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Opening Extract from...

If the Dress Fits

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PROLOGUE

Twelve years ago

'Do you think I should get my nose pierced, Callie?'

'No way! Your mum would kill you.'

'My mum is not the boss of me.'

'She is when you're fourteen years old and you have to sit opposite her at the dinner table every night as she tuts and rolls her eyes at you and generally despairs about what teenagers call fashionable nowadays. Or worse, she could bang on about all those infections people get from body jewellery that she comes across every day on the wards. Gross.'

'Killjoy. Hey, turn the radio up – I love this song!'

'Boring! Robbie Williams is old enough to be your dad! What is he, like, forty?'

'Thirty. So what, if he's gorgeous?'

Callie spun from her stomach into a sitting-up position – no mean feat when she had just finished painting both her fingernails and toenails in a delectable shade of fuchsia – and cast her eyes over the posters

plastered across every spare inch of Nessa's bedroom walls. She even had a Robbie Williams pillow, for God's sake. Crushfest or what?

Nessa finished her off-key rendition of 'Millennium' on a high note. With a theatrical swoon, she dropped down from her bed onto the sheepskin rug next to Callie, her bare feet swinging in the air behind her, her chin cupped in her palms as she studied Callie's pencil sketch.

'Wow, that's stunning, Callie. I'm definitely booking you to design my wedding dress.'

'For when you marry Robbie, right?'

'Yep. Look.'

Nessa reached underneath her bed and hauled out a large square box decorated with a collage of wedding scenes she'd cut from sheets of wrapping paper. On the lid, Nessa had glued a glossy photo of her idol.

'So you've relegated Seb to second place, have you?'

'Your cousin is gorgeous, Callie, but, well, this is Robbie Williams we're talking about!'

Callie giggled. These Sunday afternoons at Nessa's house were what she looked forward to all week. They'd established a routine whereby each week they'd add something new to their wedding scrap boxes. This week it was veils and headpieces and that morning she'd found a heavenly tiara in one of the Sunday supplements. She passed the cutting over for Nessa's valued opinion.

'What do you think?'

'Exquisite taste as usual, Callie-Louise, fashion designer to the stars. And I see Theo is still in residence.' Nessa pointed to the picture sellotaped to the lid of Callie's own wedding scrap box. 'There are loads of other guys to choose from, you know.'

'But I'm dating Theo. And I'm going to marry him!'

'No one meets their soulmate when they're fourteen, Callie.'

'I've known Theo since I was ten, Nessa. He's been Seb's best friend and partner in crime since the day they liberated Gordon the gerbil from his home in Miss Porter's reception class.'

'But you've got to spread your wings, try a few more before you buy.'

Callie tossed a fluffy cushion at her best friend. 'Hey, stop dissing my boyfriend. Anyhow, you're just jealous!'

'You got me there. It's true – he's hot!'

Nessa collected her imaginary microphone, flung her auburn curls over her shoulder, and struck a pose on top of her duvet, her recently applied emerald nail polish glittering in the afternoon light that bleached through her bedroom window.

Listen up, all you music fans out there! Mr Theo Dalton Drake, seventeen-year-old heartthrob and lead singer in up-and-coming teenage rock band The Razorclaws, is taken! Yes, you heard right! The hunk

with hair the colour of sand washed in warm summer sunshine, the cutest chin this side of Leeds and a body to die for has fallen for his childhood sweetheart, Callie-Louise Henshaw.

'When asked to comment, Miss Henshaw clasped her chest and informed the braying paparazzi, Oh, my, I just knew we were destined to be together when – aged only ten – our eyes met across the headteacher's office after we'd been found snogging in the bushes. Stay tuned, peeps, for details of our helpline number!'

Callie rolled her eyes at her BFF, but her smile was as wide as an actress's in a toothpaste commercial.

CHAPTER ONE

‘Callie? Earth to Callie?’ smirked Flora, dragging a gargantuan cardboard wardrobe into the design studio, a bangle of brown tape around her wrist and a coffee cup balanced precariously in her hand. ‘Are we ready to pack this glitzy creation of silk and pearls into its protective shell? The courier will be here any minute and you know what they’re like – won’t be kept waiting for anything. You don’t want to miss the deadline, do you? Can I help?’

‘No!’ Callie raised her head from where she had been snoozing at her desk. An unpleasant waft of stale pizza assaulted her nostrils and a crumpled Post-it had attached itself to her cheek. She held up her palm to Flora’s face. ‘Step away from the dress! I mean it, Flora. If you even come one step closer with that skinny latte, I’ll be forced to shoot you with my staple gun. What’s possessed you to bring coffee in here, anyway?’

Her response sounded like the snap of an irate dragon, a mother protecting its young, and so it was to

Callie. The gestation of the Callie-Louise entry into the wedding gown competition of the decade had been a full nine months and was now, save for a few final tweaks, ready for its delivery into the outside world – well, to the Audley Suite at The Dorchester, where the judging would take place the next day.

'Sorry, Flora, don't take any notice of me. I'm just exhausted. Thanks, though. Only these last few seed pearls and I'm done. But you could do me a huge favour by asking Scarlet to come down here?'

'Sure.' Flora meandered from the room, humming to herself. She was not the sharpest pair of scissors in a tailor's armoury, but her sweet temperament and her willingness to skip down the street for their regular infusions of espresso, latte and cappuccino made her a popular and essential member of the Callie-Louise Bridal Couture team.

Callie rethreaded her needle, knelt down at the hem of the gown and, with her bottom pointing to the ceiling, resumed the intricate task of squinting at the exquisite ivory silk that had formed the backdrop to her dreams for the last six months. The nationwide competition to design the wedding dress the celebrity actress Lilac Verbois would wear for her forthcoming marriage to Finn Marchant at York Minster at the end of July had gripped the country. She hadn't been able to believe it when she'd been informed on the first of January that her design had been shortlisted from

over two hundred and fifty entries to be made up as a sample garment. These gowns were to be presented to Lilac, who would make a final decision on the choice of her wedding dress with the assistance of her mother, her PA, Nikki Coates, and her wedding planner, Tish Marshall, at her hotel suite at The Dorchester on the last day of March, when she had a break in her filming schedule. There wasn't an academically trained fashion advisor in sight, so it was anyone's guess who would win.

Callie experienced a flash of excitement. The wedding was being billed as the celebrity event of the year. TV crews and the paparazzi would be out in force at the ceremony. The reception, to be held in a majestic stately home in North Yorkshire, would be attended by every A-lister who could wangle an invitation. The whole wedding had morphed from being just one more movie star marrying a musician into a fairy-tale romance. Lilac and Finn, whether by generosity or insanity, had opened up the celebration of their union to the whole country by creating the competition to design Lilac's wedding gown.

Callie-Louise Bridal Couture was her creation, a project she had worked ferociously and diligently on ever since leaving university three years ago. She understood what an honour it was whenever one of her designs was chosen to become the star attraction at the most important occasion in a girl's life. She

had designed wedding gowns for several actresses, even a minor royal, but Lilac and Finn's wedding would be the highlight of her career. She did not intend to let anything scupper the opportunity of a lifetime to showcase her talents to a nationwide, if not international, audience. She intended to seize it with both hands, even if this had meant the exclusion of all life's other demands.

Over the last three months, her world had become a frenzy of late nights, cold pizza and too much coffee. She had existed on snatched naps at her work table. Mannequins heard her complaints, dressmakers' dummies her confessions, but there was nothing new there.

Callie checked her watch. Her initial excitement and anticipation tipped over into nausea and tendrils of fear looped around her flat abdomen. Time was running out. There was only an hour left to apply the final embellishments by hand and she could not depend on Scarlet or Flora to do it to her exacting standards. Once she had attached the final pearls, the gown had to be sealed into the custom-created cardboard wardrobe provided by Lilac's wedding planner and ready for the specially appointed courier to collect at seven o'clock that evening, before completing its fateful journey from conception in their tiny studio in South West London to its debut into the glitzy world of The Dorchester the following morning.

What if something happened to the dress en route? What if it didn't arrive? What if the courier had an accident, or stopped for a beer and overindulged, or had to deliver twins in a roadside café?

She pushed her neurotic vacillations into the crevices of her exhausted mind. Jules Gallieri, the milliner who owned the hat shop round the corner from Callie-Louise Bridal and who created exquisite wedding fascinators and tiaras for her clients, labelled her work ethic as obsessive. It was true. She'd even succumbed to regular nightmares involving Bondesque espionage by her fellow competitors. Lilac's team would not be announcing the winning designer to the general public until her wedding day – if Callie heard nothing, it meant the Callie-Louise design hadn't been selected. And who could blame Lilac for that? The media would have been camped outside the chosen studio for the next four months, hoping for a sneak preview they could splash across their pages, and what bride wanted that?

Callie trusted no one, especially in an industry where integrity fought ignorance and ambition on a daily basis. She had sworn the whole team to absolute secrecy. If even a whiff of the design were made public, the Callie-Louise Couture entry would be disqualified. All her hopes and dreams were pinned on winning this competition, which would catapult Callie-Louise Bridal Couture into the upper echelons of bridal fashion design, the pinnacle of her lifelong ambition and the fulfilment of a promise she

had made to her parents when she'd used her inheritance to start her business.

'Take a break, will you, Callie? Flora tells me she found you snoring at your desk!'

Scarlet, as slender as a shop mannequin, lounged against the cutting table. She gazed intently at the deft weaving of the needle as Callie completed the final essential touches whilst she nibbled at the tips of her fingernails, painted the colour her name demanded.

'You know, I still can't grasp the reasoning behind Lilac's crazy scheme. Why splash open your marriage to one of the hunkiest men alive in a nationwide competition to design your wedding gown? I mean, she's one of the most sought-after actresses of her genre – especially since she won that BAFTA for best supporting actress last year. And Finn, well, what I wouldn't do to trade places and get my mitts on those buttocks of steel! *And* they could get hitched anywhere in the world: a yacht moored off the Cote d'Azur, a white-powdered beach in Hawaii; I'm even certain that St Paul's Cathedral would have overlooked the residence requirements. But, oh, no, Lilac Verbois wanted to get married in Yorkshire. Nothing wrong with Yorkshire per se and York Minster is the most gorgeous venue for the ceremony. But, well, you know… Yorkshire?' Scarlet wrinkled her pert, freckled nose as she twisted a glossy lock of her amber hair around her ring finger. 'Why didn't she go for The Plaza in New

York or a palazzo in Venice? There's no competition, in my humble opinion.'

'Hey, quit dissing Yorkshire! You know it's where I grew up.' Callie smiled, exaggerating her accent. 'The Verbois/Marchant wedding is going to be the glitziest, most glamorous wedding, no matter where it's held. And it's what Lilac wants, Scarlet. Don't you think a bride *should* be able to choose where she ties the knot?'

Scarlet pulled a face. 'But why the competition to design her wedding dress? You know, I wouldn't want the job of that poor wedding planner – what's her name, Tish? – for all the silk in China. I bet you she's already planning to shoot herself and the competition hasn't even been finalised yet. It's the end of March, the wedding's on the thirty-first of July; that's just four months away. I predict a confetti-infused nightmare!'

'Well, it's just as well she did, isn't it, Scarlet?' Callie smiled, tucking the sharply angled sides of her ebony bob behind her ears. She blew her fringe away from tickling at her eyelashes as she finished the last embellishment, then snipped the thread like a ceremonial ribbon.

'Why?'

Callie rolled her eyes. Scarlet was her clear-headed second-in-command, but sometimes she seemed to inhabit a galaxy far, far away. 'Because, Scarlet darling, in case you haven't noticed, Callie-Louise Bridal Couture has been shortlisted through to the final stages.'

'Oh, yes. And your design will win, Callie, I know it will. It's a heavenly creation! I'm so proud of what you've done.'

'What we've all done. This has been a real team effort. Even Flora has had an input.' Callie rubbed the heels of her hands over her eyes in an effort to squeeze one last drop of energy from her addled brain.

'Sure.' Scarlet's perfectly outlined Cupid's bow stretched to reveal her white, even teeth.

It was difficult not to adore Scarlet, with her signature red lips and nail polish chosen to clash violently with her auburn hair. She had, without a murmur of complaint, hand-sewn the tiniest of crystals onto the ivory silk until her fingers bled and she was banished from the studio for fear of jeopardising the pristine fabric. After that, she had assumed the mantle of caring friend, force-feeding Callie a diet of chocolate digestives and toast – the extent of her culinary knowledge – for which Callie had been immensely grateful. Some days it was the only sustenance to pass her lips and had kept the hunger pangs at bay.

Never one to hold back when delicacy was required, Scarlet would regularly burst forth with gems of her own brand of wisdom. 'You need to get out more' was a regular refrain delivered to Callie's ears, and the ubiquitous 'all work and no play', before she went on to dispense a dose of friendly criticism of her failure to frequent the capital's bars and restaurants. She would

end with a demand that Callie join her and Flora for a night on the town when Callie could no longer focus her eyes on the wedding dress of the decade.

Callie had watched from her seat in the Grand Circle as Scarlet took her own advice and lurched from one romantic encounter to the next, leaving her heart-broken conquests littering her fragrant slipstream.

'So, what's new on the relationship front, Scarlet?'

'Well, now that I'm about to be freed from the shackles of my workaholic boss, I intend to make up for my enforced dating celibacy by hitting the bars in the West End and sampling a different cocktail in every single one, starting with your personal favourite – a vodka martini. And you will be perched on the stool next to me, Callie. You haven't had a date in months. In fact, when was the last time you agreed to go out with a guy?'

'Oh, you know me. I don't have time to date. I'm just too busy with…'

'We're all busy, Callie. But that's not it. You always seem to come up with a convenient diagnosis of a fatal flaw in every guy you date. You seem to perform the dating equivalent of an archaeological dig in order to unearth any perceived imperfection that you can hone in on as an excuse not to take things further. Remember Marcus? He was gorgeous – a model, for God's sake! He could make a bin liner look sexy. He was perfect!'

'And didn't he know it,' muttered Callie.

Scarlet ignored her. 'And Andrew? The paediatrician? The guy who sent you flowers every day for a month?'

'Too attentive, too studious, and he talked about having kids the whole time!' Callie averted her eyes from Scarlet's stony glare.

'What about Carter? He was an American footballer! What's not to like? He flew you to New York for the weekend! You stayed at the Waldorf Astoria!'

'It rained the whole time.'

'You know, Callie, I wish I'd had half your opportunities to find "the one". You've got to relax, give someone the chance to get to know you. But there's something else going on here, isn't there? Something you're not telling me. What exactly are you searching for?'

Scarlet shook her head slowly, then fixed her eyes on Callie and lowered her voice to a whisper. 'It's Theo, isn't it?'