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# **A Kept Woman**

Written by Louise Bagshawe

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# A Kept Woman

Louise Bagshawe



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# Chapter One

Diana Verity looked at her reflection and smiled.

The mirror in her mother's bedroom was spotted slightly with age round its antique frame, but nothing could detract from the dazzling vision she saw there. Diana was a lovely girl who had never looked lovelier. It was marvellous to be a bride, but infinitely better to be a young, beautiful one, wearing a dress which cost more than some people made in a year, bedecked with minute silk roses and hand-sewn crystals, carrying a bouquet personally put together by the top florist in London. Her hair gleamed like spun glass; John Frieda had opened just for her, at an ungodly hour, and Joel himself had attended to the choppy fringe that swung so delightfully under the glittering tiara of Swarovski crystal, jet and cultured pearls which kept her small veil in place. Diana had been tempted by an all-over cathedral-length veil, but nothing should be allowed to obscure the view of her dress for her guests, not to mention the photographers from *Tatler* and *Hello!* who were massing outside the church.

You might as well not be married at all if nobody could see how exquisite you looked. Perhaps the pictures would even console Daddy for the colossal dent

Diana had put in his wallet. Basia Zarzycka gowns did not come cheap.

‘You look stunning, darling.’

Victoria Verity pursed thin, immaculately painted lips and regarded her eldest daughter with a critical eye. Diana was a gorgeous, selfish, spoiled butterfly, but today all you noticed was the butterfly part. It cost Ernie, her fiancé, a lot of money to keep Diana in the wonderfully groomed, plucked and polished state to which she had become accustomed, but Victoria had no doubt that when he saw his bride Ernie would think she had been worth every penny. A wedding day is trumpeted as the most important in a bride’s life, Vicky thought, and maybe it is. But there is a certain type of groom for whom the wedding is almost equally important. She considered her future son-in-law with well-bred distaste.

Ernest Foxton was the bad boy of British publishing. After ruthlessly trimming down one of Britain’s oldest imprints, firing staff *en masse* and pruning unprofitable authors relentlessly from its list, he was heading across the pond to America. Ernie had dual citizenship through his mother, and now it had come in useful. He’d been tapped to run Blakely’s, the old-fashioned New York house whose shareholders thought it needed a major revamp. Ernest was a cut-throat businessman, Victoria reflected, and he knew the value of a beautiful, graceful English wife at his side as he networked through the charity balls and opening nights that constituted Manhattan’s social scene. It was no surprise to her that a ring had been produced, and a fast wedding arranged.

Diana had risen to the challenge. She had never used her considerable brains – her mother felt sure they were considerable, if only Di would dig them out – for

anything other than sneaking her way into the hottest Alexander McQueen show, or snatching up the last Prada limited-edition yellow calfskin handbag. She had dropped out of college, and taken a job at *Vogue* as a fashion assistant, accepting their minute wages and living on the generous allowance Ernie provided. Victoria knew Diana gave legendary dinner parties and was a bit of an 'It' girl. In snagging Ernie, her finest hour had come, and her life, presumably, would be one long American edition of *Jennifer's Diary* after another. With barely four months' notice, Diana had managed to put together a stellar guest list full of people she didn't care about, a delightful reception at Brown's, spectacular flowers, a string quartet and a handmade dress designed especially for her. Ernie would be proud.

'It's not too bad, is it?'

Diana turned round this way and that, admiring the tiny cap sleeves and almost indecently low bodice, the plunging back covered with a Greek-goddess silk drape and her white satin slippers stitched with delicate gold thread.

'It's almost too much.'

Susie Amberson, Diana's chief bridesmaid and younger cousin, gave Diana a jealous smile. It was so unfair that she should look like this, her brown hair all silky and gleaming, her slim silhouette sparkling with white and glittering like Cinderella. What on earth did Ernie see in her? There was a rumour going round the girls that last week Diana had flown into Manhattan *just to get her eyebrows plucked* at the John Barret salon in Bloomingdales. The wedding was already the talk of London. 'Sophie Rhys-Jones went for subtlety. I thought that was *so* tasteful.'

'Darling.' Diana turned those luminous blue eyes on

her, which she had emphasised with blue mascara, and which still somehow managed to look natural. 'You couldn't be more wrong. Minimalism is so over. So nineties. It's all about modern classics today.'

'Modern classics,' Susie said, with a trace of sarcasm, all she dared. After all, you couldn't be rude to the bride, even if you were the maid of honour. Diana had chosen the bridesmaids' outfits and they were a picture of subtle beauty; moss-green velvet, Empire-waisted gowns, with tiny bouquets of pink rosebuds and small white clouds of baby's breath and a white rose in full blossom pinned into everyone's hair. Susie scowled. Even the satisfaction of bitching that Diana had made her look like a heifer was denied to her.

'That's right.' Diana spritzed herself lightly with rose water – she would not use anything as unsubtle as a perfume today. 'A wedding where people are formally dressed. Full skirts and trains and veils and tiaras. Classical waltzes instead of cheesy eighties disco. Did you know I have an usher standing at the door who is passing out carnations to any man that turns up without a buttonhole?'

'How thoughtful,' Susie said nastily.

Diana gave her a blossoming smile, and Susie was left with the unpleasant feeling that Diana found her bitchiness amusing. She had meant to put a small fly in the ointment, and had wound up only helping Diana enjoy herself more. Which was just like Diana Verity: she never did a stroke of work; she just floated through life. It was obnoxious.

'I like to help people out when they are ignorant of the right way to behave,' Diana said.

Susie flushed and picked up her bouquet. Bitch. She hated Diana, from the tips of her satin slippers to the

elegant, perfectly plucked and now almost legendary eyebrows.

‘Hurry up, darling.’ Victoria poked her head around from behind the screen where she was getting changed into her pink Chanel suit. ‘We don’t want to keep the carriage waiting.’

Ernie Foxton sat in his home office and tapped at the computer keys. It was a glorious, sunlit morning outside in Chelsea, and his best man, resplendent in his morning suit, was downstairs telling obscene jokes to the ushers. But Ernie was oblivious to all this. He had the blinds down, and the pristine creases in his trousers could only be seen by the dull light of his computer screen. He was online, checking his stocks. It was a morning ritual which never changed. He saw no reason to change it now just because he was getting married.

AOL was up again. Terrific. He had made over 400 per cent on that baby and had no intention of cashing it in just yet. What else? His US trust had taken a small dive, in line with the Dow, but he wasn’t particularly concerned. Ernie knew money and he knew the Dow only went one way, upwards. That’s if you were prepared to wait a few months for the inevitable ‘corrections’ to right themselves. It was only the pikers, the fools who had blood instead of ice-water running through their veins, who sold when things got a little bearish. Buy and hold and you always make money.

He tapped a few letters on his keyboard. BLKY, the sign for his new publishing firm. Good, it was up one and an eighth, on the news that Grant Valentine had been fired and he’d been appointed to replace him. That was significant enough to impress his new bosses already, before he’d even stepped out of Concorde, or introduced



his fragrant and deliciously decorative little wife. Ah yes. Wife. Better not keep her waiting. He quickly sold some cotton futures he wasn't sure about and bought a few more shares in Blakely's. A celebration.

Things were good, and they were going to stay that way.

Ernie switched off the computer and drew the curtains, allowing daylight to flood into the gloomy burgundy and mahogany tones of the room. A glass of Krug was fizzing pleasantly on the side of his desk, awaiting him. He picked it up and sipped reflectively. Just a little something to relax him before the ceremony. It was a bore, but you had to go through it. Besides, Diana had reassured him that the coverage was going to be fantastic. His parents, both dead now, had been a wide-boy city trader from the East End of London and a cook at Chelsea FC. His father's hard work and financial flair had made enough money for Ernie to be sent to Eton, where he had learned little academically, but enough snobbery to make him violently ashamed of both of them. He'd worked like a demon with an eye only for money and as a result he'd made enough cash to wipe out the embarrassing stain of his parentage. The wedding today would be attended by a wonderful mixture of London society with enough titles for Ascot, and a bride who was undeniably top drawer, even if she had no money. Ernie didn't need money; he needed what Diana could bring him. In New York she'd be a marvellous asset. Just the right touch to complete his profile. He was sure he'd made the right decision.

Ernie shut off his computer and walked down his solid glass spiral staircase to where Gerald, his best man, a colleague he didn't dislike too much, was waiting with the ushers.

‘Ready, old man?’ Gerald asked him. ‘Still enough time to bolt.’

The lads chuckled.

‘That’d be a bit messy.’ Ernie grinned. ‘And we’d miss the booze-up afterwards.’

‘True. Better get the car round.’ Gerald adjusted his buttonhole and went off to summon the chauffeur.

‘You know, Susie’s awfully cut up,’ said Gerald’s cousin Harry. ‘She always thought you were going to be hers.’

‘Plenty of fillies champing at the bit, not just Susie, thanks. Anyway, I’ll be married, I won’t be dead,’ Ernie said, winking. ‘I’ll need some time off for bad behaviour.’

They laughed, and went out to where the car was waiting.

Diana leaned back in her carriage and waved, just like the Queen. People stopped in the streets to cheer, watching a bride in full rig drive past in a horse-drawn carriage, and she basked in the attention. Some of the men stared at the creamy bosom spilling out over the tight bodice of her gown and whistled and catcalled. She thought she liked that most of all. Japanese tourists and the occasional American stopped to take photographs of her, and she tossed her veil back and gave them a dazzling smile – extra-specially whitened with cosmetic dentistry just last week, so she looked like one of those American models.

So what if it was ridiculously extravagant? It was her day to be extravagant. Daddy shouldn’t complain about the cost. Since she’d started dating Ernie he’d stopped going on about settling down and getting a proper job, thank God. She had a job. All right, not one that paid the bills, but Ernie was doing that for her now. Diana

glanced to her right and saw a young woman striding down towards Piccadilly, carrying a briefcase. She was wearing a nice suit – tightly fitted and lemon yellow, which always goes well with chestnut hair. Diana tried to peg the designer. It looked like a Richard Tyler, almost, but you didn't see too much of his stuff in London. LA was his territory. Maybe it was, though. Anyway, what a fool. Look at her, working all the hours God sends for some feeble little salary. She's a good-looking girl, Diana thought. Perhaps not quite as good-looking as me, but then again, who is? She bit on her plump lower lip to stop herself breaking out into an unattractive and unladylike grin. She should hook herself a nice, rich husband, and do things the old-fashioned way. They might be at the start of a new millennium, but the old ways never went out of style.

Her mother had squeezed her hand as she had helped her up into the carriage, lifting the lower folds of her dress, which Diana knew Susie was hoping would trail in the gutter or something.

'You're sure you're doing the right thing, aren't you, darling? I mean, you do love him, don't you?'

'Hush, Ma.' Diana gave her mother a peck on the cheek, very lightly so her lipstick didn't smudge. 'Of course I do. I love him madly, always will.'

She was pleased with that little diplomatic triumph. It was what her mother wanted to hear, and it wasn't *that* much of a lie. Of course she loved Ernie. He was dashing and he dressed beautifully, and he treated her so well. He'd never denied her anything she wanted, and they had a good time together. What more could you ask for? What was that old saying? It was as easy to fall in love with a rich man as a poor man. Diana had just seen to it that she'd fallen in love with the first sort.

Her mother and father did pretty well. Dad was a lawyer and had a nice practice in Lincoln's Inn. He had put three daughters through public school and had a pretty house in Kent. But it wasn't the sort of life Diana wanted; she needed more than the odd skiing holiday and riding lessons, she wanted to shop haute couture and buy herself diamond earrings, and fly first class, and holiday in the Seychelles, or better still, Mustique, on a private island somewhere. And she didn't see why she had to work like a slave to get those things. The good Lord had blessed her with beauty and style, and beauty and style were valuable.

I backed the right horse, Diana told herself, waving and smiling. Traffic slowed to a halt to let her carriage turn into St James's and there was the church up ahead, a beautiful old Anglican pile of eighteenth-century honey-coloured elegance, with a gratifyingly large posse of paparazzi parked right in front. Diana pulled her slim shoulders back and rearranged a few folds of chiffon and antique silk to give the best possible angle for the first shots. The light was going to be perfect, too. Everything was going to be perfect.

She started to sing.

'Going to the cha-pel, and I'm gonna get married . . .'