



Summer at Shell Cottage

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Lucy
Diamond



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For reckless women everywhere





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Chapter One

The first time Olivia and Alec Tarrant saw Shell Cottage, back in July 1975, they had been married precisely eight hours and twenty-two minutes, and their honeymoon getaway car had broken down in the wilds of Devon. It had been a long, hot day, beginning with the hectic rush of preparations first thing in the morning: the hairdresser arriving to tong and spray Olivia's hair into blonde ringlets, the careful stepping into her long satin dress ('Mind your feet, Olivia!') with her mum and sisters yanking the bodice ribbons so tight she could hardly breathe. Then had come the hushed, nerve-racking journey in the Bentley, borrowed from a friend of Mr Johnson next door, the sweet summer scent of white roses in the church, and all those familiar smiling faces turning towards her as she walked in with her dad. Vows and kisses, photographs in the churchyard, and then lunch, speeches and dancing in the Regent Hotel. *Mrs Tarrant*, she kept thinking dazedly, as Alec whirled her across the dance floor, his strong hands light on her back. No longer Olivia



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Marchant, barely more than a girl with her long hair and upturned nose. Now she was a wife. A woman. Mrs Tarrant.

By rights they should have been speeding on their way to Cornwall and their honeymoon cottage at this moment, the wind in their hair, the promise of their wedding night lying excitingly (and somewhat terrifyingly) ahead. Instead they were stranded in the middle of nowhere, after the car had made a strange choking sound and juddered to an abrupt halt. As she stood by the dusty roadside in her brocade wedding shoes, the long train of her gleaming white dress draped heavily across one arm in an attempt to protect it from dirt, Olivia felt a lump in her throat and thought for a horrible moment she might actually cry. On her wedding day!

Alec was rolling up his shirtsleeves in order to tinker with the engine's innards but came to hook an arm around his new wife's waist when he noticed her anxious expression. 'Hey, don't worry,' he said, giving her a comforting squeeze. He smelled of wine and aftershave and sweat: a husband's smell, she thought distractedly. 'We'll get there. Think of this as an adventure, not a problem.'

Olivia sniffed and tried to smile. An adventure, not a problem: that was Alec all over. Confidence ran through the very marrow of him, leaving no room for doubt or anxiety. Olivia, by contrast, tended to have a list of worries and what-ifs as long as her bridal train.

A bird cheeped in the lush green hedgerow; a small,





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cheerful sound against the emptiness of their surroundings. 'We'll take the scenic route,' Alec had decided when they set off from the reception earlier but it was almost seven o'clock in the evening now and they still had miles to go. At this rate, they'd end up bedding down in a field for their first night as man and wife, Olivia thought in dismay. (Please, no. She had packed a cream lacy negligee for the occasion, and could only imagine the grass stains.)

Oh, Olivia! her mum had always sighed. *What will we do with you?* If her mum and sisters could see her now, standing at the roadside by the broken-down car, they would exchange knowing looks in that irritating way of theirs. *Oh, Olivia! Why do these things always happen to you? We should have known!*

She was just wondering if it would be very forward of her to take off the too-tight garter she'd borrowed from her cousin when there came the sound of a car approaching. Without hesitating, she stepped into the road and waved frantically. 'Stop!'

'Oh dear, oh dear. What's happened here, then?' A tall, florid-faced man swung himself out of a dark blue Ford Cortina, just like the one from *The Sweeney*, and Olivia almost swooned in relief. His eyes twinkled with amusement as he looked at her in her wedding finery, ringlets collapsing in the heat. 'Can I give you two lovebirds a lift anywhere?'

Thank goodness for unexpected blue Cortinas and the kindness of strangers – in this case, the kindness of Jed





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McGarry. He wasn't able to fix the car but he offered them transport and a night at his brother's place if they needed it. 'He's got a B&B not far from here,' he told them. 'And we can send one of the lads over with the toolbox first thing tomorrow. Between us, we'll have you back on the road, all right?'

Alec glanced down at the engine again and then at his watch, clearly weighing up the best option. Olivia didn't hesitate, though. She was not spending her wedding night sleeping in a field, or their broken-down car, and that was that. 'Thank you,' she said quickly. 'That would be lovely.'

Jed McGarry drove for about twenty minutes and then they rounded a bend and were startled by the sight of the headland, and the sea beyond, a muted blue expanse stretching far out to the horizon. The sea! Olivia's spirits lifted immediately and she glanced over at Alec, who was smiling too. He reached across the back seat and took her hand in his, his large square-ended fingers folding around her small white ones. She felt a throb of excitement at his touch, and at the whole unanticipated situation of being jolted around on the slippery vinyl back seat of a stranger's car, heading who knew where with her gorgeous new husband.

Maybe this was what life had in store for her as Alec Tarrant's wife: one surprising adventure after another. The thought was not displeasing. In the eight hours that she'd





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been Mrs Tarrant, nobody had dared say *Oh, Olivia!* at her in that wearily despairing sort of way. This was definitely progress.

Two minutes later, they were pulling up in front of a generous-sized cottage, painted a soft barley colour, with a thatched roof and a poppy-scarlet front door, above which a scallop shell had been carved into the centre of the stone lintel. Behind the house you could see a flower-filled garden, which looked very much as if it might lead straight onto sand dunes and then a pale, curving beach in the distance.

'Here we go. Shell Cottage,' said Jed. 'Now let's just hope Sam's got room for a couple of newly-weds, eh?'

There were seagulls dipping and wheeling above their heads, the mingled scents of cut hay, sweet peas and a briny sea tang in the air, and a soft breeze that tickled the back of Olivia's hot neck as she made her way out of the car. 'This is lovely,' she whispered to Alec, feeling shy all of a sudden as a man emerged around the side of the house with a wheelbarrow, and raised his eyebrows at the sight of the bride and groom.

Alec took her hand and squeezed. 'What did I tell you? An adventure, not a problem. Stick with me, Mrs Tarrant. We're going to have a lot of fun together.'

Despite Olivia's trepidation, it turned out to be the most perfectly romantic wedding night a bride could wish for. *This*





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is my happy ever after, right here, Olivia thought as she woke the next morning to the glorious sight of Alec sleeping beside her in the wide oak-framed bed, his hair ruffled, his strong jaw and cheekbones rendering him breath-catchingly handsome even in slumber. She nestled against him, feeling an uncontrollable rush of joy that she would be waking up beside him for the rest of her life, and he stirred, throwing a heavy arm across her and pulling her closer so that she could hear the beating of his heart. ‘Good morning, Mrs Tarrant,’ he murmured without opening his eyes, and she smiled.

Later that morning, following a hearty breakfast on the small stone sun terrace, Olivia managed to peel her admiring gaze away from her new husband for a few minutes in order to appreciate the beautiful old house in which they were staying. She loved how much character it had, with the beamed ceilings, mullioned windows and sea views, and the way that the ancient claw-foot bath could comfortably fit two. It was the kind of house that was hard to say goodbye to, a house made for happy, romantic times.

Afterwards, they went on to enjoy the rest of their honeymoon in Cornwall but Shell Cottage had cast a spell over them both. The following summer, Olivia and Alec returned there for a week-long holiday, and the summer afterwards too, when their baby daughter Freya was just three months old, and then . . . well, every single summer after that, basically, until the year that Olivia rang the McGarrys to book





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their usual stay – two adjoining rooms now that they had Freya and Robert – only to be told that unfortunately, the McGarrys were retiring and selling up.

At the time, Alec's second thriller had just hit the bestseller list, and he'd recently received a generous payment from his publishers, having signed a new contract to write three more books. Life was good: the family had moved from a small terraced house in Barnet to a slightly larger one in Tufnell Park where the children had a bedroom each, and Olivia was learning to drive her very own Austin Metro on the wide tree-lined streets. Package holidays abroad were becoming popular and when Olivia broke the news about Shell Cottage to her husband, she half expected him to suggest a trip to the Costa del Sol instead, like some of their neighbours were planning. But Alec was a romantic through and through; he loved Shell Cottage and what it stood for. 'We'll buy it,' he said.

Olivia thought this was one of his whims at first – a silly joke, a crazy impulse. People like them didn't have two homes! Her parents had lived in the same semi-detached house in Buckinghamshire their entire lives and had been perfectly happy. A second home seemed wildly extravagant, way beyond their means.

Alec, though, was deadly serious. What was more, when he made his mind up about something, there was no stopping him. They drove down to Devon the very next day,





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taking the children out of school, so that he could strike a deal. Just like that, it was done.

Of course, for some years afterwards, they were stretched financially, letting out Shell Cottage to friends and family in order to make ends meet, but it was worth all the hardship and extra work. Olivia and Alec were never happier than when they were driving out of London, the car loaded with suitcases, headed towards Silver Sands Bay for a summer holiday, Christmas, New Year or simply a long weekend.

As their fortunes had grown over the decades, so too had the house. When one of Alec's books was turned into a film, they spent the money on an extension, adding a couple of extra bedrooms upstairs and a larger, more modern kitchen. They decorated throughout in cool off-whites, heaving up the old carpets and waxing the floorboards, hanging the walls with seascapes by local artists. There were huge soft beds for the rooms upstairs, a luxurious bathroom with a drenching monsoon shower and a deep, linger-for-hours bathtub.

It was a special place for them all. Freya and her husband Victor had spent their wedding night in the house fourteen years ago, and now there were the grandchildren, Dexter, Libby and little Ted, who came for a fortnight's holiday each summer and frolicked like sleek, shrieking seal pups in the sea. Robert had brought Harriet and her daughter with him three summers ago and announced at the annual end-of-





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holiday family barbecue that they were going to get married. And for Alec, who had gone on to write twenty-four other successful novels over the years, the house was his favourite place to come and work in solitude for a few weeks every winter, and then again in early summer, once he'd completed a first draft for the final crucial read-through. A routine had developed where he'd take himself off to Devon in July with his printed-out manuscript, straw hat and a bottle of scotch, to be joined a few weeks later by the rest of the family.



Not this year, though, thought Olivia now, as she trudged slowly downstairs in their silent London home, trying to avoid looking at the framed holiday photographs that hung on the wall. Tears smarted in her eyes as her gaze was inevitably drawn to her favourite picture of all, taken the day after their wedding, of her and Alec, perched on the front wall outside Shell Cottage, arms around each other. You could practically see the happiness crackling about them like a force field, fierce and bright, strong enough to protect them from anything.



Almost anything, anyway. A sob rose in her throat and she walked quickly away, but it was no use, the tears were already falling. Summers would never be the same again.