

Chapter One

Burracombe, June 1954

It really was a rainbow wedding.

Hilary Napier, standing with her father, the village squire, and her brother Stephen at the end of the family pew in the village church, turned her head to watch Stella Simmons proceed up the aisle. She moved slowly, but she was on her feet and walking, as she had been determined to do ever since that day in early January when she had promised Felix Copley that she would, after all, marry him.

The seven bridesmaids followed her, bringing smiles from the congregation. Hilary smiled too, knowing that Stella had really wanted a quiet, simple wedding, with her sister Maddy and perhaps one or two smaller children to follow her. During the planning, though, it had become clear that keeping the number of bridesmaids down was going to be a difficult task; and to prevent an overpowering mass of one single colour they had finally settled on a mixture.

The idea of a rainbow – intended to brighten the January day originally fixed for the wedding – had been Felix’s, and a colour was chosen to suit each bridesmaid. Now, six months later than originally planned, it brought the glowing brightness of June into the church.

Stella, at the head of the procession on Frank Budd’s arm, was transformed into a beacon of clear white light in front of this blaze of colour. In a sheath of oyster satin, fitted closely from neck to waist and swirling out to a rippling circle of rich cream, she appeared even more slender than before the accident that had threatened to rob her of so much, and more than one person wiped a tear from their eye at the sight of her radiant face.

Her bouquet was of simple June flowers – foxgloves, champions and bluebells, frothed with Queen Anne’s Lace and meadowsweet,

all gathered from the hedgerows near the church. The lychgate and church door were also festooned with garlands of the same flowers, so that the simple beauty of the country lanes flowed seamlessly in through the ancient oak door. The church was lit by the sunshine streaming through the plain glass windows, while the bright colours of the bridesmaids' dresses were like patterns cast through stained glass.

Maddy, Stella's younger sister, and their friend Val Ferris came first, Maddy wearing the blue of a spire of delphinium and Val in the glowing red of a rose. They were followed by the two fourteen-year-olds, Maureen Budd and Felix's niece Pearl (known to her family as Button), in yellow and indigo, and Pearl's cousins, five-year-old Julie and Vivienne, in soft green and a violet so pale it was really lilac; and, finally, Janice Ruddicombe, the little girl chosen by her schoolmates from the class Stella taught, looking so much like an exotic flower in her dress of deep burnt orange, with a rosette tucked into her shining dark hair, that the limp caused by her heavy built-up boot passed without notice.

The brilliant cavalcade stopped as Stella reached the head of the aisle and Felix turned towards her. Hilary was close enough to hear him catch his breath and her eyes swam again at the tender delight in his eyes and the answering glow on Stella's face. For a tiny space of time there was no sound in the little church and she wondered, briefly and painfully, whether she would ever share such a moment with the man she loved; then, taking a determined grip on herself, she focused all her thoughts on the couple at the altar steps.

The bells, rung from behind the wrought-iron screen and gates at the west end, had ceased as Stella entered through the south door, and the swelling notes of the organ now faded to a trembling echo of their harmony. Like Hilary, the entire congregation seemed to be holding its breath and the two who were about to be married to be enclosed in the shining iridescence of a bubble.

Even through her own heartache, Hilary could wish them nothing but joy.

Chapter Two

Burracombe, January 1954

It had been a relief to the whole of Burracombe when Stella Simmons, so badly injured in the accident with the Dartmoor ponies on that dark, cold December night, had finally agreed to marry Felix Copley.

‘So the poor little maid’s come to her senses,’ said Stella’s landlady, Dottie Friend, wiping a tear of relief from her eye with the corner of her pinafore when the little group came back from the hospital in Plymouth to give her the good news. ‘Thank the Lord for that.’ She reached up to put her arms around the young vicar standing just inside the door of her little cottage. ‘Oh Felix, my dear, you must have wanted to go down on your knees and give thanks right there in the hospital when she told you.’

‘I did,’ he said feelingly. ‘And while I was there, I proposed to her all over again, just to make sure. I’m not letting her get away this time.’

‘He had witnesses, too,’ Stephen Napier said, laughing. ‘Hilary and Maddy and me – we all saw it. And we heard her say yes, so unless she wants to be sued for breach of promise ...’

‘Mr Stephen!’ Dottie exclaimed in horror. ‘What a thing to say! Sued, indeed. Now, don’t all stand there in the doorway, cluttering the place up. Sit down and have a cup of tea before you go back to the Barton. I dare say that’s where you’re all going, isn’t it?’

‘Not me,’ Felix said, lifting the fat black cat off one of the sagging armchairs and sitting down with it on his lap. ‘I’ll have to be getting back to Little Burracombe, and before that I want to slip into the vicarage to see Basil and Grace and tell them the news. But I’ll have a cup of tea first, please.’

‘I won’t stay,’ Hilary said. ‘I need to go home and see how my father is. I just wanted to come in and tell you first.’

‘Oh, we’ll stay for a bit,’ Maddy said, reluctant to leave their old friend on her own so soon. ‘There’s so much to talk about now. We’ve got a wedding to plan again!’

‘Well, not for a while,’ Felix said. ‘Stella’s got a long road to travel before she can walk up the aisle, I’m afraid. I had a word with the doctor afterwards and he says it’s going to take several months. They’ve got to be sure her broken leg’s healed before they can know for certain if the paralysis really has gone, and then she’ll have to learn to walk again, almost as if she were a baby. I don’t think the wedding can be before June at the earliest.’

‘We can still plan it,’ Maddy said. ‘It will be good for her to think about bridesmaids’ dresses and flowers and things, not to mention her own dress. It’ll give her something to do if she’s got to be in hospital all that time.’

‘As long as we don’t tire her out,’ Felix said, clearly still anxious.

‘Of course we won’t. It will only be short visits, and I’ll have to be at West Lyme most of the time anyway – the Archdeacon has given me quite enough time off. And Stephen’s got to come all the way from the air base at White Cheriton. But we’ll come whenever we can, won’t we, Stephen?’

Stephen nodded and accepted a cup of tea from Dottie. ‘She’ll probably get tired of seeing our faces at the door.’ He glanced at Felix. ‘How are you going to get there every day, Felix? It’s not so easy without a car. I know there are trains and buses, but they take a long time, and you’ve got a parish to look after as well.’

‘I’ve been thinking about that,’ Hilary said, before Felix could answer. ‘I don’t see why we shouldn’t lend him the little Austin. I hardly ever use it now – Travis and I share the Land Rover for estate work – and with Dad not able to drive until Charles Latimer says so, I can always use the Armstrong-Siddeley. It’s quite all right,’ she went on firmly as Felix began to object. ‘Don’t forget, if you hadn’t kindly offered to go to Exeter to fetch Rob from the train, you’d never have had the accident in the first place. It’s the least we can do. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it sooner. Anyway, there’s to be no argument. I’ll arrange the insurance and it’s yours for as long as you need it.’

‘That’s really very kind of you,’ Felix said. ‘Thank you so much. It will make an enormous difference.’

‘And you’re not to use it just for visiting Stella,’ she told him. ‘Use it for your parish work as well. I know some of your parishioners live miles away and if you have to cycle to them it’ll take you all day.’

‘I shall be thoroughly spoilt,’ he protested. ‘I won’t want to give it back at all if I get used to such luxury.’

‘You’d have had a car already if Mirabelle hadn’t been smashed up,’ she pointed out. ‘Anyway, your living is in the Burracombe gift, so it’s for my father to say if you should have a car, and I think I know what he will say. I doubt if we’ll be wanting it back. You won’t want Stella overtaxing herself when she’s your wife.’

Stephen laughed and Hilary gave him a stern glance, while Maddy punched him on the arm. Dottie lifted the teapot and offered to refill their cups, but Hilary shook her head.

‘I’ll be off now. I’ll see you two later,’ she said to Stephen and Maddy. ‘You’re coming for supper, aren’t you? Dad will want to hear all the news.’

Her brother was stretched out in the other armchair, looking as if he’d settled in for the evening, but he nodded and said, ‘We’ll be there. I’ve got to go back to the airfield tonight, but I don’t need to leave until half past eight. I’ll drop Maddy back here then, if that’s all right,’ he said to Dottie. ‘She’s decided to go back to West Lyme on the early train tomorrow, so if she can stay here she can have the rest of the evening with you.’

‘Of course it’s all right. You know I love to have the maid here – both of them.’ Dottie wiped her eyes again. ‘It sounds as though it’ll be long enough before Stella comes walking in through the door again, the dear of her.’

‘But at least we know she will,’ Maddy said comfortingly. ‘When we left here this morning, none of us had any idea – or that she’d have changed her mind about marrying Felix. Now everything’s different again – and for the better.’

Felix stood up and put the cat gently back on its cushion. ‘I feel as though I’ve lived through a hundred years since this morning,’ he said. ‘Almost like the prince breaking through the thorny hedge to find his Sleeping Beauty.’ He paused for a moment, considering, and then said in a tone of surprise, ‘In fact, I think that’s just what *has*

happened. Maybe that's what the old fairy tale is all about – breaking through the thorny hedge of our doubts to be awakened by love. Do you know—'

'I think I feel a sermon coming on!' Stephen broke in with a grin. 'If you go over to Little Burracombe next Sunday, Dottie, you'll hear the whole thing in full. Go on, Vicar – go back and torment your own parishioners! We've got better things to think about. You're not the only man here who's engaged to one of the Simmons sisters, you know.'

Felix laughed. 'So I'm not. But you're right, I should go.' He turned to Hilary. 'I think perhaps I'll leave visiting the Harveys until tomorrow. They're bound to want me to stay to supper and to be honest I just want to go home, have a cheese sandwich and go to bed. I'll beg a lift to the end of your drive, if I may. I can walk down the footpath and across the Clam from there.'

'Indeed you will not,' she said firmly. 'I'll take you round by the main road. And tomorrow you can collect the Austin.' She kissed Maddy. 'I'll see you later. Thank you for the tea, Dottie.'

'And you won't just make yourself a cheese sandwich, either,' Dottie said, equally firmly. 'There's the best part of a cottage pie left in my larder – you can take that back with you and heat it up. You want something hot inside you in this cold weather.' She went to the larder, took out an enamel dish and put it in a basket. 'You can bring the pan back tomorrow.'

Hilary opened the door and went out. Felix kissed Maddy too, shook hands with Stephen and then put his arms around Dottie's plump figure.

'You're such a comfort, Dottie,' he said. 'I don't know what we'd do without you. Now, I'm going to the hospital again tomorrow and I'd like you to come too. You will be able to, won't you?'

'Go on, you don't want me with you,' she said, giving him a push. 'You and Stella will have far too much to talk about.'

'We'll want you as well,' he said firmly. 'Stella will want to see you. Don't forget what Maddy said just now – there's a wedding to plan, and dresses to talk about!'

Hilary took Felix to his vicarage in the village across the river, then drove back. She felt suddenly tired and dispirited. The excitement of

Stella's improvement had buoyed up her spirits, but, now that she was alone, her own troubles came seeping back into her mind like a cold grey mist, and she wondered if things would ever come right for her.

For her and David, she amended, as she turned off the main road into the narrow lane that wound for a mile to Burracombe. The situation was even worse for him. She didn't yet know how serious his wife's condition was – all he'd been able to tell her during the hurried phone call that morning, just before she'd had to leave for the hospital, was that Sybil had had a stroke. It might be a minor one, from which she would recover quite quickly, or it might be serious enough to disable her for the rest of her life. For all Hilary knew as she approached the drive of the Barton, Sybil might even be dead.

The thought struck as cold as ice into her heart. Horrifying though it was to find herself considering it, she could not help knowing that if Sybil died, the way would be left clear for herself and David to marry, without the scandal of a divorce, which, although Sybil herself had demanded it, would involve him in the distasteful process of providing 'evidence'. Evidence that would ruin his career as a doctor and, if – *when* – they married, Hilary's reputation simply through association, as well as, quite possibly, her father's health. Having a daughter married to a divorced man – a disgraced doctor at that – would be a shame he would never be able to tolerate.

And if Sybil didn't die? The speculation slid into her mind as appallingly as the other. I *can't* be wishing her dead, Hilary thought with a sense of self-disgust. Yet she could not help the thoughts crowding in upon her. Suppose Sybil remained helpless for years, as people with strokes often did? Hilary knew that Sybil's lover would be unlikely to marry her or take over her care in those circumstances. She would remain David's wife, and David would never be able to leave her.

The whole situation seemed impossible and, not for the first time, Hilary wished that she had never gone to the reunion where she had met David again, so many years after their first affair during the war. It had been brief and unfulfilled then, since they were both committed to other people, but on this second meeting their feelings had overpowered them and Hilary had found herself unable to hold back. She had cast all her scruples, all her inhibitions and all her upbringing to the winds and flung herself, part joyous and part guilty, into David's waiting arms.

Neither of us was cut out for this, she thought sadly. Neither of us is the type to have affairs, to be unfaithful. It's been worse for David than for me, because he had Sybil, even though she was never faithful to him. What must he be going through now, seeing her suffer and knowing that whatever happens it will be even harder for us both – but especially for him?

Suddenly, she knew that she needed to talk to someone else about this. Val was the only one who knew about David, though she did not yet know about Sybil's stroke, nor about the demands she'd been making for a divorce. Hilary hesitated, then drove past the gates of Burracombe Barton and turned back to the village, pulling up outside Jed's Cottage, where Val and Luke Ferris lived with their baby Christopher.

'Hilary!' Val said, opening the door. 'I've been wondering if you might pop in. How is she?'

Hilary stared at her for a moment before realising that she meant Stella. 'Oh, a lot better,' she said, following Val into the tiny back room and dropping into a chair. 'Well, maybe not a lot, but it's made a great deal of difference.' She told Val about the returning sensation in one of Stella's feet. 'I think he's trying not to show it – he just said it was a good sign – but the doctor's obviously very optimistic, and Felix is over the moon. Mainly because it seems to have brought Stella to her senses and she says she'll marry him after all.'

'Oh, that *is* good news!' Val exclaimed. 'So why are you looking as if you've lost a shilling and found sixpence?'

'I'm not, am I? Well, perhaps I am feeling a bit like that,' Hilary admitted. Then, quite without warning, her features crumpled and she covered her face with her hands. 'Oh *Val* ...'

'Hilary!' Val dropped to her knees beside her friend and put her arms around her. 'Whatever is it? Do you think there's something the doctor's not telling you? D'you think Stella knows it's worse and is just being brave? What—'

'No – no, it's nothing like that. It's not Stella at all.' Hilary lifted her face from her hands and felt in her pocket for a hanky. She blew her nose, wiped her eyes and said shakily, 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to break down like that. But there's nobody else I can talk to. It's – it's ...' Her face crumpled again and she shook her head speechlessly.

'It's David, isn't it?' Val said quietly, taking hold of her hands. 'What's happened to him, Hil?'

‘Nothing’s happened – to him. But Sybil . . . Val, she’s had a stroke!’

‘A *stroke*? Oh my Lord.’ Val sat back on her heels. ‘How bad is it?’

‘I don’t know. I’ll have to try to phone him tonight. I only found out just as we were leaving for the hospital, and that was all he had time to tell me.’ Hilary shook her head again. ‘I didn’t even have time to think about it until I’d taken Felix back to the vicarage. It hit me on the way. I just had to come and talk to you. There’s no one else . . .’ Her voice trembled. ‘I don’t know what’s going to happen now. He won’t be able to go through with the divorce, anyway.’

‘The divorce? What divorce?’

‘Sybil wanted it,’ Hilary said wearily. ‘She’d found someone else – she’s had a lot of lovers over the years, but this one wanted to marry her. But she didn’t want to be the guilty party, of course, so David was going to have to do it.’

‘And involve you?’ Val stared at her, shocked. ‘Hilary, that’s awful!’

‘No, he wouldn’t involve me. He knew what it would mean. I’d have done it, mind,’ she added fiercely. ‘I wouldn’t have cared about myself. But there’s Dad to think about. The scandal of it all – it would be in the newspapers, all his friends would know, the whole village would know. It could kill him. I couldn’t do that, even if David had let me. And I wouldn’t let him do it the other way – a hotel room with some woman, and a maid giving fabricated evidence. It’s so *sleazy*, Val.’

‘So what . . .?’

‘We didn’t know,’ Hilary said wryly. ‘We were still talking about it. But something was going to have to be done, because Sybil had found out about us. Or suspected, anyway, and that’s the same thing, because David wouldn’t lie about it. And now . . .’ She shrugged. ‘Now, I just don’t know. I don’t even know if she’s still alive. If she is, David will have to look after her. He won’t have any choice.’

‘But what about the other man?’

Hilary lifted one shoulder again. ‘I don’t suppose they’ll see him for dust. Who would want to take on an invalid? Anyway, David’s her husband. He’s responsible for her, and he won’t duck that. He’s not that sort of man.’

‘No,’ Val said thoughtfully. ‘No, he’s not. Oh Hilary, what an awful mess.’

‘It always was,’ Hilary said drearily. ‘Right from the start – when

I first saw him at the reunion. When we first met, all those years ago in Egypt. It was always a mess – and yet it always seemed so right for us to be together. But nobody else will understand that. I don't understand it myself, Val.'

'I know,' Val said, thinking of the difficult start her own relationship with Luke had had. 'Oh dear, Hilary, I wish I could say it'll all turn out right in the end, but I can't. I just can't see what's going to happen.'

'At least that's honest,' Hilary said. 'I'd rather that than have you say you're sure it will be all right, when you can't possibly know.' She drew in a deep breath. 'I ought to go home. Maddy and Steve will be in soon for supper, and Dad will be wondering where on earth I've got to.'

'There's someone with him, is there? Mrs Ellis?'

'Yes, but she'll be wanting to get home. I can't keep on taking advantage of her – she's not a nurse, after all.' Hilary rose to her feet. 'Oh, why does everything happen at once?'

'I don't know, but it always does.' Val gave her friend another hug. 'Don't let it get you down, Hilary. Ring David as soon as you can and find out what the situation is, and come down and let me know when you get a chance. I'll be thinking of you. Remember, I'm always here – or not far away, anyway.'

'I know.' Hilary gave her a grateful smile. 'I don't know what I'd do without you to turn to.'

'You've got more friends than you realise,' Val told her. 'But I know what you mean – there are some things you don't want to tell all and sundry. Anyway, you go home now and try not to worry too much. It's not going to make any difference to what happens to Sybil.'

Hilary nodded and went to the door. Outside, it was growing dark and she shivered and drew her coat more tightly around her. The early stars were obscured by flying rags of clouds and, as she glanced up at them, a thin, spiteful wind seemed to strike to her very bones. She wished she had worn a thicker coat, then wondered if it would have done any good anyway. It was as if there were no coat thick enough to keep this kind of cold from her heart.

It's like a portent, she thought. An omen of worse to come.