's finally outgrown Australia. Oh my Lord, you don't think she wants to come and live with us, do you?'

Jack shook his head. 'No, of course not. Maybe she's just . . .' he began, obviously struggling to come up with some explanation, while fiddling with a sugar packet, tipping it end over end so it made a sound like waves breaking on the beach.

After the tide had rolled in and out half a dozen times, he shook his head. 'No, actually, Rose, you're right. I have no idea what Fleur's up to, but to be honest it makes a nice change. In all the years I've known her she's never so much as offered to buy a cup of tea, let alone treat us to a day out. And you have to admit she's been really cheerful and good company today. I'm really rather enjoying myself.'

As if to underline the point, Fleur reappeared from inside the teashop carrying a huge tray. Jack leapt to his feet to rescue her. Rose smiled. Jack was always the perfect gentleman even when it came to her grumpy sister.

'Here, let me have that,' he said, taking it out of her hands. 'Bloody hell, that looks amazing, you must have bought half the shop. Are you trying to feed us up?'

'Thanks, Jack,' said Fleur with relief. 'I didn't know what you liked, so I got a selection of little sandwiches and cakes. There's salmon and cucumber, egg and cress, Victoria sponge, and a lemon drizzle cake. Oh, and Danish pastries.'

Rose looked at them in astonishment. 'We haven't long had lunch, we'll never eat this lot.'

'I know, I got the boy behind the counter to give me a box so we could take home what we don't eat. Waste not want not.' Fleur settled herself down at the table. 'So have you enjoyed your day so far?' she said, in a tone that suggested it was a leading question.

'Yes, we were just saying that it's been lovely,' said Rose, watching her sister's face for clues. 'I was going to talk to you about that.'

'The thing is,' said Fleur, leaning forward to unpack the cups and pour the tea. 'Coming here today. To the gardens. It wasn't really my idea.'

‘Now there’s a surprise,’ said Rose, shooting Jack a knowing look.

‘Actually it was Suzie’s. She said that you’d always wanted to come here and as it’s your fortieth wedding anniversary she thought it would be a nice gesture—’

‘If you brought us?’ asked Rose sceptically. ‘Why didn’t she bring us herself?’

‘Well, the thing is, Liz is taking us all out to dinner tonight and Suzie got you those lovely olive trees and to be perfectly honest I couldn’t think of anything else to buy you. So I thought this would be the perfect present – a nice day out. Just the three of us.’

‘I don’t know why you bothered. You never bought us anything before,’ Rose said, the words out before she could stop herself.

‘That’s hardly fair,’ said Fleur. ‘I gave you that lovely cut-glass decanter, remember?’

‘Which someone gave you,’ Rose fired straight back.

‘Only because I thought it was more your sort of thing than mine and how was I to know that you knew the man at the garage?’

‘They were giving them away with petrol tokens,’ said Rose to a bemused-looking Jack by way of explanation.

‘Yes, but the promotion was over,’ protested Fleur.

‘I know,’ said Rose. ‘The man in the garage told me they were throwing the rest of them out and asked if I wanted one to match the one I’d already got.’

‘You said you liked it.’

‘I was being polite,’ growled Rose, ignoring the sandwiches and helping herself to the chocolate éclair from the selection of cakes on the plate.

‘I was going to have that one,’ Fleur said, sounding hurt.

‘I know,’ said Rose, biting off the end.

Jack, who had been watching the exchange, looked from one sister to the other. ‘When did we ever have a cut-glass decanter?’ he asked.

‘Fleur gave it to us as a wedding present,’ said Rose, through a mouthful of éclair. ‘I gave it to your mum for Christmas.’

Jack sighed and made a start on the sandwiches.