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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Birthday Party

Written by Veronica Henry

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# The Birthday Party

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# One

There was a joke, a plagiarised version of the one about the Sixties, that went: 'If you can remember the Raffertys' wedding, then you weren't there.'

Delilah could remember, however. Every last magical moment of it. The sun had rained down liquid gold all day, before evaporating into a deep pink sunset that melted into velvet black. Then the stars had come out, more than anyone had ever seen, and there were some guests who swore they could see the bride and groom's names spelt out amongst the constellations.

Delilah and Raf.

They had only known each other two months before they were married. There had been no question about it. She wasn't even entirely sure he had officially asked for her hand. It had been a given. It was meant to be.

Raf Rafferty, the hell-raising heart-throb who could down seventeen pints of Guinness then deliver a Shakespeare soliloquy in a mellifluous, husky half-whisper that had his audience weeping. And Delilah MacBride, his co-star, the copper-haired ingénue, the only woman who had ever stopped him in his tracks.

It still made her shiver, the memory of standing next to him at the altar, her tiny hand in his, as he slid the band of gold onto her finger; melting into his hypnotic blue eyes as he drew her towards him for the sealing kiss. She'd tasted the whiskey on him already that day, the peaty kick of Paddy's. But that was part of the package. She'd known that all along.

They'd barely done any organising for the wedding. No official invitations, just word of mouth amongst their coterie of friends and a few phone calls to lure people across the Channel or Atlantic. No formal catering: the food was thrown together in a languidly haphazard fashion. No seating plan – not even any seats to speak of. Just a hot summer afternoon in the medieval monastery in Herefordshire they were renting while they finished the movie they were making. They'd had no idea who was going to turn up, nor did they much care. There were barrels of cider, a cellar full of wine, Delilah barefoot wrapped in twenty yards of diaphanous silk organza held together with giant safety pins aeons before Elizabeth Hurley was even a twinkle in Versace's eye . . .

It was a million miles from the party she was planning today: her fiftieth birthday, just over two months away. A lavish extravaganza to recognise her half century, a fact which, with her typical and refreshing honesty, she had emblazoned across the invitations. It was something to celebrate, not hide. Delilah had never had a problem with age. Why bother worrying about something you had no control over? Life threw enough at you without inventing problems.

Mind you, some people would say it was all right for her not to worry, when she barely looked forty. Her skin was wrinkle-free, still creamy, lightly dusted with freckles. Her eyes were unlined, her lips full, her cheeks still plump, her hair long and thick and lustrous – sure, she had it coloured, but not to hide grey, just to add streaks of amber and topaz to her natural chestnut. She knew she was lucky. By now she should be haggard and drawn, her complexion dull. She put it down to good genes and the generous application of Jo Wood organic products.

She was sitting at the kitchen table, her bare feet resting on Doug the Pug, surrounded by brochures and menus, price lists and guest lists and check lists. She had her MacBook in front of her, her iPhone at her side, the lid off her Shanghai Tang fountain pen as she scribbled furiously, writing out all the

details that she needed to check – all the minutiae that were going to make this party perfect.

It had to be perfect. The party represented a turning-point in her life. Everything was . . . well, just as it should be. Her last cookery show was a ratings winner – again – and the accompanying glossy recipe book had shot to the top of the bestseller charts – again. The girls were all settled – each in jobs, flats of their own. And Raf.

Raf was about to make a comeback.

She looked at the Fornasetti clock on the wall. He should be meeting Dickie Rushe right about now. Raf would completely flip if he knew about all the clandestine conversations she had had with Dickie. The director had approached her first, because everyone thought that she wore the trousers in the Rafferty house, which actually wasn't true at all. They were a team, a proper partnership. It was just that she tended to be the mouthpiece, and she was far more in the public eye these days, so people often thought there was no point in running something past Raf if Delilah hadn't approved it first.

And she did approve. The time was right. Even a year ago, she would have thought it a potential disaster. But Raf was strong enough. He was ready. Of that she felt certain. They'd talked it over, long into the small hours, for over a week now. It was going to mean upheaval, added pressure, unwanted publicity, a gruelling schedule, days and nights apart, but on the plus side, it was a challenge, a project for Raf to get his teeth into, the glamour and excitement that a film shoot always brought, new friends . . .

Oh, and money.

Delilah would never have dreamed of voicing it, but for her this was the biggest plus. She was tired of being the breadwinner, which she had been for the past ten years. And she knew Raf didn't have any real idea of what it cost to keep the Rafferty machine afloat. The fuck-off mansion on Richmond Hill, the flats for the girls, the cars, the staff, the clothes . . . She spent five hundred pounds a month on fresh flowers alone

– probably the mortgage repayments for the average family in Britain.

She would never, ever have used this to push Raf into making a decision about his career. She hadn't complained once about the pressure she felt to fill their coffers. She was very cautious not to push him over the edge. For all his manliness, for all that testosterone that made women weak at the knees, Raf was fragile. He needed cocooning. And Delilah had built that cocoon, carefully spinning the silken threads around him to protect him from the real world.

Her iPhone burbled at her. She flicked her eyes at the screen: Coco. The first call of the day. There would be anywhere between fifteen and thirty between now and midnight. Coco might be the eldest of her three daughters, but she needed constant reassurance.

Violet, the middle one, never called. She didn't even have a mobile. Delilah kept buying them for her, but she left them in cafés, in bookshops, on the tube. And Tyger, her baby – Tyger called when she felt like it, usually at three in the morning when she was on her way home in a cab, bubbling with excitement and gossip and laughter.

They were so different, each of her daughters. She wouldn't have them any other way, but she worried about them nonstop. One was too dependent, another too independent. One was too focused, another too dreamy. One worked too hard, another not enough. There was always some issue to keep her lying awake. Like any other mother, she supposed.

She answered the call.

'Hey.'

'Hi, Mum. I'm on my way to the studio. What's new?'

'Party planning. Are you bringing anyone, by the way? I need to know.' Delilah's pen hovered over the guest list, which was at three hundred and rising. 'Plus ones have to be named. We can't have random people turning up. The security guys will go nuts.'

'No. In fact, I don't know if I'll even be able to come.'

Delilah rolled her eyes. This was typical Coco. Drama queen. Emotional blackmail all the way. Don't rise. Don't rise.

'Why not?'

'It's on a Thursday, isn't it? We film late on Thursdays. And start at six the next morning.'

'Surely you can talk to the producers? Book the time off?'

'I don't want to piss them off when I'm still new.'

Delilah didn't protest any further. It wasn't worth it.

'All right,' she replied, non-committal. 'Just let me know nearer the time.' You couldn't force Coco into anything. It had to come from her. 'Did you sleep OK?'

'Mmm . . .'

Coco had always had trouble sleeping. Right from birth. Even now she was up half the night, falling into a troubled slumber two hours before it was time to get up. Delilah didn't know how she was coping with her relentless shooting schedule. She worried about her driving home at night exhausted. She worried about her driving to work in the morning exhausted. She worried about her not eating . . .

Although Coco's constant calls drove her mad, at least when she phoned she knew she was all right.

'You're coming tomorrow, aren't you?' she asked.

Lunch at the Raffertys' on the first Saturday of every month was a ritual. All the family turned up, together with an assortment of current beaux or friends and whoever Delilah and Raf had invited to throw into the mix. It started at midday and finished – sometimes – at midnight, though it had been known to carry on until the early hours of the next day.

The girls turned up religiously. For which Delilah was grateful. It was the only way she could keep a proper eye on them these days. Only today Coco was prevaricating. She was in one of her uncooperative moods, which meant she was unsettled.

'Maybe,' she replied cautiously. 'Depends whether we get through the shooting schedule. It's pretty tight.'

Delilah frowned. Of course they would get through the shooting schedule. They had to. No studio could afford to

run over these days. They couldn't cough up the money to bring in actors and crew on a Saturday, not to mention location caterers. Coco was bullshitting . . . But she was new to all this. For God's sake, her scenes hadn't even been aired on TV yet.

'Got to go, Mum. I'm nearly at the studio.'

'OK. Bye, sweetheart.' But Coco was gone. Delilah looked at the phone suspiciously. What was up? Was she entangled with some new bloke who wasn't yet ready for the Rafferty circus? Was she heading for one of her dark spells? Or did she just want to spend the day in bed?

The phone rang again.

'Is Tyger coming?'

Delilah was instantly wary. Coco and Tyger could be the best of friends or the worst of enemies. You could never tell. Was this the root of Coco's reticence – a feud with her little sister?

'I haven't heard from her,' she replied truthfully.

'OK.' Coco rang off.

Delilah rolled her eyes. It was such a typical Coco call – no greeting, no goodbye, just a curt question. Sometimes she found her eldest daughter irritatingly self-absorbed. Or maybe Coco felt so close to her that she didn't need to be polite?

She went back to her planning, and her heart quailed. This party was going to be a fracas, no matter how carefully she planned it. There would be squabbles and scenes and tantrums, about who was wearing what and who was bringing who and who was sitting where. The Rafferty sisters could be guaranteed to make a drama out of a crisis. She supposed it was her own fault. She'd brought them up to be feisty and independent, able to voice their own opinions, so she shouldn't complain when she was on the receiving end of it. And they would all be as good as gold on the night, she was sure of it. She knew perfectly well Coco would turn up in the end.

As she looked down the list for the hundredth time, racking her brain to see if she had left anyone off, a thought occurred

to her. She *hadn't* heard from Tyger, for over a week. She usually phoned every couple of days, her breathless, rushed tones imparting the latest scandal, but there had been nada since . . . Delilah couldn't remember when she'd last spoken to her.

Delilah scrolled through the names on her phone and pressed dial. It went straight to voicemail: *Hi, it's Tyger. You know what to do.*

Delilah hung up. There was no point in leaving a message. It would be one of a thousand. She'd see her tomorrow. Of all the girls, Tyger was the most loyal, even though her life was lived at a hundred and ten miles an hour. She lived in a whirlwind of business meetings, press launches, PR stunts and parties. She never returned anyone's phone call, but she got away with it because of her impish charm. And because most people needed her more than she needed them.

But she never failed to turn up for the Saturday lunch. Never.

The Presidential Suite at the Bellagio looked as if it had been turned over by the Las Vegas Police Department. Open suitcases disgorged a trail of clothes that led to the bed, the bathroom, the wardrobe and back again. Plates of half-eaten food – sushi, Caesar salad, pizza, melted ice-cream – were strewn over every available surface. In the middle of the floor was a half-eaten three-tier wedding cake. Iced in red, white and black and studded with treble clefs and musical notes, it proclaimed around the bottom layer, 'I Love Rock 'n' Roll'. Two champagne glasses lay amongst the crumbs, accompanied by several empty bottles of Krug. A phone in the corner of the room rang insistently, then stopped, tired of being ignored.

Room service had tried to get in but the 'do not disturb' sign had been up for thirty-six hours, and the management had advised the cleaners to steer clear.

Honeymooners. They'd set off the smoke alarm six times with their cigarettes. And the noise of the music . . . Even

now, at half past eight in the morning, Audioslave blared out from the sound system. On the bed, a young man lay strumming along on his guitar. He was skinny and sinewy; the physique of a man who burned his fuel before it even hit his stomach. He wore ripped jeans and a leather waistcoat, his torso bare, covered in a mass of tattoos. On his head was a battered top hat.

A girl came out of the bathroom. She had a spiky peroxide crop and a cute little face with a turned-up nose and freckles. She looked about twelve, dressed in a red polka-dot dress with sky-high scarlet stilettos. She bounded across the room, scrambled onto the bed and straddled him. She could feel the buckle of his belt digging into her and she rubbed against it, enjoying the sensation of cold metal against her hot clit. He ran his hands over her taut arse appreciatively, sliding his fingers under the skimpy lace of her knickers. He twisted the flimsy fabric in his hands and gave a sharp tug. The knickers came away in his hand.

'Cheap shit,' he commented with a grin.

'Cheap shit that retails at sixty-five quid.'

'You were robbed.' He held up the flimsy scrap disparagingly.

The girl lowered her face down to his and wrinkled her nose.

'Cheap shit that's paid for this room.'

They locked gazes for a moment.

'So, Mrs Dagger,' he said softly, 'what do we do now for kicks?'