



A Vintage Year

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CHAPTER ONE

There was barely a breeze ruffling the leaves of the trees in the graveyard as Bella drifted serenely up the path on her father's arm. The only sound was the whispering of the heavy duchess satin dress, not pure white, but a more flattering silvery, oyster hue. The simple draped neckline set off her lightly tanned shoulders before narrowing to a sheath of fabric, clinging to her slim body and then pooling into a short, elegant train. She held a hand-tied bouquet of white lilies with trailing jasmine and three fully opened, pale-pink roses, each petal touched with a blush of peach. Her thick, unruly brown hair was behaving immaculately for once, curled and pinned high, with ringlets dropping to emphasise her long neck. Her green eyes danced as she smiled at her father, just like she always had – that sideways, cheeky grin that made him laugh.

The cloudless summer sky was as blue as her lover's eyes and – for a moment – she was struck by the notion

that, in the silence, the little church they were approaching was empty. Her heart did a flip of anxiety. But it wasn't, of course. A trickle of organ music drifted to her ears and the languid hum of conversation, like a contented hive of bees, grew louder as they arrived at the church door.

With a nod to the vicar, and a tremulous squeeze of her father's arm, she straightened and waited. The opening strains of the 'Arrival of the Queen of Sheba' rang out and they stepped forward into the church.

Smiling faces either side of her: her best friend Maddy laughing at herself because she was already crying and fumbling for a tissue; her mother, looking appraisingly at the dress, checking the final tiny adjustments she had made earlier, before giving a nod of satisfaction; her Bespoke Consortium friends from the farmhouse artisan collective, all in a group, grinning and giving her the thumbs up; her mother-in-law Caroline, the spitting image of Camilla Parker-Bowles in her jauntily slanted hat and duck-egg blue dress-coat ensemble. And there was her father-in-law giving her a reassuring nod as he wiped the sweat from his upper lip with a silk handkerchief. Handsome, glowering Lord Havenbury – Zach – was there too, with his latest girlfriend in a huge hat and a navy striped dress and coat. Bella couldn't tell whether she had met her before or not. They were all so alike: blonde, slim, accomplished . . . with names like 'The Honourable Arabella something or other . . .' 'Posh totties', Charlie called them. Local GP Simon, his lovely teacher wife Genny, Maddy's partner Ben, Patrick and Helen from the Havenbury Arms. They were all here. All of them. For her and her husband-to-be.

The sun slanted through the stained-glass windows, throwing coloured shadows onto the cool, stone floor. The musty, damp odour of the church, mingling with all the perfumes, the aftershaves of the guests in a heady, intoxicating mix . . . the organist stumbling slightly over the more difficult bits, making people smirk and duck their heads. The flowers tumbling down from the pew ends . . . more of the billowing pink roses to match the ones in her bouquet, some Petersham ribbon – goodness, the searches to get the right colour and width – tied just so, to create the relaxed effect she had been after. They looked perfect.

Everything was perfect.

Content at last, Bella looked straight ahead and there, broad-shouldered in his morning coat, standing next to his best man Ben, was Charlie. He was a little taller than his friend, his curly black hair contrasting with Ben's light brown. They had both gone to the barber the day before, revealing a touchingly pale stripe of untanned skin at the backs of their necks. He leant towards Ben and said something. Ben laughed and patted his pocket. The ring.

At the exact moment Bella arrived at his side, Charlie turned, smiled and took her hands in his own.

Suddenly, they were alone. She stood, gazing into his eyes steadily. They repeated the words as if in a trance, quietly, intimately, pledging their troth, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, and then a strange litany of words she definitely didn't remember from the rehearsals. '*Carpe diem . . . Modus operandi . . . Caveat emptor . . . Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus . . .*' she repeated obediently into the echoing silence of the empty church, and then – at last – Charlie leant slowly in for a

kiss, his sky-blue eyes on hers, his body pressing heavily against her own, crushing her a little. Her eyelids fluttered closed, she leant forward, her head tilted back and then . . . he licked her, starting at her chin and finishing at her forehead, depositing copious, breath-blocking saliva in both of her nostrils en route.

Spluttering, her eyes flew open and she saw not her husband's face, but a pair of deep-brown eyes, surrounded by shiny black hair. They gazed down at her lovingly, as their owner contemplated the potential benefits of further tongueage. Instead, seeing her darling mistress was awake at last, Dolly sneezed with excitement, adding a fine spray of dog snot to Bella's already wet face.

'Thanks,' she spluttered, noticing the space beside her in the bed was already empty.

She dragged her arm out from under the black Labrador's body with difficulty and looked at her watch. It was just past seven o'clock.

'Fair enough,' she sighed, wiping her face. 'You weigh a tonne, by the way.'

Newly optimistic at developments, Dolly jumped off the bed and bounced up and down, a little too close to Ghengis Cat – Ghengis for short – who withdrew to the safety of the window sill with a look of disapproval. He had been hoping for some appreciation of his marauding the previous night, not this careless and disrespectful affront to his person. Still, it was only a matter of time before Bella saw the mangled corpses and realised how clever he had been.

The bare wooden floor was cold and unyielding, but Bella's slippers were nowhere to be seen. She threw an accusing look at Dolly but didn't pursue the matter as

she was diverted by the horror of seeing herself in the bedroom mirror.

‘Cripes,’ she muttered, ‘that’s bad.’

She hadn’t bothered with pyjamas the previous night. It was too cold to get naked, even briefly, so she had just peeled down to her grey thermals and slept in those.

In the cold light of a February morning, it wasn’t a good look. She sucked in her tummy and stood sideways. Nope. There was no hiding it. The bathroom scales had been telling her a story and she could see exactly what they meant.

‘I’m voluptuous,’ she told Dolly, who was now sitting on her plump, black bottom, regarding her mistress anxiously. She was deeply concerned that Bella might have lost the plot again. The plot being breakfast. Obviously. Without further delay.

‘You’re a bit bleeding voluptuous too, I might add. Skipping breakfast would do you no harm at all.’

Encouraged by hearing the word ‘breakfast’, Dolly skittered to the top of the stairs and looked behind her expectantly.

In utter frustration, she then watched her mistress disappear in to the bathroom, closing the door firmly in her face.

The shower thundered briefly, and Bella shot out again wrapped in a large towel that was no longer white and distinctly threadbare.

‘God, what I wouldn’t do for a bit of central heating,’ she muttered, as she rifled through her drawers for clothes, shivering in her damp towel. ‘Even a heated flipping towel rail would help. Who doesn’t have heated towel rails nowadays? It’s a basic human right, for heaven’s sake.’

She piled a motley selection of layers onto the unmade bed. Pants, bra, more thermals – these ones even more disreputable and unflattering than the ones she had removed. She looked disconsolately at a large hole that had appeared in the leggings around mid-thigh. They had given up under the strain, she thought.

Turning resolutely from the mirror, she piled on a vest, T-shirt, a cosy checked flannel shirt she had liberated from Charlie's wardrobe and topped off the whole lot with jeans, a massive blue jumper and two pairs of socks.

'Mmm, sexy,' she said, taking a last look in the mirror and blowing herself a kiss. Make-up could wait. She had no client meetings today, or even this week, so she probably wouldn't bother at all.

'Bacon sarnie?' asked Charlie, his back to her, as he heard her rattling down the stairs straight into the flag-stoned kitchen.

The low beamed room, with its scrubbed pine table and a deep Butler's sink under the window, was – because of the Rayburn where Charlie was standing – at least reasonably warm.

'Absolutely not,' said Bella. 'My body is a temple. I'm having muesli. Actually, sod it, go on then.'

He added two more rashers to the pan without comment.

'Been up long?' she asked, wrapping her arms around him and resting her head on his back.

'Couldn't sleep. Done two more rows,' he said. 'Back out straight after this.'

'It's such a lot of work for you on your own,' she said. 'At least with your dad there was two of you. Will you get them all done in time?'

‘Before they blossom? Hope so. No one else does it right,’ said Charlie.

‘You could teach me.’

‘Yeah, we tried that, remember? But you always cut the wrong shoots off and then you’re not strong enough to tie them onto the wires. I’ll get through it. I always do.’

‘Sorry I was asleep when you got back last night,’ she said, giving up on the vines.

‘Don’t apologise. I was pretty late. Went out for a drink with Steve and caught the last train. Full of drunks . . . including me. It was running behind schedule, as usual.’

‘So, how was London?’

‘Still there,’ said Charlie, turning the bacon and then – with his back still to her – slicing and buttering four doorsteps of a large white loaf. ‘Smelly, noisy, exhausting . . .’

‘Does Morris want to list the latest vintage?’

For a moment, she thought Charlie hadn’t heard her. She waited.

‘I saw that Tom bloke off the telly, that you like,’ he said. ‘Just walking down the street, he was.’

‘You didn’t? Wow! Seriously? I love him . . .’

‘Yeah, coming right at me, he was. Incredibly short in real life. Practically a dwarf.’

‘But that’s not the point,’ she insisted. ‘He’s got charisma. The man’s a giant in my eyes.’

‘Well he’s definitely got giant ears. You really don’t get a sense of the massive ears when you see him on the screen. I was deeply struck by them. In fact, so much so, I felt compelled to bring the issue up with him.’

‘You didn’t!’ said Bella, half laughing, half horrified.

‘Well, no,’ admitted Charlie. ‘He was on the phone. It would have been rude to interrupt.’

‘Yeah, *that* would have been rude. Anyhow, don’t change the subject.’

Charlie sighed. ‘He doesn’t want to list it this year,’ he admitted. ‘And I wouldn’t either. It tastes like cat’s piss.’

‘I quite like it.’

‘Good, because there’s twenty thousand bottles of the stuff. So, dipsomaniacal as you are, my love, even you . . .’

‘It’s saleable.’

He shook his head. ‘It’s not good enough. We’re trying to build a brand here. We can’t afford to tarnish our name with second-rate wine. It was a bad year. It happens. We write it down to experience and chuck it down the drain.’

Bella opened her mouth to say something and then shut it again.

They sat at the table to eat their breakfast, Charlie at the end, Bella to his right, just as they had since his father died and vacated the place at the head of the table. Charlie’s mother Caroline had made him do it since the very day it all happened, not able to stand looking at the empty chair. She now lived in Dove Cottage, the little brick and flint gingerbread house fifty yards down the rutted track that linked Dovecot Farmhouse to the main road. When Bella and Charlie had first got together, Bella had made it into a cosy love nest for her and Charlie. She missed it dearly, especially on cold days like this.

He slipped his arms around her from behind as she piled yesterday’s mugs and plates plates into the sink, putting her hand under the running tap to see if she had left any hot water after her shower. She hadn’t.

‘Don’t worry,’ he murmured, nuzzling her neck. ‘It’ll work out.’

Encouraged, she turned in his arms, planting a kiss onto his mouth, loving the smell of fresh air in his hair, the stubble on his chin where he had gone out without shaving that morning.

‘Come back to bed with me,’ she said, reaching around to squeeze his bum suggestively. ‘We could make a baby.’

He drew away, breaking eye contact.

‘I got you Dolly,’ he joked. ‘And now you want a baby as well?’

The dog was whiffing her nose hopefully at the remains of the bacon sandwiches on the table. Ropes of drool hung from her mouth, and they swung as she turned her head on hearing her name.

‘I know your mum thinks dogs are more important than children,’ she replied, ‘but you do understand that’s not normal, don’t you?’

‘It isn’t?’

‘Nope.’

‘How can you say such a thing? In front of Dolly, too . . .’