Excerpt: Sweet Pursuits

With hindsight, buying my dream wedding dress before Owen had actually got down on one knee may have been a mistake. But it was so exquisite, and such an incredible bargain at sixty per cent off. And I was so certain that one day soon I would be walking up a peony-scented church aisle towards him, that I took the gamble. It was the sensible, economic thing to do, after all. Weddings are expensive and, on his meagre academic salary, I knew Owen would appreciate my thriftiness.

Except *appreciative* didn't exactly describe his reaction.

'Bella, what in the name of God is that?' He threw the Vera Wang gown, still in its garment cover, on our bed.

'Oh!' I was admittedly unprepared for this conversation. He rarely, if ever, delved into the airing cupboard. 'You've found it.'

'It looks,' he said, backing away as if it were a white tiger which might spring up and attack him, 'like a wedding dress.'

'Er, yes.' I sensed from his tone that the timing of this momentous discovery might be off. I attempted distraction. 'What were you doing in the airing cupboard?' Ironing pillow cases and placing them neatly on the slatted shelves next to our aging boiler was not Owen's scene.

'Looking for a suitcase,' he said, his face as pale as the dress.

'Why do you need a suitcase?'

By now Owen was pressed against the wall, in a curious impression of a man on a cliff ledge. 'Job interview.' He'd barely taken his eyes off the gown.

'Where?' I asked, at precisely the same moment he said, 'Is it yours?'

'Well, yes,' I laughed. 'With two bachelor brothers, it's not like I'm storing it for them.'

I saw him swallow. Twice.

'So, where did you say?' I asked again, thinking he wouldn't need to stay the night in London or Oxford, so it must be further, like Manchester or Leeds. I wasn't sure how I felt about moving away from Cambridge.

He didn't answer.

'Owen,' I tutted. 'You're being all strange. Where's your job interview?'

Finally he looked at me, his expression a blank mask. 'California.'