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Wedding Belles

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Extract

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Chapter 1

St Jude's vicarage, one chilly evening in January . . .

'I know you'll think I'm a silly old fool,' said Gerry Craine, 'but you two are certain this is what you want, aren't you? I mean, absolutely certain?'

Belle Craine looked into her father's eyes and saw an awful lot of love, and just a little concern. 'Of course we don't think you're silly, Dad,' she answered in surprise. 'But you know we're sure about getting married.'

She and Kieran exchanged loving looks. 'We're meant to be together, Mr Craine,' said Kieran. 'Always have been, always will be.'

Belle and Kieran were sitting on squishy floor cushions in the front room at the vicarage, drinking hot chocolate with marshmallows and vaguely helping Brenda to sort out the wedding invitations. Outside the windows, a few fat snowflakes were drifting lazily down onto the wet January earth.

'Gerry, love, do try and stop worrying,' urged Brenda, who was working her way laboriously through a pile of old address books, in search of any relatives and friends who might have slipped through the net. 'You'll make the poor girl neurotic and give yourself another ulcer.'

Now in his forties, Gerry Craine was still the best-looking reverend in Cheltenham: tall and broad-shouldered, with amiable brown eyes and near-black hair that was only just beginning to show a few distinguished streaks of grey. He was also a man who could worry for Britain.

'I just want to them to be absolutely certain they're making the right decision,' he told his wife. 'They're both still very young, you know. And marriage is a very big commitment.'

'Come on love, you're not running one of your marriage preparation classes now. This is Annabelle and Kieran you're talking about, not some pair of daft teenagers.' Brenda finished jotting down the names of some distant cousins in Perth, then looked up. 'Anyway, marrying young didn't

do us any harm, did it?' she pointed out. 'Or are you saying we should've waited?'

'No, of course I'm not, I'm just . . .' Gerry threw up his hands. 'I'm just doing my job, I guess,' he said with a rueful smile.

'We've given this an awful lot of thought,' stressed Kieran. 'In fact, I think we've known ever since the day we met that this was going to be for ever. Haven't we, Belle?'

Belle answered this unusually intense declaration with a coy smile. 'Well, the day *after* the day we met anyway,' she quipped. 'The day we met, all I could think was that you must be the worst newspaper reporter in the world, because you kept coming back to the shop to ask me all these really peculiar questions.'

Everybody laughed at the familiar story, and even Kieran chuckled. Sent by his editor to Belle's shop to do a feature on cosmetics for men, he'd taken one look at Belle and fallen hard. He'd spent the rest of the day trying to think up reasons to go back and talk to her again. He'd bought four different kinds of moisturiser before he finally plucked up the courage to ask her out.

'Hey, it's not easy being a bloke,' he protested good-naturedly. 'The minute you meet the girl of your dreams, you can't think of a sensible word to say, because all you really want to say is "marry me".' He gazed adoringly at his fiancée. 'Well, I plucked up the courage in the end. And lucky for me, she said yes.' He turned back to Gerry. 'I promise I'll take good care of her. Always.'

'He knows that, don't you, Dad?' Belle, who was sitting by her father's armchair, reached up and took his hand. His clasp felt reassuring and strong, a token of the deep emotional bond that had grown up between Gerry and his elder daughter. 'He's just trying to protect me. But Dad, we're not kids and we've been going out for nearly three years. It's not as if Kieran was my first boyfriend, is it? And don't forget he's a few years older than I am.'

'And what's the point of waiting,' Kieran added, 'when you know you've found the person you want to spend the rest of your life with?'

Gerry looked at the semi-circle of faces, hesitated for a moment, and then smiled. 'I know, I know, I'm just being an overprotective dad. You can't blame me though, in my job I see far too many marriages go wrong.'

Belle's promise was firm and unafraid. 'Ours won't be like that. We won't let it.'

He smiled down at the pair of them. 'I just want the best for you,' he said. 'Both of you.'

'We know.' Belle squeezed her dad's hand. We're so alike, she thought. Same hair, same features, same personality; it was no wonder they'd been

so close ever since she was a baby. 'But Kieran is the best, so you can stop worrying, can't you?'

'Yes,' echoed Brenda with a chuckle. 'You can, can't you?'

Gerry laughed softly. 'Well . . . if you put it like that.'

Brenda was muttering to herself as she shuffled books and papers on the coffee table. 'Great-Aunt Margot, Cyril . . . oh no, not Cyril. Can't really leave him out though, he's a cousin. Emma and John – wait a minute though, wasn't it John who ran off with the au pair, or was that Andy and Jane?'

Belle got up and went over to her mum. 'Need a hand?'

'Several,' replied Brenda, raking harassed fingers through her hair and leaving her fringe standing on end. 'Please, somebody sort out this guest list,' she implored. 'I'm sure I've put some of these people down twice. And I've a nasty feeling a couple of them might be dead.'

Kieran's eyebrows shot up at the sight of Brenda's enormous hand-written list. 'Good grief, how many guests? Blimey, I know I don't have much in the way of family, but the Craines sure make up for it.'

Belle felt for Kieran; knew that the light-hearted comment concealed a deep sadness. He had accumulated plenty of good friends along the way, but when it came to family, he was definitely the poor relation compared to Belle. His father had left home before he was born, and his mother – unable to cope on her own – had allowed him and his sister to be taken into care. Their childhood and adolescence had been a succession of foster homes, sometimes together, sometimes apart, but always longing for something that they could call 'family'. Belle had always thought it was remarkable that Kieran was so well adjusted, with nobody but a sister who lived at the opposite end of the country, but as Belle and Kieran had grown closer he'd confided that he'd always felt there was something missing in his life, until he'd found her. And now, through Belle, he had found that precious something.

'I thought we'd agreed to keep it just to family and close friends,' Gerry remarked.

'These are family and close friends, dear! And this is only about two-thirds of the total. I haven't included all the people who are just coming to the evening do.'

Belle swallowed. 'Mum—'

But Brenda just ploughed on regardless. 'You can't invite one family member without the rest of them, can you? And Belle has family all over the place, don't you dear? And then there's all your friends, Kieran . . .'

Seeing all those names written down made Belle's head spin. All those people, she thought. All those people, coming to the church to stare at me and Kieran! The very idea made her feel queasy. When Brenda paused to

take a breath, Belle cut in. 'Mum, do we really have to invite all of them?'

'Yes, of course we do!' laughed Brenda as if this was the funniest thing she'd ever heard.

'Why?'

'I told you, dear: because they're family!' Brenda explained with infant-school patience. 'And we don't want to upset anybody, do we?'

'Hm. I suppose.' Belle glanced down the list. 'But I don't even recognise some of these names! Who on earth is Gregory Ansell-Smith? And you can't possibly invite that awful Marion woman – isn't she the one who dropped Jax in the font and nearly split her head open?'

Brenda sighed. 'Trust me, when you're older you'll understand. It's all about being diplomatic. Take Cousin Les – we've no choice but to invite him. And if we invite him, we'll have to invite all the rest of the Liverpool Craines as well.'

'What, even that creep Sebastian?' shuddered Belle.

Brenda laughed uneasily. 'Don't worry dear, I'll keep him away from the bridesmaids. And the . . . er . . . pageboys. Then there are all your father's Church contacts. We absolutely can't avoid inviting the bishop . . .'

'But couldn't we just—?'

'Just what?' enquired Kieran.

'Like you said, keep it small,' said Belle, feeling almost apologetic, which was rather ridiculous seeing as this was supposed to be her wedding.

'This is –'

'No, Mum, I mean really small. And, well, affordable. I mean, you and Dad aren't exactly millionaires, and neither are Kieran and I. Why don't we just invite a handful of guests who really mean a lot to us?'

'That might be nice,' pondered Gerry. 'Intimate and meaningful.'

'No, it wouldn't,' Brenda replied sharply. 'This is your wedding, Annabelle, your once-in-a-lifetime day, and we're going to do it properly.'

'Oh dear,' said Belle. 'I was afraid of that.'

It was halfway through the evening when Belle's sister Jax finally stomped home in her big black boots with the soles like car tyres and her favourite ripped combats, low-slung to show off the silver skull dangling from her belly button.

She was followed into the front room by a boulder-shaped youth with so many facial piercings that he jingled when he walked.

'Oh look,' Kieran nudged Belle in the ribs. 'It's Frankenstein and the monster.'

‘Kieran!’ she hissed back. ‘Don’t be so mean.’ Belle tried to stifle a laugh, but only succeeded in getting mulled wine up her nose. ‘Now look what you’ve made me do,’ she scolded him, half-laughing and half-coughing.

Jax threw her elder sister a look of severe suspicion. ‘If you two are taking the piss out of me, you’re going to die,’ she said, matter-of-factly.

‘Don’t use language like that, dear,’ called Brenda from the hall, where she was struggling to hang up Razor’s huge ankle-length leather trench-coat. She said it more as a kind of reflex than in any serious attempt to modify her daughter’s behaviour. Even Brenda wasn’t that much of an optimist.

‘Where’s Dad?’ demanded Jax, once a natural blonde like her mother but currently sporting a fetching royal-blue crop that bore more than a passing resemblance to the new carpet in the doctor’s surgery.

‘He’s visiting the sick,’ replied Belle.‘Why?’

‘What!’ Jax was considerably less than impressed. ‘He’s out? Again? But me and Razor wanted him to give us a lift to Cirencester.’ She lowered her voice to an irritable whisper, out of earshot of her keen-eared mother. ‘There’s an all-nighter in the big tithe barn, bring your own sleeping bag.’

Belle didn’t normally get involved in her sister’s social life, but this was just preposterous. ‘Oh come on,’ she cut in. ‘You know Dad would never let you go to something like that!’

Jax folded her arms and scowled. ‘He would if he thought we were going to spend the night at Razor’s Auntie Jen’s,’ she retorted.

‘You’d lie to Dad?’

‘And you wouldn’t?’

‘No.’

‘Liar.’

The two sisters glared at each other from opposite sides of the room. It was Jax’s boyfriend, the rock-like Razor, who broke the silence. From the look of him, you’d have expected him to have the sort of voice that came from eating gravel; but when he did speak, it was in the embarrassing public school accent he just knew he was never going to be able to get rid of. Wealthy parents could be such a bummer. ‘Hello Mrs Craine,’ he said, clearing his throat as she walked into the room, a little flushed after her tussle with the two-ton coat. ‘You’re looking very nice this evening.’

‘Thank you, Marcus,’ smiled Brenda, who couldn’t and wouldn’t come to terms with calling anybody Razor. She peered a little more closely at his face. ‘Is your eyebrow all right, dear? It looks awfully sore.’

Razor flushed slightly and gingerly prodded it. ‘Actually I think it might be going a bit septic, Mrs C,’ he admitted sheepishly. ‘I s’pose I should’ve sterilised the needle or something.’

‘Oh Marcus, you silly, silly boy. I hope you’re up to date with your tetanus injections. Come along, you’d better let me clean it up.’ Abandoning her pile of address books, Brenda got to her feet and chivvied Razor in the direction of the nearest first aid kit.

That left just Belle, Kieran and a very disgruntled Jax.

‘Poor Razor,’ commented Kieran, for want of anything else to say.

Jax glowered. ‘Razor’s a prat.’

‘That’s not a very nice thing to say about your boyfriend,’ commented Belle.

‘Shut up. You’re a prat too. You’re all prats.’

‘Don’t worry Jax, you’ll grow out of being unpleasant,’ observed Kieran impishly; ‘right now you can’t help yourself – it’s just the hormones.’ For all her hard exterior, Jax blushed crimson, and couldn’t think of a single clever thing to say in reply. Blushing and going all squishy-brained was something that often happened when Kieran spoke to her, though of course she’d die rather than admit it to anyone else. Especially Kieran himself.

Belle shut Kieran up with a poke in the ribs. She’d promised herself – and her mother – that she and her little sister were going to be on good terms for the next six months if it killed them. And the way things were going, somebody was certainly going to die. ‘We’ve been planning a few things for the wedding,’ she said with a conscious effort at niceness as Jax flung herself into her father’s armchair.

‘So?’

‘So we were wondering if there’s anybody you’d like to invite, weren’t we Kieran?’

This time it was a well-placed elbow that jolted Kieran into responding. ‘We were? Oh. Yes, definitely. I’m sure there must be somebody you’d like to have along. Razor, perhaps?’

‘No, there isn’t, OK?’

‘We’re really looking forward to having you there,’ Belle went on.

‘Yeah, right! Like you think I’ll fit right in with all your boring friends.’

‘We do very much want you there, really we do. And actually, I was sort of hoping . . .’ She remembered what her mother had said, only the other day: ‘I’d so love it dear, it’d make my day complete,’ and forced herself to be convincingly enthusiastic. ‘Kieran and I were sort of hoping you’d be a bridesmaid.’

For a moment, Jax just stared open-mouthed at her sister, momentarily deprived of the power of speech. Then she threw back her head and laughed until her mascara ran.

Unlike sporty Kieran, Belle had never been one for exercise: in fact she absolutely despised it. Running around in the mud or jumping up and

down for no good reason had always struck her as uniquely pointless. Being rubbish at ball games at school hadn't helped either. On the last day of school she'd made a bonfire of all her PE kit and sworn a silent oath never to set foot in a sports centre again.

So the New You Fitness Club wasn't perhaps the first place you'd expect to find her – but nevertheless she was there, spending an hour of her precious day off lifting weights and pounding tedious miles on a treadmill – all in aid of New You's special 'Buff Bride' exercise course. The course was a series of punishing one-hour sessions, spread out over a couple of months and supervised by an instructor. It wasn't just a lot of jumping around, either; there was a diet to follow too. Not that Belle was doing very well on it. As she took a breather with her best friend Ros she was nibbling on a contraband Snickers bar.

It was good having fitness fanatic Ros along, to give her a bit of moral support. In fact, Belle seriously doubted if she'd ever have got past the front door of the gym without Ros to egg her on.

'You know, I think it's starting to work,' said Ros, cheerfully flicking glossy brown hair out of her eyes. 'You're really beginning to get some definition in those lower-body muscles.'

Belle contemplated her thighs, quivering like two sweaty pink jellies after twenty minutes of pumping up and down on the pedals of an exercise bike. 'It's OK, Ros, you don't have to lie,' she declared bravely. 'I'm a lardy lump and I know it.'

'You're not lardy and you're not a lump!' retorted Ros with a squeal of laughter. 'You're just . . . curvy.'

'Fat,' Belle corrected her.

'Shapely.'

'Tubby.'

'Well-proportioned.'

'The human blimp.'

'Don't talk rubbish! At least you're woman-shaped.' Ros stopped eating raw carrot sticks for a moment and jiggled her upper half; or rather, tried to. 'Look at my boobs – if you've got a microscope handy. They're like two aspirins on an ironing board.'

They shared a giggle and a couple of bites of the chocolate bar Belle had smuggled in. 'OK, point taken. Nobody's perfect. But at this rate I'm never going to be a Buff Bride, am I? And with you buggering off to see the world for the best part of a year, who's going to motivate me to stick at it?'

'You are! Just think of the look on Kieran's face when he sees you on your wedding day. And if I'm flying back from the other side of the world just to be your chief bridesmaid, I'm expecting you to be nothing less than drop-dead gorgeous for Kieran.'

Belle shrugged. ‘Oh, everybody looks good in a wedding dress anyway.’

Ros winked. ‘I didn’t mean with your dress on.’

God I’m going to miss you, Ros, thought Belle as they chatted. The two of them had been mates on and off ever since their last year at school, when they were both desperate to get out of uniform and into the world of work. But Ros had grown bored with her office job, and had just inherited a bit of money, so what better time to take a year off and see the world? Why did it have to be now though, with the wedding looming on the horizon and Belle struggling to stick to her new exercise regime?

‘I’ve come to a decision,’ she announced. ‘You can’t go. You’ve got to cancel everything and stay here with me. Otherwise I’ll stuff myself with cake and explode long before I ever get up the aisle.’

‘Sorry mate, I’ve already bought the tickets.’ Ros’s expression turned thoughtful. ‘Tell you what though – why don’t you escape from all this and come with me?’

‘What? Aagh.’ Belle spluttered as a peanut went down the wrong way.

Ros patted her on the back. ‘I’m serious, Belle. If all of this is getting you down, say “sod it”, pack a bag and take some time out, just for yourself. Why shouldn’t you? It’s your life – not your mother’s, or Kieran’s, or anybody else’s.’

For a fleeting second, the prospect seemed curiously appealing. No pressure, no limelight, no silly pretentious announcements in *The Times*; new things to see, new challenges . . . But even before that second had passed, Belle knew it was just a silly fantasy, and not for her in a million years. Quite apart from anything else, it was way, way, way too scary for somebody like her. ‘Nice idea, Ros, but no thanks.’

‘You’re chicken!’

‘No, I’m not,’ she protested. ‘Well OK, maybe I am a bit. But that’s not the point. Kieran makes me happy and I’m going to marry him in six months’ time, and we’re going to have a home together, and that’s what I want. It’s what I’ve always wanted, more than anything – you of all people know that.’ Her eyes sought Ros’s, urging her to understand. ‘I’m not an adventurer like you. Not a go-getter. I’m just . . . I don’t know . . . one of life’s ordinary people.’

Ros shook her head and tutted. ‘No such thing as ordinary.’

‘You wouldn’t say that if you were me.’

‘Ah well, you can’t say I didn’t try. Anyway, come rain or shine I’m going to be on that plane next week, so you’re just going to have to stick to the plan all on your own. You can do it!’

‘If you say so . . . Couldn’t you stay just a few more weeks? I need you

here to keep me sane! And stop me murdering my sister,' she added under her breath.

'Jax? What's little sis done now?' Ros enquired.

'I asked her if she'd be a bridesmaid – just to please Mum – and I asked her nicely, honestly I did. Anyhow, when she'd finished laughing, she said she'd rather stuff a live wasp up her nose.'

'Not a definite yes, then?' Ros shrugged. 'Never mind, it's her loss. I bet you've got tons of cousins and nieces and what-have-you who'd love to be bridesmaids. And you've got to admit, she wouldn't exactly ... blend in.'

Belle sighed. 'True. But there's only one Jax. And she may be a pain in the bum sometimes, but it would mean a lot to Mum to see her following me up the aisle in a pretty dress.'

'Jax? In a dress?' Ros considered the concept. 'No, it's no good, I just can't see it.'

'Me neither,' lamented Belle. 'So what do I do? Give up?'

'Half an hour on the weights,' replied Ros. 'And then on to the treadmill. You want to be a buff bride for this perfect husband of yours, don't you?'