

**ESCAPE TO
PUMPKIN COTTAGE**

By Anna and Jacqui Burns

Poles Apart

Escape to Pumpkin Cottage



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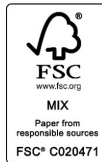
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For Carole
We miss you every day.

Chapter One

Pippa

Pippa lets out an involuntary shriek as she spots the sign. WELCOME TO RIVERDEAN. She has arrived!

She follows the road as it bends sharply to the right, and her Audi is plunged under a canopy of trees. The brilliant blue of the sky peeks through the green and mustard leaves, as though even the sky is promising good times to come. And boy, does Pippa need good times. It's been one hell of a year, filled with grief, job stress and break-up angst.

Pippa is ready for a fresh start. To stand on her own feet. The months of preparation, staying up late after work to plan, nights filled with worry and doubt, all seem worth it now she's here.

She's waiting for her first glimpse of the village. The Google images promised her chalet-style cottages in vibrant reds and greens, all with views of the sparkling river, scenes not unlike the Swiss Alps. The magic her mum spoke about all those years ago, wistful tales about her childhood spent in the idyllic Wye Valley. It sounded like a fairy tale to Pippa's ears, compared to the constant bustle of London.

She spots one cabin, almost hidden from the road amongst

the trees, spellbinding with fairy lights wrapped around the porch and ivy growing either side of the door. It's all starting to feel real. The fairy tale might actually come true. Pippa can't wait.

She rounds one more bend and is dazzled by the sun glinting off the river, ripples of babbling waters, just like the pictures. She thinks of lowering the window to hear the rush of water, but before she can, Pippa nearly barrels into the car in front of her.

She brakes just in time, gasping and yanking the seat belt away from crushing her chest.

The road has narrowed to a single track and, ahead, cars are stopped as far as Pippa can see.

A traffic jam in Riverdean? That's not part of the plan.

She notices the car in front of her has its doors open and a man is leaning against it. He's obviously been here some time. Pippa presses a few buttons on her car touchscreen, willing the satnav to work its magic.

'Searching for alternate route . . .' the robotic voice tells her. 'No route found.'

Pippa repeats this a few times with the same outcome and sighs. She opens the car door herself, and shouts to the man.

'Excuse me, do you know if there are any other routes into Riverdean?'

He turns round, surprised to be spoken to. 'Tough luck,' a Welsh accent tells her. 'One road in, one road out. Probably some van up ahead blocking everyone's way.'

'Oh,' Pippa says, her good mood starting to fail her.

'I'd settle in if I were you. All part of Riverdean's charm.'

She gets back in the car, shutting the door with a huff. She

still has half an hour before she's arranged to meet the local handyman at the house. She guessed he was the real deal when he told her he could only fit her in for ten minutes on Tuesday for a quote.

The river seems to be taunting her now, as do the roofs of cottages up ahead. So close and yet . . .

Pippa takes a sip of the pumpkin-spiced latte she picked up in Hereford. It's her yearly tradition on the first of September, a way to mark the start of her favourite season. There's the prospect of getting her coats out of hibernation, of taking long bubble baths with hot chocolates, the heat of the London Underground turning from unbearable to almost tolerable. Not that she'll be seeing much of the city any more. Autumn in Riverdean seems a much more favourable option, if slightly terrifying. There is a sign advertising the RIVERDEAN HARVEST FESTIVAL on the side of the road, complete with hand-painted gourds. *This is more like it*, Pippa thinks.

Pippa had driven from London to Hereford this morning, getting to the estate agents just after opening time to pick up the keys.

The keys to her very own B&B.

Something she's dreamt of since she was a teenager. The white envelope on her passenger seat feels pregnant with future possibilities, the keys to her new venture. She can't quite believe it's hers. Can't believe she no longer has to work on the reception desk of a hotel chain any more, trilling 'Welcome to Mallory's. Checking in?' hundreds of times a day, drafting staff rotas and cajoling teenagers into cleaning rooms. She gets to be her own boss, set her own rules.

Pippa has wanted this ever since she stayed in a B&B in Scotland with her mother when she was about thirteen. She'd had a tough week in school and was feeling down.

'We haven't left the city for far too long,' her mother had said, sensing her unhappiness. They'd driven up, spur of the moment, on a dark and dreary Friday night. The hotel was an old castle, and Pippa vividly remembers the owner passing her a cup of coffee as she curled up in front of the stone fireplace. She remembers feeling so grown up. How that weekend had felt more like home than any of their flats in London. How she and her mother had giggled, chatted and relaxed in the countryside. They'd left the B&B only to go for walks and had been greeted with warm biscuits and blankets on their return. Pippa wanted to create that atmosphere for other people. She wanted to curate her own slice of it in Riverdean.

And now all her belongings are crammed into the Audi, ready to get started. It's depressing to think this junk filled her flat in Clapham, but barely reaches the roof of her car now. She thinks she had more possessions when she went off to uni to study Hospitality and Tourism. Then again, after uni, she shared so much stuff with Ben, the flotsam and jetsam of couple-life accumulated over their five years together. She couldn't bear to see it any more after they broke up. And so, a few sad boxes are all she has. Some possessions of her mother's. Cushions and a duvet. A box of photo albums.

Pippa blinks. She's becoming maudlin now. This is an opportunity to buy new things. To fill her B&B with modern and quirky items that will keep her guests coming back for years to come. She already has three Pinterest boards dedicated to

ideas for different themes. Scandinavian cosiness is her favourite at the moment, but she will decide when she sees the building she's bought.

If she ever sees it.

Suddenly, there is noise. Car doors slamming shut. Engines turning on. The car in front lurches ahead and she trundles after it. She can see the reason for the hold-up as a box van is waiting, two-wheels perched on someone's driveway, letting others pass.

Does this seriously count as a road? It's ridiculous, Pippa thinks, as she's forced to edge off the road to get past the van, her wheels practically dancing over the drop to the river. She takes another gulp of pumpkin latte to bolster her confidence as though it contains alcohol, and nearly misses her turning.

The B&B is down a steep incline, and another sharp bend. She'll have to warn guests about this when she updates the website, Pippa realises. Maybe she can have a map and a recommendation for parking. At the moment it's just a white screen, with the words '*Pumpkin Cottage B&B. Coming Soon . . .*' in black cursive letters, aptly named for the most scenic season in Riverdean.

God, how do people in this village get around? The opportunities for dropping into the river seem all too possible. She needs the nerves of a moped driver on the Amalfi coast to navigate this road. Pippa's brakes make an uncomfortable noise as she inches downwards, bunny-hopping her way towards the bottom. Where the hell is this place?

Finally, she spots the right building. There are only two other cottages on this road, which runs parallel to the river, with the B&B right at the end. It's familiar from afar, similar in shape to

the estate agent's pictures, but up close is another story.

Is this really the 'Charming B&B in need of updating' they advertised? 'Updating' seems the understatement of the millennium. This looks as if it needs tearing down and starting again. She sees the crumbling brickwork, the faded paint on the door and windows, the weed-ridden front driveway, and water damage reaching over a foot up the front wall.

'Bloody hell,' Pippa sighs, turning the car engine off. What has she let herself in for?

She gets out of the car and walks around to the house. It has an odd layout, Pippa can tell even from the outside. 'Higgledy-piggledy perfection,' Pippa remembers the estate agent brochure saying. There was clearly a main house built at some point, but the building has been extended and extended, in various clashing styles of architecture, to form a real mishmash. She wonders where her dwelling will be. Hopefully she can find some corner tucked away from her guests, so she can have her own privacy.

Pippa's Hunter Wellington boots sink into the muddy drive. This will be the first speck of mud they've seen since she purchased them in London years ago. They were a payday present to herself, representing her countryside dream, and she thought today would be the perfect day to get them out of the box. Pippa thought she'd fit right in with her Barbour jacket, Mango sweater, and wellies, but she suddenly feels like an alien. What is she doing? Buying a B&B like this, without even having seen it? No one she knows to help her?

This is new territory for Pippa and, despite her doubts, she's determined to make a go of this on her own.

She walks up to the front door and inserts the key, although

the door is in such a crumbling state Pippa wouldn't be surprised if it fell open at the touch of her hand. Stepping immediately into a kitchen, she's greeted by the enormous kitchen island, although that's where the modern luxuries end, as the kitchen itself is an ode to pine. The pine cabinets blend into the pine-panelled walls so well, that the only giveaway to where the counters are is the lurid green work surface. The previous owner clearly had a love affair with china ornaments and net curtains, and the whole room seems dark, weighed down with the clutter, and lingering smells of greasy breakfasts. In need of updating is too right. Probably more than that, if the sagging damp patch in the centre of the ceiling is anything to go by.

And then Pippa sees it. The Aga. Standing proudly in the heart of the kitchen. If it was a Farrow & Ball colour, it would be named 'Heritage Green', Pippa thinks. She closes her eyes, imagining the current pine hideousness replaced by oak countertops, repainted cupboards, and a Belfast sink. Yes. The Aga would fit in quite nicely. She just needs to learn how the hell to use it.

The rest of the main building is in a similar state. Swirly-patterned brown carpets, corduroy furniture and Artex-covered walls abound. Just when Pippa's feeling really disheartened, her gaze is pulled to movement outside the window. A flash of colour. She moves to look out of the communal living room window, and her heart soars. The view really is breathtaking. Nothing but the blue of the river, and verdant green of the trees opposite creeping up the other side of the valley. It feels as though the living room is suspended over the water. The flash of colour was a passing kayak, and Pippa watches as a group of them whizz

past, a flurry of red plastic and the foamy spray of water.

‘Okay, so it has potential,’ Pippa says aloud, needing to hear her voice, to make sure this is all reality, not a far-off dream. She’s really here and this is really her B&B. This mess.

The doorbell rings and Pippa bolts to answer it.

‘You must be Grant,’ she says.

The man, in his early forties, is sullen and his creased forehead suggests this is his habitual expression. He raises an eyebrow, as if to say *durr?* The splattered overalls and dirty fingernails confirm she has the right man.

‘I’m Pippa. Come in,’ she offers, although he is already squeezing past her in the doorway, stepping on the cigarette he’s just stubbed out in the process. Okay, so she and Grant aren’t exactly going to hit it off.

‘Feel free to take a look around,’ Pippa says.

‘No, s’alright,’ he says in one word. ‘My grandma used to own this place. I know it like the back of my hand.’

‘Oh,’ Pippa says, unsure of herself. She recovers, reminds herself she is in charge. ‘Then you’ll know there’s quite a lot of water damage, some damp that needs fixing. I’m hoping to replace the render, maybe have some of the building cladded. Then a new kitchen, obviously. Replaster and paint throughout. I’ll source the materials.’

She nods, happy that she sounded confident, and fairly competent. Grant says nothing, but crosses his arms and walks past her so she’s forced to follow him. She notices his glance at her boots, the doubtful look on his face. Oh God, he knows she is a fraud.

‘I want the wall knocking down to the smallest bedroom too,

open it up. I assume that'll need planning permission?

'Should be fine,' Grant shrugs. 'I wouldn't bother.' Pippa frowns. She'll have to check that.

'I need this doing by the end of the month.' She wants to get her first bookings in for October.

At this, Grant puffs out a breath. Pippa tries to keep her voice even. She's used to dealing with builders, in fact prided herself on her ability to interact with them in Mallory's. Whether she was chatting with decorators or schmoozing VIP guests, Pippa could mould herself into whatever was needed. A social chameleon. So why are her skills failing her now? She suddenly feels very tired. The early start. The drive. The exhaustion of finding herself here. Has this all been a mistake?

'What do you think?'

Grant is silent again, and Pippa wishes he'd say something to ease her discomfort. She wishes she had someone she could call and complain to. Her mother. Maybe even Ben.

Grant turns to her suddenly. 'Should be doable,' he nods. 'I've got a young lad that helps me out if it's a big job. It'll cost, though. I hope you've brought your chequebook.'