

I Do



Cheyenne Blue



Chapter 1

“I MAY BE DESPERATE FOR work, but I’m applying for jobs I actually know how to do.” Allie stared at her identical twin sister in disbelief. Why on earth did Sophie think Allie’s accountancy skills made her the ideal person to stand in for her as an event planner? Maybe the strong painkillers were messing with her mind. “I can’t do your job. You might as well ask me to split the atom. I’ve got as much chance of pulling that off.” She puffed out her cheeks. “More, maybe.”

“No chance—you failed physics at school.” Sophie plucked the bedclothes away from her injured leg. “Please, Allie. There is literally no one else I can ask. My business is on the line.”

“Literally anyone would do a better job than me. Aren’t there agencies where you can hire people short term? Someone who knows event planning or at least the difference between an airwall and an AirPod.”

“At least you’ve heard of an airwall. You’re already in front.” Sophie shuffled in bed, struggling to reach behind for her pillow. “I wouldn’t ask if I weren’t desperate, Al.”

Allie stood and held out an arm, bracing herself as Sophie grabbed it and hauled herself forward with a grimace. Allie plumped up the pillow behind her. “You want another one behind your back?”

“No. Thanks.” With a sigh, Sophie settled back. “It’s not difficult. You just have to schmooze with people, show some tact and social skills—”

“Accountants aren’t known for their social aptitude.”

Sophie rolled her eyes. “Please. That’s bollocks. People like you. You can make small talk with a gatepost. And accountants need to be organised and detail oriented. Essential skills for event planners.”

Cheyenne Blue

Allie sat on the edge of the bed and twisted her hands together in her lap. Sympathy for Sophie fluttered its wings in her chest. The last thing she wanted to do was go to Quandong—a tiny town somewhere off the beaten path in New South Wales. She wasn't even sure where it was. And to go as the event planner for their festival? It was a disaster waiting to happen.

“Soph, I don't think I can do this. Even as your stand-in. If people see me on the phone to you every other minute, they'll realise I know less than an office junior on her first day. At least a junior can be sent out for coffee and sticky buns. They'll be stuck with me. Honestly, I think you'd be better off going to an agency.”

Sophie pushed a hand through her floppy blue hair. Her blonde roots were starting to show. “The thing is, this job was going to make my business. The first big event of many. I can't afford to hire anyone else. I quoted on a shoestring to get it, and if I bail, not only will I leave Quandong in the lurch, but I can kiss my business goodbye.” She took Allie's hands in her own. “I trust you like no one else, Allie. I know how efficient and competent you are. Kirkland & Partners shafted you in the worst way possible—no wonder you've lost confidence in yourself. Maybe this will help you regain it.” She fixed her gaze on Allie. “I know I'm asking a lot of you—”

Allie managed a wobbly smile. “Thanks for the support. But I think you're asking too much of me. It's nearly as big an ask as when you got me to pretend to be you in high school and go on a date with Wallis Simpson, because you'd agreed and then changed your mind.”

“Ellis Simpson, not Wallis. Wallis was something to do with a royal scandal back in the day. And I'd only agreed to go out with him because he asked me in the ten minutes when I figured I better at least try to be straight.”

“Ellis, Wallis. Both forgettable.” Allie shrugged. “My point remains. Going out with Wall— Ellis was torture. He talked non-stop about his Gangnam Style video.”

“To be fair, everyone was doing that in 2012.”

“Still. It wasn't his finest moment.”

Sophie laughed, which ended with a gasp. She crushed her lower lip between her teeth.

Allie picked up her hand and squeezed it. “Breathe. The doctors said you'll get through this. You'll get better. The swelling will go down and the nerves will heal. It could have been so much worse.” She closed her eyes

momentarily, willing away the memory of waking in the night with her right leg aflame with pain. She hadn't needed the call from the hospital to know something was seriously wrong with Sophie.

Sophie's grey eyes, identical to her own, clung to hers as she panted her way through the spasm. When it ended, she seemed to deflate in the bed, her blue hair sweaty on her forehead. "If this is what labour is like, I'm never pushing a kid out my vag."

Allie laughed. "Any mother would tell you it's worse."

"Yeah, what do they know?" She fell silent.

Allie gripped her sister's hand, her thumb stroking over the back of it. Not for the first time, she cursed the driver of a stolen car who mounted the pavement and crashed into the front of the restaurant Sophie and her friend were leaving. No one was hurt—except for Sophie, her right leg crushed between the vehicle and brickwork. Initially, doctors had thought they'd have to amputate the leg to save her. Sophie would recover, but it would take many more months of rehab.

Allie hitched a breath. It was the worst time for her to go to Quandong—not only did she not want to leave Sophie right now, but there was her own career to consider. She had to keep her feelers out, keep applying for jobs, and not let the lack of response get her down.

But then...she couldn't not go to Quandong. She was being selfish. What was a couple of weeks from her life if it helped her sister keep her business? Love and sympathy for Sophie twined in her chest. So what if it interrupted her own job hunt? It wasn't as if job offers were falling out the sky, despite the shortage of qualified accountants in Sydney. The old boys' network at Kirkland & Partners had seen to that. She pressed her lips together as the familiar knot of anger twisted in her guts. And maybe Sophie was right. She was a good accountant. And skills were transferrable. She straightened her back. She could do this.

"I'll go to Quandong in your place."

Sophie closed her eyes for a second, and when she opened them, they were damp. "Thank you. You're the greatest sister on the planet." Her breath whooshed out. "When all this is over, we'll go to Laredo's and drink a cauldron of margaritas and stuff ourselves with smoky beef fajitas until we explode."

Cheyenne Blue

“As long as it’s your treat.” Allie pulled her lips into a smile even as her stomach plunged at the thought of time away from Sophie.

“It will be. We’ll swagger in there, arm-in-arm, and raise the roof.” Sophie glanced at the frame keeping the quilt away from her useless leg.

“So tell me what this festival is about. Should I take notes?”

“No need. You can take my file. It has everything you need to know.”

“Tell me the bones now, so I don’t go home and start panicking you’ve sent me to a doomsday preppers convention.”

“Way more interesting and upbeat.” The lines of pain around Sophie’s eyes eased for a moment as her lips curved into a small smile. “Quandong is a cute and characterful small town forty-five minutes inland from Byron Bay. It’s gorgeous—think rainforest, sparkling creeks, and a historic town centre. But few tourists make the drive out there. They stay on the beach in Byron because it’s trendy and Instaworthy.”

“Hey, I like Byron. It can’t help its celebrity town status! I bumped into Chris Hemsworth at Hip Coast Coffee once.”

“You know I don’t share your lust for the Hemsworth hunks.” Sophie’s lips twitched. “Moving right along before you melt; Quandong wants its share of the tourist dollar, and they’ve come up with a great idea: they’re going to bill themselves as the gay wedding capital of Australia. The town has the infrastructure already—there’s a heap of accommodation, three wedding celebrants, indoor and outdoor venues, and a gorgeous location.”

“So what’s the festival?” Allie leaned forward. If she were honest, the town sounded appealing. Small and cute, like her friend Leila’s Pomeranian.

“Gay Bells Festival. It’s two days of events with a same-sex marriage theme culminating in a parade, a fake wedding ceremony and afterparty. Most of the arrangements are in place—there are teams of volunteers assigned to each event. Your job is to oversee them all, defuse any tension over differences of opinion, arrange, delegate, and then be on hand during the festival to sort out the last-minute snafus. Simple.”

“I’m glad you think so.” Allie pinched the bridge of her nose where a headache threatened. “I don’t know how to do any of that stuff. You should implant a communication chip in my brain—it will save on the endless phone calls to you.”

“Not constantly.” Her twin’s gaze shifted away toward the window that looked out over the street. “Only when there’s no one around.”

“Why? You’ll have told them I’m standing in for you, right?”

“Not exactly.” Sophie’s fingers twitched on the quilt. “I’m asking you to pretend to be me. Go there and be Sophie Lane. My contract says I can’t delegate my duties unless I have approval in advance.”

The headache was now a reality. “Me pretending to be you must be in breach of that contract. Not to mention deceitful. There’s no way I could pull that off—surely you’ve met some of the organisers already? What if they ask a question that you would know and I don’t?”

“It’s not ideal, I know that. But I can’t think of any other way other than to pull out all together. You’re right; they probably wouldn’t knowingly accept you as a substitute, even though I have good reason.” She heaved a shuddering breath. “I trust you, Allie. You’re an *accountant*; sensible and practical is part of the job description—”

“Unemployed accountant,” Allie muttered.

“Through no fault of your own. And this gets you out of Sydney. Gives you a break in a cute town with nice people. Everyone I’ve met there has been lovely.”

“So you’ve met them. They’ll know I’m not you.” She pointed at her own natural blonde hair. “No blue hair. And it’s longer than yours.”

“Tell them you dyed it back to natural and that you’re growing it out. Honestly, I’ve only met a couple of people—I doubt they’ll remember me that well. Other than that, we’re identical. We even sound the same.”

“You’ve got a fleck in your left eye,” Allie started, “and I’m half a centimetre taller, and—”

“You really think anyone will notice those things?”

“Probably not,” she admitted. “But I’m not comfortable with this. The whole pretending-to-be-you part. What if I don’t answer to Sophie? What if they realise I’m not you? Your business will be completely down the gurgler then.” She shook her head. “I’m very afraid I’ll stuff it up for you, Soph. It seems...wrong.”

Sophie’s body rattled with a dry cough, and she clutched her ribs. “Fucking cough. Fucking bruised lungs. Fucking body. Look, if you’re not okay doing this, then don’t worry about it. I’ll go to the agency as you said.”

Allie bit her lip. Would it really be so bad pretending to be her twin? If Sophie was on the other end of the phone, then she was, effectively, doing the job. Allie would just be her mouthpiece. And it wasn’t as if they hadn’t

pretended to be each other in the past. Exhibit A: Wallis Simpson. Or Ellis. She hung her head for a moment. “You don’t need to call the agency—I’ll go to Quandong. Just make sure you answer the phone if I call.”

“Of course I will. I’ve got nothing else to do, after all, except lie here and heal. Thank you. I’d hug you if I could move and my lungs weren’t pulped.”

Allie leaned in for a careful hug. Her sister smelled stale, as if she’d aged a few decades. She pressed her nose to the side of Sophie’s neck. “I love you. Of course I’ll do this for you. I’m sorry I didn’t agree immediately.” She released her. “When would I have to go?”

“Ten days’ time, for four days over the weekend. Then the festival is six weeks after that, and you’ll need to be there for two weeks.”

“I can do that.” She hoped. She swallowed away the nerves that threatened even now, and the curl of worry that the idea of deceit brought. “So that’s it? You’ll give me your file to read?”

“You can take it now. It’s on the desk in my office.” Sophie jerked her head toward the sunroom she’d made her home office.

Allie tilted her head. “There’s one thing still bothering me. Who’s going to look after you if I’m not here? You still need help getting to the bathroom and making food, and someone to drive you to doctors and rehab.”

“The insurance company has finally agreed to pay for around-the-clock care. I’ll take them up on it. I’ll be all right.” Her grin was a faint approximation of her smile from before the accident. “It’ll be okay.”

“Then that’s settled. I’ll read the file later. Is Bettina still coming to stay with you tonight?”

“Mm. She’ll be here in a couple of hours, so you can go home.” Sophie glanced at her fingers twisted on the quilt. “There’s just one other thing I haven’t told you about the festival.”

The hesitancy in her voice jolted Allie in the chest. *What else can there be?* Was she to be Lady Godiva, naked on a white horse at the head of the parade? Was she to source a full gay choir and orchestra? Or simply arrange a sit-down meal for three hundred people? Sophie’s voice alerted her a big ask was about to come her way.

“You better tell me.”

“Part of the reason I got the job is because I’m part of the queer community. As you’re pretending to be me, you’ll have to pretend to be a lesbian.”

Allie slumped. *Pretend to be gay?* Her stomach gave an uncomfortable lurch. “How do I do that? It seems...wrong. Pretending to be something I’m not.”

“There’s no magic to it. You’ve been around gay people ever since I came out at fifteen. Before then. There isn’t a homophobic bone in your body. You march in the Pride parades—”

“As an ally.”

“But you do it. You come with me and my friends to queer clubs and bars. You’ve been hit on by women. And I know you’ve kissed at least one.”

Allie looked down at her hands. Her skin itched as if it were a tight fit around her body. “She was lovely. And, well, I wanted to know if...because you were...and she understood...and we kissed.”

Sophie’s cough rattled her body. “Al, you don’t have to explain—again. We talked about this at the time. You kissed a girl, you liked it, but you’ve never done it again. But you’re a part of the queer community all the same. Not because you kissed a girl necessarily but because you support us, enjoy being with us. You’re an ally in the truest sense. So you don’t have to do anything different in Quandong; just be yourself. And if anyone asks questions just deflect them. You don’t have to explain to anyone.”

“You’re right. It just seems like the deceptions are piling up. I hope I keep it together in my head.”

“You will. And thank you. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

She went through to Sophie’s office to find the Quandong file. It lay on the desk, thick and bursting with papers stuffed into the folder with Sophie’s usual haphazard lack of organisation. How she managed to be such a meticulous event planner was beyond her. She put the file on the hall table next to her car keys. Despite Sophie’s assurances, nerves jumped in her belly. Could she pull this off? Maybe. Hopefully. For Sophie’s sake she would have to try.

Allie went into the kitchen for a glass of water. She’d agreed, and that was all there was to it. She just hoped she could do it.

Chapter 2

TARRYN ADJUSTED HER SAFETY GOGGLES, put on her earmuffs, and picked up her welder. The steel plating she'd salvaged from the local tip, once cut to shape, would be perfect to create the rounded body of the metal emu she was crafting. She paused to visualise it in her mind's eye, then pulled her gloves higher and turned on the welder.

"Is that a piglet?"

The voice reached her over the sizzle and pop of the welder, and she looked up. Will stood in the doorway of her workshop, hands on hips as he studied her creation.

Pleasure warmed her at the sight of her best friend despite the chill of her workshop. She turned off the welder, removed her earmuffs, and tugged off her heat-resistant gloves. "It's an emu. Or it will be once I find something for the legs and the neck."

"And if you don't, you could put chubby little legs underneath, a slot in its bum, and I'd have the mailbox you keep promising me."

She laughed. "Not this one. Soon." She removed her visor and set it on the bench.

"You keep saying that."

"Is that why you're here? To harass me for freebies?" She ran a hand over her close-cropped iron-grey curls.

"No. I'm on a mission from on high."

"What sort of on high? The Happy High Herb Shop, or have you finally found religion and want to convert me?"

"Neither. Phyllis-on-high." Will grimaced. "She wants to make sure you'll be at tomorrow's planning meeting for the festival." He side-eyed her.

Tarryn snorted. “I wonder why that is?”

“Is that a serious question?” Will leaned against her workbench, then bounced away once he saw the dust. “Who in the entire town of Quandong is the person least likely to embrace a wedding? Who has made her views perfectly clear about the ridiculousness of spending the equivalent of a house deposit on what is essentially a big party? Who states—often—that while it’s great that Australia has same-sex marriage, it’s ridiculous for the queer community to embrace such a rigid heterosexual institution. Who—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tarryn grinned at Will’s drama and rested her butt against the bench.

“However, who, in this entire town of fifteen hundred people, has got the job of assistant to the event planner and therefore should be at tomorrow’s planning meeting, if only to meet her boss and make a good impression.” He pointed with both hands. “Tarryn Harris should.”

Tarryn scrunched her lips. “I’ll meet her soon enough. I’m only her glorified gofer—I won’t be doing anything important. I don’t need to ooh and aah over frills, balloons, and wedding favours any sooner than I have to.” She guessed the planner would be prissy and insist that every tiny detail be exactly just-so: the perfect shade of lavender, the stalls lined up to the centimetre, the music the exact volume allowed by the council. Event planning didn’t seem like a job where you could wing it. And that meant she and this perfect event planner were polar opposites.

“If Garrett and I ever get married, we won’t be having frills. The Gay Bells Festival isn’t just for the girls.”

“I don’t want to coo over matching bow ties and poodle ringbearers any more than I do over floral bouquets and white dresses. What an impractical colour!”

“I went to a wedding once where the couple’s spaniel was the ringbearer. The dog jumped into the lilypond and emerged to shake itself over all the nearby guests. At least the rings were still on its back. You look good in white, by the way, with your gorgeous olive skin. Not all clothing has to be practical.”

“You’re the perfect person to be on the planning committee.”

“Which is why I am. And you need to show your face tomorrow afternoon.” Will made puppy-dog eyes. “Please say you will. It’s such a pretty face.” He laughed at Tarryn’s horrified expression. “So, are you coming?”

Cheyenne Blue

“I really can’t. I have to go to Kyogle to weld a truck tray for one of my regular customers. I’ll call Phyll and let her know, and I can call in to the planner later to say hi. I might not agree with the purpose of the festival, but I hope it brings business into the town. I’ll do a good job, just as long as I don’t have to embrace the ideals of the festival.”

“I know you will, hon. You always do your brilliant best. And this might not be as bad as you think—Kirra’s met Sophie and says she’s okay. And of course, she’s community.” He edged closer and fingered the high-vis jacket she wore. “Fluorescent yellow really isn’t your colour—it’s too harsh for you. Does this come in purple?”

She rolled her eyes. “Purple is not a high-vis colour. And it’s good the event planner’s queer. Some things need to be kept close.”

“I’ll drop you a text if there’s anything you need to know that comes out of the meeting before you go see Sophie.” He lifted his gaze to the ceiling. “Pray for me. With Phyll in the chair, this could go on all night.”

“If it goes on too long, pull out your phone and stare at it, make a horrified face, then hurry out the room looking anxious. They’ll assume it’s a family emergency.” She shrugged. “It’s worked for me.”

“Sometimes, you have the best ideas.” Will winked.

“That’s not what you said when I asked you to come bungee jumping.”

“That’s not a good idea; that’s an ambulance ride to the hospital to have your eyeballs put back in their sockets.”

She pointed at her face. “Eyeballs. Two of them. Still in place.”

“For you maybe. I think mine would have ended up drifting down the river.” Will pulled his jacket tighter around himself. “Now that I’ve fulfilled my committee duty by asking you, I’ll see you around.”

“I’m sure you will.” Tarryn kissed his cheek and screwed up her face. “Ew, stubble.”

“I’m embracing my masculine side.” He stroked his pale cheeks. “Bye.”

Tarryn replaced her safety gear and turned the welder back on. The assistant’s job had sounded like an easy few weeks’ work when Phyll had suggested it. Now she wasn’t so sure.

It all depended on how this Sophie was.

Chapter 3

THE COMMUNITY HALL WAS BUZZING with people when Allie climbed the wooden steps to the entrance at one minute to four. Butterflies twirled in her stomach. She stopped at the top of the steps and smoothed a hand over her hair, pushing the wayward strands back from her face. Her stomach lurched uncomfortably. She cursed the roadworks that meant the journey from Sydney had taken longer than expected. She was always punctual, and worry she might be late had her on edge. At least she'd arrived on time—just. She took a deep breath. *Oh, Sophie, I hope I don't mess up.*

She stood in the doorway and looked around. A knot of people chatted in a corner, and an older white woman with precision-cut grey hair directed a skinny guy in the tightest jeans Allie had ever seen to set chairs out in rows. The older woman must be Phyllis—or Phyll as she preferred to be called—the chairwoman of the festival committee and overall busybody.

A tall, brown-skinned person with wildly frizzy hair and dressed in a black shirt with white dragonflies printed on it was talking with a petite woman with a long auburn plait. The brown-skinned woman matched Sophie's description of Kirra—the owner of the Airbnb where she was staying. Sophie's email jumped into Allie's head: *I've met Kirra—she's a proud Bundjalung sistergirl, pronouns shelher. She's one of the organisers. The town is on Bundjalung country.*

Allie licked her lips. Who to approach first? Walking into a roomful of people feeling unprepared was so not her thing. She owned the room when she talked about accountancy, but this? Impostor syndrome. This time she warranted it.

Cheyenne Blue

She took a steadying breath, pasted on a smile, and entered the hall. The woman talking to Kirra moved away, so Sophie went across. Her first test. “Hi, Kirra.” Her palms were instantly clammy, and she wiped them surreptitiously down the sides of her pants. What if Kirra took one look and asked who she was? What if she proclaimed, “You’re not Sophie!” to the entire hall?

Kirra flashed a wide grin showing crooked, white teeth. “Sophie, how lovely to see you again.” She frowned. “What happened to your hair?”

Allie put a self-conscious hand to her new ear-length bob, which feathered and curled around her head. She and Sophie had agreed there was no way anyone would believe Sophie’s hair had grown six centimetres in as many weeks, so Allie had agreed to the cut. She was still trying to get used to the lightness of it. “I dyed it back to my natural colour.”

Kirra studied her with pursed lips. “It suits you. But I did like the blue.”

“And I like your shirt.” She hoped it wasn’t Kirra’s everyday wear.

“Thank you, possum. It’s one of my favourites.”

Up close, her skinny body towered over Allie. Her legs were bare under a short skirt, despite the cool day, and her large feet were covered by canvas tennis shoes with no laces.

“I brought the key to the Airbnb,” Kirra said. “I can take you there after the meeting’s over. Assuming it finishes before midnight.” She cast a meaningful glance in Phyll’s direction.

Surely, she was joking.

Kirra nudged her. “Not really—it’s never later than ten. Maybe you can keep them in order tonight.”

Ten was bad enough after the eight-hour drive from Sydney. Allie suppressed an internal sigh. “I better catch Phyll before we start. See you later.”

Kirra nodded, and Allie stepped away.

Phyll swung around as she approached the table. “Will, once you’ve put the chairs out, can you make sure the urn is heating up for tea?”

The skinny man nodded and, abandoning the chairs, headed for the kitchen off the hall. Escaping Phyll? Maybe.

Allie moved closer. “How are you, Phyll? It looks like a lot is happening here.”

“Sophie, welcome. Glad you got here.” Phyll nodded, her grey hair moving stiffly with her head as if welded there. “Yes, everything is under control—so far.” She stared at Allie. “Glad you’ve got rid of the blue hair.

It undermined your authority.” She glanced at the solid watch on her wrist. “You cut it a bit fine—wondered if you were going to make the meeting.”

Uh oh. Exactly what Sophie warned me about. As for the comment on her hair, well, she wouldn’t go there. She inclined her head. “Roadworks. But I’m here now. It was important I come up this weekend so I can patch any holes and keep things moving along.”

“Well, that’s good.” Phyll swung away and clapped her hands. “If we could all take our seats now, we’re ready to begin.” She moved behind the table facing the room and took the seat in the centre.

Allie dithered. Was Phyll expecting her to sit at the table? Well, she *was* the event planner. Sort of. She set her shoulders back and moved to sit next to Phyll, who gave her a brief nod. The other seat remained vacant.

When people had sat and more or less fallen into silence, Phyll stood. “Welcome everyone. Now, before we all give our reports, I’d like to introduce Sophie Lane from Events Done Right in Sydney. Sophie is here to keep us on track and help with the festival.”

Allie smiled and nodded at the faces. Most looked interested, a few scrolled on their phones. Should she say something? Panic gripped her chest—she had no idea what.

Phyll kept talking, obviously not expecting her to speak.

Allie heaved a deep breath and concentrated on keeping a calm, interested look on her face. She pulled her pad and pen from her bag ready to take notes.

Phyll consulted her own pad. “First, an update on the wedding fair in Silver Creek Park. This is my baby. So far, we have almost seventy registered exhibitors, eighteen of which are local. We have a marquee for the wedding attire parade and the singer.”

“Then the marquee will be sitting empty for a lot of the time.” The woman with the auburn plait popped up from her seat. “We’d like to use it for our celebrity chef talk on Saturday. It’s at ten; you should have enough time to set up for the frocks and jocks parade at two.”

Phyll pushed her tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses up her nose. “We’ll need that time to arrange the wedding attire parade.”

“Three hours?” the original speaker asked. “We’ll be out by eleven, and it will save us hiring a second marquee.”

Allie swallowed her nerves and tapped her pen on the pad. Did Sophie know this woman? “I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your name?”

“Ziggy,” the woman replied. “We haven’t met. Myself and Will are organising the local food showcase.”

Of course. That had been in Sophie’s notes. “What would you need for your speaker?”

“Just what’s already available: the podium and sound set-up. We’re happy to use the chairs around the catwalk.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Allie said. “Does that work for you, Phyll?”

“It should do.” Phyll’s lips thinned. “As long as they don’t overrun.”

“I’m sure that won’t be the case. Ziggy, can you make sure whoever introduces your celebrity chef also wraps them up in good time at the end?”

“No worries.” Ziggy bobbed back into her seat.

Relief made her limp for a moment. One tiny test passed—at least she hoped so. She listened to Phyll droning on about the wedding attire parade. It all sounded terribly formal. White dresses and tuxes. The same-sex weddings she’d attended had been more about fun than frills. At the last one, the brides had worn rainbow sneakers, and their person of honour had been their gay friend who wore a mismatched multicoloured suit that was anything but formal.

“What about the fun element?” she asked when Phyll ground to a halt. “The less formal approach many people like. Do we have anything to showcase that?”

Phyll shot her a look from under lowered brows. “We discussed this the last time you were here—I’m surprised you don’t remember.”

Oh shit. Allie searched her memory. They’d been nothing in Sophie’s file about that. She opened her mouth, but her mind blanked and she had no reply.

Phyll gave her a strange look. “We’ve had a few more stallholder applications since then, but my reservations are the same as I discussed with you then.” She pursed her lips. “I haven’t made any decisions. I’m concerned they may lower the tone.”

Sophie wouldn’t have gone along with that, surely. She squared her shoulders and offered Phyll a smile. “I think it best that we go through the applications together. How about we do that tomorrow?” She didn’t wait

for Phyll's acknowledgment but instead looked out across the seated people. "Who's next to report?"

Ziggy jumped to her feet again. "Now we've got the celebrity chef venue sorted"—she flashed Allie a smile—"the local food showcase is under control. We've got a good mix of produce and products and a few wineries. A couple of caterers have asked if they can be part of it. I'm not sure if they wouldn't be better off in the wedding fair. What do you think?"

Yikes! What would Sophie do? Maybe she should have that slogan put on a T-shirt. The nerves that had settled when she'd been able to deal with the first issues leaped anew. She swallowed hard. "Phyll? What do you think?"

"In the wedding fair, definitely. Unless they're selling food on the day, they're promoting a service."

Of course. Allie let out a quiet breath. It was so obvious when Phyll put it like that. Sophie would have picked it immediately.

"Thanks," Ziggy said. She looked at a pad in her hand. "Sophie, we could do with help dealing with the council—they're being difficult with a couple of permits. Is that the sort of thing you can do?"

"Absolutely." Allie nodded. *Oh fuck.* "Anything else?"

"Sometime this weekend, I'd like if we could walk through the stall area and discuss the best layout for flow of foot traffic."

"Great idea." Her armpits were clammy. It seemed Ziggy knew far more than she did. Flow of foot traffic? Surely people just wandered around as they pleased.

Ziggy sat, and immediately Kirra sprang to her feet. "Saturday's parade," she announced. "Starting at four on the dot, or as soon as we can herd everyone into line. We've got just over forty floats and marchers so far. The usual community groups, local politicians, and businesses, plus the fun stuff. We've got reptile handlers, drag queen cheerleaders, and the boys from the Gay Pride of Lions—the local rugby team."

"I hope there won't be any inappropriate clothing," Phyll said with a sniff. "It's a family day, after all."

"I'm sure there will be," Kirra said. "It's a Pride parade, after all. Don't worry, Phyll, we'll keep it legal. We've still got to sort out the best running order—Sophie, your input would be great. The Bundjalung Nation float will be first with our sistergirls, brotherboys, and queer mob on board, and dancers following. I've lined up an elder to give the Welcome to Country. Then

the next float will be the brides or grooms who will get ‘married’ in the fake wedding ceremony which takes place at the end of the parade. We have their float, and we’ve got a couple of businesses willing to supply the dresses or tuxes. We just need our couple.”

Allie frowned. “Isn’t this leaving it somewhat late?”

Kirra pouted and gave Allie a “you’re telling me” look. “We can’t decide. There are a few volunteers—some more serious than others.”

“Who’s volunteered?”

“Two sistergirls, the drag queens from Sydney who are performing at the afterparty, two high school teens, and one or two real-life local couples.”

“We shouldn’t play this for laughs,” Allie said slowly. “We want people to be caught up in the romance of a wedding, to get that fuzzy loving feeling inside, the ooh and ahh moments. If we treat it as a joke, that’s how people will see weddings in Quandong. A real couple, or people prepared to play it seriously, might be best.”

“I agree,” someone shouted from the back of the room. “This is about love.”

“Fun too,” said Kirra, “but yeah. It’s mainly the love.” She made a heart shape with her fingers and thumbs. “Will, are you and Garrett adding yourself to the volunteers?”

“I didn’t say that,” Will said from the back of the room.

“Maybe you should.” Kirra fluttered her lashes at him.

“Why don’t we get everyone involved?” Allie said. “Everyone gets to vote for the two people they’d like to see do it. The winners get first option to be our couple.” Was there a word for non-binary wedding participants? Her mind buzzed, but she couldn’t think. She’d have to look it up later. So many small traps for the unwary. “How long is needed to organise the wedding clothes?”

“They all can do it in a week. Off the shelf only, of course,” Kirra said.

“We’ll set up a couple of ballot boxes and count the votes the week before the festival.” Allie gripped her thumbs in clenched fists. Was this a brilliant idea or an absolutely crap one that was destined to flop? She wished Sophie was there to whisper in her ear. No, that was selfish. She wished Sophie was there, full stop. Healthy and pain-free, with a body healed and back to how she was before the accident. *Oh, Sophie.* Tears pricked behind her eyes, and she blinked fast, trying to clear them.

“That will work,” Kirra said. Others nodded as well.

Only Phyll appeared uncertain. “What if a totally unsuitable couple wins?”

Kirra folded her arms across her flat chest. “Define ‘totally unsuitable.’”

Phyll flapped her hand. “Comedians. Underage children. People who don’t reflect the values of our town.”

Values? Phyll sounded dangerously close to an extreme right-wing politician on a mission to purify Australia. *Ha! Good luck with that.* “If we let people know our reasons, hopefully everyone will consider them when they vote. You have to trust people.” Allie gave Phyll a soft smile. Getting on Phyll’s wrong side would be a shortcut to failure.

Phyll gave a soft harrumph and settled lower in her seat.

Allie scribbled more notes on her pad.

Phyll leaned across. “You know we hired you an assistant? She can take notes in future. She’s not here today, though. Had a prior commitment with her other work.”

“No, I didn’t know.” She dropped the pen on the pad. This was *great* news. Hopefully the assistant was a whiz at event planning. “Is she local?”

Phyll nodded. “Yes. Her name’s Tarryn Harris and she’s very efficient. She runs her own metal-work business, but she also picks up many of the short-term jobs around town.”

“I hope to meet her soon.” She tapped the pad. “There’s already a lot she can be doing.”

Phyll’s eyebrows lowered until they closed in on her nose. “I’ll tell her to get in contact with you.”

Allie pressed her lips together. It was a pity Tarryn wasn’t at the meeting, but hopefully, she would make life a lot easier.

* * *

Despite Kirra’s dire prediction, the meeting wound up by six. Allie arranged to meet one-on-one with the various organisers the next day.

Her car was a mess. Guiltily, she threw the clutter that littered the passenger seat into the back so Kirra could ride with her.

Kirra fastened her seat belt. “The apartment where you’re staying is above my café.”

Cheyenne Blue

Allie's eyelid twitched. She'd driven along Quandong's main street on her way to the meeting but hadn't noticed the café. And what if there was more than one? Sophie had mentioned Kirra owned a café, so she had probably been there. What if she went to the wrong one? She fumbled the key in the ignition of the Pajero and pulled out of the car park and headed into the centre of town. The wide street had cars parked in the middle, and the shops on either side of the street were a mishmash of architectural styles. The only common denominator were the brightly painted doors. She drove underneath the large banner that spanned the street announcing the Gay Bells Festival. Large silver bells—wedding bells, she presumed—adorned each end. She looked around, trying to see a café.

"You're in luck." Kirra pointed. "There's a park right outside the door."

Thank goodness. The brightly painted sign proclaiming *Kirra's Kafé* was decorated with pictures of the vivid blue rainforest fruit that gave the town its name. A rainbow flag fluttered from a pole next to an Australian Aboriginal flag.

Allie parked and grabbed her case.

"This way." Kirra used the key to unlock a lime-green door sandwiched between the café and the health food store next door.

The door swung open, and Kirra led the way up a steep set of stairs which opened into a large room with high ceilings. Light streamed in through tall windows, illuminating a large, dark wooden table, a couch with a coffee table in front of a TV, and a compact kitchen.

Allie caught her breath. The apartment was gorgeous, perfect. Nicer—and bigger—than her low-ceilinged apartment on the twentieth floor of a huge complex in Sydney. She turned a circle, humming in appreciation.

Kirra led the way to the rear and flung open the door to the bedroom. The small room was dominated by a queen bed covered by a quilt with an aboriginal design. "Bathroom's through there." She indicated another door.

"The apartment's gorgeous." Allie smoothed the soft cotton quilt, tracing the blue and green patterns. "I love this design."

"It's Bundjalung. There's an artists' collective up the street. They do beautiful things. This design is a representation of the clans."

"I'll go and take a look at what else they have."

"You do that. Is there anything else you need?"

"I'm good, thanks."

Kirra flashed her white grin again. “We’re glad you’re here, Sophie. We need your skills.”

Allie pasted on a smile. She just hoped Kirra still thought that after the next couple of days.

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BY CHEYENNE BLUE

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