



THE REBEL AND THE HEIRESS

Michelle Douglas

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The Rebel and the Heiress

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From rebel—to knight in shining armor...?Losing her family fortune, it's time for once-privileged Nell Smythe-Whittaker to make it on her own...with a little help from delicious bad boy Rick Bradford!Rick hasn't seen Nell since childhood, but with a family mystery to solve Rick needs Nell as much as she needs him. Yet with a past as checkered as his, can Rick ever be good enough for this beautiful heiress? It's something he's willing to prove....The Wild Ones What will it take to tame these rebels?

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She smelled like sugar and frosting and all the things he'd ever longed for. An ache gripped him so hard he had to drag in a breath.

She swayed toward him, those green eyes lowering to his lips. The pulse at the base of her throat fluttered faster and faster. Her hand tightened in his.

He gripped her chin, lifted it, needing to taste her so badly he thought he might fall to his knees from the force of it. Desire licked fire through his veins. His lips started to descend. He moved in close, so close he could taste her breath, but the expression in her eyes froze him.

They glittered. With tears.

“Don't you dare kiss me out of pity.”

She didn't move out of his hold, and he knew then that she was as caught up in the same grip of desire as him.

“Please, Rick. Don't kiss me because you feel sorry for me.”

The tears trembled, but they didn't fall. Every muscle he had screamed a protest, but he released her and stepped back.

He swallowed twice before he was sure his voice would work. “Pity was the last thing on my mind.”

The Wild Ones

What will it take to tame these rebels?

A brand-new duet

by Michelle Douglas

Best friends Tash and Rick are in for the wildest of rides when they're forced to spend time on the other side of the tracks.

Reforming a rebel image is tough—especially when the past is against them. But when their future depends on learning to trust someone else, they soon find out that with the right person on their side, they can do anything...even risk it all for love!

The Rebel and the Heiress

Michelle Douglas



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At the age of eight, MICHELLE DOUGLAS was asked what she wanted to be when she grew up. She answered, “A writer.” Years later she read an article about romance writing and thought, Ooh, that'll be fun. She was right. When she's not writing she can usually be found with her nose buried in a book. She is currently enrolled in an English master's program for the sole purpose of indulging her reading and writing habits further. She lives in a leafy suburb of Newcastle, on Australia's east coast, with her own romantic hero—husband Greg, who is the inspiration behind all her happy endings.

Michelle would love you to visit her at her website, www.michelle-douglas.com.

For my little brother, Kyle, who's always been a rebel in his own way.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

RICK BRADFORD STARED at the Victorian mansion elegantly arranged in front of him and then down at the note in his hand before crumpling the piece of paper and shoving it in his jeans pocket.

He'd checked with his friend Tash earlier. 'You're sure you got that right? Nell Smythe-Whittaker rang and asked if I'd drop round?'

'For the tenth time, Rick, yes! It was the Princess all right. And no, she didn't mention what it was about. And no, I didn't ask her.'

For the last fortnight Tash's brain had been addled by love. His lip curled. Not that he had anything against Mitch King and it was great to see Tash happy but, as far as he could tell, her street smarts had all but floated out of the window. Why hadn't she asked the Princess what this was about?

Because she was viewing the world through rose-coloured glasses, that was why. His lip curled a little more. He wasn't sure he could stand being a third wheel in her and Mitch's hazy, happy little world for much longer. It was time to move on. Tomorrow he'd head up the coast, find work somewhere and...

And what?

He lifted a shoulder.

First he'd find out what Nell Smythe-Whittaker wanted. You won't find that out by standing here on the footpath like some dumb schmuck.

Blowing out a breath, he settled a mantle of casual, almost insolent assurance about himself. The people from Nell's world—probably including Nell herself—looked down on the likes of him and he had no intention of giving them, or her, the satisfaction of thinking he cared two hoots either way.

Would Nell look down that pretty autocratic nose at him? He hadn't spoken to her since they were ten years old. He could count the number of times he'd seen her since then—and only ever in the distance—on one hand. They'd never spoken, but she'd always lifted a hand in acknowledgement. And he'd always waved back.

It had never felt real. It had always felt somehow apart from the daily humdrum. He scratched a hand across his face. Stupid! Fairy tales! He was too old for such nonsense.

You're only twenty-five.

Yeah? Well, most days he felt as if he was fifty.

Clenching his jaw, he pushed open the gate and strode up the walk to the wide veranda with its ochre and cream tessellated tiles. With an effort of will, he slowed his strides to a saunter and planted a devil-may-care smirk on his face.

Up closer, he could see that Nell's fancy castle needed some attention. Paint peeled at the window trims and flaked here and there from the walls. One section of guttering leaned at a drunken angle and the wider garden was overgrown and unkempt. Here and there he caught sight of the silver wrappers of crisp packets and chocolate bar wrappers winking in the sunlight.

So...the rumours were true then. The Princess had fallen on hard times.

Ignoring a doorbell he had little faith would work, he lifted his hand to knock on the ornately moulded front door when voices from the partially open French windows further along the veranda halted him. Words didn't just drift out on the summer air. They sped.

'You won't get another opportunity like this, Nell!'

A male voice. An angry male voice. Rick's every muscle bunched in readiness. He hated bullies. And he really hated men who bullied women. He stalked down to the windows.

'You are a sleazy, slimy excuse for a man, Mr Withers.'

He paused. Her voice held no fear, only scorn. She could obviously deal with the situation on her own.

'You know it's the only answer to the current straits you find yourself in.'

'Is that so? And I suppose it's a coincidence that this particular solution is one that will also line your pockets?'

'There isn't a bank manager in Sydney who'll loan you the money you need. They're not going to touch that business plan of yours with a bargepole.'

'As you don't happen to be a bank manager and I no longer have any faith in your professionalism you'll have to excuse my scepticism.'

Rick grinned. Go, Princess!

'Your father won't be pleased.'

'That is true. It's also none of your concern.'

'You're wasting your not inconsiderable talents.' There was a silence. 'You're a very beautiful woman. We'd make a good team, you and I, Nellie.'

Nellie?

'Stay where you are, Mr Withers. I do not want you to kiss me.'

Rick straightened, instantly alert.

In the next moment a loud slap rang in the air, followed by scuffling. Rick leapt for the window, but it burst open before he could reach it and he found himself pressed back against the wall of the house as Nell frogmarched a man in a shiny suit along the length of the veranda, his earlobe twisted between her thumb and forefinger, and all but threw him towards the gate. 'Good day, Mr Withers.'

The suit straightened and threw his shoulders back. Rick went to stand behind Nell, legs planted and mouth grim. He folded his arms and flexed his biceps.

The suit gave the kind of smirk Rick would give a lot to wipe off his face...except he wasn't that kind of guy any more.

'I see you've your bit of rough. So that's the way you like it?'

'I'm afraid, Mr Withers, you're never going to find out how I like it.' She glanced behind her and met Rick's gaze, her green eyes...beautiful. 'Hello, Mr Bradford.'

Her voice reached out and wrapped around him like a caress. ‘Hello, Princess.’ He hadn’t meant to call her that; it just slipped out. Those eyes widened and continued to stare into his until the breath jammed in his throat.

‘Well, you needn’t think your bit of rough is going to get you out of your current jam and—’

‘Oh, do be quiet, you horrible little man.’

Those green eyes snapped away and Rick found he could breathe again.

And then he looked at her fully and what he saw made him blink. Nell looked as if she’d just stepped out of some nineteen-fifties movie. She wore a dress that made every male impulse he had sit up and stare. It had a fitted bodice that was snug to the waist and a skirt that flared out to mid-calf. It sported a Hawaiian beach print complete with surf, sand and palm trees.

‘Mr Bradford is ten times the man you are and what’s more he has manners, like a true gentleman.’

He did? In the next instant he shook his head. They were reading from different scripts here.

Without another word, Nell turned and took his arm. ‘I’m so glad you could drop around.’ And she led him back along the veranda, effectively dismissing the other man. ‘I’m terribly sorry. I’d take you through the front door—I don’t want you thinking I’m taking you in via the tradesman’s entrance or some such nonsense—but I can’t get the rotten thing open. I’m also afraid that you’ll have to excuse the mess.’

She led him through the French windows into a large room—a drawing room or parlour or music room or something of that nature. Whatever it was, it wasn’t the kind of room he’d had much experience with and, despite her words, it wasn’t ridiculously messy, but there were haphazard piles of boxes everywhere and piles of papers on the only piece of furniture in the room—a small side table.

‘Why can’t you get the door open?’ He detached his arm from hers. Her warmth was...too warm.

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ She waved a hand in the air. ‘It’s jammed or swollen up or something.’

Why hadn’t she had it looked at?

None of your business. He hovered by the French windows until he heard the clang of the front gate closing behind the suit. He glanced behind to make sure anyway. He turned back to Nell. ‘What was that all about?’

Those green eyes caught fire again. ‘He’s an estate agent who wants to sell my house, only I’m not interested. In more ways than one! He turned out to be a seriously sexist piece of work too. I can tell you now, Mr Bradford, that if you try any of the same tricks you’ll meet with the same fate!’

She was a slim blonde firecracker. In a retro dress. He wanted to grin. And then he didn’t.

The fire in her eyes faded. She made as if to wipe a hand down her face only she pulled it away at the last moment to clasp both her hands lightly in front of her.

She was so different from the last time he’d seen her.

‘I’m sorry, that was an unforgivable thing to say. My blood’s up and I’m not thinking clearly.’

‘It’s all right,’ he said, because it was what he always said to a woman.

Nell shook her head. ‘No, it’s not. I have no right to tar you with the same brush as Mr Withers.’

That was when he noticed that behind the blonde princess perfection she had lines fanning out around her eyes and she wasn’t wearing lipstick. ‘I’d prefer it if you’d call me Rick.’

The hint of a smile played across her lips. ‘Are you up for a coffee, Rick?’

And, just like that, she hurtled him back fifteen years. Come and play. It hadn’t been a demand or a request, but a plea.

He had to swallow the lump that came out of nowhere. He wanted to walk out of those French windows and never come back. He wanted...

He adjusted his stance. ‘I thought you’d never ask.’

She smiled for real then and he realised that anything else that had passed for a smile so far hadn’t reached her eyes. ‘C’mon then.’ She hitched her head and led him through the doorway into a hallway. ‘You don’t mind if we sit in the kitchen rather than the parlour, do you?’

‘Not at all.’ He tried to keep the wry note out of his voice. His type was never invited into the parlour.

Her shoulders tensed and he knew she’d read his tone. She wheeled around and led him in the other direction—back towards the front door—instead. She gestured into the large room to the left. ‘As you’ll see, the parlour is in a right state.’

He only meant to glance into the room but the sight dragged him all the way inside. In the middle of the room something huddled beneath dust sheets—probably furniture. It wasn’t that which drew his attention. Plaster had fallen from one of the walls, adjacent to an ornate fireplace, and, while the mess had been swept up, nothing had been done about the gaping hole left behind. A rolled-up carpet leant against another wall along with more cardboard boxes. The light pouring in at the huge bay window did the room no favours either. Scratching sounded in the chimney. Birds or a possum?

He grimaced. ‘A right state is the, uh, correct diagnosis’

‘Yes, which is why I currently prefer the kitchen.’

Her voice might be crisp, but her shoulders weren’t as straight as they could be. He followed her into the kitchen and then wasn’t sure if it was much better. The housekeeper had obviously upped and left, but how long ago was anyone’s guess. A jumble of dishes—mixing bowls and baking trays mostly—teetered in the sink, boxes of foodstuffs dominated one end of the enormous wooden table and flour seemed to be scattered over the rest of its surface. It smelt good in here, though.

She cleared a spot for him, wiped as much of the table down as she could and he sat. Mostly because it seemed the most sensible and least dangerous thing he could do. He didn’t want to send anything flying with a stray elbow or a clumsy hip. Nell moved amid the mess with an ease and casual disregard as if she were used to it. He didn’t believe that for a moment, though. The Princess had grown up in a world where others cleaned up the mess and kept things organised. This was merely a sign of her natural polish.

Or unnatural polish, depending on how one looked at it. She’d lacked it as a ten-year-old, but her parents had obviously managed to eventually drill it into her.

The scent of coffee hit him and he drew it slowly into his lungs. ‘So...you’re moving out?’

Nell started as if she’d forgotten he was there. She sent him one of those not quite smiles. ‘Moving in, actually.’

Moving in? On her own? In this great old empty mansion?

None of your business.

His lips twisted. Since when had he been able to resist a damsel in distress? Or, in this case, a Princess in distress. ‘What’s going down, Nell?’

She turned fully to stare at him and folded her arms. ‘Really?’

He wasn’t sure what that really referred to—his genuine interest or his front in asking a personal question. He remembered his devil-may-care insolence and shrugged it on. ‘Sure.’

She made coffee and set a mug in front of him. Only when he’d helped himself to milk and two sugars did she seat herself opposite and add milk to her own mug. The perfect hostess. The perfect princess.

‘I’m sorry. I’m so used to everyone knowing my business that your question threw me for a moment.’

‘I’ve only been back in town for a fortnight.’ And he and she came from two different worlds, even if they had grown up in the same suburb.

Even amid all the disrepair and mess, she shone like some golden thing. Him? He just blended in.

‘I did hear,’ he ventured, ‘that your father had fallen on hard times.’

Her lips tightened. ‘And nearly took the livelihoods of over a hundred people with him in the process.’

Was she referring to the workers at the glass factory? It'd been in the Smythe-Whittaker family for three generations. Tash had told him how worried they'd been at the time that it'd go down the proverbial gurgler, that more unemployment would hit the area. But... 'I heard a buyer came in at the last minute.'

'Yes. No thanks to my father.'

'The global financial crisis has hit a lot of people hard.'

'That is true.' He didn't know why, but he loved the way she enunciated every syllable. 'However, rather than face facts, my father held on for so long that the sale of the factory couldn't cover all of his growing debts. I handed over the contents of my trust fund.'

Ouch.

'But I've drawn the line at selling Whittaker House.'

Her grandmother had left it to Nell rather than her father? Interesting. 'But you gave him your money?'

She rested both elbows on the table and stared down into her mug. 'Not all of it. I'd already spent some of it setting up my own business. Though, to be perfectly frank with you, Rick, it never really felt like my money. Besides, as I was never the daughter my father wanted, it seemed the least I could do.'

'But you're still angry with him.'

She laughed then and he liked the way humour curved her lips in that deliciously enticing manner. Lips like that didn't need lipstick. 'I am. And as everyone else around here already knows the reason, I'll even share it with you, tough guy.'

He leaned towards her, intrigued.

'Besides the fact he had no right gambling with the factory workers' livelihoods, his first solution was to marry me off to Jeremy Delaney.'

His jaw dropped. 'Jeez, Nell, the Delaneys might be rolling in it, but it's a not-so-secret secret that he's...' He trailed off, rolling his shoulders. Maybe Nell didn't know.

'Gay?' She nodded. 'I know. I don't know why he refuses to be loud and proud about it. I suspect he's still too overawed by his father.'

'And you refused to marry him?'

'Of course I did.'

He flashed back to the way she'd frogmarched the suit out of her office earlier and grinned. 'Of course you did.'

'So then my father demanded I sell this house.'

It wasn't a house—it was a mansion. But he refrained from pointing that out. 'And you refused to do that too?'

She lifted her chin. 'As everyone knows, I gave him the deeds to my snazzy little inner city apartment. I handed over my sports car and I signed over what was left of my trust fund, but I am not selling this house.' Her eyes flashed.

He held up his hands. 'Fair enough. I'm not suggesting you should. But jeez, Nell, if you don't have a cent left how are you going to afford its upkeep?'

The fire in her eyes died and her luscious lips drooped at the corners. And then he watched in amazement as she shook herself upright again. 'Cupcakes,' she said, her chin at just that angle.

'Cupcakes?' Had she gone mad?

In one fluid movement she rose, reached for a plate before pulling off a lid from a nearby tin. 'Strawberries and Cream, Passion Fruit Delight, Lemon Sherbet, and Butterscotch Crunch.' With each designation she pulled forth an amazing creation from the tin and set it onto the plate, and somehow the cluttered old kitchen was transformed into a...fairylane, a birthday party.

She set the plate in front of him with a flourish and all he could do was stare in amazement at four of the prettiest cupcakes he'd ever seen in his life.

‘I do cupcake towers as birthday or special event cakes in whatever flavour or iced in whatever colour the client wants. I provide cupcakes by the dozen for birthday parties, high teas, morning teas and office parties. I will even package up an individual cupcake in a fancy box with all the bells and whistles...or, at least, ribbons and glitter, if that’s what a client requests.’

He stared at the cakes on the plate in front of him and then at the mountain of dishes in the sink. ‘You made these? You?’

His surprise didn’t offend her. She just grinned a Cheshire cat grin. ‘I did.’

The Princess could bake?

She nodded at the cupcakes and handed him a bread and butter plate and a napkin. ‘Help yourself.’

Was she serious? Guys like him didn’t get offered mouth-watering treasures like these. Guys like him feigned indifference to anything covered in frosting or cream, as if a sweet tooth were a sign of a serious weakness.

He didn’t stop to think about it; he reached for the nearest cupcake, a confection of sticky pale yellow frosting with a triangle of sugared lemon stuck in at a jaunty angle and all pale golden goodness, and then halted. He offered the plate to her first.

She glanced at her watch and shook her head. ‘I’m only allowed to indulge after three p.m. and it’s only just gone two.’

‘That sounds like a stupid rule.’

‘You don’t understand. I find them addictive. For the sake of my hips and thighs and overall general health, I’ve had to put some limits to my indulging.’

He laughed and took a bite.

Moist cake, a surge of sweetness and the tang of lemon hit him in a rush. He closed his eyes and tried to stamp the memory onto his senses and everything inside him opened up to it. When he’d been in jail he’d occasionally tried to take himself away from the horror by imagining some sensory experience from the outside world. Small things like the rush of wind in his face as he skateboarded down a hill, the buoyancy of swimming in the ocean, the smell of wattle and eucalyptus in the national park. He’d have added the taste of the Princess’s cupcakes if he’d experienced them way back when.

He finished the cupcake and stared hungrily at the plate. Would she mind if he had another one?

* * *

Rick stared at the three remaining cupcakes with so much hunger in his eyes that something inside Nell clenched up. It started as a low-level burn in her chest, but the burn intensified and hardened to eventually settle in her stomach. It was one thing to feel sorry for herself for the predicament she found herself in, but she’d never experienced the world as the harsh, ugly place Rick had. And you’ll do well not to forget it.

She had to swallow before she could speak. ‘Scoff the lot.’ She pushed the plate closer. ‘They’re leftovers from the orders I delivered earlier.’

He glanced at her and the uncertainty in his eyes knifed into her. He’d swaggered in here with his insolent bad-boy cockiness set off to perfection in that tight black T-shirt, but it was just as much a show, a fake, as her society girl smile. Still... She glanced at those shoulders and her mouth watered.

In the next instant she shook herself. She did not find that tough-guy look attractive.

He pushed the plate away, and for some reason it made her heart heavy. So heavy it took an effort to keep it from sinking all the way to her knees.

‘How...when did you learn to cook?’

She didn’t want to talk about that. When she looked too hard at the things she was good at—cooking and gardening—and the reasons behind them, it struck her as too pathetic for words.

And she wasn’t going to be pathetic any more.

So she pasted on her best society girl smile—the one she used for the various charity functions she’d always felt honour-bound to attend. ‘It appears I have a natural aptitude for it.’ She gave an

elegant shrug. She knew it was elegant because she'd practised it endlessly until her mother could find no fault with it. 'Who'd have thought? I'm as surprised as everyone else.'

He stared at her and she found it impossible to read his expression. Except to note that the insolent edge had returned to his smile. 'What time did you start baking today?'

'Three a.m.'

Both of his feet slammed to the ground. He leant towards her, mouth open.

'It's Sunday, and Saturdays and Sundays are my busiest days. Today I had a tower cake for a little girl's birthday party, four dozen cupcakes for a charity luncheon, a hen party morning tea and a couple of smaller afternoon teas.'

'You did that all on your own?'

She tried not to let his surprise chafe at her. Some days it still shocked the dickens out of her too.

His face tightened and he glanced around the kitchen. 'I guess it does leave you the rest of the week to work on this place.'

Oh, he was just like everyone else! He thought her a helpless piece of fluff without a backbone, without a brain and probably without any moral integrity either. You're useless.

She pushed her shoulders back. 'I guess,' she said, icing-sugar-sweet, 'that all I need to do is find me a big strong man with muscles and know-how...and preferably with a pot of gold in the bank...to wrap around my little finger and...' She trailed off with another shrug—an expansive one this time. She traded in a whole vocabulary of shrugs.

A glint lit his eye. 'And then you'll never have to bake another cupcake again?'

'Ah, but you forget. I like baking cupcakes.'

'And getting up at three a.m.?'

She ignored that.

He frowned. 'Is that why you wanted to see me?'

It took a moment to work out what he meant. When she did, she laughed. 'I guess you have the muscles, but do you have the know-how?' She didn't ask him about the pot of gold. That would be cruel. 'Because I'm afraid I don't.' She bit back a sigh. No self-pity. 'But no, that's not why I asked you to drop by.'

His face hardened. 'So why did I receive the summons? If you knew I was at Tash's, why couldn't you have dropped by there?'

She heard what he didn't say. Why do you think you're better than me? The thing was, she didn't. He wouldn't believe that, though. She moistened her lips. 'I didn't think I'd be welcome there. I don't believe Tash thinks well of me.'

He scowled. 'What on earth—?'

'A while back I went into the Royal Oak.' It was the hotel where Tash worked. Nell had been lonely and had wanted to connect with people she'd never been allowed to connect with before. For heaven's sake, they all lived in the same neighbourhood. They should know each other. She was careful to keep the hurt out of her voice. She'd had a lot of practice at that too.

There you go again, feeling sorry for yourself.

She lifted her chin. 'I ordered a beer. Tash poured me a lemon squash and made it clear it'd be best for all concerned if I drank it and left.'

Rick stared at her, but his face had lost its frozen closeness. 'And you took that to mean she didn't like you?'

She had no facility for making friends and the recent downturn in her circumstances had only served to highlight that. 'Yes, I did.'

'Princess, I—'

'I really wish you wouldn't call me that.' She'd never been a princess, regardless of what Rick thought. 'I much prefer Nell. And there's absolutely no reason at all why Tash should like me.' Given

the way her parents had ensured that Nell hadn't associated with the local children, it was no wonder they'd taken against her. Or that those attitudes had travelled with them into adulthood.

He looked as if he wanted to argue so she continued—crisp, impersonal, untouchable. 'Do you recall the gardener who worked here for many years?'

He leant back, crossed a leg so his ankle rested on his knee. Despite the casual demeanour, she could see him turning something over in his mind. 'He was the one who chased me away that day?'

That day. She didn't know how that day could still be so vivid in her mind. 'Come and play.' She'd reached out a hand through the eight-foot-high wrought iron fence and Rick had clasped it briefly before John had chased him off. John had told her that Rick wasn't the kind of little boy she should be playing with. But she'd found an answering loneliness in the ten-year-old Rick's eyes. It had given her the courage to speak to him in the first place. Funnily enough, even though Rick had only visited twice more, she'd never felt quite so alone again.

That day John had given her her very own garden bed. That had helped too.

But Rick remembered that day as well? Her heart started to pound though she couldn't have explained why. 'Yes, John was the one who chased you away.'

'John Cox. I remember seeing him around the place. He drank at the Crown and Anchor, if memory serves me. Why? What about him?'

'Did you know him well?'

'I'm not sure I ever spoke to the man.'

'Right.' She frowned. Then this just didn't make any sense.

'Why?' The word barked out of him. 'What has he been saying?'

'Nothing.' She swallowed. 'He died eight months ago. Lung cancer.'

Rick didn't say anything and, while he hadn't moved, she sensed that his every muscle was tense and poised.

'John and I were...well, friends of a kind, I guess. I liked to garden and he taught me how to grow things and how to keep them healthy.'

'Cooking and gardening? Are your talents endless, Princess?'

She should've become immune to mockery by now, but she hadn't. She and Rick might've shared a moment of kinship fifteen years ago, but they didn't have anything in common now. That much was obvious. And she'd long given up begging for friends.

She gave a shrug that was designed to rub him up the wrong way, in the same way his 'Princess' was designed to needle her. A superior shrug that said I'm better than you. Her mother had been proficient at those.

Rick's lip curled.

She tossed her hair back over her shoulder. 'John kept to himself. He didn't have many friends so I was one of the few people who visited him during his final weeks.'

Rick opened his mouth. She readied herself for something cutting, but he closed it again instead. She let out a breath. Despite what Rick might think of her, she'd cried when John had died. He'd been kind to her and had taken the time to show her how to do things. He'd answered her endless questions. And he'd praised her efforts. The fingers she'd been tapping on her now cold coffee cup stopped.

'Nell?'

She dragged herself back from those last days in John's hospice room. 'If the two of you never spoke, then what I'm about to tell you is rather odd, but...'

'But?'

She met his gaze. 'John charged me with a final favour.'

'What kind of favour?'

'He wanted me to deliver a letter.'

Dark brown eyes stared back at her, the same colour as dark chocolate. Eighty per cent cocoa. Bitter chocolate.

‘He wanted me to give that letter to you, Rick.’

‘To me?’

She rose and went to the kitchen drawer where she kept important documents. ‘He asked that I personally place it in your hands.’

And then she held it out to him.

CHAPTER TWO

EVERY INSTINCT RICK had urged him to leap up and leave the room, to race out of this house and away from this rotten city and to never return.

He wanted away from Nell and her polished blonde perfection and her effortless nose-in-the-air superiority that was so at odds with the girl he remembered.

Fairy tales, that was what those memories were. He’d teased them out into full-blown fantasies in an effort to dispel some of the grim reality that had surrounded him. He’d known at the time that was what he’d been doing, but he’d wanted to hold up the promise of something better to come—a chance for a better future.

Of course, all of those dreams had shattered the moment he’d set foot inside a prison cell.

Still...

The letter in Nell’s outstretched hand started to shake. ‘Aren’t you going to take it?’

‘I’m not sure.’

She sat.

‘I have no idea what this John Cox could have to say to me.’ Did she know what was in the letter? He deliberately loosened his shoulders, slouched back in his chair and pasted on a smirk. ‘Do you think he’s going to accuse me of stealing the family silver?’

She flinched and just for a moment he remembered wild eyes as she ordered, ‘Run!’

He wanted her to tell him to run now.

‘After all, I didn’t disappoint either his or your father’s expectations.’

Those incredible eyes of hers flashed green fire and he wondered what she’d do next. Would she frogmarch him off the premises with his ear between her thumb and forefinger. And if she tried it would he let her? Or would he kiss her?

He shifted on the chair, ran a hand down his T-shirt. He wasn’t kissing the Princess.

‘If memory serves me correctly—’ she bit each word out ‘—you went to jail on drug charges, not robbery. And if the rumours buzzing about town are anything to go by, those charges are in the process of being dropped and your name cleared.’

Did she think that made up for fifteen months behind bars?

A sudden heaviness threatened to fell him. One stupid party had led to...

He dragged a hand down his face. Cheryl, at seventeen, hadn’t known what she’d been doing, hadn’t known the trouble that the marijuana she’d bought could get her into—could get them all into. She’d been searching for escape—escape from a sexually abusive father. He understood that, sympathised. The fear that had flashed into her eyes, though, when the police had burst in, her desperation—the desperation of someone who’d been betrayed again and again by people who were supposed to love her—it still plagued his nightmares.

His chest cramped. Little Cheryl who he’d known since she’d started kindergarten. Little Cheryl who he’d done his best to protect...and, when that hadn’t been enough, who he’d tried to comfort. He hadn’t known it then, but there wasn’t enough comfort in the world to help heal her. It hadn’t been her fault.

So he’d taken the blame for her. He’d been a much more likely candidate for the drugs anyway. At the age of eighteen he’d gone to jail for fifteen months. He pulled in a breath. In the end, though, none of it had made any difference. That was what really galled him.

Nell thrust out her chin. ‘So drop the attitude and stop playing the criminal with me.’

It snapped him out of his memories and he couldn't have said why, but he suddenly wanted to smile.

'The only way to find out what John has to say is to open the letter.'

He folded his arms. 'What's it to you, anyway?'

'I made a promise to a dying man.'

'And now you've kept it.'

She leaned across, picked up his hand and slapped the letter into it. She smelled sweet, like cupcakes. 'Now I've kept it.'

A pulse pounded inside him. Nell moved back. She moved right across to the other side of the kitchen and refilled their mugs from the pot kept warm by the percolator hotplate. But her sugar-sweet scent remained to swirl around him. He swallowed. He blinked until his vision cleared and he could read his name in black-inked capitals on the envelope. For some reason, those capitals struck him as ominous.

For heaven's sake, just open the damn thing and be done with it. It'd just be one more righteous citizen telling him the exact moment he'd gone off the rails, listing a litany of perceived injuries received—both imagined and in some cases real—and then a biting critique of what the rest of his life would hold if he didn't mend his ways.

The entire thing would take him less than a minute to read and then he could draw a line under this whole stupid episode. With a half-smothered curse he made deliberately unintelligible in honour of the Princess's upper class ears, he tore open the envelope.

Heaving out a breath, he unfolded the enclosed sheet of paper. The letter wasn't long. At least he wouldn't have to endure a detailed rant. He registered when Nell placed another mug of coffee in front of him that she even added milk and sugar to it.

He opened his mouth to thank her, but...

The words on the page were in the same odd style of all capitals as the envelope. All in the same black ink. He read the words but couldn't make sense of them to begin with.

They began to dance on the page and then each word rose up and hit him with the force of a sledgehammer. He flinched. He clenched the letter so hard it tore. He swore—loud and rude and blue—as black dots danced before his eyes.

Nell jumped. He expected her to run away. He told himself he hoped she would.

'Rick!' Her voice and its shrillness dive-bombed him like a magpie hostile with nesting instinct. 'Stick your head between your knees. Now!'

And then she was there, pushing his head between his knees and ordering him to breathe, telling him how to do it. He followed her instructions—pulling air into his lungs, holding it there and releasing it—but as soon as the dizziness left him he surged upright again.

He spun to her and waved the balled-up letter beneath her nose. 'Do you know what this says? Do you know what the—'

He pulled back the ugly language that clawed at his throat. 'Do you know what this says?' he repeated.

She shook her head. 'I wasn't there when he wrote it. It was already sealed when he gave it to me. He never confided in me about its contents and I never asked.' She gave one of those shrugs. 'I'll admit to a passing curiosity.' She drew herself up, all haughty blonde sleekness in her crazy, beautiful Hawaiian dress. 'But I would never open someone else's mail. So, no, I haven't read its contents.'

He wasn't sure he believed her.

She moved back around the table, sat and brought her mug to her lips. It was so normal it eased some of the raging beast inside him.

She glanced up, her eyes clouded. 'I do hope he hasn't accused you of something ridiculous like stealing my grandmother's pearls.'

He sat too. 'It's nothing like that.'

‘Good, because I know for a fact that was my father.’

He choked. Father. The word echoed through his mind. Father. Father. Father. In ugly black capitals.

‘And I’m sorry I’ve not tracked you down sooner to give that letter to you, but John died and then my father’s business fell apart and...and I wasn’t sure where to look for you.’

He could see now that she hadn’t wanted to approach Tash to ask how she might find him.

He wasn’t sorry. Not one little bit.

‘But when I heard you were home...’

He dragged a hand down his face before gulping half his coffee in one go. ‘Did he say anything else to you when he gave you this?’ The letter was still balled in his hand.

She reached out as if to swipe her finger through the frosting of one of the cupcakes, but she pulled her hand back at the last moment. ‘He said you might have some questions you’d like to ask me and that he’d appreciate it if I did my best to answer them.’

He coughed back a hysterical laugh. Some questions? All he had were questions.

Her forehead creased. ‘This isn’t about that nonsense when we were ten-year-olds, is it?’

He didn’t understand why she twisted her hands together. She wasn’t the one who’d been hauled to the police station.

‘I tried to tell my parents and the police that I gave the locket to you of my own free will and that you hadn’t taken it. That I gave it to you as a present.’

She stared down into her coffee and something in her face twisted his gut.

‘I thought it was mine to give.’ She said the words so softly he had to strain to catch them. He thought about how she’d handed her apartment, her car and her trust fund all over to her father without a murmur. So why refuse to hand over Whittaker House?

She straightened and tossed back her hair. ‘That was the moment when I realised my possessions weren’t my own.’

But for some reason she felt that Whittaker House was hers?

‘I told them how I wanted to give you something because you’d given me your toy aeroplane.’

It was the only thing he’d had to give her.

‘Which, mind you, I absolutely refused to hand over when they demanded me to.’

That made him laugh.

She met his gaze squarely and there wasn’t an ounce of haughtiness in her face. He sobered. ‘I’ve never had the chance to say it before but, Rick, I’m sorry. My mother and father were so angry. And then the policeman frightened me so much I...I eventually just told them what they wanted to hear. It was cowardly of me and I’m truly sorry if that episode caused a lot of trouble for you.’

It’d caused trouble all right. It was the first time he’d come to the police’s attention. It hadn’t been the last time he’d been labelled a thief, liar and troublemaker by them, though.

They’d just been two kids exchanging treasures and trying to forge a connection. Her father, the police and his background had all conspired to blow it out of proportion.

But none of it had been Nell’s fault and he’d always known that. ‘Don’t sweat it, Princess.’ He used the nickname to remind himself of all the differences between them, to reinforce them.

She sat back, her chin tilted at that unconsciously noble angle that made him want to smile. ‘Don’t worry. I was let off with a caution, but I didn’t know the police had questioned you too.’ The poor kid had probably been terrified. He had been.

She nodded to the letter balled in his hand. ‘But John hasn’t hassled you about any of that?’

He shook his head and her shoulders slumped in relief. She straightened again a moment later. ‘So...do you have any questions?’

She looked as puzzled and bewildered as he felt. He wondered if she was counting down the minutes until this interview ended. Did she find it awkward and wrong for him to be sitting across the table from her? Or did it feel weirdly comfortable?

He shook off the thought and set the crumpled letter on the table and did what he could to smooth it out.

‘I won’t beat around the bush,’ he read, ‘but you might as well know that I’m your father.’

Nell’s mug wobbled back to the table. She stared at him. Her mouth opened and closed. ‘But he chased you away.’ And then her eyes filled.

Rick knew then that she’d had no notion of what John’s letter contained.

He glanced back at the letter and continued reading. ‘I may be better served taking this knowledge to the grave as it’s brought me no joy. I don’t expect it to bring you any either.’

Nell’s intake of breath reverberated in the silence.

‘I have no faith in you.’

Her hands slapped to the table.

‘But you might as well know you have a sibling.’

She practically leapt out of her chair. ‘Who?’ she demanded, and then forced herself back down into her seat. ‘Really?’ She frowned. ‘Older or younger?’

He raised an eyebrow. ‘I think I’m the one who’s supposed to be asking the questions.’

‘Oh, yes, of course.’ She sat back and folded her hands in her lap. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’m not going to tell you who it is. If it matters to you then you’ll have to prove it.’

Her jaw dropped. ‘But that’s... How...how can he be so hard and cold? He’s supposed to have looked after you and...’ She swallowed and sat back again. ‘Sorry.’ She smiled, a weak thing that did nothing to hide her turmoil. She made a zipping motion across her mouth.

Rick shrugged. ‘He ends by simply signing it John Cox.’

She shook herself, frowned. ‘I know the questions belong to you, but, Rick, I have no idea how to answer any of them. I haven’t a clue who your sibling could be. I had no idea John was your father. I’ve never seen him with either a woman or a child. I—’

He handed the letter to her. He watched her face as she read the remaining lines. It darkened, which gladdened his heart.

And then it went blank. Rick eased back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling, not knowing whether to be relieved or disappointed.

* * *

Nell ignored the first lines John addressed to her in the letter. Miss Nell, if you think Rick is in any way redeemable and you can find it in yourself to help him... She snorted. What kind of nonsense was that? What kind of father just turned his back on his child? She thought about her own father with all of his demands and bit back a sigh.

‘You’ll find a clue where the marigolds grow.’ She turned the letter over, but there was nothing written on the back.

‘Any idea what that might mean?’ Rick asked, slouching back in his chair as if they were discussing nothing more interesting than the weather.

She opened her mouth. She closed it again and scratched her head. ‘My best guess is that, as he was a gardener and this is where he gardened, it refers to a garden bed somewhere on the estate, a garden bed where he grew marigolds, but...’

‘But?’

Rick sounded bored. She glanced at him, tried to read his face, but couldn’t. She lifted one shoulder. ‘The thing is, I don’t recall John ever growing marigolds. Apparently my mother didn’t like them.’

She stabbed a finger into the Passion Fruit Delight cupcake, glowering at it. ‘Why couldn’t he have just told you who your sibling is?’ She stabbed it again. ‘Why couldn’t he have told you the truth from the start and been a proper father to you?’ Stab. Stab. ‘I’d never have guessed any of this in a million years and—’

She pulled herself up and collected herself. None of this was helping. She wiped her finger on a napkin. 'Okay, so what else could marigold mean?'

Rick picked up the Strawberries and Cream cupcake and pushed nearly half of it into his mouth. She watched, mesmerised, at the way his lips closed around it, at the appreciation that lit his eyes and the way his mouth worked, the way his Adam's apple bobbed...the way his tongue flicked out to seize a crumb from the corner of his mouth.

She wrenched her gaze back. 'It could be a girl's name.' Her voice came out strangled.

'Do you know a Marigold or two?'

The words came out lazy and barely interested. Didn't he care? She tried to focus on the question he asked rather than the ones pounding through her. She frowned, thought hard and eventually shook her head. 'I don't think so. I don't even think I know any Marys.' She leapt up, seized her address book from the sideboard drawer and flicked through it...and then searched the list of contacts in her mobile phone. Nothing.

She stood. 'Okay, maybe there's marigold wallpaper somewhere in the house or...or moulding in the shape of a marigold...or an ornament or a painting or—'

'Princess, you've lived here your whole life. Do you really need to go through this mausoleum room by room to know whether it has marigold wallpaper?'

No, of course not. She sat. She knew every room intimately. She could remember what it looked like ten years ago as if it were only yesterday. There hadn't been any marigold paintings on any of the walls. There'd been no marigold wallpaper or bedspreads or curtains. No marigolds. Anywhere.

She glanced at Rick again. She could deal with his devil-may-care teasing and that tough-guy swagger. In fact, those things gave her a bit of a thrill. Considering she didn't get too many thrills, she'd take them where she could. She could even deal with the cold, hard wall he retreated behind. She could relate to it, even if she did feel he was judging her behind it and finding her lacking. But this... This nothingness hidden behind mockery and indifference. She was having no part of it.

She folded her arms. 'Don't you care?'

'Why should I?' He licked his fingers clean.

'Because...'

'What did he ever do for me?'

'Not about John!' She could understand his indifference and resentment of the other man. On that head it was John's stance that baffled her. She leaned across the table until its edges dug into her ribs. 'Don't you care that you have a brother or sister somewhere in the wide world?'

One shoulder lifted. He reached for the last unmangled cupcake. A dark lick of hair fell across his forehead. Nell pushed away from the table to stare, unseeing, out of the kitchen window, determined not to watch him demolish it with those delectable lips, determined not to watch him demolish it the way he seemed hell-bent on destroying this chance, this gift, he'd been given.

She pressed her hands to her chest. To have a sibling...

She stilled. She glanced back behind her for a second and then spun back. Rick hadn't left. He hadn't read John's letter and then stormed out. He had shared the letter with her. Rick could feign indifference and couldn't-care-less disregard all he wanted, but if he really didn't care he'd have left by now.

Her cupcakes were good, but they weren't that good.

She sat again. 'I wish I had a brother or sister.'

'And whose image would you most like them cast in?' He leaned back, hands clasped behind his head. 'Your mother's or your father's?'

She flinched. He blinked and for a moment she thought he might reach across the table to touch her. He didn't. She forced herself to laugh. 'I guess there is always that. A sibling may have provided further proof that I was the cuckoo in the nest.'

'I didn't mean it like that.'

The hell he hadn't. 'It's okay.' She made her voice wry. 'You've had a shock, so it's okay to say hurtful things to other people.'

He scrubbed a hand across his face. 'I didn't mean for it to be hurtful. I'm sorry. I just refuse to turn this into a "they-all-lived-happily-ever-after" fairy tale like you seem so set on doing.'

He didn't want to get his hopes up. She couldn't blame him for that.

He rose. 'I believe I've long outstayed my welcome.'

Nell shot to her feet too. 'But...but we haven't figured out what marigolds mean yet or—'

'I'm not sure I care, Princess.'

She opened her mouth, but he shook his head and the expression on his face had her shutting it again. 'Good girl,' he said.

Her chin shot up. 'Don't patronise me.'

He grinned a grin that made her blood heat and her knees weak and she suddenly wanted him gone. Now. 'You know where to find me if you decide to investigate this issue further.' And then she swung away to dump the used coffee grounds into the kitchen tidy. When she turned back he was gone. She sat, her heart pounding as if she'd run a race.

* * *

Rick let himself into Tash's house, his head whirling and his temples throbbing. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

What do you want to do?

He wanted to run away.

But...

He pulled up short, dragged in a breath and searched for his customary indifference, but he couldn't find it. Too many thoughts pounded at him. And one hard, implacable truth—he might not be able to do anything with the information John Cox had belatedly decided to impart. Marigolds might remain unsolved forever.

In which case he could jump in his car—now—and head north without a backward glance, without a single regret. Except...

What if Nell does work out what it means?

He had a brother or a sister. He rested his hands against his knees and tried to breathe through the fist that tightened around his chest.

'That you, Rick?'

Tash's voice hauled him upright. 'Yep, just me,' he called back, shoving aside the worst of his anger and confusion. Tash might be his best friend, but he wasn't sharing this news with anyone.

He just hoped the Princess would keep her mouth shut too.

He forced his feet down the hallway and into Tash's living room—still full of sun and summer, and all he wanted to do was close his eyes and sleep. One glance at him and Tash's eyes narrowed. 'What did Nell want?'

He swung away to peer into the fridge. 'Soda?'

'No, thanks.'

He grabbed a soda and then sauntered over to plant himself in an armchair.

Tash folded her arms. 'She's obviously pushed your buttons.'

'Nah, not really.' He shrugged. 'She wanted to know if I had the time and the inclination to do some work on Whittaker House.'

'Oh, Lord, you're going to make the Princess your next project?'

He stretched out a leg. 'I haven't decided yet.' He took a long drink. The cold liquid helped ease the burning in his throat. 'Mind you, the place is going to rack and ruin.'

'It's a shame. It's such a nice old place. Gossip has it that she only moved back in this week so she's not wasting any time getting things shipshape again.' Tash sent him one of her looks. 'Rumour has it that she's far from cash-happy at the moment.'

‘I kinda got that impression. What else does rumour say?’

Tash managed a local pub—The Royal Oak. Lots of workers from the glass factory drank there. What Tash didn’t know about local happenings wasn’t worth knowing.

‘Well, apparently there’s no love lost between Nell and her father.’

She could say that again.

‘Old Mrs Smythe-Whittaker left the house to Nell and I’m not sure how these things work, but it was left in trust for her father to manage until Nell turned twenty-five.’ Tash’s lips twisted. ‘Nell turned twenty-five earlier in the week. She moved in and...’

‘Her father moved out?’

‘Bingo.’

Before he could ask any more, Mitch came striding into the room. ‘Hey, gorgeous.’

‘Hey, doll,’ Rick murmured back, but neither Tash nor Mitch paid him the slightest attention.

Tash flew out of her chair to launch herself at the big blond detective. ‘Catch any bad guys today?’

Mitch thrust out his chest and pounded on it with one hand. ‘Loads.’

For a moment it made Rick grin. Mitch the shrewd detective and Tash the take-no-prisoners barmaid in love and flirting. A miracle of miracles.

He rose and set off back down the hallway for the front door. ‘I’m eating out tonight,’ he tossed over his shoulder.

He needed time to think.

He pushed out of the front door, his hand clenching into a fist. This whole thing could be an elaborate hoax, a nasty trick.

Or you could have a brother or a sister.

Could he really walk away from this?

He lengthened his stride but the thoughts and confusion continued to bombard him. Damn it all to hell! Why did this have to involve the Princess? She’d been trouble fifteen years ago and hard-won wisdom warned him she’d be trouble now.

There was something about her that set his teeth on edge too.

Somewhere inside him a maniacal laugh started up.

* * *

The next afternoon, Nell swiped a forearm across her brow and stared at the mountain of dishes that needed washing.

Staring at them won’t get them done. If she were going to take a half-day on Mondays then she needed to use that time productively. She started to move towards them when a knock sounded on the back door.

She spun around and then swallowed. Rick. In worn jeans and another tight black T-shirt. And with that bad-boy insolence wrapped tightly around him. She didn’t know whether to be relieved or something altogether different—like apprehensive.

She wiped her hands down her shorts. Instinct warned her that the less time she spent in Rick’s company the better. Better for her peace of mind and better for her health if the stupid way her heart leapt and surged was anything to go by. She tried to swallow back her misgivings. Her family had done this man no favours. She owed him for that.

With a sigh she waved him inside, kissing goodbye to the notion of a clean kitchen followed by a soak in a hot tub with a good book. ‘Good afternoon.’

He just nodded as he took the same seat at the table as he had the previous day.

‘Can I get you anything?’

‘No, thanks.’

Neither of them spoke and the silence grew heavy. Nell moistened her lips. ‘I...’ She couldn’t think of anything to say.

Rick's gaze speared to hers. 'Shall I tell you what occurred to me overnight?'

Her mouth dried though she couldn't have explained why. She gave a please continue shrug.

'I wondered if there was the slightest possibility that by staying here it meant John Cox had the chance to remain close to his other child?'

It took a moment for that inference to sink in. In a twisted way, she could see how he could make that leap. Without a word she went to her important documents drawer and pulled out a folder. She opened her mouth to try and explain its contents only to snap it shut. She shoved the folder at Rick instead. The contents could speak for themselves.

He stared at her for a moment and then riffled through the enclosed sheaf of papers. A frown lowered over his face even as his chin lifted. For a moment he looked like a devil. One who'd cajole with dark temptations that could only end in destruction and ruin. Her heart kicked in her chest.

She swallowed and looked away.

'This is a paternity test your father had done...twelve years ago.'

'That's correct. He arranged for that test when he and my mother divorced. As he said at the time, he had no intention of being financially responsible for a child that wasn't his.' Only the tests had shown beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was his daughter.

And that he was her father.

Rick slammed the folder shut. 'God, Nell, that man's a nightmare of a father!'

She turned back and raised an eyebrow. 'Snap.'

He rocked back and then a grin crept across those fascinating lips of his and a light twinkled in those dark eyes and some of the awkwardness between them seeped away. 'Okay, you got me there. I'll pay that.'

And then he laughed, and the laugh completely transformed him. It tempered the hard, insolent edges and made him look young and carefree. It made him breathtakingly attractive too, in a dangerous, thrilling way that had her blood surging and her pulse pounding.

She swallowed. 'On that head, though...' She nodded at the folder. 'I can't say I blame him. My mother isn't the kind of woman who has ever let the truth get in the way of a...good opportunity.'

Her mother was in the Mediterranean with husband number four the last she'd heard, which was about three times a year. Oh, yes, her family—they were the Brady Bunch all right.

Rick clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back. She wondered if he knew precisely how enticing that pose was to a woman—the broad shoulders on display, those biceps and the hard chiselled chest flagrantly defined in the tight black T-shirt angling down to a hard flat abdomen...and all in that deceptively open, easy, inviting posture.

She bet he did.

Even with all of that masculine vigour on display, it was his eyes that held her. He surveyed her until she had to fight the urge to fidget. She reached for another shrug—a pray tell, what on earth do you think you're staring at? shrug. She was pretty certain she pulled it off with aplomb, but it didn't stop him staring at her. A ghost of a smile touched his lips. 'I'm starting to get the hang of those.'

She squinted at him—a what on earth are you talking about? squint. 'I'm sorry, you've lost me.'

He lowered his arms. 'For all of these years, here I was thinking you had the best of everything.'

She flicked her hair over her shoulders. 'Of course I did. I had the best education money could buy. I had designer clothes, piano lessons and overseas holidays. I had—'

'Parents who were as good at parenting as mine.'

She swallowed. 'One shouldn't be greedy.' Or self-pitying. 'Besides, they were merely products of their own upbringing...and they had their good points.'

'Name one.'

'We've already uncovered one. They didn't betray each other so badly that I was the cuckoo they thought I might be. I'm not John's secret love child and therefore I'm not your mystery sibling.'

'Just thought I'd ask.'

She hesitated. 'I did wonder...'

'What?'

'Would your mother be able to tell you anything that might be of use?'

She didn't like to ask about Rick's mother—she'd been a prostitute. Nell had a lot of bones to pick with her parents, but she'd never had to watch her mother sell her body. She'd always known where her next meal was coming from. She'd had a warm bed to retreat to. She'd been safe. She gripped her hands together. She was very grateful for those things.

Rick shook his head. 'She developed dementia a few years ago. It's advanced rapidly. Nine times out of ten, she doesn't recognise me these days.'

Oh. Her heart burned for him. 'I'm sorry.'

He merely shrugged. 'What are you going to do?' He said it in that casual, offhand way, which only made her heart burn more fiercely.

She clapped her hands together in an attempt to brisk the both of them up. 'Well, I had another thought too. We should go and check out John's cottage. It's been empty since he went into hospital. I mean, I know it was cleaned, but maybe it'll contain some clue.'

'It could all be a hoax, you know?'

'For what purpose?' She didn't believe it was a hoax. Not for a moment. And when she made for the door, Rick rose and followed.

They picked their way through the overgrown garden—across the terrace to the lawn and then towards the far end of the block. Whittaker House had been built on generous lines in more generous times. The house and grounds sprawled over the best part of a city block. No wonder her father wanted her to sell it.

She wasn't selling! But it all needed so much attention. She bit back a sigh. It was all she could do not to let her heart slump with every step they took. It had all been so beautiful once upon a time.

'Hell, Princess, this looks more like years rather than months of neglect.'

'John was sick for a long time before he had to go into the hospice. He had a young chap in to help him, but...' She shrugged and glanced around. Her father hadn't maintained any of it. 'There are a lot of vigorous-growing perennials here that have self-seeded and gone wild. It looks worse than it is.' She crossed her fingers.

'Do you see any self-seeding marigolds?'

He'd adopted that tone again. 'I'm afraid marigolds are annuals not perennials. They need to be replanted each year.'

'Why go to all that bother?'

'For the colour and spectacular blooms. For the scents and the crazy beauty of it all. Because—'

She slammed to a halt and Rick slammed right into the back of her. 'What on earth—'

He grabbed her shoulders to steady her, but she didn't need steadying. She spun around and gripped his forearms. 'You'll find a clue where the marigolds grow.'

His face lost some of its cockiness. And a lot of its colour. She couldn't concentrate when he stared at her so intently. She sat on the edge of the nearest raised bed and rubbed her temples. 'When did I find out my mother didn't like marigolds? John told me when I wanted to plant some of my own.'

Rick sat beside her, crushing part of a rampant rosemary bush. The aroma drifted up around them.

'And why did I want to plant marigolds?' Oh, but... 'He couldn't have known, could he?'

'Couldn't have known what?'

She turned to him. 'After he chased you away that day he gave me my very own garden bed to tend.'

'And you grew marigolds?'

She shook her head. 'I wanted to, but I didn't. You see I had this old chocolate box tin and it had pictures of marigolds on it and I showed it to John and told him that's what I wanted to grow.'

Beside her, Rick stiffened. ‘A tin?’

She nodded.

‘What happened to the tin, Nell?’

‘I put all of my treasures in it and...’ But it had been a secret. John couldn’t have known. Could he?

‘What did you do with them?’

‘I buried them here in the garden. After the policeman left. I snuck out in the middle of the night and buried them when nobody could see what I was up to.’ She turned to meet his chocolate-dark eyes. ‘And I never dug it back up.’

He swallowed. ‘Okay, so all we have to do is try to find where you buried it.’ He leaned back on his hands as if he hadn’t a care in the world, but she’d seen beneath the façade now. ‘I bet you’ve long forgotten that?’

No. She remembered. Perfectly.

She leaned back on her hands too, crushing more rosemary until the air was thick with its scent. She drew a breath of it into her lungs. ‘Doesn’t that remind you of a Sunday roast?’

He didn’t say anything.

‘What are you afraid of?’ She asked the question she had no right to ask. She asked because he kept calling her Princess and it unnerved her and she wanted to unnerve him back.

‘Where I come from, Nell, Sunday roasts weren’t just a rarity; they were non-existent.’

He said her name in a way that made her wish he’d called her Princess instead.

He leaned in towards her. ‘And what am I afraid of? I’m afraid this isn’t some hoax your gardener has decided to play and that everything he’s said is true. I’m afraid I have a thirteen-year-old brother somewhere out there growing up by the scruff of his neck the way I did and with no one to give him a hand.’

Her stomach churned.

‘I’m afraid he’s going to end up in trouble. Or, worse, as a damn statistic.’

She pressed a hand to her stomach and her mouth went so dry she couldn’t swallow.

‘Is that good enough for you?’

It wasn’t good. It was horrible. Her parents might not have been all that interested in her, but she hadn’t been allowed to roam the streets unchecked or at risk of being taken advantage of. Her parents might not have been interested in her, but she had been protected.

‘I remember exactly where I buried it, Rick.’

He stared and then he half laughed. ‘You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?’

She leapt up and dusted off her shorts. ‘We’d better hope John put it back in exactly the same spot or we’re going to be spending a lot of time digging.’

She led the way to the garden shed. She grabbed a spade, secateurs and a couple of trowels. And gloves. Rick merely scoffed when she asked if he’d like a pair too. ‘On your own head be it,’ she warned. ‘We’re heading for the most overgrown part of the garden.’

He took the spade and secateurs before sweeping an elegant bow. ‘Lead the way, Princess.’

It was crazy, but it made her feel like a princess. Not a princess on a pedestal, but a flesh and blood one.

She led him across to the far side of the garden. ‘I’ll trade you a trowel for the secateurs.’ He handed them to her and she cut back canes from a wisteria vine gone mad. ‘That’s going to be a nightmare whenever I find the time to deal with it,’ she grumbled. She cut some more so he had room to move in beside her. ‘Believe it or not, there’s a garden bed there.’

She trimmed the undergrowth around it, found the corners. It wasn’t as big as she remembered, but that still didn’t make it small.

She moved into the centre of it, stomping impatiens and tea roses. She closed her eyes and shuffled three steps to the right. She took a dolly step forward and drew an X on the ground. ‘X marks the spot,’ she whispered.

CHAPTER THREE

RICK STARED AT the spot and cold sweat prickled his nape. What the hell was he doing here?

To run now, though, would reveal weakness and he never showed weakness. In the world where he’d grown up weakness could prove fatal.

Not showing weakness and acting with strength, though, were two different things. When Nell took one of the trowels from his nerveless fingers, he couldn’t do a damn thing about it. He couldn’t move to help her. He couldn’t ask her to stop.

‘The spade will be overkill, I expect. The ground is soft and although it felt like I’d dug for a long time I was only ten so I expect the tin shouldn’t be buried too deeply.’

It was only when she dropped to her knees in the dirt that Rick was able to snap back to himself. ‘Princess, you’ll get dirty.’

She grinned, but she didn’t look up. ‘I like getting mucky in the garden.’

She certainly knew how to wield a trowel.

‘Cupcakes aren’t the only things I’m good at, you know?’

‘I didn’t doubt for a moment that you’d be a gardening expert too.’ He wondered if he should climb into the garden bed and help her. Except she looked so at home and he had a feeling he’d only get in the way. ‘Can I help?’

Her grin widened. ‘Nah, you just stand there and look pretty.’

He couldn’t help it. He had to grin too.

‘I can cook other things too. I’ll cook you a Sunday roast some time and then you’ll know what I meant about the scent of rosemary.’

Something hard and unbending inside him softened a fraction. Digging in the garden, grinning and teasing him, she was the antithesis of the haughty, superior woman she’d turned into yesterday. He could see now that he’d done something to trigger that haughtiness because Nell used her supercilious shrugs and stuck her nose in the air as a shield. The same way he used his devil-may-care grins and mocking eyebrows.

As he continued to stare at her, some parts of him might be softening, but other parts were doing the exact opposite. He adjusted his stance and concentrated on getting himself back on an even keel.

He wasn’t letting a slip of a girl—any girl—knock him off balance.

‘Princess, I admire cooking and gardening skills as much as the next man, but it’s all very domestic goddessy.’ A bit old-fashioned. He was careful to keep the judgement out of his voice and the mockery from his eyebrows. He didn’t want her getting all hoity-toity again.

‘Oh, that’d be because—’

She froze. It was only for a second but he was aware of every fraction of that second—the dismay on her face, the way the trowel trembled and then the stubborn jut of her jaw. She waved a hand in the air, dismissing the rest of whatever she’d been about to say.

He frowned. What on earth...?

Metal hitting metal made them both freeze. With a gulp, Nell continued digging. Rick collapsed onto the wooden sleeper that made the border for the bed and tried to ease the pounding in his chest.

Within a few moments Nell had freed the tin, brushed the dirt from its surface along with the dirt from her knees. She dropped the trowel at Rick’s feet and settled herself beside him. The tin sat in her lap. They both stared at it as she pulled her hands free of the gloves. She reached out to trace the picture on the lid.

‘Marigolds,’ he said softly.

She nodded.

‘Why didn’t John let you plant marigolds here?’

‘Because my mother didn’t like them, remember?’

‘Nobody would’ve seen them all the way down the back here.’

She lifted a shoulder. ‘I found it was always best not to make waves if one could help it.’

‘I decided on an opposite course of action.’

She glanced up with a grin, her green eyes alive with so much impish laughter it made his chest clench. ‘You did at that. I’m going to take a leaf out of your book and fill this entire garden bed with marigolds.’

Good for her.

She held the tin out to him. ‘Would you like to do the honours?’

His mouth went dry. He shook his head. ‘They were your treasures.’ He couldn’t help adding, ‘Besides, you could be wrong and maybe John never knew about the tin.’

‘I’m not wrong.’

Her certainty had his heart beating hard and fast.

She sent him a small smile. ‘Well, here goes.’ And she prised the lid off.

An assortment of oddments met his gaze. Silly stuff one would expect a ten-year-old to treasure. And from it all she detached a small gold locket that he recognised immediately. She held it out to him and his heart gave a gigantic kick. ‘When I buried this I swore that if I ever had the chance I’d give it to you.’

‘Nell, I couldn’t—’

She dropped it in his hand. ‘Even now it brings me no joy. It reminds me of the trouble it caused. Throw it away if you want and spare me the bother.’

His hand closed about it and his heart thumped. In kid-speak their exchange of gifts had been a token of friendship. Not that the adults had seen it that way. But the locket shone as brilliantly for him now as it had back then.

‘While I keep this.’

She held up the tin aeroplane he’d given her and a laugh broke from him. He took it from her and flew it through the air the way he used to do as a boy. ‘You really did keep it.’

‘I wasn’t a defiant child. I generally did as I was told.’ Her lips twisted. ‘Or, at least, I tried to. This was the one thing I dug my heels in about.’

Along with this big old relic of a Victorian mansion. He wondered why it meant so much to her.

‘I should’ve dug my heels in harder about the rest of it too, Rick. I’m sorry I didn’t.’

He handed her back the plane. ‘Forget about it. We were just kids.’ And what chance did a timid ten-year-old have against bullying parents and glaring policemen?

‘Hey, I remember those—’ he laughed when she pulled out a host of cheap wire bangles in an assortment of garish colours ‘—the girls at school went mad for them for a while.’

‘I know and I coveted them. I managed to sneak into a Two Dollar Shop and buy these when my mother wasn’t looking, but she forbade me from wearing them. Apparently they made me look cheap and she threatened to throw them away.’

So instead Nell had buried them in this tin where no one could take them away from her...but where she’d never be able to wear them either. Not even in secret.

She dispensed quickly with a few other knick-knacks—some hair baubles and a Rubik’s Cube—along with some assorted postcards. At the very bottom of the tin were two stark white envelopes. The writing on them was black-inked capitals.

One for Nell.

One for him.

With a, ‘Tsk,’ that robbed the moment of its ominousness, she handed them both to him and then proceeded to pile her ‘treasures’ back into the tin and eased the lid back on. ‘Do we want to rip them open here or does it call for coffee?’

‘Coffee?’ His lip curled, although he tried to stop it.

‘You’re right. It’s not too early for a drink, is it?’

‘Hell, no. It has to be getting onto three o’clock.’

‘I don’t have any beer, but I do have half a bottle of cheap Chardonnay in the fridge.’

‘Count me in.’

He carried the spade, the secateurs and the letters. She carried the trowels and the tin. It touched him that she trusted him with her letter. He could simply make off with both letters and try to figure out what game John Cox was playing at. But the gold locket burned a hole in his pocket and he knew he wasn’t going anywhere.

Besides, Nell had been the one to decipher the clue and dig up the tin. So he helped her stow the garden tools and followed her across the weed-infested lawn, along the terrace and back into the kitchen. He set both letters onto the table. Nell washed her hands, collected two wine glasses and the bottle of wine.

He took the bottle, glanced at the label and grinned. ‘You weren’t joking when you said cheap, were you?’

‘Shut up and pour,’ she said cheerfully. ‘When it’s a choice between cheap wine and no wine...’

‘Good choice,’ he agreed, but a burn started up in his chest at all this evidence of the Princess fallen on hard times.

He handed her a glass, she clinked it with his and sat. He handed her the letter. She didn’t bother with preliminaries. She set her glass down, tore open the envelope, and scanned the enclosed sheet of paper.

Rick remained standing, his heart thudding.

With a sound of disgust she thrust it at him. ‘I don’t like these games.’

Rick read it.

Dear Miss Nell,

If you think he’s worth the effort, would you please pass these details on to him?

Yours sincerely,

John Cox.

She leapt up and snatched the letter back. ‘He calls you “him” and “he’s”.’ She slapped the sheet of paper with the back of her hand. ‘He doesn’t even have the courtesy to name you. It’s...it’s...’

‘It’s okay.’

She stared at him. She gave him back the letter. ‘No, it’s not.’ She took her seat again and sipped her wine. She didn’t grimace at its taste as he thought she would. In fact, she looked quite at home with her cheap wine. He’d have smiled except his letter burned a hole in his palm.

‘And just so you know,’ she added, ‘the details there are for his solicitor.’

Rick didn’t think for a moment that John had left him any money. It’d just be another hoop to jump through. Gritting his teeth, he slid a finger beneath the flap of the envelope addressed to him and pulled the letter free.

At least it was addressed to him.

Rick

If you’ve got this far then you have the approval of the only woman I’ve ever trusted and the only woman I have any time for. If you haven’t blown it, she’ll provide you with the information you’ll need for the next step of the journey.

It was simply signed John Cox.

He handed the letter to Nell so she could read it too. It seemed mean-spirited not to. She read it and handed it back. ‘Loquacious, isn’t he?’

Rick sank down into his chair.

‘The solicitor, Clinton Garside, is wily and unpleasant.’

‘Just like John Cox.’

She shook her head and then seemed to realise she was contradicting him. Based on all the evidence Rick had so far, ‘wily and unpleasant’ described John to a T. ‘I never knew this side of him. He was quiet, didn’t talk much and certainly wasn’t affectionate, but he was kind to me.’

Maybe so, but he still hadn’t let her plant marigolds.

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