



ELLIE DARKINS

A Dorset
Wedding
to Remember

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Katie breathed in the sea-salt air as she leaned back into Jude and waited for the sun to rise. The stones of the beach were sharp against the soles of her feet, even through her sandals, but she couldn't bring herself to care. Not when everything about this scene was so fairy tale that she didn't quite trust herself to believe in it. But the arms around her waist were solid and warm, reminding her that this was real.

Pebbles rattled in the ebb and flow of the waves, with just a breath of silence before the water crashed on to the shore, dragging the noise towards them. The deep midnight blue of the sky was starting to lighten in the east, and she knew that it wouldn't be long before the soft fingers of dawn started to appear over the horizon, as the sun rose over the cliffs, through the rock formations, turning the sea into a shimmering haze of gold and silver, striping the sky with pinks and purples and blues. It was just a hint of a shadow, right now, the timeless arch of Durdle Door. A heavy midnight silhouette against the softening navy of the sky, waiting to be revealed.

Warm lips nudged at her and she let her head fall to one side, giving access to the sensitive skin on her neck, breathing out a little sigh of pleasure as Jude trailed butterfly kisses up to her jaw. When he'd said, 'shall we find somewhere quieter,' this wasn't exactly what she'd expected. At nearly four in the morning, the wedding where she'd been bridesmaid and he best man had been starting to wind down, only the hardcore still dancing, or propping up the bar. But the promise in his eyes had been so enticing that she'd not been able to resist it.

If he'd taken her straight back to the hotel, she wouldn't have questioned it. She would have jumped into his bed faster than she thought she could actually move. Then he had asked the taxi driver to stop at the top of the cliff, and she'd realized he had something more

adventurous in mind. She was up for an adventure, no question. But the time between the wedding and his bed was giving room for doubts to creep in.

In the magic of a wedding, where normal rules are suspended and the stranger seated next to you can be your bestie by the time the dancing kicks in, she hadn't questioned Jude's motives. When they'd clicked with instant chemistry at the rehearsal dinner, and she'd felt that spark again today, as they'd watched their friends exchange vows, and then raise the roof celebrating, she had assumed that what she felt was genuine. Now they had left that bubble, were out in the real world, still in her floaty dress and him in a suit, doubts were starting to kick in. She'd seen enough glances in their direction, enough hints about what a bridesmaid and the best man should be getting up to, to suspect that she was something of a cliché.

She hadn't felt like a cliché when they'd spent the wedding breakfast with their heads together, laughing and joking, swapping anecdotes about shared acquaintances, holding eye contact for a moment, and then a moment longer. Small talk had given way to something more personal, as they had talked about their families, their work, their hopes for the future.

Then, later, there had been the dancing, the touching, the figuring out of boundaries, testing the edges of their attraction, how far each was willing to go to reveal what they were feeling. How she was drawn to touch him, like his skin was a magnet that she was incapable of resisting. How the first time his hand had brushed against hers, she had gasped so audibly that she had to cover it with a cough. Could her hands drift here, as they danced, down the length of his upper arm, feeling the strength of the muscles beneath? Could she let her hands lift higher, to rest on his shoulders, to pull him closer and encourage his arms around her waist, her breasts pressed against his chest?

And then, as the marquee had cleared out, they had found themselves almost alone, in a seat not quite big enough for two, in a discreet corner of the bar, surrounded by fairy lights. She hadn't felt like a cliché then, when he leaned in slowly, one hand curving round her

cheek, until his lips were almost touching hers. She'd felt desirable, powerful. He had stopped then, and she'd thought that she might die with the waiting. Her eyes had startled open, to find him watching her, his mouth millimetres from hers, his hand teasing its way into her hair, until his fingers were at the nape of her neck, gentle but insistent.

He'd smiled at her, in that way that made her want to drag him straight into the nearest bed, and she'd taken what she wanted, pressing her lips on his, letting out a sigh at the taste, at the heat of him. He'd taken the kiss deeper, tipping her head back with the hand in her hair, pulling her closer at the waist with his other. When he'd broken away, she'd thought she might die for a second time that night, until he'd asked her to leave with him and she'd never meant the word 'yes' more in her life.

They had tripped down the path from the car park, where the taxi driver had dropped them with a knowing wink, following the torches on their phones and trying not to fall.

And now she was on a deserted beach before dawn, waiting for the sun, waiting for the majestic sweep of Durdle Door to be revealed. Waiting to see what was left of their connection in the new day.

A gentle breeze whipped at the skirt of her bridesmaid dress, the tiny pleats playing around her legs.

'What's wrong?' he breathed in her ear, one arm wrapped tight around her waist, the other skimming down her arm, and pulling her closer, tighter. Warming her with his body.

'It's nothing,' she said, leaning her head back against his shoulder, not quite able to shake the feeling that it was, in fact, something.

His hands and lips stilled, his posture tense. 'Tell me,' he insisted. Then the warmth of his hand landed on her cheek, turning her face to him. She looked back over her shoulder and tried to smile.

'Honestly, it's nothing. It's just ...'

She might as well say it. If she was right, then it was better to know now. ‘It’s just, are we only here because of this?’ She gestured down at her dress. ‘Is this just because I was a bridesmaid? I mean I know everyone jokes about it, but—’

He cut her off with a lingering kiss, his lips barely touching hers. Just enough to have her moving closer, demanding more of him. She broke away, a hint of a smile on her lips, as her confidence in what they shared started to return. ‘We’re here because you’re you,’ he said, hand dropping back to her waist, wrapping her tight, his lips at her ear. ‘We’re here because I haven’t stopped thinking about you for even a second since the moment that I met you. We’re here because when you look at me, I feel like a combination of a twelve-year-old and some ancient hero, all powerful but completely terrified that you’re going to turn me down, and I’m going to have to find a way to win you back. I’m here because you make me laugh,’ he said, smiling at her between kisses. ‘I’m here because I’ve not danced in God knows how many years, but I wanted to tonight, with you. I’m here because I don’t want tonight to end, and if we watch the sun rise, it will be tomorrow already, and we won’t have said goodbye.’

He kissed her again, but something about the light changed, and she broke away to see the very crest of the sun above the cliffs to the east, the tiniest sliver of orange, flaring gold and yellow into the sky and over the sand. As the sun rose higher, the light crept through the eye of Durdle Door, casting a deep shadow of the arch over the water. The ancient rocks, veteran of millions of sunrises and sunsets, towered above them, a silent witness to their words.

‘See,’ Jude said, turning her to face him, threading his hands through her hair, and turning her face up to him for another kiss. ‘It’s tomorrow already, and I’m still here. What do you want to do today?’

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