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Opening extract from

The Castle

Written by

Sophia Bennett

Published by

Chicken House

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From the Chicken House

I often have dreams about stowing away – or hiding in secret places in boats, castles or dark tunnels. But I would never have the real-life courage to follow Sophia Bennett's awesome heroine into this nail-biting thriller, as she squeezes herself in and out of the tightest spots to find out the truth about her family.

I think the best adventures are funny and clever too – and maybe a bit romantic. This is one of the very best adventures!

Barry Cunningham
Publisher

Sophia Bennett

THE CASTLE

Chicken House

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To my father, Ray

Prologue

Today, while nobody was watching, the prisoner gave me a special message for the girl. I must repeat it exactly, so I will say it many times in my head so I do not forget.

He did not tell me what they will do if they find her. He did not need to – I already know.

ONE

What is wrong with this picture?

It's Saturday afternoon. We're in the small, ancient church of St Thomas the Martyr in Winchelsea, where my granny does the flowers, and where I was christened fourteen years ago.

I'm in a satin dress. An old-fashioned bridesmaid's dress with a sash. It's apricot satin, apparently. Or peach. Some soft fruit or other. And it comes down to my ankles. Oh, and did I mention the sash? There are no words.

Sitting to my right are three tall blonde girls, also dressed à la fruit. Somehow, they look gorgeous. They're trying to pretend I'm not here. At the top of the aisle, my mother is

standing next to the blonde girls' father, who is Rupert, Mum's boyfriend. Fiancé. About-to-be-husband. She's looking lovingly into his eyes.

The vicar is saying, 'If anyone present knows a reason why these persons may not lawfully marry, they must declare it now.'

And about half the congregation are casting sideways glances in my direction. Because they know that I, for one, can think of one teeny little reason why these persons may not lawfully marry: my mother still happens to be married to my father. Which means she could end up in jail one day, when Dad comes home.

And THAT is what is wrong with this picture. Although the peach satin comes a close second.

But I promised I'd be good today. So I look up at the beautiful stained-glass window of a knight rising to heaven, which I know so well from endless Christmases and Sunday mornings spent in this place, and I keep my peace. If you can call it peace. Personally, that's not how I'd describe it.

Once the 'declare it now' moment has passed, a sigh of relief goes round the congregation: *The loopy daughter didn't mess it up for her mother.* The vicar smiles and carries on with the ceremony. Mum and Rupert are holding hands now. Eugh.

The tall boy on my right slips his hand reassuringly around mine. He knows how hard this is for me, and how brave I'm being. I think it's brave, anyway. Maybe I'm just being stupid to go along with it all. This wedding is probably illegal (look up 'bigamy' in the dictionary: bad thing), but it's what Mum wants.

The boy is Luke McCrae and he's my best friend from

Dad's old army days. He looks pretty good in his dark suit, with his hair gently curling over his collar. He squeezes my hand gently, three times, while I hold my breath and say nothing. I'm counting up to a hundred in sevens in my head, to take my mind off things.

'Good girl,' he whispers, lifting his left arm out of its crutch to ruffle my hair.

Yes. Today I'm being a good girl. Mum thinks of herself as a recently bereaved widow, and that's tough. Rupert has indeed been very supportive – rushing over to be by her side the moment we got the news about the so-called bomb that supposedly killed my father in Baghdad. Rupert's broody and good looking, like a Brontë hero, and it isn't exactly Mum's fault that she let her hormones run away with her. We studied it in biology, but she just got antsy when I tried to explain it to her. She thinks this is true love. She wants a nice, romantic wedding and a honeymoon in the Caribbean. I want a quiet life.

'And do you, Isabelle Maria Henrietta, take this man, Rupert Simon . . .'

The hush of the congregation is suddenly shattered by very loud music. I recognise it straight away: Roxanne Wills singing 'Walk Away' – her club hit from a couple of years ago. It's coming from one of the front rows. The vicar looks up. We all glance round.

Walk away, uh huh, don't look back

Walk away down a different track

We look up and down. The eight-year-old on the opposite aisle wiggles her hips to the music. From the front row, my grandmother's furious stare could cut the wedding cake all by itself.

Walk away, uh huh, he's no good

Walk away like you know you should

It wails on and on and nobody stops it. The horrible truth sinks in. A certain bridesmaid realises that her phone is going off in her bag. When she looks down, she can actually see the bag vibrating at her feet. She simply can't be seen to lean forward and pick it up at this crucial moment, and so admit she was the one who chose this ringtone. The best she can do is to manoeuvre her peach satin scarf on top of it with her shoe, while trying to maintain a look of innocent bemusement like everyone else.

Eventually the vibrating stops and Roxanne Wills goes silent. Unlike Luke McRae, who is sobbing by my side. No, wait – his shoulders are heaving, but that noise is actually suppressed giggles. Go Luke. Way to be a friend.

'I can't believe you did that!' he mouths at me, while the vicar quickly recovers and gets on with the vows.

'I didn't! I didn't do anything!'

That's the whole problem, not that anyone will ever believe me. I was so busy stressing about Mum and the wedding and the dress (mine, not hers – Mum adores hers), and not saying anything and being good, that I didn't even think about turning my phone off. Besides, who would be calling me right now? Half my family are here; Dad's parents died years ago; and all my school friends know I'm busy at my mother's wedding, and so now is not a good time, actually.

As soon as the vows are over, Mum whips round and gives me a look that makes Granny's cake-knife stare seem positively friendly. I put on my *sorry, big-time accident, sorry* face. Honestly! I'm trying *so hard* today. Surely I deserve just a bit of credit?

Finally, the organ strikes up something old and loud while

Mum and Rupert head off towards the ancient tombs at the side of the church for the signing of the register. The congregation starts up a steady hum of its own, chatting about how lovely Mum looks in her vintage lace, and how well she's bearing up after . . . well . . . *you know* . . . And wasn't it horrific when that phone went off? Talking of which, Luke leans across and surreptitiously pulls it out of my bag.

'D'you want me to check it for you?'

'No. *So* no. It's probably just someone trying to sell me insurance. Just turn it off. Please.'

He presses the button and holds it down. Just for a moment, I wonder if the call was from Dad. It's a hope I'm learning to crush, but every time something unusual happens I can't help wondering if it was Dad-related. I keep asking myself where he really is. Will he suddenly show up on our doorstep one day? Or randomly call me on a Saturday afternoon during Mum's wedding . . .?

No. He wouldn't do that – of course he wouldn't. But somebody did, and the timing was *weird*. It has to be a wind-up. I check around the church. Has somebody here called me deliberately to make Roxanne go off at precisely that moment?

The gorgeous blondes are chatting among themselves and paying me no attention (as usual). I don't think it was them. And I honestly can't imagine people like my great-uncle Alastair and my second cousin Emily hate me that much. Or know my ringtone. Or even my number. I can only assume it was a random joke.

Ha ha. *So* funny. Really loving my life right now.