



2 in 1
GREAT
VALUE

A WEDDING AT
LEOPARD TREE LODGE

LIZ FIELDING

THREE TIMES A
BRIDESMAID...

NICOLA MARSH

Cherish

Nicola Marsh
Liz Fielding
**A Wedding at Leopard Tree
Lodge / Three Times A
Bridesmaid...: A Wedding
at Leopard Tree Lodge**

Аннотация

A WEDDING AT LEOPARD TREE LODGE Liz Fielding Events planner Josie Fowler has scooped the wildest celebrity wedding in a luxury lodge hotel in Botswana! As Josie wrestles with taffeta and table plans, lodge designer and enigmatic entrepreneur Gideon McGrath's sexy smile is getting under her skin...THREE TIMES A BRIDESMAID... Nicola Marsh Another wedding invitation has landed on Eve Pemberton's doormat. Determined not to attend alone again, Eve organises a date for the day! At such short notice she's ended up with billionaire Bryce Gibson – the guy who broke a teenage Eve's heart!

Содержание

A Wedding At Leopard Tree Lodge	5
Liz Fielding	6
Nicola Marsh	7
Table of Contents	8
A Wedding at Leopard Tree Lodge	10
CHAPTER ONE	11
CHAPTER TWO	31
CHAPTER THREE	52
CHAPTER FOUR	74
CHAPTER FIVE	94
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	109

BUSINESSWOMEN TO BRIDES!

*They're usually the ones attending or planning weddings...
Now, they and their gorgeous grooms-to-be are about to take
centre stage!*

Prepare to be dazzled by exotic destinations and wedding bells
in:

A WEDDING AT LEOPARD TREE LODGE

by Liz Fielding

THREE TIMES A BRIDESMAID...

by Nicola Marsh

**He got out first, offered her his hand as if she was visiting
royalty, and walked her across to a point where there was a
clear view of the mighty Zambezi, pouring into the gorge in
a dizzying rush.**

Everywhere was overgrown with ferns and tropical plants,
dripping with moisture in the steamy atmosphere.

‘Will you kiss me, Gideon?’

Would he kiss her?

Did she have any idea what she was asking? Would he kiss
her? In a heartbeat.

Should he?

‘Be still,’ he said. Then again as, startled, she looked up at him
and he captured her face between his hands, lowered his lips to
hers. ‘Be still...’

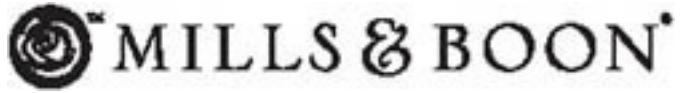
A Wedding At Leopard Tree Lodge

by

Liz Fielding
Three Times A Bridesmaid...

by

Nicola Marsh



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Table of Contents

[Cover Page](#)

[Other Books By](#)

[Excerpt](#)

[Title Page](#)

[A Wedding At Leopard Tree Lodge](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Three Times A Bridesmaid...](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Copyright](#)

A Wedding at Leopard Tree Lodge

by

Liz Fielding

Liz Fielding was born with itchy feet. She made it to Zambia before her twenty-first birthday and, gathering her own special hero and a couple of children on the way, lived in Botswana, Kenya and Bahrain—with pauses for sightseeing pretty much everywhere in between. She finally came to a full stop in a tiny Welsh village cradled by misty hills, and these days mostly leaves her pen to do the travelling. When she's not sorting out the lives and loves of her characters she potters in the garden, reads her favourite authors, and spends a lot of time wondering 'What if...?' For news of upcoming books—and to sign up for her occasional newsletter—visit Liz's website at www.lizfielding.com

CHAPTER ONE

Destination weddings offer up a host of opportunities for a ceremony with a difference...

—*The Perfect Wedding* by Serafina

March

‘WHERE?’

Josie Fowler wasn't sure which stunned her most. The location of the wedding which, despite endless media speculation, had been the best kept secret of the year, or the fact that Marji Hayes, editor of *Celebrity* magazine, was sharing it with her.

‘Botswana,’ Marji repeated, practically whispering, as if afraid that her line might be bugged. If it was, whispering wouldn't help. ‘I called Sylvie. I had hoped...’ Her voice trailed off.

‘Yes?’ Josie prompted as she used one finger to tap ‘Botswana’ into the search engine of her computer. Silly question. She knew exactly what Marji had hoped. That the aristocratic Sylvie Duchamps Smith would rush to pick up the pieces of the most talked about wedding of the year. Sylvie, however, was too busy enjoying her new baby daughter to pull Marji's wedding irons out of the fire.

‘I realise that she's still officially on maternity leave, but I had hoped that for something this big...’

Josie waited, well aware that not even a royal wedding would have tempted Sylvie away from her new husband, her new baby.

Trying to contain a frisson of excitement as she realised what this call actually meant.

‘When I called, she explained that she’s made you her partner. That weddings are now solely your responsibility.’ She couldn’t quite keep the disbelief out of her voice.

Marji was not alone in that. There had been an absolute forest of raised eyebrows in the business when Sylvie had employed a girl she’d found working in a hotel scullery as her assistant.

They’d got over it. After all, she was just a gofer. Someone to run around, do the dirty work. And she’d proved herself, become accepted as a capable coordinator, someone who could be relied on, who didn’t flap in a crisis. A couple of bigger events organisers had even tried to tempt her away from Sylvie with more money, a fancy title.

But clearly the idea of her delivering a design from start to finish was going to take some swallowing.

She’d warned Sylvie how it would be and she’d been right. She’d been a partner for three months now and while they had plenty of work to keep them busy, all of it pre-dated her partnership.

‘You’re very young for such responsibility, Josie,’ Marji suggested, with just enough suggestion of laughter to let her know that she wasn’t supposed to take offence. ‘So very...eccentric in your appearance.’

She didn’t deny it. She was twenty-five. Young in years to be a partner in an events company but as old as the hills in other ways.

And if her clothes, the purple streaks in her lion's mane hair, were not conventional, they were as much a part of her image as Sylvie's classic suits and pearls.

'Sylvie was nineteen when she launched SDS Events,' she reminded Marji. Alone, with no money, nowhere to live. All she'd known was how to throw a damn good party.

Despite their very different backgrounds, they'd had that nothingness in common and Sylvie had given her a chance when most people would have taken one look and taken a step back. Two steps if they'd known what Sylvie knew about her.

But they had worked well together. Sylvie had wooed clients with her aristocratic background, her elegance, while she was the tough working class girl who knew how to get things done on the ground. An asset who could cope with difficult locations, drunken guests—and staff; capable of stopping a potential fight with a look. And in the process she'd absorbed Sylvie's sense of style almost by osmosis. On the outside she might still look like the girl Sylvie had, against all the odds, given a chance. But she'd grabbed that opportunity with all her heart, studied design, business, marketing, and on the inside she was a different woman.

'And if I changed my appearance no one would recognise me,' she added, and earned herself another of those patronising little laughs.

'Well, yes.' Then, 'Of course there's no design involved in this job. All that was done weeks ago and at this late stage...'

In other words it was a skivvy job and no one with a 'name'

was prepared to take it on. The wretched woman couldn't have tried any harder to make her feel like the scrapings at the bottom of the barrel and Josie had to fight the urge to tell her to take her wedding and stick it.

Catching her lower lip between her teeth, she took a deep breath; she still had quite a way to go to attain Sylvie's style and grace, but this was too important to mess up.

With this wedding under her belt—even in the skivvy role—she could paint herself purple to match her hair and clients would still be scrambling to book her to plan their weddings.

Not as a stand-in for Sylvie, but for herself.

But she'd had enough with the I-really-wish-I-didn't-have-to-do-this delaying tactics.

'Can we get on, Marji? I have a client appointment in ten minutes,' she said and Emma, her newly appointed assistant, who was busy filling in details on one of the event plans that lined the walls of her small office, glanced up in surprise, as well she might since her diary was empty.

'Of course.' Then, 'I'm sure I don't have to impress upon you the need for the utmost confidentiality,' she said, making it absolutely clear in her lemon-sucking voice that she did.

Not true.

Josie had seen the build-up to the wedding of Tal Newman, one of the world's most highly paid footballers, to Crystal Blaize. The ferocious bidding war against all-comers had cost *Celebrity* a fortune—money that the couple were using to set up a charitable

trust—and the magazine was milking it for all it was worth. Hying up the secrecy of the location was all part of that. It also helped keep rival publications from planting someone on the inside to deliver the skinny on who behaved badly and grab illicit photos so that they could run spoilers.

If she let slip the location, SDS might as well shut up shop.

‘My lips are sealed,’ she said. ‘I’m not even sure where Botswana is,’ she lied. According to the screen in front of her, it was a ‘tranquil’ and ‘peaceful’ landlocked country in southern Africa.

Marji clucked at her ignorance. ‘It’s a very now destination, Josie.’

‘Is it? That information seems to have passed me by.’ But then she didn’t spend her life obsessing over the latest fads of celebrities.

‘And Crystal is such an animal-lover.’

Animals? In Africa?

‘So that would be...Elephants? Lions?’ No, smaller... ‘Monkeys?’

‘All of those, of course. But the real stars will be the leopards.’

Even with his underdeveloped human sense of smell, Gideon McGrath knew Leopard Tree Lodge was close long before the four-by-four pulled into the compound. There was a sweet, fresh green scent from the grass that reached out across the sparse bush that drew the animals from across the Kalahari, especially now as they neared the end of the dry season.

Once his pace had quickened too, his heart beating with excitement as he came to the riverbank that he had claimed as his own.

The driver who'd picked him up from the airstrip pulled into the shaded yard and he sat for a moment, gathering himself for the effort of moving.

'*Dumela, Rra!* It is good to see you!'

'Francis!'

He clasped the hand of the man who emerged from the shadows to greet him with a broad smile of welcome.

'It has been a very long time, *Rra*, but we always hoped you'd come...' His smile quickly became concern. 'You are hurt?'

'It's nothing,' he said, catching his breath as he climbed down. 'I'm a bit stiff, that's all. Too many days travelling. How is your family?' he asked, not wanting to think about the tight, agonising pain in his lower back. Or its cause.

'They are good. If you have time, they will be pleased to see you.'

'I have some books for your children,' Gideon said, turning to take his bag from the back seat. He spent half his life on the move and travelled light but, as he tried to lift it, it felt like lead.

'Leopards?' Josie repeated. 'Aren't they incredibly dangerous?'

'Oh, these are just cubs. A local man has raised a couple of orphans and he's bringing them along on the day. All you'll have to do is tie ribbons around their necks.'

‘Oh, well, that’s all right then.’ Maybe. She had a cat and even when Cleo was a kitten her claws were needle-sharp...

‘The wedding is going to be held at Leopard Tree Lodge, you see?’ Marji told her. ‘It’s a fabulous game-viewing lodge. Utter luxury in the wilderness. To be honest, I totally envy you the opportunity to spend time there.’

‘Well, golly,’ she said, as if she, too, couldn’t believe her luck.

‘You won’t even have to leave your private deck to view the big game. None of that racketing about in a four-wheel drive getting covered in dust. You can simply sit in your own private plunge pool and watch elephants cavorting below you in an oxbow lake while you sip a glass of chilled bubbly.’

‘Well, that’s a relief,’ Josie replied wryly, recognising a quote from a tourist brochure when she heard one. Marji might believe that she was offering her a luxury, all expenses paid holiday; she knew that once on site she wouldn’t have a minute to spare to draw breath, let alone dally in a plunge pool admiring the view.

Relaxation in the run-up to a wedding was the sole privilege of the bride and good luck to her. Although, with half a dozen issues of *Celebrity* to fill with pictures, even she wasn’t going to have a lot of down time before, or during, the big day.

For the person charged with the responsibility of ensuring that everything ran smoothly it was going to be a very hard day at the office, although in this instance it wouldn’t be her own calm, ordered space, where everything she needed was no more than a phone call away.

As she knew from experience, even the best organised weddings had the potential for last minute disasters and in the wilds of Botswana there would be none of the backup services she was usually able to call on in an emergency.

And it would take more than a look to stop a leopard disturbing the party. Even a baby leopard.

‘There’s nothing like being covered in dust to put a crimp in your day,’ she added as, with the ‘where’ dealt with, she confronted a rather more pressing problem.

Unless the word ‘wilderness’ was simply travel brochure hyperbole—and the reference to elephants sloshing about in the river at her feet suggested otherwise—there wasn’t going to be an international airport handy.

‘How is everyone going to get there?’

‘We’ve booked an air charter company to handle all the local transport,’ Marji assured her. ‘You don’t have to worry about that —’

‘I worry about everything, Marji.’ Including the proximity of elephants. And the damage potential of a pair of overexcited leopard cubs. ‘It’s why SDS weddings run so smoothly.’

‘Well, quite. If Sylvie’s company wasn’t so highly thought of we wouldn’t be having this conversation.’ She paused, her train of thought disrupted. ‘Where was I?’

‘Transport?’ Josie prompted, doing her best to keep a lid on her rising irritation.

‘Oh, yes. Serafina was due to fly out first thing tomorrow. You

heard what happened?’

The official version was that Serafina March, society wedding ‘designer’—nothing as common as ‘planner’ for her—and self-proclaimed ‘wedding queen’ who had been given the awesome responsibility of planning this event, had been struck down by a virus.

Insider gossip had it that Crystal had thrown a strop, declaring that she’d rather get married in a sack at the local register office than put up with another moment with ‘that snooty cow’ looking down her nose at her.

Having been looked down on by Serafina herself on more than one occasion, Josie knew exactly how she felt.

‘How is Serafina?’

‘Recovering. It’s just a shame she can’t be there, especially when she’s put her heart and soul into this wedding.’ Then, having got that off her chest, she proceeded briskly, ‘The bride’s party will be flying out the following day but Tal has a number of official engagements in the capital so he and Crystal won’t arrive until the next evening. Plenty of time for you to run through everything before they arrive so that you can iron out any last minute snags.’

‘Since there’s so little to do, maybe I could leave it until the day after tomorrow?’ Josie suggested, unable to help herself.

‘Better safe than sorry. This is going to be a fairly intimate wedding. Leopard Tree Lodge is a small and exclusive safari camp, however, so we’ve chartered a river boat to accommodate

the overflow.’

Wilderness, water and wild animals—three things guaranteed to send shivers down the spine of the average event planner. And there was also the word ‘camp’—not exactly reassuring.

No matter how ‘luxurious’ the brochure declared it to be, a tent was still a tent.

When she didn’t rush to exclaim with excitement, gush at the honour being bestowed on her, Marji said, ‘All the hard work has been done, Josie.’

All the interesting work.

The planning. The design. Choosing food, music, clothes, colour scheme, flowers. The shopping trips with a bride whose credit never ran out.

‘You just need me to ensure that everything runs smoothly,’ Josie said.

‘Uh-oh!’ Emma’s eyebrows hit her hairline as she picked up on the edge she hadn’t been able to keep out of her voice, but being patronised by Marji Hayes really was more than flesh and blood could stand.

‘Absolutely. Serafina’s organised everything down to the last detail.’ The wretched woman had a skin as thick as a rhinoceros. It would take more than an ‘edge’; it would take a damn great axe to make an impression. ‘I just need someone to ensure her design is carried through. Check that all her wonderful detail is in place so that our photographers can get great shots for the series of features we have planned. Exactly what you’d do for Sylvie.’

‘And ensure that the bride and groom have their perfect day?’ she offered, unable to stop herself from reminding Marji that this was about more than a skirmish in her circulation war with the growing number of lifestyle magazines on the market.

‘What? Oh, yes,’ she said dismissively. Then, ‘We’re running out of time on this, Josie. I’ll email the flight details and courier the files over to your office. You can read them on the plane.’

It was the opportunity of a lifetime but she’d been insulted, subtly and not so subtly, so many times in the last ten minutes that she refused to do what was expected and simply roll over.

‘To be honest,’ she said, her voice growing softer as her fingers did to her hair what she wanted to do to Marji, ‘with so little to do, I don’t understand why you need me at all. Surely one of your own staff could handle it?’ She didn’t wait for an answer but added, ‘Better still, why don’t you go yourself? Once you’ve dealt with all those little details you’ll be able to chill out in that plunge pool.’

With luck, a leopard would mistake her for lunch.

‘Oh, don’t tempt me,’ Marji replied with one of her trilling little laughs that never failed to set Josie’s teeth on edge. ‘I’d give my eye teeth to go, but I have a magazine to run. Besides, I believe these things are best left to the professionals.’

Professionals who didn’t patronise the bride...

‘I’ve promised Crystal the wedding of her dreams, Josie.’

Her dreams? Maybe.

It had no doubt started out that way, but Josie wondered how

Crystal was feeling about it now. Giddy with excitement, thrilled to be marrying the man she loved in the biggest, most lavish ceremony she, or rather Serafina March, could imagine?

Or was she frazzled with nerves and desperately wishing she and Tal had run away to Las Vegas to say their vows in private?

Most brides went through that at some point in the run-up to their wedding, usually when they were driven to distraction by family interference. Few of them had to cope with the additional strain of a media circus on their back.

‘We can’t let her down,’ Marji persisted, anxious as she sensed her lack of enthusiasm. ‘To be honest, she’s somewhat fragile. Last minute nerves. I don’t have to tell you how important this is and I believe that Crystal would be comfortable with you.’

Oh, right. Now they were both being patronised. Tarréd with the same ‘not one of us’ brush, and for a moment she was tempted to tell Marji exactly what she could do with her wedding and to hell with the consequences.

Instead, she said, ‘You’ll run a piece in the next issue of the magazine mentioning that I’m taking over?’

‘It’s Serafina’s design,’ she protested.

‘Of course. Let’s hope she’s fit enough to travel tomorrow—’

‘But we will be happy to add our thanks to you for stepping in at the last moment, Josie,’ she added hurriedly.

It was a non-committal promise at best and she recognised as much, but everyone would know, which was all that mattered. And in the end this wasn’t about her, or Marji, or even the

wedding queen herself.

If Sylvie had taught her anything, it was that no bride, especially a bride whose wedding was going to be featured in full colour for all the world to see, should be left without someone who was totally, one hundred per cent, there for her on the big day. Josie let out a long, slow breath.

‘Courier the files to my office, Marji. I’ll email you a contract.’

Her hand was shaking as she replaced the receiver and looked up. ‘Email a standard contract to Marji Hayes at *Celebrity*, Emma.’

‘Celebrity!’

‘Standard hourly rate, with a minimum of sixty hours, plus travel time,’ she continued, with every outward appearance of calm. ‘All expenses to their account. We’ve picked up the Tal Newman/Crystal Blaize wedding.’

As Emma tossed notebook and pen in the air, whooping with excitement, her irritation at Marji’s attitude quite suddenly melted away.

‘Where?’ she demanded. ‘Where is it?’

‘I could tell you,’ she replied, a broad grin spreading across her face. ‘But then I’d have to kill you.’

‘Dumela, Rra. O tsogile?’

‘Dumela, Francis. Ke tsogile.’”

Gideon McGrath replied to the greeting on automatic. He’d risen. Whether he’d risen well was another matter.

This visit to Leopard Tree Lodge had taken him well out

of his way, a day and night stolen from a packed schedule that had already taken him to a Red Sea diving resort, then on down the Gulf to check on the progress of the new dhow he'd commissioned for coastal cruising from the traditional boat-builders in Ramal Hamrah.

While he was there, he'd joined one of the desert safaris he'd set up in partnership with Sheikh Zahir, spending the night with travellers who wanted a true desert experience rather than the belly-dancer-and-dune-surfing breaks on offer elsewhere.

He was usually renewed by the experience but when he'd woken on a cold desert morning, faced with yet another airport, the endless security checks and long waits, he'd wondered why anyone would do this for pleasure.

For a man whose life was totally invested in the travel business, who'd made a fortune from selling excitement, adventure, the dream of Shangri-La to people who wanted the real thing, it was a bad feeling.

A bad feeling that had seemed to settle low in his back with a non-specific ache that he couldn't seem to shake off. One that had been creeping up on him almost unnoticed for the best part of a year.

Ever since he'd decided to sell Leopard Tree Lodge.

Connie, his doctor, having X-rayed him up hill and down dale, had ruled out any physical reason.

'What's bothering you, Gideon?' she asked when he returned for the results.

‘Nothing,’ he lied. ‘I’m on top of the world.’

It was true. He’d just closed the deal on a ranch in Patagonia that was going to be his next big venture. She shook her head as he told her about it, offered her a holiday riding with the gauchos.

‘You’re the one who needs a holiday, Gideon. You’re running on empty.’

Empty?

‘You need to slow down. Get a life.’

‘I’ve got all the life I can handle. Just fix me up with another of those muscle relaxing injections for now,’ he said. ‘I’ve got a plane to catch.’

She sighed. ‘It’s a temporary measure, Gideon. Sooner or later you’re going to have to stop running and face whatever is causing this or your back will make the decision for you. At least take a break.’

‘I’ve got it sorted.’

Maybe a night spent wrapped in a cloak on the desert sand hadn’t been his best idea, he’d decided as he’d set out for the airport and the pain had returned with a vengeance. Now, after half a dozen meetings and four more flights, the light aircraft had touched down on the dirt airstrip he’d carved out of the bush with such a light heart just over ten years ago.

It had been a struggle to climb out of the aircraft, almost as if his body was refusing to do what his brain was telling it.

His mistake had been to try.

The minute he’d realised he was in trouble, he should have

told the pilot to fly him straight back to Gabarone, where a doctor who didn't know him would have patched him up without question so that he could fly on to South America.

Stupidly, he'd believed a handful of painkillers, a hot shower and a night in a good bed would sort him out. Now he was at the mercy of the medic he retained for his staff and guests and who, having conferred with his own doctor in London, had resolutely refused to give him the get-out-of-jail-free injection.

All he'd got was a load of New Age claptrap about his body demanding that he become still, that he needed to relax so that it could heal itself. That it would let him know when it was ready to move on.

With no estimate of how long that might be.

Connie had put it rather more bluntly with her '...stop running'.

Well, that was why he was here. To stop running. He'd had offers for the Lodge in the past—offers that his board had urged him to take so that they could invest in newer, growing markets. He'd resisted the pressure. It had been his first capital investment. A symbol. An everlasting ache...

'Are there any messages, Francis?' he asked.

'Just one, *Rra.*' He set down the breakfast tray on the low table beside him, took a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and, with his left hand supporting his right wrist, he offered it to him with traditional politeness. 'It is a reply from your office.' Before he could read it, he said, 'It says that Mr Matt Benson has flown

to Argentina in your place so you have no need to worry. Just do exactly what the doctor has told you and rest.’ He beamed happily. ‘It says that you must take as long as you need.’

Gideon bit back an expletive. Francis didn’t understand. No one understood.

Matt was a good man but he hadn’t spent every minute of the last fifteen years building a global empire out of the untapped market for challenging, high risk adventure holidays for the active and daring of all ages.

Developing small, exclusive retreats off the beaten track that offered privacy, luxury, the unusual for those who could afford to pay for it.

Matt, like all his staff, was keen, dedicated, but at the end of the day he went home to his real life. His wife. His children. His dog.

There was nothing for him to go home for.

For him, this company, the empire he’d built from the ruins of the failing family business, was all he had. It was his life.

‘Can I get you anything else, *Rra*?’

‘Out of here?’ he said as he followed the path of a small aircraft that was banking over the river, watched it turn and head south. It had been a mistake to come here and he wanted to be on board that plane. Moving.

The thought intensified the pain in his lower back.

After a second night, fuming at the inactivity, he’d swallowed enough painkillers to get him to the shower, determined to leave

even if he had to crawl on his hands and knees to Reception and summon the local air taxi to pick him up.

He'd made it as far as the steps down to the tree bridge. Francis, arriving with an early morning tray, had found him hanging onto the guard rail, on his feet but unable to move up or down.

Given the choice of being taken by helicopter to the local hospital for bed rest, or remaining in the comfort and shade at Leopard Tree Lodge where he was at least notionally in control, had been a no-brainer.

Maybe the quack was right. He had been pushing it very hard for the last couple of years. He could spare a couple of days.

'Is that someone arriving or leaving?' he asked.

'Arriving,' Francis said, clearly relieved to change the subject. 'It is the wedding lady. She will be your neighbour. She is from London, too, *Rra*. Maybe you will know her?'

'Maybe,' he agreed. Francis came from a very small town where he knew everyone and Gideon had long ago learned that it was pointless trying to explain how many people lived in London. Then, 'Wedding lady?' He frowned. 'What wedding?'

'It is a great secret but Mr Tal Newman, the world's greatest footballer, is marrying his beautiful girlfriend, Miss Crystal Blaize, here at Leopard Tree Lodge, *Rra*. Many famous people are coming. The pictures are going to be in a magazine.'

As shock overcame inertia and he peeled himself off the lounge, pain scythed through him, taking his breath away.

Francis made an anxious move to help him but he waved him away as he fell back. That was a mistake too, but whether the word that finally escaped him as he collapsed against the backrest was in response to the pain or a comment on whoever had permitted this travesty of everything his company stood for was a moot point.

‘Shall I pour your tea, *Rra*?’ Francis asked anxiously.

‘I wanted coffee,’ he snapped.

‘The doctor said that you must not have...’

‘I know what he said!’

No caffeine, no stress.

Pity he wasn’t here right now.

He encouraged his staff to think laterally when it came to promoting his resorts but the Lodge was supposed to be a haven of peace and tranquillity for those who could afford to enjoy the wilderness experience in comfort.

The very last thing his guests would expect, or want, was the jamboree of a celebrity wedding scaring away the wildlife.

The last thing he wanted. Not here...

If that damn quack could see just how much stress even the thought of a wedding was causing him he’d ban that too, but having prescribed total rest and restricted his diet to the bland and boring he’d retired to the safety of Maun.

‘Tell David that I want to see him.’

‘Yes, *Rra*.’

‘And see if you can find me a newspaper.’ He was going out

of his mind with boredom.

‘The latest edition of the *Mmegi* should have arrived on the plane. I will go and fetch it for you.’

He’d been hoping for an abandoned copy of the *Financial Times* brought by a visitor, but that had probably been banned too and while it was possible that by this evening he would be desperate enough for anything, he hadn’t got to that point yet.

‘There’s no hurry.’

CHAPTER TWO

Luxurious surroundings will add to the bride and groom's enjoyment of their special day.

—*The Perfect Wedding* by Serafina

March

JOSIE, despite her many misgivings, was impressed.

Leopard Tree Lodge had been all but invisible from the air as the small aircraft had circled over the river, skimming the trees to announce their arrival.

And the dirt runway on which they'd landed, leaving a plume of dust behind them, hadn't exactly inspired confidence either. By the time they'd taxied to a halt, however, a muscular four-wheel drive was waiting to pick up both her and the cartons of wedding paraphernalia she'd brought with her. 'Just a few extras...' Marji had assured her. All the linens and paper goods had been sent on by Serafina before she had been taken ill.

The manager was waiting to greet her at the impressive main building. Circular, thatched, open-sided, it contained a lounge with a central fireplace that overlooked the river on one side. On the other, a lavish buffet where guests—kitted uniformly in safari gear and hung with cameras—helped themselves to breakfast that they carried out onto a shady, flower-decked terrace set above a swimming pool.

'David Kebalakile, Miss Fowler. Welcome to Leopard Tree

Lodge. I hope you had a good journey.'

'Yes, thank you, Mr Kebalakile.'

It had felt endless, and she was exhausted, but she'd arrived in one piece. In her book that was as good as twenty-four hours and three planes, the last with only four seats and one engine, was going to get.

'David, please. Let's get these boxes into the office,' he said, summoning a couple of staff members to deal with all the excess baggage that Marji had dumped on her, 'and then I'll show you to your tree house.'

Tree house?

Was that better than a tent? Or worse?

If you fell out of a tent at least you were at ground level, she thought, trying not to look down as she followed him across a sturdy timber walkway that wound through the trees a good ten feet from the ground.

Worse...

'We've never held a wedding at the Lodge before,' he said, 'so this is a very special new venture for us. And we're all very excited at the prospect of meeting Tal Newman. We love our football in Botswana.'

Oh, terrific.

This wasn't the slick and well practised routine for the staff that it would have been in most places and, as if that wasn't bad enough, it was the groom, rather than the bride, who was going to be the centre of attention.

The fact that the colour scheme for the wedding had been taken from the orange and pale blue strip of his football club should have warned her.

Presumably Crystal was used to it, but this was her big day and Josie vowed she'd be the star of this particular show even if it killed her.

'Here we are,' David said, stopping at a set of steps that led to a deck built among the tree tops, inviting her to go ahead of him.

Wow.

Double wow.

The deck was perched high above the promised oxbow lake but the only thing her substantial tree house—with its thatched roof and wide double doors—had in common with the tent she'd been dreading were canvas sidings which, as David enthusiastically demonstrated, could be looped up so that you could lie in the huge, romantically gauze-draped four-poster bed and watch the sun rising. If you were into that sort of thing.

'Early mornings and evenings are the best times to watch the animals,' he said. 'They come to drink then, although there's usually something to see whatever time of day or night it is.' He crossed the deck and looked down. 'There are still a few elephants, a family of warthogs.'

He turned, clearly expecting her to join him and exclaim with delight.

'How lovely,' she said, doing her best to be enthusiastic when all she really wanted to look at was the plumbing.

‘There are always birds. They are...’ He stopped. ‘I’m sorry. You’ve had a long journey and you must be very tired.’

It seemed that she was going to have to work on that one.

‘I’ll be fine when I’ve had a wake-up shower,’ she assured him. ‘Something to eat.’

‘Of course. I do hope you will find time to go out in a canoe, though. Or on one of our guided bush walks?’ He just couldn’t keep his enthusiasm in check.

‘I hope so, too,’ she said politely. Not.

She was a city girl. Dressing up in a silly hat and a jacket with every spare inch covered with pockets to go toddling off into the bush, where goodness knew what creepy-crawlies were lurking held absolutely no appeal.

‘Right, well, breakfast is being served in the dining area at the moment, or I can have something brought to you on a tray if you prefer? Our visitors usually choose to relax, soak up the peace, after such a long journey.’

‘A tray would be perfect, thank you.’

The peace would have to wait. She needed to take a close look at the facilities, see how they measured up to the plans in the file and check that everything on Serafina’s very long list of linens and accessories of every kind had arrived safely. But not before she’d sluiced twenty-four hours of travel out of her hair.

‘Just coffee and toast,’ she said, ‘and then, if you could spare me some time, I’d like to take a look around. Familiarise myself with the layout.’

‘Of course. I’m at your command. Come to the desk when you’re ready and if I’m not in my office someone will find me. In the meantime, just ring if you need anything.’

The minute he was gone, she took a closer look at her surroundings.

So far, they’d done more than live up to Marji’s billing. The bed was a huge wooden-framed super king with two individual mattresses, presumably for comfort in the heat. It still left plenty of room for a sofa, coffee tables and the desk on which she laid her briefcase beside a folder that no doubt contained all the details of what was on offer.

Those bush walks and canoe trips.

No, thanks.

Outside, there was the promised plunge pool with a couple of sturdy wooden deck loungers and a small thatched gazebo shading a day bed big enough for two. Somewhere to lie down when the excitement got too much? Or maybe make your own excitement when the peace needed shaking up—that was if you had someone to get excited with.

The final touch was a second shower that was open to the sky.

‘Oh, very “you Tarzan, me Jane”,’ she muttered.

To the front there were a couple of director’s chairs where you could sit and gaze across the oxbow lagoon where the family of elephants had the same idea about taking a shower.

All she needed now was the bubbly, she thought, smiling as a very small elephant rolled in the mud, while the adults used

their trunks to fling water over their backs. Kids. They were all the same...

Looking around, she could see why *Celebrity* was so keen. People were crazy about animals and the photographs were going to be amazing. But, while the place had 'honeymoon' stamped all over it, she wasn't so sure about the wedding.

It had required three aircraft to get her here and the possibilities for disaster were legion.

She shook her head, stretched out cramped limbs in the early morning sunshine. She'd worry about that when it happened and, after one last look around, took herself inside to shower away the effects of the endless journey, choosing the exquisitely fitted bathroom over the temptations of the louche outdoor shower.

She was here to work, not play.

Ten minutes later, having pampered herself with the delicious toiletries that matched the 'luxury' label, she wrapped herself in a snowy bathrobe and went in search of a hairdryer.

Searching through cupboards and drawers, all she found was a small torch. Not much use. But, while she had been in the bathroom, her breakfast tray had arrived and she gave up the search in favour of a caffeine fix. Not that David had taken her 'just coffee and toast' seriously.

In an effort to impress, or maybe understanding what she needed better than she did herself, he had added freshly squeezed orange juice, a dish of sliced fresh fruit, most of which she didn't recognise, and a blueberry muffin, still warm from the oven.

She carried the tray out onto the deck, drank the juice, buttered a piece of toast, then poured a cup of coffee and stood it on the rail while she ruffled her fingers through her hair, enjoying the rare pleasure of drying it in the sun.

It was her short punk hairstyle as much as her background that had so scandalised people like Marji Hayes when Sylvie had first given her a job.

Young, unsure of herself, she'd used her hair, the eighteen-hole Doc Martens, scary make-up and nose stud as armour. A 'don't mess with me' message when she was faced with the kind of hotels and wedding locations where she'd normally be only allowed in the back door.

As she'd gained confidence and people had got to know her, she'd learned that a smile got her further than a scowl, but by then the look had become part of her image. As Sylvie had pointed out, it was original. People knew her and if she'd switched to something more conventional she'd have had to start all over again.

Admittedly the hair was a little longer these days, an expensively maintained mane rather than sharp spikes, the nose stud a tiny amethyst, and her safety pin earrings bore the name Zandra Rhodes, who was to punk style what Coco Chanel had been to business chic. And her make-up, while still individual, still her, was no longer applied in a manner to scare the horses.

But while she could manage with a brush and some gel to kill the natural curl and hold up her hair, the bride, bridesmaids

and any number of celebrities, male and female, would be up the oxbow lagoon without a paddle unless they had the full complement of driers, straighteners and every other gadget dear to the crimper's heart.

Something to check with David, because if it wasn't just an oversight in her room they'd have to be flown in and she fetched her laptop from her briefcase and added it to her 'to do' list.

She'd barely started before she got a 'battery low' warning.

Her search for a point into which she could plug it to recharge proved equally fruitless and that sent her in search of a telephone so that she could ring the desk and enquire how on earth she was supposed to work without an electrical connection.

But, while David had urged her to 'ring', she couldn't find a telephone either. And, ominously, when she took out her mobile to try that, there was no signal.

Which was when she took a closer look at her room and finally got it. Fooled by the efficient plumbing and hot water, she had assumed that the fat white candles sitting in glass holders were all part of the romance of the wilderness. On closer inspection, she realised that they were the only light source and that the torch might prove very useful after all.

Wilderness. Animals. Peace. Silence. Back to nature.

This was hubris, she thought.

She had taken considerable pleasure in the fact that Marji Hayes had, through gritted teeth, been forced to come to her for help.

This was her punishment.

There had been no warning about the lack of these basic facilities in the planning notes and she had no doubt that Marji was equally in the dark, but she wasn't about to gloat about the great Serafina March having overlooked something so basic. She, after all, was the poor sap who'd have to deal with it and, digging out the pre-computer age backup—a notebook and pen—she settled herself in the sun and began to make a list of problems.

Candlelight was the very least of them. Communication was going to be her biggest nightmare, she decided as she reached for the second slice of toast—there was nothing like anxiety to induce an attack of the munchies. As she groped for it there was a swish, a shriek and, before she could react, the plate had crashed to the deck.

She responded with the kind of girly shriek that she'd have mocked in anyone else before she saw the small black-faced monkey swing onto the branch above her.

'Damn cheek!' she declared as it sat there stuffing pieces of toast into its mouth. Then, as her heart returned to something like its normal rate, she reached for a sustaining swig of coffee. Which was when she discovered that it wasn't just the monkey who had designs on her breakfast.

'Is that coffee you're drinking?'

Letting out the second startled expletive in as many minutes as she spilled hot coffee on her foot, she spun to her left, where the neighbouring tree house was half hidden in the thickly cloaked

branches.

‘It was,’ she muttered, mopping her foot with the edge of her robe.

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.’

The man’s voice was low, gravelly and rippled over her skin like a draught, setting up goose bumps.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded, peering through the leaves. ‘Where are you?’

‘Lower.’

She’d been peering across the gap between them at head height, expecting to see him leaning against the rail, looking out across the water to the reed-filled river beyond, doing his David Attenborough thing.

Dropping her gaze, she could just make out the body belonging to the voice stretched out on one of those low deck loungers.

She could only see tantalising bits of him. A long, sinewy bare foot, the edge of khaki shorts where they lay against a powerful thigh, thick dark hair, long enough to be stirred by a breeze coming off the river. And then, as the leaves stirred, parted for a moment, a pair of eyes that were focused on her so intently that for a moment she was thrown on the defensive. Ambushed by the fear waiting just beneath the surface to catch her off guard. The dread that one day someone would see through the carefully constructed shell of punk chic and recognise her for what she really was.

Not just a skivvy masquerading as a wedding planner but someone no one would let inside their fancy hotel, anywhere near their wedding, if they could see inside her head.

‘Coffee?’ he prompted.

She swallowed. Let out a slow careful breath.

Stupid...

No one knew, only Sylvie, and she would never tell. It was simply lack of sleep doing things to her head and, gathering herself, she managed to raise her cup in an ironic salute.

‘Yes, thanks.’

Without warning, his mouth widened in a smile that provoked an altogether different sensation. One which overrode the panicky fear that one day she’d be found out and sent a delicious ripple of warmth seeping through her limbs. A lust at first sight recognition that even at this distance set alarm bells ringing.

Definitely her cue to go inside, get dressed, get to work. She had no time to waste talking to a man who thought that all he had to do was smile to get her attention.

Even if it was true.

She didn’t do holiday flirtations. Didn’t do flirtations of any description.

‘Hold on,’ he called as she turned away, completely oblivious to, or maybe choosing to ignore her ‘not interested’ response to whatever he was offering. Which was about the same as any man with time on his hands and nothing but birds to look at. ‘Won’t you spare a cup for a man in distress?’

‘Distress?’

He didn’t sound distressed. Or look it. On the contrary, he had the appearance of a man totally in control of his world. Used to getting what he wanted. She met them every day. Wealthy, powerful men who paid for the weddings and parties that SDS Events organised. The kind of men who were used to the very best and demanded nothing less.

She groaned at falling for such an obvious ploy. It wouldn’t have happened if she’d had more than catnaps for the last twenty-four hours. But who could sleep on a plane?

‘The kitchen sent me some kind of ghastly herbal tea,’ he said, taking full advantage of her fatal hesitation.

‘There’s nothing wrong with herbal tea,’ she replied. ‘On the contrary. Camomile is excellent for the nerves. I thoroughly recommend it.’

She kept a supply in the office for distraught brides and their mothers. For herself when faced with the likes of Marji Hayes. Men who got under her skin with nothing more than a smile.

There was a pack in the bridal emergency kit she carried with her whenever she was working and she’d have one now but for the fact that if she were any calmer, she’d be asleep.

‘I’d be happy to swap,’ he offered.

Despite her determination not to be drawn into conversation, she laughed, as no doubt she was meant to.

‘No, you’re all right,’ she said. ‘I’m good.’

Then, refusing to allow a man to unsettle her with no more

than a look—she was, she reminded herself, now a partner in a prestigious event company—she surrendered.

After all, she had a pot full of good coffee that she wasn't going to drink. And unless he was part of the wedding party—and, as far as she knew, no one was arriving until tomorrow—he'd be gone by morning.

'But if you're desperate you're welcome to come over and help yourself.'

'Ah, there's the rub,' he said before she could take another step towards the safety of the interior, leaving him to take it or leave it while she got on with the job she'd come here to do. 'The mind is willing enough, but the back just isn't listening. I'd crawl over there on hot coals for a decent cup of coffee if it were physically possible, but as it is I'm at your mercy.'

'You're hurt?' Stupid question. If he couldn't make the short distance from his deck to hers there had to be something seriously wrong. She would have rung for room service if there had been a bell. Since that option was denied her, she stuck her notebook in the pocket of her robe, picked up the coffee pot and said, 'Hang on, I'll be right there.'

His tree house was at the end of the bridge, the furthest from the main building. The one which, according to the plan she'd been given, had been allocated to Crystal and Tal as their bridal suite.

Definitely leaving tomorrow, then.

There was a handbell at the foot of the steps and she jangled

it, called, 'Hello,' as she stepped up onto his deck.

Then, as she turned the corner and took the full impact of the man stretched out on the lounge—with not the slightest sign of injury to keep him there—she came to an abrupt halt.

Even from a distance it had been obvious that he was dangerously good-looking. Up close, he looked simply dangerous.

He had a weathered tan, the kind that couldn't be replicated in a salon and never entirely faded, even in the dead of winter. And the strength of his chin was emphasized by a 'shadow' that had passed the designer stubble stage and was heading into beard territory.

She'd already experienced the smile from twenty metres but he wasn't smiling now. On the contrary, his was a blatantly calculating look that took in every inch of her. From her damp hair, purple-streaked and standing on end where she'd been finger-drying it, her face bereft of anything but a hefty dose of moisturiser, to her bare feet, with a knowingness that warned her he was aware that she was naked beneath the robe.

Worse, the seductive curve of his lower lip sparked a heat deep within her and she knew that he was far more deadly than any of the wild animals that were the main attraction at Leopard Tree Lodge.

At least to any woman who didn't have her heart firmly padlocked to her chest.

Resisting the urge to pull the robe closer about her and tighten

the belt, betraying the effect he had on her, she walked swiftly across the deck and placed the coffee pot on the table beside him.

‘Emergency coffee delivery,’ she said, with every intention of turning around and leaving him to it.

Gideon had watched her walk towards him.

Until ten minutes ago, he would have sworn he wasn’t in the mood for company, particularly not the company of a woman high on getting her man to sign up for life—or at least until she was ready to settle for half his worldly goods. But then the tantalising scent of coffee had wafted towards him.

Even then he might have resisted if he hadn’t seen this extraordinary woman sitting on the deck, raking her fingers through her hair in the early morning sun.

If he had given the matter a second’s thought, he would have assumed anyone called Crystal to be one of those pneumatic blondes cloned to decorate the arms of men who were more interested in shape than substance when it came to women.

Not that he was immune. Shape did it for him every time.

But she wasn’t blonde. There was nothing obvious or predictable about her. Her hair was dramatically black and tipped with purple and her strong features were only prevented from overwhelming her face by a pair of large dark eyes. And while her shape was blurred by the bulky robe she was wearing, she was certainly on the skinny side; there were no artificially enhanced curves hidden even in that abundance of white towelling.

In fact she was so very far from what he would have expected

that his interest had been unexpectedly aroused. Rather more than his interest if he was honest; a sure sign that his brain was under-occupied but it certainly took his mind off his back.

An effect that was amplified as she stepped up onto his deck and paused there for a moment.

Straight from the shower, her face bare of make-up, her hair a damp halo that hadn't seen a comb, without sexy clothes or high heels, it had to be the fact that she was naked under that robe that momentarily squeezed the breath from his chest as she'd walked towards him.

'You're an angel, Miss Blaize,' he said, collecting himself.

'Not even close,' she replied.

She'd worked hard to scrub the inner city from her voice, he judged, but it was still just discernible to someone with an ear for it.

'On either count,' she added. 'I'm sorry to disappoint, but I'm plain Josie Fowler.'

She wasn't the bride?

Nor was she exactly plain but what his mother would have described as 'striking'. And up close he could see that those dark eyes were a deep shade of violet that exactly matched the highlights in her hair, the colour she'd painted both finger and toenails.

'Who said I was disappointed, plain Josie Fowler?' he said, ignoring the little leap of gratification that she wasn't Crystal Blaize. It was her coffee he wanted, not her. 'I asked if you'd

share your coffee and here you are. That makes you an angel in my eyes.'

'You're easily satisfied...?'

On the contrary. According to more than one woman of his acquaintance, he was impossible to please—or maybe just impossible—but right now any company would be welcome. Even a big-eyed scarecrow with purple hair.

'Gideon McGrath,' he said in answer to the unvoiced question. Offering her his hand.

She hesitated for the barest moment before she stepped close enough to take it, but her hand matched her features. It was slightly too large for true femininity, leaving him with the feeling that her body hadn't quite grown to match her extremities. But her grip was firm enough to convince him that, apart from the contact lenses—no one had eyes that colour—its owner was the real thing.

'Forgive me for not getting up, but if I tried you'd have to pick me up off the deck.'

'In that case, please don't bother. One of us with a bad back is quite enough. Enjoy your coffee,' she said, taking a clear step back.

'Would you mind pouring it for me? It's a bit of a stretch,' he lied. But he didn't want her to go.

'Bad luck,' she said, turning to the tray and bending to fill his cup. 'Especially when you're on holiday.' Then, glancing back at him, 'What on earth made you think I was Crystal Blaize?'

Her hair, drying quickly as the sun rose, began to settle in soft tendrils around her face. And he caught the gleam of a tiny purple stud in her nose.

Who was she? What was she? Part of the media circus surrounding the coming wedding?

‘One of the staff called you the “the wedding lady”?’ he replied, pitching his answer as a question.

‘Oh, right. Milk, sugar?’ she asked, but not bothering to explain. Then, looking over the tray, ‘Actually, that would be just milk or milk. There doesn’t appear to be any sugar.’ She sighed as she straightened. ‘I was assured that this place was the last word in luxury and to be sure it looks beautiful...’

‘But?’

‘There’s no power point or hairdryer in my room, no sugar on your tray and no telephone to call the desk and tell them about it, despite the fact that David told me to ring for anything I needed. I can’t even get a signal on my mobile phone.’

‘You won’t. The whole point of Leopard Tree Lodge is to get away from the intrusion of modern life, not bring it with you,’ he said, totally ignoring the fact that he’d been fuming about the same thing just minutes before.

Well, obviously not the hairdryer. But he could surely do with a phone signal right now, if only to reassure himself that this was a one-off. That someone in marketing hadn’t decided that weddings were the way to go.

Since he was the one who’d laid out the ground rules before

a single stone had been laid or piece of timber cut, however, he could hardly complain.

But it occurred to him that if 'plain Josie Fowler' was with the wedding party, she would be given free run of the communications facilities and, if he played his cards right, she'd be good for a lot more than coffee.

'The electricity to heat the water is supplied by solar energy,' he explained, 'but it doesn't run to electrical appliances.'

'Once I'd clocked the candles, I managed to work that out for myself,' she replied. 'The escape from reality thing. Unfortunately, I'm here to work. If I was mad enough to come here for a holiday I'd probably feel quite differently.'

Clearly that prospect was as unlikely as a cold day in hell.

'You don't like it?'

'I'd like it better if it was beside a quiet bay, with a soft white beach and the kind of sea rich people pay to swim in.'

'This is supposed to be a work-free zone,' he pointed out, more than a touch irritated by her lack of enthusiasm. He put all his heart and a lot more into building his hotels, his resorts, some of them in exactly the kind of location she described.

But this had been his first. He loved it and hated it in equal measure, but he had the right.

'For others, maybe,' she retaliated, putting her hand to the small of her back and stretching out her spine, 'but for the next few days it's going to be twenty-four/seven for me.'

'Sore back?' he asked.

‘Just a bit. Is it catching?’ she asked with a wry smile.

‘Not as far as I know.’

Maybe.

Her back hadn’t seized up—yet—but just how many of his guests arrived feeling as if they were screwed up into knots? Zahir had built a very profitable spa on the coast at Nadira, where most of his travellers chose to spend a couple of days after the rigours of the desert. Would that work here, too? Massage, pampering treatments, something totally back to nature...

There was plenty to keep the dedicated naturalist happy. Canoe trips, bush walks, birdwatching, but big game viewing was the big attraction and that was primarily a dawn and dusk event.

Not that he was interested, but it would be useful to mention the possibilities for expansion when it came to negotiations with potential buyers.

‘So, tell me, what’s the deal with the herbal tea and no sugar?’ she asked.

‘It’s a mystery,’ he lied. ‘Unless the ants have got into the stores.’

‘Ants?’

‘Big ones.’ He held thumb and forefinger apart to demonstrate just how big.

Her eyes widened a fraction. ‘You’re kidding?’

He said nothing. There were ants that big but the storeroom had been designed and constructed to keep them out.

She had, however, been rather dismissive of Leopard Tree

Lodge. Worse, she was on a mission to disrupt it.

Protecting the unspoilt places where he built his resorts from pollution of every kind—including noise—had been high on his agenda from the outset. And, in his admittedly limited experience, weddings tended to be very noisy affairs.

Unfortunately, *Celebrity* would have a contract and wouldn't hesitate to sue him and his company for every lost penny if he messed with their big day. And that would be small beer compared to compensation for distress to the bride, the groom, their families, the bridesmaids...

He was stuck with the wedding, so tormenting the woman he now realised was the wedding planner was about as good as it was going to get.

CHAPTER THREE

A wedding is a day to spend with friends...

—*The Perfect Wedding* by Serafina

March

THE WEDDING PLANNER, however, refused to fulfil the role assigned.

There was no girly squeal at the thought of giant ants munching their way through the sugar supply. No repeat of the shriek provoked by the raid on her breakfast by a thieving monkey.

She merely shook her head, as if he'd done no more than confirm her worst fears, took a small black notebook out of her robe pocket, wrote something in it and then returned it to her pocket before turning back to the tray.

'There's a little pot of honey, here,' she said, picking it up and showing it to him. 'According to my partner, it actually tastes better in coffee as well as being healthier than refined sugar.'

'That'll be fine. I don't want milk.' He watched her open the pot, then said, 'Partner?'

From the way Francis had spoken, he'd assumed she was on her own. He hadn't noticed anyone with her, but he hadn't been interested enough to look until the scent of coffee had reached him.

'Is he with you?'

‘She.’ She stirred a spoonful of honey into his coffee. Then, realising what kind of partner he meant, she added, ‘Sylvie’s my business partner. And no. She’s got a project of her own keeping her busy right now.’

The thought widened her mouth into a smile that momentarily lit up her face, transforming the ‘striking’ into something else. Not beauty—her features were not classically proportioned. It was nothing he could put a name to. He only knew that he wanted to see it again.

‘Not that she’d have come with me even if she was free. Weddings are my department.’ Then, as if aware that she hadn’t made it clear, ‘I’m an events planner.’

‘I’d just about worked that out. It was just that when Francis said you were the “wedding lady” I assumed that you were the bride.’

‘Not in this life,’ she said matter-of-factly as she handed him the cup. ‘My role is simply to deliver the wedding on time, on budget, with no hitches. Will that do?’ she asked as he sipped it and, when he smiled, made another move to go.

‘Stay. Sit down,’ he said with a gesture at the lounge beside him.

‘Do you always issue invitations as an order?’ she asked, ignoring the invitation.

‘On the contrary, I always issue orders as an invitation.’ Then, before she could walk away—he couldn’t remember the last time he’d had to work this hard to keep a woman’s attention; when

he'd wanted to—he said, 'Simply?'

'Sorry?'

'You think delivering a wedding here will be simple?'

That earned him a smile of his own. A slightly wry one, admittedly, with one corner of her mouth doing all the work and drawing attention to soft, full lips.

'Weddings are never simple,' she said, perching on the edge of the lounge rather than stretching out beside him as he'd hoped. Keen to be off and conquering worlds. No prizes for guessing who that reminded him of. 'Certainly not this one.'

'But you're the wedding lady,' he reminded her. 'It was your bright idea to have the wedding here.'

'You don't approve the choice of location?' she asked, her head tilting to one side. Interested rather than offended.

He shrugged without thinking and as he caught his breath she moved swiftly to steady the cup with one hand, placing her other on his shoulder.

'Are you all right?' she said.

No. Actually, far from all right.

As she'd leaned forward her robe had gaped to offer him a tantalising glimpse of the delights it was supposed to conceal. Her breasts were not large, but they were smooth, invitingly creamy and, without doubt, all her own and he was getting an overload of stimulation. Pain and pleasure in equal measure.

'A noisy celebrity wedding doesn't seem to fit the setting,' he said and, doing his best to ignore both, especially the warmth of

her palm spreading through him, he looked up.

Her face was close enough to see the fine down that covered her fair, smooth skin. Genuine concern in those extraordinary eyes. But what held his attention was a faint white scar that ran along the edge of her jaw. It would, under normal circumstances, have been covered by make-up, but Josie had come on her errand of mercy without stopping to apply the mask that women used to conceal their true selves from the outside world.

No make-up. No designer clothes.

It left her more naked than if she'd stripped off her robe and he had to clench his hand to stop himself from reaching out, tracing the line of it from just beneath her ear to her chin as if he could somehow erase it, erase the memory of the pain it must have caused her, with his thumb.

'What about the other guests who are here to watch the wildlife?' he demanded, rather more sharply than he'd intended as he sought to distance himself. 'Don't they get any consideration?'

'There won't be any,' she said, removing her hand as she sat back, distancing herself. Leaving a cold spot where it had been.

'Exactly my point.'

'No, I meant that there won't be any other guests, Gideon. We've taken over the entire resort for the wedding so we won't be disturbing anyone.'

'Apart from the animals. Every room?'

'And the rest. We've got a river boat coming to take the

overflow.’

‘Well, I hate to be the one to say “I told you so”, but here comes your first complication. I’m not going anywhere.’

‘Then you’re going to have to bivouac in the bush because you’re certainly not staying here,’ she replied.

He didn’t bother to argue with her. She’d find out just how immovable he could be soon enough.

‘Did you get a good discount for block booking?’ he asked.

‘What?’ She shook her head. ‘There’s nothing discount about this wedding but, since I wasn’t part of the negotiations, I couldn’t say what financial arrangements were made with the owners. I was brought in at the last minute when the original wedding planner had to pull out. Not that it’s any of your business,’ she added.

‘If it had been your call?’ he pressed. ‘Would you have chosen Leopard Tree Lodge?’

‘The venue is the bride’s decision,’ she replied. Then, with the smallest of shrugs, ‘I might have tried to talk her out of it. Not that the location isn’t breathtaking,’ she assured him. ‘The drama of flying in over the desert and then suddenly seeing the green of the Okavango delta spread out below you, the gleam of water amongst the reeds. The river...’

She was going through the motions, he realised. Talking to him, but her brain was somewhere else. No doubt working out the implications of a cuckoo in the nest.

‘The photographs are going to be breathtaking,’ she said,

making an effort. ‘Any special deal that *Celebrity* managed to hammer out of the company that owns this place is going to be cheap in return for the PR hit. Six weeks of wall-to-wall coverage in the biggest lifestyle magazine in the UK. Well, five. The first week is devoted to the hen weekend.’

Undoubtedly. A full house as well as a ton of publicity. Whoever it was on his staff who’d negotiated this deal had done a very good job. The fact that he or she hadn’t brought it to his attention in the hope of earning a bonus suggested that they knew what his reaction would have been.

Not that they had to. His role was research and development, not the day-to-day running of things. No doubt they were simply waiting for the jump in demand to prove their point for him. And earn them a bonus.

Smart thinking. It was just what he’d have done in their position.

‘If the setting is so great, what’s your problem with it?’ he asked.

It was one thing for him to hate the idea. Quite another for someone to tell him that it was all wrong for her big fancy media event.

‘In my experience there’s more than enough capacity for disaster when it comes to something in which such strong emotions are invested, without transporting bride, groom, a hundred plus guests, photographers, a journalist, hair and make-up artists, not to mention all their kit and caboodle six thousand

miles via three separate aircraft. One of them so small that it'll need a separate trip just for the wedding dress.'

'You're exaggerating.'

'Probably,' she admitted. 'But not by much.'

'No. And that's another problem,' he said, seizing the opening she'd given him. 'It's a gift to the green lobby. They'll use the high profile of the event to get their own free PR ride over the carbon footprint involved in transporting everyone halfway round the world just so that two people can say "I do".'

'You think they should have chosen the village church?'

'Why not?'

'Good question,' she said. 'So, tell me, Gideon McGrath, how did you get here? By hot-air balloon?'

For a man who probably flew more miles in a year than most people did in a lifetime that sounded very appealing and he told her so.

'Unfortunately, there is no way of making a balloon take you where you want to go.'

'Maybe the trick is to want to go where the balloon takes you,' she replied.

'That's a bit too philosophical for me.'

'Really? Well, you can stop worrying. Tal Newman's PR people have anticipated the negative reaction and he's going to offset the air travel involved by planting a sizeable forest.'

'Where?' he asked, his interest instantly piqued. A lot of his clients offset their travel, but maybe he could make it easy

for them by offering it as part of the package. Do more. Put something back, perhaps. Something meaningful...

‘The forest?’ She shook her head. ‘Sorry, that information is embargoed until the day before the wedding.’

‘In other words, you don’t know.’

‘No idea,’ she admitted. ‘Everything about this wedding is on a “need to know” basis. Not that you could call anyone and tell them.’ She thought about that and added, ‘You know it’s possible that the lack of communication may be one of the reasons *Celebrity* seized on this location. Without a signal, there’s no chance of the guests, or staff, sending illicit photographs to rival magazines and newspapers via their mobile phones so that they can run spoilers.’

‘I thought you said the location was the bride’s call?’

‘It is for my brides but this isn’t just a wedding, it’s a media event. Of course Crystal apparently loves animals so it fits the image.’

He snorted derisively.

‘Any animals she sees here are going to be wild and dangerous—especially the furry ones. She’d have done better getting married in a petting zoo.’

‘You might say that,’ she replied with a deadstraight face. ‘I couldn’t possibly comment.’ Then she took out her notebook and jotted something down. ‘But thanks for the idea.’

He laughed, jerking the pain in his back into life.

Josie’s hand twitched as if to reach out again, but she closed

it tight about her pen and he told himself that he was glad. He preferred his relationships physical, uncomplicated. That way, everyone knew where they were. The minute emotions, caring got involved, they became dangerous. Impossible to control. With limitless possibilities for pain.

‘You don’t believe in any of this, do you?’ he said, guarding himself against regret. ‘You provide the flowers and frills and fireworks but underneath you’re a cynic.’

‘The flowers and frills,’ she replied, ‘but it was stipulated by the resort that there should be no fireworks.’

‘Well, that’s a relief. You never know which way a startled elephant will run.’

‘That’s an image I could have done without,’ she said. ‘But, since you won’t be here, there’s no need to concern yourself. How was the coffee?’

Gideon looked at his empty cup. ‘Do you know, I was so absorbed by all this wedding talk that I scarcely noticed.’ Holding it out for a refill, he said, ‘I’ll concentrate this time.’

Josie replenished it without a word, then leaned forward to stir in another spoonful of honey.

‘Enough?’ she asked, raising long, naturally dark lashes to look questioningly at him.

‘Perfect,’ he said as he was offered a second glimpse of her entrancing cleavage. A second close-up of that faint scar.

Was it a childhood fall? A car accident? He tried to imagine what might have caused such an injury.

‘So, what have you actually done to your back?’ she asked, distracting him. ‘Did you get into a tussle with a runaway elephant? Wrestle an alligator? Total a four-by-four chasing a rhino?’

‘Actually, since we’re in Africa, that would be a crocodile,’ he pointed out, sipping more slowly at the second cup. Savouring it. Making it last. He didn’t want her to rush off. ‘The creatures you should never smile at.’

‘Sorry?’

‘It’s a song. *Never smile at a crocodile...*’ As he sang the words, he felt the tug of the past. Where the hell had that come from?

‘*Peter Pan,*’ she said. ‘Forgive me, but I wouldn’t have taken you for a fan.’

He shrugged without thinking, but this time it didn’t catch him so viciously. Maybe the doc was right. He just needed to relax. Spend some time talking about nothing much, to someone who didn’t want something from him.

Apart from his room.

Obviously a woman at the top of her field in the events industry—and she had to be good or she wouldn’t be in charge of Tal Newman’s high profile wedding—would have that kind of easy ability to talk to anyone, put them at their ease. He’d only been talking to her for a few minutes and already he’d had two good ideas.

Even so.

Most women he met had an agenda. Hers was to evict him

and while, just an hour ago, he would have been her willing accomplice, just the thought of getting on a plane tightened the pain.

She might not be a babe, nothing like the women he dated when he could spare the time. Who never lasted more than a month or two, because he never could spare the time, refused to take the risk...

What mattered was that she had access to coffee, the little pleasures that made the wheels of life turn without squeaking, and she would have that vital contact with the outside world.

The fact that she was capable of stringing an intelligent sentence together and making him laugh—well, smile, anyway; laughing, as he'd discovered, was a very bad idea—was pure bonus.

'My father was into amateur dramatics,' he told her. 'He put on a show for the local kids every Christmas.'

'Oh, right.' For just a moment she seemed to freeze, then she pasted on a smile that even on so short an acquaintance he knew wasn't the real thing. 'Well, that must have been fun. Were you Peter?' She paused. 'Or were you Captain Hook?'

Something about the way she said that suggested she thought Hook was more his thing.

'My father played Hook. I didn't get involved.' One fantasist in the family was more than enough.

She lifted her eyebrows a fraction, but kept whatever she was thinking to herself and said, 'So? Despite the paternal advice, did

you smile at one?’

‘Nothing that exciting. Damn thing just seized up on me. I was planning to leave yesterday, but apparently I’m stuck here until it unseizes itself,’ he said, firing a shot across her assumption that he would be leaving any time soon.

‘That must hurt,’ she said, her forehead puckering in a little frown. ‘Have you seen a doctor?’

Good question.

She was going to be responsible for the health and safety of a hundred plus people. If anyone hurt themselves—and weddings were notoriously rowdy affairs—she needed to know there was help at hand.

Or maybe she was finally getting it. What his immovability meant in terms of her ‘block booking’.

‘There’s a doctor in Maun. He flew up yesterday, spoke to my doctor in London and then ordered complete rest. According to him, this little episode is my body telling me to be still.’ He made little quote marks with his fingers around the ‘be still’. He wouldn’t want her, or anyone else, thinking he said things like that.

‘It’s psychological?’

Something about the way she said that, no particular shock or surprise, suggested that it wasn’t the first time she’d encountered the condition.

‘That’s what they’re implying.’

‘My stepfather suffered from the same thing,’ she said. ‘His

back seized up every time someone suggested he get a job.’

She said it with a brisk, throwaway carelessness that declared to the world that having a layabout for a stepfather mattered not one jot. But her words betrayed a world of hurt. And went a long way to explaining that very firm assertion—strange for a woman whose life revolved around it—that marriage wasn’t for her.

‘I didn’t mean to imply that that’s your problem,’ she added with a sudden rush that—however unlikely that seemed—might have been embarrassment.

‘I promise you that it’s not,’ he assured her. ‘On the contrary. It’s made worse by the fact that I’m out of touch with my office. That I’m stuck here when I should be several thousand miles away negotiating a vital contract.’

Discovering that the marketing team he’d entrusted with selling his hard won dream appeared to have lost the plot and being unable to do a damn thing about it.

‘I’m beginning to understand how that feels.’ She was still leaning forward, an elbow on her knee, chin propped on her hand, regarding him with that steady violet gaze. ‘The being out of touch thing. I usually spend the twenty-four hours before a big event with my phone glued to my ear, although who I’d call if I had a last minute emergency here heaven alone knows.’

‘Necessity does tend to be the mother of invention when you’re this far from civilisation,’ he agreed.

‘Even in the middle of civilisation when you’re in the events business. Clearly, this is going to be an interesting few days.’

Then, looking at him as if he was number one on her list of problems, ‘Would a massage help?’

‘Are you offering?’ he asked.

Josie had thought it was quiet here, but she was wrong.

There was no traffic, no shouting or sirens—the constant background to daily life in London—but it wasn’t silent. The air was positively vibrating with energy; the high-pitched hum of insects, bird calls, odd sounds she couldn’t identify, and she was suddenly overwhelmed with a longing to lie back, soak it all up, let the sun heat her to the bone.

The shriek of a bird, or maybe a monkey, snapped her out of her reverie and she realised, somewhat belatedly, that Gideon McGrath’s dark eyes were focused not on her face, but lower down.

Typical man...

‘All I’m offering is coffee,’ she said crisply, rising to her feet, tightening her belt.

‘Pity,’ he replied with a slow, mesmerising smile. It was like watching a car roll towards you in slow motion; one minute you were safe, the next...

‘Shall I leave the pot?’ she asked.

‘Better take it with you, or the room service staff will get their knickers in a twist hunting for it.’

‘It’s not a problem,’ she said abruptly. Calling herself all kinds of a fool for allowing herself to be drawn in by a smile, a pair of dark eyes. He might be confined to a deck lounge, but he was

still capable of inflicting terminal damage and she wished she'd stuck with her initial response which had been to ignore him. 'I'll let them know where it is.'

'Don't bother about it. Really. You've got more than enough on your plate.'

'It's no trouble,' she assured him, backing towards the exit. 'I'll be visiting the kitchen anyway.' She had to talk through the catering arrangements for the pre-wedding dinner with the chef. 'I can mention the mistake with the herbal tea while I'm there if you like.'

'No. Don't do that, Josie.'

Something about his persistence warned her that she was missing something and she stopped.

'It wasn't a mistake,' he said. 'The tea.'

'I'm sorry, I don't understand...' Then, quite suddenly, she did. 'Oh, right. I get it.' She stepped forward and snatched up the coffee pot, brandishing it at him accusingly. 'This is a banned substance, isn't it?'

'You've got me,' he admitted, his smile turning to a wince as he shrugged without thinking and she had to fight the urge to go to him yet again, do something to ease the pain.

'I believe I'm the one who's been had.' And, before he could deny it, she said, 'You've made me an accessory to caffeine abuse in direct contravention of doctor's orders and—' as he opened his mouth to protest—'don't even think about apologising. I can tell that you're not in the least bit sorry.'

‘Actually, I wasn’t going to apologise. I was going to thank you. Everyone keeps telling me that I should listen to my body. Its demands for caffeine were getting so loud that I’m surprised the entire camp couldn’t hear it.’

‘Not the entire camp,’ she replied. ‘Just me.’

‘You were very kind and I took shameless advantage of you,’ he said with every appearance of sincerity. She wasn’t taken in.

‘I was an idiot,’ she said, holding up her hand, palm towards him as if holding him off, despite the fact that moving was clearly the last thing on his mind.

‘Not an idiot.’

‘No? So tell me about the sugar?’

‘You didn’t give me sugar,’ he pointed out.

‘I would have done if you’d...’ She stopped, furious with herself.

‘The honey was inspired,’ he assured her. ‘Tell your partner that I’m converted.’

‘So what else is banned?’ she demanded, refusing to be placated.

‘White bread, red meat, salt, animal fats.’

Gideon knew the list by heart. His doctor had been trotting it out for years at the annual check-ups provided for all staff. Annual check-ups which the firm’s insurance company insisted should include him, despite his protestations that it was totally unnecessary. Now she’d got him captive, she was taking full advantage of the situation.

‘All the usual suspects, in other words.’

‘Along with the advice to walk to work...’ as if he had time
‘...and take regular holidays.’

He spent half his life at holiday resorts, for heaven’s sake; why would he want to go to one for fun?

And of course there was the big one. Get married.

According to actuarial statistics, married men lived longer. But then that doctor was a woman, so she would say that. He wasn’t going to.

‘The holiday part doesn’t appear to be working,’ Josie pointed out.

‘Nor does the diet. My life has been reduced to steamed fish, nut cutlets and oatmeal,’ he complained. And there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it. Unless, of course, he could convince Josie to take pity on him.

She’d been quick with a tender hand and he was sure that if he’d asked she’d have gone and fetched sugar for him from her own tray. If he’d done that she’d be really mad at him.

She might even have indulged his massage fantasy if she hadn’t caught him with his eyes rather lower than they should have been.

‘I take it that I can cross ants off the list of things I have to worry about,’ she said without the least sign of sympathy.

Okay, so she was too mad to indulge him now, but it wouldn’t last. She laughed too easily to hold a grudge.

‘If I say yes, will you have lunch with me?’ he asked.

‘So that you can help yourself to forbidden treats from my

tray?’

‘Me? I’m helpless. Of course, if you forced them on me there isn’t a thing I could do to stop you.’

‘You can relax,’ she replied, but her lusciously wide mouth tightened at the corners as she fought to stop it responding to his outrageous cheek with a grin. ‘I wouldn’t dream of it.’

‘I’d make it worth your while,’ he promised.

‘Give it up, Gideon. I can’t be bribed.’

Of course she could. Everyone could be bribed. You just had to find out what they wanted most in the world. Preferably before they knew they wanted it.

‘You’re going to need a friendly ear in which to pour your frustrations before this wedding is over.’ That he would be the major cause of those frustrations didn’t preclude him from offering comfort. ‘A shoulder to cry on when everything falls apart.’

‘All I need from you is your room,’ she replied. ‘Besides, you’re supposed to be on a low stress regime.’

‘It would be your stress, not mine,’ he pointed out.

‘Yes, well, thanks for the offer,’ she said, losing the battle with the smile and trying very hard not to laugh. ‘I appreciate your concern, but SDS Events do not plan weddings that fall apart—’

‘You didn’t plan this one.’

‘—and you won’t be here long enough to provide the necessary shoulder for tears or any other purpose.’

‘I’ll be here until my back says otherwise.’ And, quite

unexpectedly, he didn't find that nearly as infuriating as he had just half an hour earlier.

'Your back doesn't have a say in the matter. I hate to add to your stress, but unless you intend playing gooseberry to the bride and groom you would be well advised to make other arrangements.'

'Are you telling me that this is going to be the bridal suite?'

'Twenty-four hours from now, you won't be able to move in here for flowers,' she assured him, so seriously that he laughed.

It hurt like hell but he didn't care. He was throwing a spanner in the wedding works and he didn't have to lift a finger—let alone a telephone—to do it.

'I'm glad that amuses you, Mr McGrath. They do say that laughter is very healing, which, since you have to be out of here by first thing tomorrow, is just as well. Maybe you should try the plunge pool,' she suggested. 'It will take the weight off your muscles. Ease the pain.'

'I'm willing to give it go,' he assured her. 'But I'll need a hand.'

'No problem. I'd be happy to give you a push.'

'But will you stick around to help me out?'

'Sorry, I have a full day ahead of me. Enjoy the herbal tea and nut cutlets.'

'You're full of excellent ideas, Josie. You just don't follow through.'

'Don't test me,' she warned.

She turned with a splendid swish of her robe, giving him an

unintentional glimpse of thigh.

‘I’ll give you one thing,’ he called after her.

‘Your bed?’

‘Communication.’

She stopped and, when she turned back to face him, he said, ‘If you’ll make a call for me.’

‘You want me to call your wife and tell her you’re catching the next plane home?’

‘There’s no one waiting for that call, Josie.’ No one to rush back to. ‘I want you to ring my office. Give me your notebook and I’ll write down the number.’

She came closer, drawn by the temptation, took the notebook from her pocket and handed it to him with her pen. It was the kind of notebook he favoured himself, with a pocket at the back for receipts and an elastic band to hold it together. He slipped the band and it fell open at the bookmarked page where she’d started writing a list.

Hairdryers?

Ring???

Phone?

Florist

Caterer

Confectioner

He smiled and beside ‘Ring’ he jotted down a number.

‘Call Cara,’ he said, handing it back to her. ‘She’s my PA.’

‘And say what?’

‘Just ask her what the hell is going on in Marketing.’

‘What the hell is going on in Marketing,’ she repeated, then shook her head. ‘I can see why you’re stressed. You’re on holiday. Let it go, Gideon.’

‘Holidays are my work, which is why I know that David has a satellite telephone and Internet access. He keeps it a dark secret from the guests, but I’m sure he’ll make an exception in your case.’

‘You—’ She let slip a word that was surely banned from the wedding planners’ handbook. ‘Had again.’

‘You’re going to need me on your side, Josie.’

‘I need you gone!’

He left her with the last word and his reward was a view of an unexpectedly sexy rear as she walked away. A pair of slender ankles. He was already looking forward to making his acquaintance with the legs that connected them.

‘I don’t suppose you’ve got a London newspaper to spare for a man dying of boredom?’ he called after her.

‘Never touch them,’ her disembodied voice replied from the bridge. ‘Far too stressful.’

‘Liar,’ he called back as he tugged on the bell pull that Francis had extended from its place by the bed so that it was within reach of the lounge.

He really should have explained what David had meant when he’d told her to ‘ring’. Actually, David should have told her himself, but maybe he’d been distracted.

She was a seriously distracting woman.

‘Don’t forget lunch.’

CHAPTER FOUR

A stylish wedding often owes more to natural elements than the designer's art...

—*The Perfect Wedding* by Serafina

March

JOSIE was trying very hard not to grin as she walked back through the trees to her own deck and, once safely out of reach of those dangerous eyes, a mouth that teased without conscience, she swiftly recovered her senses.

Gideon McGrath might be in pain but it hadn't stopped him flirting outrageously with her. Not that she was fooled into thinking it was personal, despite the way he'd peered down her robe until she'd realised what he was doing and moved.

All he was interested in was her coffee. In having her run his errands.

'One o'clock...' His voice reached her through the branches.

And her lunch, damn it!

She was sorely tempted to stand by the rail and eat that luscious blueberry muffin, very slowly, just to torment him.

Perhaps it was just as well that the monkeys had taken advantage of her absence to clear her tray. Upsetting the milk, scattering the little packets of sugar, leaving nothing but crumbs that were being cleaned up by a bird with dark, glossy green plumage who gave her a look with its beady eyes as if daring her

to do anything about it.

She wouldn't want the man to get the impression that she gave that much of a damn and, quite deliberately turning her back towards him, she looked up at a monkey chittering at her from a nearby branch. He turned on the charm with a smile, an outstretched hand, the moment he'd snagged her attention, hoping for more little treats.

It had to be a male.

'You've cleaned me out,' she said. 'Try next door.'

She was treated to a bare-toothed grin before the little monkey swung effortlessly away into the trees, putting on a dazzling acrobatic show just for her.

'Show off,' she called after him. But the fact that she was smiling served as a reminder, should she need it, of just how dangerous that kind of self-serving charm could be. How easy it was to be fooled, sucked in.

She took a slow breath, then turned her face up to the sun, absorbing for a moment the heat, the scent of warm earth, the exotic high-pitched hum of the cicadas.

Five years ago she had been peeling vegetables and washing up in a hotel kitchen; the only job she could get.

Today, *Celebrity* magazine was paying for her to stay in one of the most exclusive safari lodges in Africa. Paying her to ensure that the year's most expensive wedding went without a hitch. And, with her name attached to this event, she would be one of the 'chosen', accepted in her own right; finally able to justify

Sylvie's faith in her.

Gideon McGrath could flirt all he wanted. It would take more than his devastating smile to distract her from her purpose.

She swiftly unpacked, hung up her clothes, then waxed up her hair before dressing for work. At home she would have worn layers of black net, Lycra and jersey; the black tights, T-shirt, a sleeveless belted slipover that came to her thighs, the purple DMs that had become her trademark uniform.

On her first foray into a 'destination' wedding, on the island of St Lucia, she'd shed the neck-to-toe cover-up in favour of black shorts, tank top and a pair of strappy purple sandals.

The misery of sunburn, and ploughing through soft sand in open-toes, had taught her a sharp, painful lesson and she hadn't made the same mistake again. Instead, she'd invested in a hot weather uniform consisting of a black long-sleeved linen shirt and a short skirt pulled together with a purple leather belt. Despite the heat, she'd stuck with black tights, which she'd also learned from experience, protected her legs from the nasty biting, stinging things that seemed to thrive in hot climates. As did her boots.

She took a folder from her briefcase that contained the overall plan for the wedding as envisaged by her predecessor, the latest guest list Marji had emailed to her—she'd need to check it against the rooms allocated by David—and her own lists of everything that needed to be double and triple-checked on site.

Marji had also sent her the latest edition of *Celebrity* with

Crystal's sweetheart face and baby-blue eyes smiling out of the cover. The first of half a dozen issues that would be dedicated to the wedding.

She glanced in the direction of Gideon's tree house. It wasn't the requested newspaper—far from it—but it did contain a dozen pages of the bride on her hen party weekend at a luxury spa. Impossibly glamorous girls poolside in barely-there swimsuits, partying till all hours in gowns cut to reveal more than they concealed would do a lot more to take his mind off his back than the latest FTSE index.

It was just the thing for a man suffering from stress overload.

Then she felt guilty for mocking him. Okay, so he'd taken shameless advantage of her, but it had to be miserable having your back seize up when you were on holiday in a place that had been designed to wipe out all traces of the twenty-first century. No television or radio to distract you. No way to phone home.

If he was as incapable of moving as he said he was. He looked fit enough—more than fit. Not bulky gym muscle, but the lean, sinewy lifestyle fitness of a walker, a climber even.

That first sight of him had practically taken her breath away.

Not just his buff body and powerful legs, but the thick dark hair and sexy stubble. Eyes from which lines fanned out in a way that suggested he spent a lot of time in the sun.

Eyes that unnerved her. Seemed to rob her of self-will. She'd been on the point of leaving him more than once and yet she'd stayed.

She dismissed the thought. It had been a long trip and she never had been able to sleep on a plane. She was simply tired.

The only thing that bothered her about Gideon McGrath was that he was here. Immovably so, according to him, and she could see how impossible it would be for him to climb aboard the tiny four-seater plane that had brought her here.

But there had to be a way. If it had been a life-threatening illness, a broken leg, they would have to get him out somehow.

She'd ask David about that.

The entire complex would very shortly be full to bursting with the wedding party, photographers, hairdressers and make-up artists for the feature on the build-up to the wedding, the setting, and no one was immune from an accident, falling ill.

She needed to know what the emergency arrangements were.

Meanwhile, whatever he came up with, they were going to need Gideon McGrath's goodwill and co-operation and she regretted dropping yesterday's newspaper in the rubbish bag before she'd left the flight from London. Getting him out of Tal and Crystal's bridal suite was her number one priority and, for that, she needed to keep him sweet. Even if it did mean hand-feeding him from her lunch tray.

She put on her sunglasses and, shouldering her bag, she headed back across the bridge. Trying very hard not to think about slipping morsels of tempting food into his mouth. Giving him a massage. Helping him into the plunge pool.

She jangled the bell to warn him of her arrival, then stepped

up onto his deck.

He hadn't moved, but was lying back, eyes closed and, not eager to disturb him, she tiptoed across to the table.

'Admit it, Josie, you just can't keep away,' he said as she put the magazine down.

She jumped, her heart jolting against her breast as if she'd been caught doing something wrong and that made her mad.

'I'm on an errand of mercy,' she said, then jumped again when he opened his eyes. He did a good job of hiding his reaction to her changed appearance. Was doubtless a good poker player.

But, for a woman who knew what to look for, the mental flinch that was usually accompanied by a short scatological four-letter word was unmistakable.

He had enough control to keep that to himself, too—which was impressive; there was simply a pause so brief as to be almost unnoticeable unless you were waiting for it, before he said, 'So? Have you changed your mind about the massage?'

And it was her turn to catch her breath, catch the word that very nearly slipped loose. Was it that obvious what she'd been thinking? Had he been able to read her mind as easily as she'd read his?

It wasn't such a stretch, she realised.

He must know how important it was to her that he move and she let it out again, very slowly.

'Sorry. It was your mental well-being I was concerned about. I didn't have a newspaper,' she said, 'but I did have this in my bag.'

He took one glance at the magazine she was offering him and then looked up at her. ‘You’ve got to be kidding?’

‘It’s the latest issue.’ She angled it so that he could see Crystal on the cover. ‘At least you won’t mistake me for the bride again.’

‘I always did think you were an unlikely candidate,’ he admitted, taking it from her and glancing at the photograph of the bikini-clad Crystal. ‘She is exactly what I expected, whereas you are...’

He paused, whether out of concern for her feelings or because he was lost for words she didn’t know. Unlikely on both counts, she’d have thought.

‘Whereas I am what?’ she enquired.

‘I’m not sure,’ he replied. ‘Give me time and I’ll work it out.’

‘There’s no rush,’ she said, taking a step back. ‘You’ve got until ten o’clock tomorrow morning. And in the meantime you can get to know Crystal.’

‘Why would I want to do that?’

She shrugged. ‘You tell me. You’re the one who wants to share her room.’

Deciding that now might be a good moment to depart, she took another step back.

‘Wait!’

And, even after all these years, her survival instinct was so deeply ingrained to respond instantly to an order and she stopped and turned without thinking.

‘Josie?’

It had taken no more than a heartbeat for her to realise what she'd done, spin on her heel and walk away.

'I'm busy,' she said and kept going.

'I know, but I was hoping, since you're so concerned about my mental welfare, that you might fetch a notebook and pen from my laptop bag?'

Gideon had framed it as a question, not an order and she put out her hand to grasp the handrail as the black thoughts swirling in her brain began to subside and she realised that his 'wait!' had been an urgent appeal rather than the leap-to-it order barked at someone who had no choice but obey.

She took a moment while her heart rate slowed to catch her breath, gather herself, before turning slowly to face him.

'Do correct me if I'm mistaken,' she said, 'but I'd have said they were on the doctor's forbidden list.'

'At the top,' he admitted, the slight frown at her strange reaction softening into a rerun of that car-crash smile.

'Well, there you are. I've done more than enough damage for one day—'

'No. It's important. I've had a couple of ideas and if I don't make some notes while they're fresh in my mind, I'm just going to lie here and...well...stress. You wouldn't want that on your conscience, would you?'

'You are a shameless piece of work, Gideon McGrath,' she told him, the irresistible smile doing nothing good for her pulse rate.

‘In my place, you’d do the same.’

Undoubtedly.

And, since they both knew that right now her prime motivation was keeping him stress-free, he had her. Again.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim interior, but at first glance his room appeared to be identical to her own. It certainly wasn’t any larger or fancier, so presumably Serafina had chosen it as the bridal suite purely because of its isolation at the furthest point from the main building.

Tomorrow it would be decked with flowers. There would be fresh fruit, champagne, everything laid on for the stars of the show.

For the moment, however, it was bare of anything that would give a clue to the character of its occupant. There was nothing lying on the bedside table. No book. No photograph. Nothing to offer any clues as to who he was. What he was. He’d said travel was his business, but that could mean anything. He could work for one of the travel companies, checking out hotels. A travel writer, even.

No laptop bag, either.

‘I can’t see it,’ she called.

‘Try the wardrobe.’

She opened a door. A well-worn carry-on leather grip was his only luggage and, apart from a cream linen suit, his clothes were the comfortable basics of a man who had his life pared to the bone and travelled light.

His laptop bag was on a high shelf—put there out of reach of temptation by his doctor?

‘Got it!’

She took it down, unzipped the side pocket, but there were no files, no loose paperwork. Obviously it wasn’t just his wardrobe that was pared to the bone. The man didn’t believe in clutter. Not that she’d been planning to snoop, but a letterhead would have given her a clue about what he did.

‘Forget the notebook, just bring the bag,’ he called impatiently.

All he carried was a small plain black notebook held together by an elastic band, an array of pens and the same state-of-the-art iPhone that she used and a small but seriously expensive digital camera.

She extracted the notebook, selected a pen, then zipped the bag shut and lifted it back into place.

‘I thought I asked you to bring the bag,’ he said when she handed them to him.

‘You did, but I thought I’d give you an incentive to get back on your feet.’

His eyes narrowed and he took them on a slow, thoughtful tour of her body. It was as if he were going through an empty house switching on the lights. Thighs, abdomen, breasts leaping to life as his eyes lighted on each in turn. Lingered.

Switching on the heating.

Then he met her eyes head-on with a gaze that was direct,

unambiguous and said, 'If you're in the incentive business, Josie, you could do a lot better than that.'

She'd had her share of utterly outrageous propositions from men since she'd been in the events business, most of which had, admittedly, been fuelled by alcohol and, as such, not to be taken seriously, even if the men involved had been capable of carrying them through.

They were all part of the job and she'd never had any problem dealing with them so the heat searing her cheeks now had to be caused by the sun. It was rising by the minute and the temperature was going up with it.

'Lunch?' he prompted.

'What?'

'As an incentive?'

Another wave of heat swept over her cheeks as he laughed at her confusion. Furious with herself—she did not blush—she replaced her dark glasses and managed a brisk, 'Enjoy the magazine, Mr McGrath.'

'I don't think so,' he said, holding it out to her. 'Give it to Alesia.'

'Alesia?'

'The receptionist. The girls on the staff will get a lot more enjoyment than I will, catching up with the inside gossip on the wedding.'

'Are you quite sure?' Something about him just brought out the worst in her. The reckless... 'You have no idea what you're

missing.'

'You can tell me all about it over lunch.'

The man was incorrigible, a shocking tease, but undoubtedly right. And thoughtful, too. Who would have imagined it?

Taking the magazine from him, she said, 'So, what would you like?' His slate-grey eyes flickered dangerously, but she didn't fall for it again.

'For lunch? Why don't you surprise me?' he said after the briefest hesitation.

'I thought I already had,' she replied, mentally chalking one up to herself. 'Don't overdo it with that heavy pen,' she warned. 'I need you fit and on your feet, ready to fly out of here tomorrow.'

'Don't hold your breath,' he advised.

'So that would be a light chicken soup for lunch...' she murmured as she walked away. 'Or a little lightly poached white fish.'

'Chilli.'

Nothing wrong with his hearing, then.

'Or a very rare steak.'

'Maybe just a nourishing posset...'

A posset? Gideon frowned. What the heck was a posset? It sounded like something you'd give a sick kid...

Oh, right.

Very funny.

And she'd also managed to get in the last word again, he realised as the sound of her humming a familiar tune faded into

the distance.

Never smile at a crocodile...

He grinned. Any crocodile who came face to face with her would turn tail and run, but plain Josie Fowler didn't frighten him. She could strut all she wanted in those boots but she'd made the fatal error of letting him see beneath the mask.

He knew that without wax her spiky purpletipped hair curled softly against her neck, her cheeks. That her eyes needed no enhancement and, beneath the unnatural pallor of her make-up, her complexion had a translucent glow.

But, more important than the surface image, he'd recognised an odd defensiveness, a vulnerability that no one who saw her now, head high, ready with a snappy retort, would begin to suspect.

She'd had the last word, but he had the advantage.

Josie hummed the silly song as she walked along the bridge to the central building, well pleased to have got in the last word. It would serve Gideon McGrath right if she delivered up some bland invalid dish.

Probably not a posset, though.

She didn't want to risk the cream and eggs giving him a heart attack, although actually, come to think of it...

'Behave yourself, Josie,' she muttered as she stepped out of the sun and into the cool reception area and got an odd look from a sensibly dressed middle-aged woman who was wearing a wide-brimmed hat and carrying binoculars.

Although, on consideration, that probably had less to do with the fact that she was talking to herself than the way she looked.

In London she didn't seem that out of place. Here...

'Hello, Miss Fowler.' The receptionist greeted her with a wide smile. 'Have you settled in?'

'Yes, thanks. You're Alesia?'

'Yes?'

'Then this is for you,' she said, handing over the magazine.

The woman's eyes lit up as she saw the cover. 'It's Crystal Blaize,' she breathed. 'She is so beautiful. Thank you so much.'

'Don't thank me, thank Mr McGrath. He said you would like it.'

'Gideon? He thought of me, even when he is in so much pain? He is always so kind.'

Gideon? If she was on first name terms with him, he must be a regular visitor, which went some way towards explaining his almost proprietorial attitude to the place. The fact that he seemed almost...well...at home here, despite the lack of any personal touches in his room.

'Have you met her?' Alesia asked.

'Who? Oh, Crystal. Yes.' Briefly. She'd insisted on a meeting before she'd left, wanting to be sure that Crystal was happy with the arrangements. Happy with her. 'She's very sweet.'

And so desperately grateful to have someone who didn't terrify the wits out of her to hold her hand on her big day that Josie had dismissed the gossips' version of Serafina's departure

as utter nonsense.

Apparently Marji, with more of a heart than she'd given her credit for, had taken pity on her.

Or maybe she just wanted to be sure that the bride didn't turn tail and run.

'Is Mr Kebabakile in his office?' she asked.

'Yes, Miss Fowler. He said to go straight through.'

'Come in, come in, Miss Fowler,' David said, rising to his feet as she tapped on the open door. 'Are you settled in? You've had breakfast?'

'It's Josie,' she said. 'And yes, thank you. It was perfect.' What she'd had of it. But it had gone down well with the monkey. 'I do, however, have a few problems with the accommodation. Only,' she hastened to add when his face fell, 'because I'm here on business rather than attempting to get away from it all.'

'You mean the lack of communications?'

'Since you bring it up, yes. How, for instance, am I expected to ring for service without a telephone?'

'You don't need a telephone, there's a bell pull by the bed.' He mimed the tugging action. 'It's all explained in the information folder left in the room.'

That would be the one she hadn't got around to reading.

'It's low-tech, but it's low maintenance too. It's just a question of renewing the cords when some creature decides to chew through them. And it works even when it rains.'

'It doesn't reach to the *Celebrity* offices, though.'

He grinned, presumably thinking she was joking.

‘David, I’m serious. I understand you have a satellite link for the telephone and Internet?’

‘Sorry. I was just imagining how much cord...’ He shook his head. ‘You’re quite right. We have excellent communication links which are reliable for almost one hundred per cent of the time.’

Almost? She didn’t ask. She had enough to worry about without going to meet trouble halfway.

‘They are, of course, yours to command.’

Of course they were. She wasn’t a guest. She was a collaborator on a wedding that was going to make this the most talked about place in the world by next week. Gideon must have realised that, even if she was too slow-witted to work it out for herself. She’d have to take it slowly today so that her brain could keep up, or she was going to do something really stupid.

‘I’ve had a desk brought in here for you,’ he said, indicating the small table in the corner. ‘I’m out and about a lot so you’ll have the office to yourself most of the time but just say if you need some privacy.’ He produced a key. ‘The office is locked when I’m not here, so you’ll need this.’

She’d have willingly sat on his lap if it gave her access to the Net, but it was clear that this wedding was a very big deal for Leopard Tree Lodge.

It might be a venue for the seriously rich—who might, like Gideon, disapprove of their retreat being contaminated by mere celebrities—but everyone was feeling the pinch right now.

‘Thank you, David. We’ll be working together on this so it makes perfect sense to share an office.’ With that sorted, she moved on. ‘Next problem. Can you tell with what the situation is with Mr McGrath?’

‘You’ve met Gideon?’ He seemed surprised.

‘Briefly,’ she admitted.

‘Well, that’s excellent. I’m sure the company did him good.’

‘I sincerely hope so. Since he’s occupying the bridal suite?’ she added.

‘Ah. Yes. I was going to—’

‘As you know, the photographer will be arriving first thing tomorrow in order to set everything up for a photo shoot and then cover Crystal and Tal’s arrival,’ she continued, firmly cutting off what she suspected would be an attempt to persuade her to switch rooms. Gideon might be a valued guest but, while she was sympathetic, her responsibility was to her client. ‘Presumably you have some way of evacuating casualties?’

‘There is a helicopter ambulance,’ he admitted, ‘and Gideon has been offered a bed in the local hospital.’ She let out the metaphorical breath she’d been holding ever since she’d realised she had a problem. ‘However, as his condition requires rest and relaxation rather than medical intervention, he chose to remain where he is.’

‘Who wouldn’t? But—’

‘Our own doctor consulted with his doctor in London and they both agreed that would be much the best thing.’

‘But not essential?’ she pressed.

‘Not essential,’ he admitted. ‘But, since Gideon owns Leopard Tree Lodge—’ He raised his hands in a gesture that suggested there wasn’t a thing he could do.

Josie stared at him.

He owned Leopard Tree Lodge?

‘I didn’t know,’ she said faintly. ‘He didn’t mention it.’

‘He probably thought you knew. He owns many hotels and resorts these days, but this was his first and he oversaw every phase of the building.’

Oh...sugar. Proprietorial was right. But surely...

‘If he owns this place,’ she persisted, grasping at the positive in that, ‘he must know that the room is taken. That every room is taken. Why it’s absolutely essential that he moves.’

Except that he hadn’t.

On the contrary, he had maintained that a noisy celebrity wedding was utterly out of place in this setting, which suggested that not only didn’t he understand, he didn’t approve.

‘He didn’t know about the wedding, did he?’ she demanded.

‘I couldn’t say, but obviously Gideon doesn’t have anything to do with the day-to-day running of the business. Hotel bookings are handled by a separate agency. Gideon’s primary role is looking for new sites, developing new resorts, new experiences.’

‘So why is he here?’ she asked. A reasonable question. This was an established resort.

‘His spirit needs healing. Where else would he go?’

His spirit?

Obviously he meant the man was stressed...

‘Would you like to get in touch with your office now?’ he asked, making it clear that he had nothing more to say on the matter.

She considered challenging him, but what would be the point? David wasn’t going to load his boss onto a helicopter and ship him out.

She’d have to talk to Gideon herself over lunch, make him see reason.

He might not like the idea of a celebrity wedding disturbing the wildlife, but as a successful businessman he had to realise how much he had to gain from the publicity.

So that would be chilli...

‘I’m sure you would like to let them know you’ve arrived safely,’ David urged, doing his best to make up for his lack of help over the cuckoo sitting in her bridal nest. ‘My computer is at your disposal.’

‘Yes. Thank you.’

‘If I could just ask you not to mention the facility to any of the wedding guests? If word gets out, neither of us will be able to move for people wanting to “just check their email”. People think they want to get away from it all, but...’ He shrugged.

‘Point taken,’ she said. ‘And I’ll try not to get under your feet more than I have to. In fact, if you could point me in the direction of a socket where I could recharge my net book I’ll be able to

do some work in my room.’ Then, as he took it from her, ‘What do you do when the sun isn’t shining? You do have some kind of backup?’ she asked, suddenly envisaging a whole new crop of problems. ‘For fridges, freezers?’

‘We use gas for those.’

‘Sorry?’

‘It’s old technology. Gideon considered using paraffin but gas meets all our needs.’

‘So do you use gas for cooking too?’

‘In the kitchen. We also have traditional wood-fired stoves in the compound which we use for bread and roasts.’

‘Fascinating. Well, I’ll try not to be too much of a burden on your system, but I would like to check my email for any updates from *Celebrity*. The guest list seems to change on the hour.’ She might get lucky and discover someone had cancelled. ‘And I need to telephone my office to warn them that I don’t have a signal here.’

‘Please, help yourself,’ David replied, leaving her to it. ‘I’ll be outside when you’re ready to be shown around.’

CHAPTER FIVE

From the original and chic to quirky and fun, add a highly individual touch to your reception. Use your imagination and follow the theme of the wedding for your inspiration...

—*The Perfect Wedding* by Serafina

March

JOSIE downloaded the latest changes to the guest list from Marji onto a memory stick and sent it to print while she called her office.

‘No mobile signal? Ohmigod, how will the celebs survive?’ Emma giggled. ‘Better watch out for texting withdrawal symptoms—the twitching fingers, that desperate blank stare of the message deprived—and be ready to provide counselling.’

‘Very funny. Just get in touch with Marji and warn her that there are no power points in the rooms, will you. The hairdresser and guests will need to bring battery or gas operated dryers and straighteners.’

While she had the phone in her hand, she double-checked delivery details with the florists, caterers, confectioners. That left Cara, Gideon’s PA, and she dialled the number with crossed fingers. With luck, the answer would be sufficiently compelling to get him on her side...

‘Cara March...’

March? As in Serafina...

‘Miss March, Josie Fowler. Gideon McGrath asked me to call you.’

‘Gideon? Oh, poor guy. How is he?’

In pain. Irritable. About to fire your sorry ass...

‘Concerned. He wants to know—and I’m quoting here—what the hell is going on in Marketing.’

‘Marketing?’

‘I get the feeling that he’s not entirely happy about having the Tal Newman wedding at Leopard Tree Lodge.’

‘Oh, good grief, is that this week?’ she squeaked.

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Damn! And bother Gideon for taking a sentimental side trip down memory lane this week. If he’d just stuck to his schedule, gone straight to Patagonia as he was supposed to, he’d never have known about it.’

Sentimental? Gideon?

‘You don’t think he would have noticed six weeks of articles in *Celebrity*?’ Josie enquired, wondering why his staff had conspired to keep this from him.

‘Oh, please. Can you imagine Gideon reading *Celebrity*? Besides, he’s far too busy hunting down the next challenge to notice things like that. He never changes his schedule, takes a day off...’

‘No?’

‘Look, tell him it’s nothing to do with Marketing, will you. Aunt Serafina called in at the office to drop something off for

my mother absolutely yonks ago. She asked me for a brochure and, like an idiot, I gave her one. I had no idea she was looking for somewhere unusual, somewhere off the beaten track for the Newman wedding. And I'm here to testify that she doesn't understand the word "no".'

'Oh.'

'You're the woman who *Celebrity* sent in my aunt's place, aren't you?' she asked.

'Yes. How is she?'

'Spitting pips, to be honest, but that's not your fault. She can be a little overwhelming if you're not used to her.'

'So I've heard. Her design is amazing, though. Tell her I'll do my best to deliver.'

'Actually, I won't, if you don't mind. Just the sound of your name is likely to send her off on one. But you can tell Gideon that I'm entirely to blame and he can fire me the minute he gets back if it will make him feel any better.'

'He won't, will he?'

Anyone with Serafina March for an aunt deserved all the sympathy they could get.

'Probably not. Josie...about Gideon. Since he's there, see if you can persuade him to stay for a while. We've all been concerned about him. He really does need a break.'

'You just wish he'd chosen somewhere else.'

'I have the feeling that Leopard Tree Lodge might have chosen him,' she said.

Terrific. Now she was involved in the conspiracy to keep him here. She picked up the printout of the latest guest list, praying for an outbreak of something contagious amongst the guests.

‘All sorted?’ David asked as she joined him in the lounge.

‘Not exactly,’ she said, skimming through Marji’s updates. No one had cried off. On the contrary. ‘We’re going to have to find another room.’

‘How’s it going?’

Gideon McGrath, cool and relaxed as he lay in the shade, removed his sunglasses as Francis set down the lunch tray beside him, giving Josie the kind of glance that made her feel even more hot and frazzled than she already was.

‘How’s your back?’ she shot right back at him. She was in no mood to take prisoners.

‘It’s early days.’ Then, once Francis had gone, ‘The coffee helped, though.’

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ she replied, helping herself to a glass of water from a Thermos jug. ‘And what’s on that tray had better finish the job.’

‘You’re just teasing me with false hope.’

‘It’s chilli,’ she said, in no mood for teasing him or anyone else. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you own this place?’

‘Does it matter?’

He said it lightly enough, but there was a challenge in those dark eyes that suggested it did.

‘It does when the manager feels he can’t ask you to leave,

despite the fact that the room has been bought and paid for by a bona fide guest,' she replied.

'None of my resort managers would expect a sick guest to leave. You, I take it,' he said, 'have no such inhibitions.'

'Too right. Although, since we both now know that you're not a guest, you'd better enjoy that chilli while you can.'

'That sounds like a threat.'

'I don't make threats. I make promises. Unless you make your own arrangements to leave, I'll be ordering up an air ambulance to take you out of here first thing in the morning. You'd better decide where you want it to take you.'

'Ambulances only have one destination,' he pointed out. 'They're not a taxi service.'

'Right. Well, that's an additional incentive because I'm betting they don't have an la carte menu at the local hospital,' she replied, refusing to think what that would be like.

He was successful, wealthy. Hospital would be a very different experience for him, she told herself, blocking out the memory of her mother shrinking away to nothing in a bare room.

Gideon McGrath would be in a private suite with the best of everything. Maybe. Would the local hospital have private suites?

'Is that really chilli?' he asked gently, as if he genuinely sympathised with her dilemma. And, just like that, all the hard-faced determination leached out of her and she knew that she couldn't do it.

'I wanted you in a good mood,' she admitted. 'I even phoned

your PA and gave her your message.'

'What did she say?'

'The exact word was unrepeatable,' she replied. 'Have you never heard of Serafina March?'

'March? That's Cara's name. Is she a relative?'

'Her aunt. She's the queen of the designer wedding. She wrote *The Perfect Wedding*, the definitive book on the subject.'

'I take it there is some reason for you telling me this.'

'You can relax, Gideon. This hasn't got anything to do with your marketing department thinking up new ways to drum up business. Serafina visited her niece in the office and saw some photographs of this place. Quiet, off the beaten track, just what she was looking for.'

'Why didn't someone just say no?'

'Apparently she is unfamiliar with the word. Cara offered to take the blame, fall on her sword if it will help.'

'Only because she knows she's indispensable.'

She'd said that too, but Josie didn't tell him that. Instead, she swallowed a mouthful of water, then, hot, tired, she pushed her glasses onto the top of her head, tilted it back and poured the rest of it over her face, shivering as the icy water trickled down her throat, between her breasts. Then she poured herself another glass before turning to find Gideon staring at her.

'Did you want some water?' she offered.

'Er...I'll pass, thanks.'

She glanced at the glass in her hand and then at him. 'No...'

Then, despite everything, she laughed. ‘You really shouldn’t put ideas like that into my head. Not after the morning I’ve had.’

‘Pass me the chilli and take the weight off your feet,’ he said. ‘My shoulder is at your disposal.’

It was a very fine shoulder. More than broad enough for a woman to lay her head against while she sobbed her heart out. Not that she was about to do that.

‘You already said,’ she reminded him, uncovering the chilli and passing it to him, along with a fork. ‘But if your shoulder was truly mine I’d have it shipped out of here so fast your feet wouldn’t touch the ground. The wise decision would be to go with it.’

Gideon grinned as he tucked into the first decent food he’d had for two days. She was a feisty female and if they’d been anywhere else he’d have put his money on her. But it was going to take more than tough talk to shift him. This was his home turf and all the muscle was on his payroll.

She poured herself another glass of water, this time to drink, and needed no encouragement from him to sink onto the lounge beside him.

‘Damn, this is good,’ he said. Then, glancing at her, ‘Aren’t you hungry?’

Her only response was to lift her hand an inch or two in a gesture that suggested eating was too much effort. Maybe it was. Now she was lying down, her eyes closed, the I’m-in-charge mask had slipped.

He'd seen it happen a dozen times. Visitors arrived hyped up on excitement, running on adrenalin and kept going for an hour or two, but it didn't take long for the journey, the heat, to catch up with them. It had happened to him once or twice and it was like walking into a brick wall.

'Okay, give,' he said. 'Maybe I can help.'

'You can, but you won't.' She caught a yawn. 'You'll just lie there, eating your illicit chilli and gloating.'

No... Well, maybe, just a little. He was in a win-win situation. He could make things as difficult for her as possible but, no matter what horrors occurred at this wedding, he knew the pain wouldn't show on the pages of *Celebrity*.

Short of the kind of disaster that would make news headlines, the photographs would show smiling celebrities attending a stunningly original wedding, even if they had to fake the pictures digitally.

In the meantime, he had the pleasure of the wedding planner doing everything she could to make him happy.

He smiled as he lifted another forkful of his chef's excellent chilli. Then lowered it again untasted as he glanced at her untouched lunch.

Was she really not hungry? Or was the food...?

He eased himself forward far enough to lift the cover on her plate.

Steamed fish. Beautifully cooked, no doubt, and with a delicate fan of very pretty vegetables, but not exactly exciting.

Clearly, she'd taken the ultimate culinary sacrifice to give him what he wanted.

'I won't gloat,' he promised.

'Of course you will,' she replied without moving. Without opening her eyes. 'You're hating this. If you could wave a magic wand and make me, Crystal, Tal and the whole wedding disappear you'd do it in a heartbeat.'

'My mistake,' he said. 'I left the magic wand in my other bag.'

Her lips moved into an appreciative smile. 'Pity. You could have used it to conjure up another couple of rooms and solved all our problems.'

'Two? I thought you were just one room short?'

She rolled her head an inch or two, looking at him from beneath dark-rimmed lids. Assessing him. Deciding whether she could take him at his word.

'Don't fight it,' he said. 'You know you want to tell me.'

'You're the enemy,' she reminded him. Then, apparently deciding that it didn't matter one way or the other, she let her head fall back and, with a tiny sigh, said, 'My problem is the chief bridesmaid.'

'Oh, that's always a tricky one. Has she fallen out with the bride over her dress?' he hazarded. 'I understand the plan is to make them as unflattering as possible in order to show off the bride to best advantage.'

Her mouth twitched. 'Wrong. I promise you the bridesmaids' dresses are show-stoppers.'

‘Oh, right. The bride has fallen out with the bridesmaid for looking too glamorous?’

‘Not that either.’

‘The bride caught her flirting with the groom?’ Nothing. ‘Kissing the groom?’ A shake of her head. ‘In bed with the groom?’

‘That would mean the wedding was off.’ Her voice was slowing as she had to think harder to find the words. ‘This is worse. Much worse.’

‘What on earth could be worse than that?’

‘The chief bridesmaid has dumped her partner.’

‘Oh.’ He frowned, trying to see why that would be a cause for wailing and gnashing of teeth. ‘Surely that means you’ve got an extra bed? You could share her room and the happy couple could have yours. Problem solved.’

‘Problem doubled,’ she replied. ‘The reason she dumped him is because she has a new man in her life and she’s not going anywhere without him.’

‘Okaaay,’ he said, still not getting it. ‘One man out, one man in. No gain, but we’re just back to square one.’

‘If only life were that simple. Unfortunately, her ex is the best man and while I’d love to suggest that you move in with him, solving one of my problems,’ she said, still awake enough to wield her tongue with sarcastic precision, ‘it seems that he wants to show the world just how much he isn’t hurting. To that end, he’s bringing his brand new girlfriend with him.’

‘You’re not convinced that it’s true love?’

‘Anything is possible,’ she admitted, ‘but it would have made my life a whole lot easier if he’d declared himself too broken-hearted to come to the wedding...’

All the tension had left her body now. Her hand, beside her, was perfectly still. Her breathing was slowing. For a moment he thought she’d gone, but an insect buzzed noisily across the deck just above her and she jerked her eyes open, flapped at it.

‘*Celebrity* would have loved a tragic broken-heart cover story, a nice little tear-jerker to wrap around the wedding,’ she said, easing herself up the lounge, battling her body’s need for sleep, ‘and bump up the emotional headline count. And a new best man would have been easier to find than another room.’

‘You’re all heart, Josie Fowler.’

‘I’m a realist, Gideon McGrath. I’ve left David juggling the accommodation in an attempt to find some space somewhere—anywhere. Hopefully with sufficient distance between the best man and the bridesmaid to avoid fingernails at dawn.’

‘And if he can’t?’

‘If the worst comes to the worst I’ll let them have my room.’

‘And where will you sleep?’ he persisted as she began to slip away again.

‘I can crash in the office,’ she mumbled. ‘I’ve slept in worse places...’

And that was it. She was gone. Out like a light.

He took his time about finishing the chilli, wondering where

Josie had slept that was worse than David's office floor. Who she was. Where she came from, because she certainly wasn't one of those finishing school girls with cut-glass accents who regularly descended on his office to organise the launch parties for his new ventures.

It wasn't just her street smart, in-your-face image that set her apart. There was an edginess about her, a desperate need to succeed that made her vulnerable in a way those other girls could never be.

It was a need he recognised, understood and, replacing his plate on the tray, he eased himself off the lounge, straightened slowly, held his breath while the pain bit deep. After a moment it settled to a dull ache and he wound out the shade so that when the sun moved around Josie would be protected from its rays.

That done, he tugged on the bell to summon Francis, then he made it, without mishap, to the bathroom.

Maybe he should make Josie's day and keep going while he had sufficient movement to enable him to get onto a plane. Perhaps catch up with Matt in Patagonia.

Just the thought was enough to bring the pain flooding back and he had to grab hold of the door to stop himself from falling.

Josie opened her eyes. Glanced at Gideon.

He was lying back, hands linked behind his head, totally relaxed, and for a moment her breath caught in her throat. She met good-looking men all the time in her job. Rich, powerful, good-looking men, but that was just work and while they,

occasionally, suggested continuing a business meeting over a drink or dinner, she was never tempted to mix business with pleasure.

It had to be because she was out of her comfort zone here, out on a limb and on her own, that made her more vulnerable to a smile. He had, despite the bickering, touched something deep inside her, a need that she had spent a long time denying.

While there was no doubt that he was causing her all kinds of bother, it was as if he was, in some way that she couldn't quite fathom, her collaborator. A partner. Not a shoulder to cry on—she did not weep—but someone to turn to.

She wanted him gone. But she wanted him to stay too and, as if he could hear the jumble of confused thoughts turning over in her brain, he turned and smiled across at her.

The effect was almost physical. Like a jolt of electricity that fizzed through her.

‘Okay?’ he asked, quirking up a brow.

‘Y-yes...’ Then, ‘No.’

Her mouth was gluey; she felt dried out. Not surprising. It had been a manic forty-eight hours. A long evening at the office making sure that everything was covered while she was away. A quick meeting with the bride, a scramble to pack and get to the airport. And she'd spent most of her time on the plane getting to grips with ‘the design’, making sure she was on top of everything that had to be done.

‘There's water if you need it,’ he said, nodding towards a

bottle, dewed with moisture, that was standing on the table between them.

‘Thanks.’

She took a long drink, then found the stick of her favourite strawberry-flavoured lip balm she always kept in her pocket.

‘What was I saying?’ she asked.

‘That you’d slept in worse places than David’s office.’

She paused in the act of uncapping the stick, suddenly chilled despite the hot sun filtering through the trees as she remembered those places. The remand cell. The six long months while she was locked up. The hostel...

She slowly wound up the balm, taking her time about applying it to her lips. Taking another long pull on the water while she tried to recall the conversation that had led up to that.

The shortage of rooms. The wretched bridesmaid and the equally annoying best man. That was it. She’d been telling him about the need for yet another room. And she had told him that she’d sleep in the office if necessary...

After that she didn’t remember anything.

Weird...

She stopped worrying about it—it would all come back to her—and, in an attempt to make a joke of it, she said, ‘You won’t tell David I said that, will you? About sleeping on his office floor. I don’t want to give him an excuse to give up trying to find somewhere.’

‘I won’t,’ Gideon assured her. ‘Not that it matters. David won’t

let you sleep in his office. Not if he values his job.'

'His job?' She frowned. 'Are you saying that you'd fire him? When you're one of the reasons we're in this mess?'

'There are health, safety, insurance considerations,' he said. 'You're a guest. If anything were to happen to you while you were bedded down on the office floor, you'd sue the pants off me.'

'Too right.' She'd considered denying it, but clearly it wasn't going to make any difference what she said. 'The pants, the shirt and everything else. Better leave now,' she urged him. Then, just to remind him that he owed her a favour, 'Did you enjoy your lunch?'

'Yes, thanks. Your sacrifice was appreciated.'

Sacrifice? Didn't he know that city girls lived on steamed fish and a mouthful of salad if they wanted to keep their figures? At least when they were being good. She could eat a pizza right now, but the fish would do and she turned to the tray. It wasn't there. There was nothing but the bottle of water.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.