



## The Wedding Bargain (The Master Vintners)

By Yvonne Lindsay

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

New Zealand born, to Dutch immigrant parents, Yvonne Lindsay became an avid romance reader at the age of 13. Now, married to her 'blind date' and with two children, she remains a firm believer in the power of romance. Yvonne feels privileged to bring to her readers the stories of her heart. In her spare time, when not writing, she can be found reading a book, reliving the power of love in all walks of life. She can be contacted via her website [www.yvonnelindsay.com](http://www.yvonnelindsay.com)

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"We are gathered here today..."

The priest's perfectly modulated voice filled the cathedral as sunlight filtered through the stained-glass windows, bathing the hallowed space with jeweled tones. The heady scent of the gardenias in Shanal's bridal bouquet, imported specifically at Burton's request, wafted up to fill her senses—and left her feeling slightly suffocated.

...to join together Burton and Shanal in matrimony..."

Was this what she really wanted above all things? She looked across to her groom. Burton Rogers, so handsome, so intelligent, so successful. So rich. He was a good guy, no, a *great* guy. And she liked him, she really did.

*Like.* Such an insipid expression, really.

"...which is an honorable and solemn estate and therefore is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently and soberly."

Words she'd spoken to her best friend, Ethan Masters, only a year ago, echoed in her mind. *You have the chance to have the kind of forever love that many people can only dream of. I envy you that because that's the kind of love I want from the man I marry, if I ever marry. And you can be certain I'm not prepared to settle for less than that, ever.*

They'd been brave words, spoken before her world had begun to crumble around her. Before she'd chosen to sacrifice the chance to find true love. Before she'd latched onto the opportunity to give her parents a secure retirement after their lives had been torn apart.

Was Burton her forever love? No. Was she settling for less? Most definitely.

Everyone in the lab at the viticulture research center had said it had been a lucky day for her when she'd caught Burton's attention. They'd teased her about finding love in their clinical environment and she guessed, on the face of things, they had a point. As her boss, Burton had a reputation for expecting excellence in everything around him. Clearly, she had fallen within that category. And on the face of it, she'd agreed about how fortunate she was—faking joy amongst her colleagues when he'd proposed marriage and offered to solve her problems. She'd convinced everyone around her until she'd nearly believed herself that her engagement had made her the luckiest woman in the world.

Everyone gathered here in the cathedral believed this to be the happiest day of her life. Everyone except the one person who'd tried to talk her out of it. She flicked a glance sideways, but she couldn't spot Raif Masters, Ethan's cousin, in the crowd of two hundred guests jammed into the pews. She knew he was here, though. From the moment she'd walked down the aisle, accompanied by both her parents—her father in his wheelchair, on a rare appearance in public—she'd felt the simmering awareness that she felt only in Raif's presence.

"Into this estate these two persons present come now to be joined."

A buzzing sound began to build in Shanal's ears and her chest grew tight. A tremor in her hands made the heavy bouquet quiver—releasing another burst of cloying scent.

"If anyone here has just cause why Burton and Shanal may not be lawfully joined together, let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

Silence stretched out in the cathedral—silence filled with the ever increasing buzz in her ears and the erratic pounding of her heart.

Forever.

It was a very long time.

She thought for a brief second of her parents. Of how her father had always loved and provided for her mother. Of how her mother had always stood rock solid by her man, even now with all the uncertainty their future promised. Would Burton ever be that rock for her? Could he be? The priest's words echoed through her mind. *...just cause...not be lawfully joined together...speak now...*

"I do," Shanal said, her voice shaking, unsure.

Burton inclined his perfectly coiffed head, a puzzled twist to his lips. "Darling? That's not your line, not yet, anyway."

She dropped her bouquet, unheeding now of the scent of the flowers as they fell heavily on the carpeted altar, and worked her three-carat, princess-cut diamond engagement ring from her finger. A princess for his princess, Burton had said when he'd slid it on her hand—its fit perfect, of course.

Shanal thrust the ring toward him. "I can't do this, Burton. I'm so sorry," she choked out.

It was the first time she'd ever seen her erudite fiancé at a loss for words. With the perfect manners that were so much a part of him, he automatically accepted his ring back from her. The moment his fingers curled around the symbol of their future together, Shanal turned away from the priest in his raiment, her groom in his hand-finished tuxedo, and gathered her voluminous skirts in her hands.

"I'm sorry," she whispered in the direction of her parents, who sat in the front pew, their faces masks of shock, dismay and concern.

Then she ran.

Raif Masters had listened to the priest intoning the ceremony—a ceremony he was attending only as a favor

to Ethan, who was away on his own honeymoon. Shanal Peat and Ethan had been friends for so long that it was almost as if she was part of the Masters family. It was only right that someone from the family be there for her today. He just wished it wasn't him. If Raif had had his way he'd have been anywhere but here. The idea of watching his cousin's best friend marrying Raif's nemesis was only slightly more appealing than spending the day passing a kidney stone.

He was already plotting his escape from the festivities at the earliest opportunity when he heard the objection request. He had, in fact, briefly considered standing up himself, because he did object to this wedding—on more than one level. But Shanal had made it perfectly clear a couple months ago that it wasn't his place to say anything. She hadn't wanted to hear it when he'd tried to explain to her that Burton Rogers was not the kind of man she should be tying herself to—literally or figuratively. Not for five minutes, let alone the rest of her life. But she had blinders on as far as Rogers was concerned, which, no doubt, was exactly as the other man liked it.

When Ethan had asked him to attend the wedding in his stead, Raif had objected quite emphatically, pointing out that he had no desire to see Rogers stand up to marry Shanal. In fact, he had no desire to see the other man, period. Even before the messiest parts of their history there had always been something about Burton that made Raif want to plant a fist in his arrogant face.

Ethan had brushed over his objections, reminding him that with all that was going on at The Masters, their family's resort and winery, he was the only one who could get away for the ceremony. Even so, it made Raif sick to his gut to see her willingly link herself to a man who lived by a single-minded agenda—doing whatever it took to make his life perfect, no matter who got hurt along the way. In Raif's experience, Burton was careless with others and only out for what he could get. He was the man Raif still held responsible for the death of his ex-girlfriend, Laurel Hollis, no matter what the coroner's findings had delivered.

Rogers had managed to walk away from the canyon-eering accident without an ounce of blame, but while Raif hadn't been witness to it he had always believed there was more to the incident than had been disclosed. And he hadn't given up on finding out the truth one day, either. But for now, he had to sit and watch the woman he'd desired ever since he was a schoolboy with a crush that had lasted for longer than he cared to admit, marry a man he neither liked nor trusted.

Younger than her by three years, Raif had always found his relationship with Shanal awkward, right from when they'd first met fifteen years ago. Once she'd embarrassingly shattered his more intimate aspirations toward her—and in front of his entire family into the bargain—their interactions had been peppered with veiled barbs and verbal sparring when they'd crossed paths. But his attraction toward her had never dimmed, in spite of it all. And while they had never been close, he did truly care about her and wanted her to be happy.

He'd borne all that in mind when he'd gone to see her when the engagement was announced. Raif didn't believe that Burton Rogers was capable of making any woman lastingly happy, and had wanted to warn Shanal. He should have known better. Once she'd overcome her surprise at his visit, she hadn't hesitated to tell him he was wasting his time when he'd strongly urged her to reconsider her marriage to her boss. In fact she'd told him, with her usual economy with words, to butt out. And he had.

Now the entire cathedral was paralyzed in disbelief—Raif no less so than the people seated on the pew next to him.

Had his words been the catalyst that now sent her flying past him in a flurry of tulle and diamantes on her

way down the aisle and out the front doors?

The stricken expression he'd spotted on her face galvanized him into action. Whatever their differences, she needed help. And since the reason she needed help was that she'd taken the advice *he* had given, he felt he owed it to her to be the one to come to her aid.

The doors of the church clanged closed in front of him and he pulled one heavy wooden panel open and shot down the steps in hot pursuit of the vision in white that raced across the road without looking, and into the gardens beyond. That was where he found her—she'd stopped running by the time he caught up. Her breath was coming in great gasps and her usually glowing, light bronze skin now looked pale and sallow. Raif guided her to a bench and pushed her head down between her knees before she collapsed right there on the gravel path.

"Breathe," he instructed, ripping off his suit jacket and draping it over her bare, shaking shoulders, dwarfing her delicate frame. Adelaide in July was not warm, and dressed as she was in a strapless gown, she'd freeze in no time. "Slow and deep. C'mon," he said encouragingly. "You can do it."

"I had...to get...away," she gasped.

He was shocked by how anxious she was. Shanal was always the Queen of Calm. Nothing unnerved her. Except maybe the carpet python he'd slipped in her bag when he was fifteen.

He rubbed her shoulders through the fine wool of his jacket. "Don't talk, just breathe, Shanal. It's going to be okay."

"No, no it's not."

Her words came out strangled, panicked.

"You'll work it out," he said, as reassuringly as he could under the circumstances.

Even as the words left his mouth he was reminded of the expression on Burton's face as he'd been left standing at the altar. An expression Shanal had missed seeing completely, thank God, or she might not have stopped running at all.

Raif had long known Burton was avaricious—he'd always had to both *be* the best and *have* the best, by any means possible. But there was another edge to him, as well—and that edge had been clear on his face for a split second as he'd seen his latest intended acquisition flee from him. Raif might not have had much to do with him over the past three years, but he knew that Burton Rogers was not a man who enjoyed being thwarted.

Shanal struggled to sit upright, tugging flowers and her veil from her jet-black hair without any heed to the pins that must be raking her scalp. She tossed the destroyed blooms and filmy material to the walkway at her feet. She turned to Raif and grabbed his hands. He was shocked at how cold she felt already. As if she was chilled to her bones.

"Take me away," she implored. "Take me far away, right now."

It was the last thing he'd expected her to say. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Just, *please*, get me out of here," she begged, her bewitching, pale green eyes shining with unshed tears.

It was the tears that undid him. He thought about his Maserati, parked a good two blocks away. Only a handful of people had come out of the cathedral so far, but more were bound to follow soon. He and Shanal would never make it to the car before someone reached them, he thought, and once the crowd got to them, Shanal would be fielding questions left and right from a slew of concerned family members and friends wanting to know why she'd walked out on her own wedding. She didn't look as if she was up to conversation right now. As he swiftly considered their options, a taxi rounded the corner. Raif secured Shanal's small hand in his and pulled her to her feet.

"C'mon," he said, as he bolted for the sidewalk, towing Shanal along behind him.

He raised his hand to get the cabbie's attention. To his immense relief the guy pulled over, his eyes as round as saucers and his mouth hanging open as Raif yanked open the back door and guided Shanal inside. He barked his address to the startled driver as he yanked the door closed behind them.

Shanal sat next to him, pale but finally seeming more composed, as they pulled away from the curb and down the street. Raif cast one look through the back window. The crowd on the sidewalk outside the cathedral had grown. In its midst stood Burton, his eyes fixed on the retreating cab. Even from this distance Raif felt a prickle of unease. The groom, understandably, did not look happy.

Raif faced forward again. Burton's happiness had never been a priority of his, and as long as the man didn't take his anger out on Shanal in any way, Raif admitted to himself that he was delighted that his nemesis's day had been ruined.

He and Shanal had little privacy in the cab and Raif maintained his silence until, nearly forty-five minutes later, they reached his home. His phone, already on Silent for the ceremony, vibrated continuously in his trou-ser pocket. He knew exactly who was calling—and he had no intention of answering him.

"What are we doing here?" Shanal asked as the cab drew away, leaving them outside Raif's single-level home nestled at the edge of the family's old and well-established vineyard. "It's the first place he'll look, isn't it? He's bound to have seen us getting into the cab together."

Raif's eyebrows shot up. "I hadn't realized we were meant to be hiding from him. You really don't want him to know where you are? You're absolutely certain you don't want to work this out with him?"

In response, Shanal shuddered. "No, I can't. just can't."

Raif reached past her to unlock his front door, then gestured for her to precede him. The incongruity of the situation struck him. He'd always imagined bringing a bride back here to his home one day—just not exactly like this. But if she wanted to get away from Burton, then the least Raif could do was let her freshen up before she headed off to...wherever it was she planned on going from here.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Some water, please."

## **Users Review**

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