

# An Extract from *The Summer Wedding*

*By Fiona Walker*

Undressing her lover with the aid of a pair of pliers and a can of WD-40 was becoming familiar practice to Iris. His grand guard was warped from lance strikes and his bevor battered from falls; the buckles on his cuirass straps had rusted and his pauldrons were so bent from multiple blows to the arms and shoulders that they resembled car bumpers in a demolition derby. Removing his chain-mail standard over his head was like lifting a shoal of heavy metal fish.

*I've got myself a real-life knight in shining armour!* Iris

announced to all her friends via text the day that she accepted Dougie Everett's marriage proposal.

Removing a suit of armour from a stunt man took a straight face as well as engineering prowess. There was always a moment when Dougie was stripped to his doublet and hose that Iris fought uncontrollable giggles, especially if he was still wearing the quilted bonnet tied under his chin like an Australian surf guard's patrol cap. The doublet was part straitjacket, part bad eighties pop video, and the hose were covered with buckles like a punk's drainpipe bondage trousers. But any laughter died when they were unlaced and she drew aside the linen shirt to reveal a tanned, muscular torso covered with bruises as blue as his eyes. He was her hero, an old-fashioned caballero of seduction. The two men – boys, really – that she had slept with before him bore no comparison, their couplings sweating and nervous occasions of self-discovery. Dougie was a maestro, as sexually bold as a young medieval king with his mistress. And removing armour certainly beat loosening a tie or unzipping a hoodie. What followed was unbridled pleasure.

In the weeks they'd been together, Iris had found herself on whole new learning and pleasure curves, as well as spread-eagled on

beds, sofas, tables and hay bales as Dougie manoeuvred her around hotel rooms and horseboxes as boldly and skilfully as he rode, until she was supple, obedient and joyful to his touch. Making love with him was intense, vivid and devoted. Dougie may have ridden a lot of horses – and women – but when he found a good one he kept them for life, and while the news of his engagement broke many hearts, he had no intention of breaking his marriage vows.

The announcement that Iris Devonshire was marrying playboy Dougie Everett received a mixed reaction. It was a provocative match, and some even called it a cynical publicity stunt – the daughter of a well-known actor getting engaged at just nineteen to a notorious hell-raiser amid a flurry of tabloid interest. On the surface, her beau was many young women's fantasy figure, a dashing stunt rider with the face of a laughing cavalier, renowned for his charm and daring.

One didn't have to scratch the surface of his armour very deeply, however, to see the base metal beneath the silver plate. Well known as a blue-blooded bruiser, Dougie Everett was a society playboy, bred in the purple from old establishment stock and now living in the pink. At twenty-eight, his colourful past was well documented. Kinder souls blamed Dougie's waywardness on his father's public disgrace at a time when he was most vulnerable: he was the son of the outspoken Tory peer and former cabinet minister Vaughan Everett, once Thatcher's young golden boy, exposed in the noughties as a serial philanderer who had accepted more cash for questions than a quiz-show host.

Fed up with loyally appearing at the gate for photo shoots holding her disgraced husband's hand, Dougie's mother had eventually run off with her fitness trainer, after which the teenage Dougie had gone increasingly off the rails, always in trouble at boarding school, bombing most of his exams, and later being thrown out of Officer Training Corps in a notorious drugs scandal. The would-be cav-

alry officer then played fast and loose with London's social set before unexpectedly settling upon his forte as a daredevil horse-man, re-enacting jousting tournaments at stately homes, showing off courtly skills at county fairs and standing in for actors in film and television. He now ran his own team of horses from a rented yard in Buckinghamshire.

It was when he'd got a job working on the fourth of the hugely successful Ptolemy Finch fantasy-adventure movies that he'd met Iris, daughter of legendary heartthrob Leo Devonshire, who'd followed in her famous father's screen-acting footsteps at a young age to play the role of Purple, sidekick to boy-hero Ptolemy. While her co-star, Con O'Mara, needed Dougie to double in all the horse-riding scenes, Iris was an accomplished rider who did her own stunt work. She had soon developed a fierce crush on charming, fearless Dougie, and riding off into the sunset together now was a dream come true.

Despite the cynical rumours that he was only marrying her to further his acting ambitions, Iris loved Dougie deeply. He was her battle-worn soldier, misunderstood and maligned but as brave and loyal as Sir Galahad. His affection-starved upbringing made it hard for him to demonstrate his emotions, but when he did – particularly when they were making love – his vulnerability could move her to tears. He also made her cry with laughter on a daily basis.

When news of the forthcoming nuptials broke, Iris's mother Mia was publicly as sanguine as ever, but privately far less reticent, alternating between hysteria, fury and desperation that her daughter was about to 'throw away' her life. Renowned for her charity work and her great beauty, Mia had lived vicariously through both husband and daughter, supporting them unswervingly through every high and low. That one now lived an entirely separate life in LA and the other wanted to abandon her ambitions so young devastated her.

But it was as though a rainbow had burst through the clouds above Iris's rainy life. She had become increasingly studious in recent years, to the degree that, until she met Dougie, she had been poised to turn her back on her early acting success and return to full-time education, longing to lead a normal life away from the media glare.

Accustomed to press interest throughout childhood because of her father's fame, she could never have anticipated the degree to which her entire life would become public property when she was cast as Purple. She had spent most of her teens synonymous with a pointy-eared, half-alien temptress. As each film was made, Ptolemy's loyal sidekick's costumes had got smaller and tighter in inverse proportion to the actress who played her growing up. By the fourth, Ptolemy Finch and the Emerald Falcon, she'd been reduced to wearing little more than a sculpted bikini in most scenes, including the fight sequences and the dramatic horse charge. That was when she'd first encountered Dougie and fallen for the handsome, laughing daredevil straight away. Her crush had raged unreciprocated until the London première, when he had presented Iris with a huge emerald pendant in front of the crowds in Leicester Square and kissed her in the most romantic of brave-hearted, audacious gestures. Their love affair had taken off like a rocket.

Just three months later, Iris was sporting a huge ruby on her ring finger. She no longer intended to take up her place at Durham University away from the press spotlight. She was going to ride all over the world with Dougie, and the spotlight could do what the hell it liked as long as it didn't frighten the horses.

Her refusal to sign her contract for the sixth and final Ptolemy movie had caused huge consternation among the producers and film-goers. With the fifth now in the can and a release date set for the following year, pre-production of Ptolemy Finch and the Raven's Curse had ground to a halt. The surrounding publicity pointed the

blame firmly at Dougie's dusty riding boots, although Iris had decided to resign as the world's favourite pointy-eared eye candy months before she'd met him. Dougie had tried to persuade her to finish the series, but public opinion had already cast him as a baddie, stealing England's finest young jewel, and there had even been a death threat against Purple's real-life fiancé.

Iris's close friends knew how unhappy she had been in recent years and how demoralising she found playing Purple and the celebrity that came with the role. Although often reported as nervy and neurotic, she possessed an impulsive optimism that made her hard to derail once she'd set upon a course. She was also fiercely stubborn. Nobody dared suggest that what she was doing was wrong. Nor could they deny how charming and good-looking Dougie was, or how madly in love the couple seemed, and his social circle brought huge fun to parties and outings. The ad hoc engagement bash, staged at a sprawling Cotswolds manor belonging to one of Dougie's relatives, had gone on for three days.

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Of all Iris's friends, Chloe Benson had known her the longest. Growing up just a few fields apart, on the leafy slopes where the banks of the Thames swept up towards the Chiltern Hills, the girls had met through a mutual passion for ponies and remained close, united by a love of all things four-legged and a hatred of public scrutiny. Both had famous fathers and had grown up familiar with bullying and false friendship.

Chloe was one of the very few who knew just how strongly Iris shared her father's distaste for fame. At fourteen, Iris had confessed that finding out she'd won the role of Purple was the worst day of her life. When, four years later, she'd excitedly announced that she had a place at Durham to read English, Chloe had been thrilled for

her. The girls had last seen each other very briefly at Christmas because Chloe had been working towards her degree in veterinary science at a farm placement over most of the holiday, and Iris had talked of nothing but her delight at the prospect of student life.

They'd excitedly pinned down their long-standing plan to travel together to a five-week slot the following summer. The girls had already plotted a route along the Mediterranean coast, much of it on horseback.

Down-to-earth pragmatist Chloe did not make friends easily. Straight-talking and stubbornly antisocial, she was always buried in a book or playing with a computer when she wasn't tending something four-legged; she would quite happily pass several days without speaking to a soul. Her self-possession had never fazed Iris, whose own mother also far preferred animals to humans and who adored Chloe for her fierce independence, her kindness, and the fact that she found celebrity a totally false god.

Chloe's father was comedy legend Oscar Benson, which inevitably led to the assumption that she should be wildly funny, which she wasn't, although she shared his rubbery face, expressive eyes and solid frame. She also shared his hair, the trademark bedsprings halo that made him unmistakable and her deeply self-conscious. Growing up as Oscar's daughter meant she knew how contrary public and private faces could be, the hapless, cuddly funnyman that the public loved at odds with the cold, money-obsessed businessman he was at home.

His two marriages had been cool-headed investments. Chloe's mother had been heiress to a Brighton entertainment magnate, who had helped launch Oscar's early stand-up career; she'd later invested a great deal of her inheritance in her husband's film-industry interests. Although he had found fame as a stand-up comic in the nineties, Oscar was better known as a film-industry insider now, but he'd never stopped craving the celebrity that had slipped

away from him and looking for ways to buy it back. Growing up, Chloe had been acutely embarrassed that her father would often bellow, 'Do you know who I am?' to bemused strangers.

Thanks to his second marriage, however, it was a phrase Oscar no longer needed to use. Laney had come with no personal wealth or notoriety, but he'd spotted her talent as a screenwriter, and recognised that the cheapest way to invest was to marry her, a move that had recently netted him the biggest box-office comedy hit of the decade and rejuvenated his performing career. Currently based in LA, where he had a sequel in development, Oscar was lapping up his new-found cachet as the British Eddie Murphy.

By contrast, Iris's father Leo seemed to have fallen upon fame as nobly as a knight upon his sword. Having made his name in feel-good romances, he was now playing the title role in the long-running US network television series Chancellor. An ever-popular chat-show guest, renowned for his anecdotes and self-deprecating wit, Leo had often been quoted as saying he'd never intended to be an actor, having always dreamed of a career as a costume designer, just as his daughter secretly longed to be an academic – or so Chloe had thought until Iris announced that she was getting married instead.

Chloe was sitting an anatomy paper when Iris's text came through. Emerging from the exam, she read the message in a daze, the last of her Pro-Plus-and-energy-drink cocktail fading away and rendering her too blunt with tiredness to absorb her friend's news. She messaged back a promise to call soon.

Her first year as an undergraduate in Nottingham had been so intense that she'd spared little thought for Iris in recent weeks, although she had seen Ptolemy Finch and the Emerald Falcon and sent her a text saying how much she'd enjoyed it, especially her incredibly brave riding. Despite their long-standing closeness, the two girls had few friends in common, their trips home to Oxford -

shire rarely coinciding in the past year. Chloe never read red-tops or gossip magazines, and while she loved Twitter and Facebook with near-geeky compulsion, she was no dedicated follower of trends, preferring quirky science, oddball comedians and her small circle of acquaintances to celebrity scandal. In a recent phone call, her mother had passed on the news that Iris had a bit of a romance going on, but Chloe was too frantic juggling course modules to take it in.

It was only when Iris messaged her again that evening, asking her to be a bridesmaid for a summer solstice wedding, that Chloe took in the scale of what was happening: this engagement was going all the way up the aisle at breakneck speed.

Her first reaction was to feel aggrieved. She'd worked hard all year, missing out on Christmas and Easter holidays to fulfil placements with dairy cattle and then sheep. She sent a curt reply: she wasn't sure she'd be available now that her summer travel plans needed rearranging. She then agreed her third student placement to follow straight on from the end of the summer term, knowing the date coincided with the ceremony.

Warm-hearted as ever, Iris wrote a long apologetic email straight away, explaining how much she loved Dougie and begging Chloe to reconsider. *You are my oldest friend. To not have you at my wedding would be like missing a limb. I know we'd planned our travels together around then, darling Chlo, but we WILL do that another time, I promise. Please say you'll be there. XXX*

Chloe replied: *Am doing animal husbandry EMS in poultry farm throughout.* Self-justification still burned at her core, filling her nostrils with an unpleasant smell that had a tang of jealousy.

Iris was immediately on the case: *Of course your studies are the priority; I admire you so much for it. You are amazing to be so dedicated. And if I can't claim you as a bridesmaid, I would really like a hen night. You can't possibly refuse to be a part of that. We'll choose the date to suit you. Animal*



*husbandry and feathers galore...XXX*

Grudgingly, Chloe let herself be talked into it: Iris needed her old friends on side right now – a moment's Googling showed that her parents' disapproval had gone viral.

Iris had inherited her mother's desire to spread happiness and good will, and in particular to her father. 'Please be happy for me,' she implored when they finally spoke on the phone after a week's terse exchange of text messages. 'I absolutely adore him.'

'Adore him, yes,' Leo said, his soft voice crackling on a bad line.

'Just don't marry him. You're way too young.'

'You and Mum were the same age as me when you married.'

'That was a lifetime ago.'

'My lifetime, not yours,' she breathed unhappily. 'Please be here to give me away.'

'Darling, you know that's impossible. I'm working all the—'

'You're just too bloody frightened of giving yourself away, you mean!' She rang off.

In floods of tears, she rode her little Italian scooter incredibly badly on the ten miles of dual carriageway between home and Dougie's stable yard, where she drew comfort from the familiar smells as she leaned across a wooden rail to watch him ride. Completely focused upon his task, Dougie was repeatedly galloping a hot-headed Friesian stallion up to a circular disc attached to a wooden T and spearing it squarely with the weighted lance beneath his arm.

He reined left and rode up to her as soon as he saw her, navy eyes squinting against a lowering sun that dyed his blond hair the colour of ripe papaya. 'What did he say?'

'He's not even bothering to come over from the States.'

'Oh, poor darling!' Spearing the lance tip into the grass alongside, he leapt from the big black horse and threw the reins over its handle before gathering her into his arms. 'I'm sure we can talk him round. He hasn't even met me yet.'

‘Forget it. I know him. He has no intention of changing his mind. He’ll plead filming commitments, but that’s bullshit. If he has enough time to talk to Mum on Skype for hours on end, he has enough time to pop home and give his daughter away. They were talking most of last night.’

‘At least they’ve agreed we can host the wedding at Wootton. That’s huge progress.’

Wootton was the Devonshire family’s riverside home just outside Morley-on-Thames, a white-tiered Palladian confection perfect for a fairy-tale wedding.

‘It’s only so they can control it all,’ she complained. ‘I haven’t told you about the conditions.’

His arms tightened around her. ‘What conditions?’

‘Must be unplugged – no cameras, phones or tablets. Absolutely no press interviews or photo shoots before, during or after. No rock bands or fireworks. No stunts. Guest list capped at a hundred.’

‘No press. Christ!’

‘The only condition I agree with,’ Iris pointed out. ‘But the guest-list cap is ridiculous – so many friends will miss out.’

‘They’re trying to control you, Riz darling.’ Smelling of mints, aftershave and hot horse, he drew her into a long, breathless kiss.

‘We’re in charge now, remember?’ he said when they finally came up for air. ‘The future Mr and Mrs Everett. I do the cherishing, and you love, honour and obey. It’ll be a very traditional marriage, not like your parents.’

‘I just want them to be happy for me.’

They kissed even longer this time before he pulled away. ‘This is going to be our special day. Let me speak with your father.’

‘You’ll never get hold of him,’ she predicted gloomily.

‘I’ll fly to LA. If you tell him I’m on my way, he can hardly refuse to see me.’

‘You’d do that?’

His deep blue eyes glittered into hers from beneath their long, sooty lashes. 'As soon as he meets me, he'll see what's best for his daughter. I'll have him eating out of my hand as well as offering to give away yours, Riz.' He cupped her face in his hands. 'Even if he really can't get off set, he can give us his blessing.'

'I'll come with you!' Her face lit up.

He shook his head. 'Turn your back and your mother will erect a medieval obstacle course of rolling boulders and boiling oil to make me run the gauntlet along the aisle. We need you here to make sure the wedding goes ahead the way we want it.'

She giggled. 'We're keeping the ceremony really simple, though, aren't we?'

Unhooking the reins from the lance, he swung easily back into the saddle and reached down to help her up in front of him.

'Just you, me and the horizon, Riz baby.' He kicked the stallion's sides so that he sprang straight into full tilt and charged across the turf.