

Vicki's Work of Heart

by

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CHAPTER 1

There can't be many weddings involving eight sixth-formers dressed in black, carrying massive paintbrushes for the guard of honour; two red setters in cream ribbon and an organist bashing out *I Will Survive*.

To be truthful, the organist's performance was at the direct bidding of myself, Victoria Emily Marchant, spinster – still – of a parish somewhere south of Bristol. After striding with whisky-fuelled confidence down to the altar rail, I turned, smiled to the assembled throng and announced, 'It may not have escaped your notice, but this is one wedding short of a bridegroom. The adorable, enigmatic and perpetually irresponsible Marc Morrison has got cold feet. So cold, in fact, he's buggered off to Barbados. Without me.' I couldn't be sure whether the gasps were for his solo exodus or my profanity in a holy place. 'However, as my parents and I have spent an absolute freaking fortune on smoked salmon, champagne and Trinidad Tyler's Steel Band, I would be even more devastated if you didn't stay and enjoy it with us. Whatever else has happened, this is still the first day of the rest of our lives. I'm young,' I threw an arm in the air; 'free,' the other arm; 'and still single. So let's shake it on down!' I believe I may have performed a neat shimmy of the hips.

There were shuffles and murmurings amongst the congregation. Faces I knew smiled sympathetically when I caught their eye; faces I didn't, gawped in fascination.

Father Patrick, purveyor of whisky to the recently jilted, was approaching at a polite but urgent pace, followed closely by my mother, father and a pair of red setters – their tails wafting proudly, like plumes on circus ponies.

I continued. 'I'm serious. What do I always tell you guys?' I asked, appealing to the eight members of my A-level Art group, who were now sitting along the fourth pew. They glanced at each other. 'Come on, what do I say? "Always..."' there was a slight mumble. I beamed at them. 'You know what I'm talking about.' As Father Patrick and Co. reached the chancel steps, I held up my hand to halt their progress.

The youngest boy, Clark, spoke hesitantly. 'Always rinse your brushes thoroughly and don't leave...'

‘Noooo!’ Not wishing to humiliate him further, I added, ‘Although you’re right in one context. Now, Briony, help me out here. What did I tell you when you couldn’t go on holiday because of that...thingy in your ear?’

Briony blushed. ‘Always make the most of the here and now?’

‘Exactly. Work with the hand you’ve been dealt. Well, my lovely friends, Granny, Auntie Grace, Mum, Dad...This is my hand. The joker in the pack has fled and, I don’t know about you, but I was really looking forward to a party; I absolutely love dancing to a steel band; and I have some wonderful friends here, who’ve travelled miles – continents even – to see me get hitched. Can’t do much about the hitching, guys, but let’s do the decent thing, get over to that marquee and make the most of what’s left. Am I right?’

Nothing.

I noticed Father Patrick, his hands plaited in prayer position, turning to his public. I cut in before he could start an oration. ‘Come on guys, help me out, here. Do you honestly want us to dump the food, the floral displays, the booze? Just look at me, all dressed up and nowhere to go.’ I gave my veil a flick. The tiara glittered with paste jewels in blue, red and pearl – a nod to the day when I’d met Marc. It had been a Red, White & Blue party on Trafalgar Day. Back then, I’d worn a dress I’d made from the Union Flag, he’d worn a knotted American flag like a toga. I’d thought it was fate. Today, my dress was ivory coloured, halter-neck style and, because Marc hated long dresses and loved my legs, I’d opted for a knee-length one and cripplingly high, crimson stilettos. ‘Let’s make this a night to remember for something other than Marc Morrison’s...cowardly departure.’ I glanced at the scattering of his family and friends to my left. ‘No offence.’

My best friend, Isabelle, who had flown in from Paris, stepped out from the front pew, ‘I think it is a wonderful idea.’ She joined me on the steps and slid an arm around my waist. ‘She deserves our support in any way she chooses. Don’t you agree?’

I could practically see half the men soften and swell at the sound of Isabelle’s French accent. She embodied Parisian chic with a dash of urban shock – dressed as she was in a figure-hugging navy dress, navy shoes, metallic handbag and a fascinator with fine metallic springs that seemed to vibrate on her head.

Mum and Dad looked at each other and closed in for a consultation. Finally, my dad faced the throng. ‘It would seem a dreadful shame for you to have come all this

way and for the caterers to dump all the food. If it's what Vicki wants, Betsy and I are happy to go along with it.'

As I marched down the aisle, with Isabelle at my side and a smile flickering on my face, I heard Father Patrick say, 'I'm thinking, maybe the whisky was a mistake.'

I woke up in the bridal suite, the following morning, with Isabelle by my side. I let out a long, low groan. 'It really happened, didn't it? I'm not married.'

Isabelle's head lolled over to look at me. 'Oui. You're still single, chérie.'

I contemplated my status for a moment. 'Not a word. Not a hint. I never saw it coming.'

'Non?'

My eyes opened a fraction wider. 'Huh?'

Isabelle turned onto her side and put a hand on my shoulder. 'He had no job, Vicki. He just wasn't the settling down type.'

'You say that, now. Hindsight in twenty-twenty.'

'No. I told you, when you came to Paris. I asked you about his work and you told me about his little business venture.'

'And?'

'Didn't we discuss how weak it was? No investors. All those get-rich-quick schemes he used to come up with at college. None of those succeeded.'

'He's an entrepreneur.'

'He's a dreamer, Vicki. Charming, yes. He could draw you in with his charisma but he is not a business man.'

'And apparently not a marrying man.'

We lay quietly for a moment. Finally, Isabelle spoke. 'I think he would make a great gigolo, you know.'

'He wouldn't. His legs are too bandy.'

For the first time since Marc's best man had delivered the bad news, I took a moment to reflect on what I'd lost. Isabelle was right – at least about the charm and charisma. But he had wanted to settle down. He'd said so. Many times. He'd loved my vision for a family home with a big garden for the kids to mess around in. We'd talked about the tree house we'd build; the vegetable garden; the playroom with a wall left bare for the children to draw and paint on. He'd even downloaded plans for the tree house and gift-wrapped them for me last Christmas. The memory of the light in

his eyes as I'd opened it and giggled with joy, now closed my throat with sadness. And as we'd made love, later that day, he'd whispered, 'Imagine we're doing it in the tree house, and one of our nosy, sexy neighbours is watching...' I groaned again and rolled over, burying my face in the pillow.

I felt Isabelle's hand move in a circular motion over my back.

This was so wrong. Marc should have been here, and we should have been having slow, delicious, married sex. Me and Marc, that is, alone. Although, I could just imagine how thrilled he would be at the prospect of sex with the pair of us. My head bucked off the pillow.

'Did he ever make a pass at you?' The hand stilled, momentarily. 'He did, didn't he?'

Isabelle took a breath. 'It was ages ago, at your graduation party.'

Pre-engagement, I thought to myself. All the same... 'What happened?'

'He said some very flattering things and tried to kiss me. So I told him he was pissed and to leave me alone.'

'That's it?'

'That's it.'

I digested the information. We were fresh out of college, back then. If I thought really hard, I might be able to dredge up some inappropriate behaviour of my own. 'Sorry, Iz.'

'Don't be. I should have told you. Then, maybe this wouldn't have come as such a shock.'

'What? You think he made a habit of it?'

Isabelle shrugged. 'I don't know. Really, I don't.'

I felt a twist in my stomach. There had also been the time I'd seen him duelling tongues with another girl on our course – Maxine Dewar – but he'd confessed that was purely down to curiosity over the two piercings she had in her tongue; well, curiosity and a very potent spliff they'd been sharing.

'Oh, Izzy, how did I get it so wrong?' I looked down at the jagged mascara tracks my tears had left on the pillow and dropped my face back into it.

An hour later, as we shared stone-cold toast from the honeymoon breakfast and stared out over the river Avon, Isabelle said, 'You know, you could use this as an opportunity to change your future for something you really want.'

I managed a slow nod. It's hard to think of a new future when the one you were on the brink of has gone missing.

'Travel, write a book, take up sculpture, work towards that painting exhibition you've always dreamed about.'

My head moved from a nod into a slow shake. One had to be inspired to paint. An exhibition of blank canvases might not quite do it for the critics.

They say, as one door closes, another one whips your tits off, and so it transpired when I investigated the Internet History on the computer I'd shared with Marc: Vegas-Casino, Winner-Takes-All, BetsOn, Chase-the-Ace...you name it, Marc had tried it. That would account for the non-existent Malaysian honeymoon I'd tried to cancel. My money – that's my hard-earned loot from daily facing the delinquents at Darwin High School, and money which I'd signed over to Marc to make the booking – was gone. It was a 'man thing', he'd said. He'd wanted to choose the location and pick the hotel, so that at least some of it would be a surprise for me. Well, what a chuffing surprise. His activity would also account for a sudden and shocking avalanche of mail from debt collectors...and six thousand pounds sterling of that, in my name.

How had I been so stupid? Where had my mind been? Apparently in our fantasy future and not in our tawdry reality.

In the ensuing months, I kept myself together; working, staying positive, waiting for a call...

Nobody saw me lying on the sofa, i-Pod plugged into my ears to drown out my own sobbing. Nobody came to drag me out of bed at a weekend, as I pulled the duvet back over my head and waited for Monday. Nobody saw the catering packs of chocolate-chip cookies I consumed.

Offers from my parents to move back in with them were waved aside. 'I'm absolutely fine, Mum. Honestly. I'll get through this. Don't worry.'

I discovered Marc's mobile number now connected me to a Bill Millfield in Streatham – that's actually, Biw Miwfield – who'd 'never-eard-o Marc Morrison'.

Each time I rang his mother, the woman went to pieces. She pleaded poverty and threatened all manner of torture to her son, should he ever step over her threshold. All of which I knew was bollocks, since Marc had always been incapable of doing any wrong in his mother's eyes. A fact the woman had alluded to on our wedding day,

when she'd held my hand, tilted her head in sympathy and intoned, 'Some men just need a little more understanding than others.'

His best man, Jamie, swore on his life he hadn't been in touch, which I was inclined to believe, since I'd always wondered at Marc's selection of Jamie as his best man; Jamie being the most abstemious of all Marc's friends but possibly the wealthiest. He too was in credit to my errant fiancé, to the tune of nine hundred quid.

No amount of petitions to the police or the debt collection agencies lowered my financial obligations, which meant I was expected to cough up every last penny.

I sold my car. I lived on BOGOFs. I turned the heating off and watched TV wrapped in a blanket with sleeves. My hair roots grew progressively darker, until a friend took pity on me and brought round a do-it-yourself highlighting kit, which not only bleached my hair the shade of straw, but rendered it so brittle I had a head like a dried thistle. At the end of the summer term, I signed the last cheque and faced my future.

It was a deep and depressing void.

No marriage to savour, no children to raise, no tree house to build.

Equally, no husband to support, no ego to stroke, no nebulous business venture to bankroll.

I picked up the phone and dialled.

'Izzy. I want to spend a year in France. I want to paint.'

CHAPTER 2

Christophe Dubois made his way through the chattering soirée, and leaned against the balcony balustrade to gaze out at the sun setting behind the Eiffel Tower, blissfully unaware of the future Isabelle was planning for him. She was the sister of his best friend, Xavier, and he had to admit, had blossomed into quite the stunner. She was curvaceous without being heavy and she knew how to dress to greatest effect. Tonight she wore a silver, beaded dress, which showed enough cleavage to tempt without being brazen, and her cropped, Audrey Hepburn hairstyle trod an interesting line between gamine and savvy – which she certainly was. He had, however, known her too long and too well to entertain any thoughts of pursuing her for his own pleasure. She was smart, she was funny but far too analytical. Many, long nights they'd spent in their youth, deep in meaningful and mind-bending discussions over life and its pitfalls; the writing of Stephen King; the varied works of Jean Cocteau and whether the human race was destined to fail, because frequent and repeated rebirths had not resulted in the soul progressing to a civilised level. Her belief in reincarnation alone was enough to put him off. There was also something disturbingly autocratic about the way she approached life.

'Christophe, here is your champagne,' she began. 'Wonderful sunset, isn't it?'

He smiled. 'Indeed. But you didn't set up this little chat to discuss the view, did you?'

'True. I have a favour to ask.'

'Go on.'

'Do you remember my English friend, Vicki?'

'Vaguely. Was she the one who threw up over Xavier at Euro Disney?'

Isabelle's expression froze, momentarily. 'Ah, yes. Who could forget?'

'What about her?'

She smiled and rested a hand on his arm. 'I'd like you to give her a room in your house, and in exchange she will cook for you.'

'What?'

'Can you cook?'

'I get by. It's quite easy to eat out, you know.'

‘I know it’s a lot to ask, but it would be so wonderful if you could help out.’

‘Why should I? Can’t she stay with you or Xavier, or even your parents?’

‘Christophe, I live in a one-bedroom apartment in the centre of Paris; Xavier is a nightmare to live with – I wouldn’t wish him on my enemy never mind my friend; as for my parents...not for a whole year. It wouldn’t be kind.’

‘To them or her?’

‘To her.’

‘Why me?’

Isabelle rolled her eyes. ‘To be honest, I’m desperate. I had a friend in Normandy lined up, but she lost her job and is having to downsize. Then I tried my cousin in le Puy but the house is being refurbished from top to bottom. And nobody on the company network showed any interest. You’re my last hope.’ Her hand on his arm was surprisingly tense.

‘So, what’s she running away from?’

‘Huh?’

‘The police must be on her tail for you to be so keen to sort this out. She’s not in trouble is she?’

‘Don’t be silly. I don’t have friends like that. She’s an artist – a brilliant artist. She’s given up her job to take a sabbatical and paint. She feels it’s her last chance to succeed at something she dearly wants to do. I told her I could find her somewhere, easily. Unfortunately, she’s out of work and soon she’ll be homeless. If I don’t sort something out, and fast, I will have blown her dream right out of the water.’ Isabelle was giving him her most beseeching expression.

‘So, it’s you I’m getting out of a fix as much as your friend.’

‘God, yes. I practically talked her into it. If I fail her now I’ll feel guilty for ever.’

Christophe knew when he was being played. ‘I doubt it,’ he smiled. ‘But I daresay you’ll make me feel guilty for ever, if I refuse.’

Isabelle moved closer. ‘You’re a philanthropic man, Christophe. I’m just asking you to be charitable to another human being, instead of all those horses you lavish your funds and attention on.’

‘Hmmm...What if she’s a pain in the neck?’

‘Vicki? Never. She’s bright and funny and a very good cook. I know you have plenty of room in your house, you need hardly see her, except at meal times. Please say, yes.’

Christophe could see some small advantage in the arrangement. 'Is she pretty?'
Isabelle's eyebrows twitched. 'Very. But don't you mess with her, Christophe, or I'll come down and chew your balls off.'

He laughed. That was exactly the reaction he'd expected.

'So, what do you say?'

'I'll only mess with her if she wants to be messed with, how's that?'

Isabelle's mouth knotted into a pout. 'Don't mess with her. This is my dearest friend, we're talking about. And one day, she will be godmother to my children. I don't want to choose who I can invite to their christening, just because you behaved with un-gentlemanly conduct.'

Christophe grinned. 'Isabelle, I'm always a gentleman.'

'Just say, yes. Please. You're my last hope.'

Thank you for reading this excerpt