



NICOLA MARSH

Who Wants To Marry a Millionaire?

MODERN  
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**Nicola Marsh**  
**Who Wants To**  
**Marry a Millionaire?**

**Аннотация**

The right time to fall for Mr Wrong? Gemma fights for what she believes in. Her local beach is under threat from developers – so she’s chained herself up suffragette-style in a dramatic protest against tycoon Rory Devlin! As an attention-grabbing stunt it’s priceless...only Gemma’s usual dedication is being sidetracked by her inconvenient attraction to the big boss man himself! Gorgeous, rich and ruthlessly cynical, this corporate shark is everything Gemma has sworn to avoid...

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# Praise for Nicola Marsh

‘Fresh, funny, flirty and feel-good—who can resist one of Nicola Marsh’s delectable category romances? With a fabulously fun heroine, a sexy hero and lashings of witty dialogue, *Overtime in the Boss’s Bed* is another keeper from the stellar pen of Nicola Marsh!’ —PHS Reviews on *Overtime in the Boss’s Bed*

‘Nicola Marsh heats up your winter nights with this blazingly sensual tale of lost love, second chances and old secrets! In *Marriage: For Business or Pleasure?* Nicola Marsh blends hot sensuality with tender romance, witty humour and nail-biting drama, which will keep readers eagerly turning the pages of this spellbinding contemporary romance!’ —PHS Reviews on *Marriage: For Business or Pleasure?*

‘This lovers-reunited tale is awash in passion, sensuality and plenty of sparks. The terrific characters immediately capture your attention, and from there the pages go flying by.’

—RT Book Reviews on *Marriage: For Business or Pleasure?*

‘Sterling characters, an exotic setting and crackling sexual tension make for a great read.’

—RT Book Reviews on  
*A Trip with the Tycoon*

# About the Author

## *About Nicola Marsh*

**NICOLA MARSH** has always had a passion for writing and reading. As a youngster she devoured books when she should have been sleeping, and later kept a diary whose content could be an epic in itself! These days, when she's not enjoying life with her husband and son in her home city of Melbourne, she's at her computer, creating the romances she loves in her dream job.

Visit Nicola's website at **[www.nicolamarsh.com](http://www.nicolamarsh.com)** for the latest news of her books.

# Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?

## Nicola Marsh



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

## Also by Nicola Marsh

Girl in a Vintage Dress

Deserted Island, Dreamy Ex!

Wild Nights with her Wicked Boss

Overtime in the Boss's Bed

Three Times a Bridesmaid ...

Marriage: For Business or Pleasure?

A Trip With the Tycoon

Two Weeks in the Magnate's Bed

**Did you know these are also available as eBooks? Visit**

**[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)**

This one's for my writing buddies,

Fiona Lowe and Joan Kilby.

Thanks for the camping tips.

If you convinced my hero to give it a go,

there's hope for me yet!

# CHAPTER ONE

‘WE HAVE a problem.’

Four words Rory Devlin did *not* want to hear—especially at his first Devlin Corp Shareholders’ Ball.

He glanced around the Palladium ballroom, ensuring everyone was engaged in drinking, dining or dancing, with no visible crisis in sight, before acknowledging the waiter hovering at his elbow.

‘What kind of problem?’

The kid, barely out of school, took a backward step and he belatedly remembered to temper his tone. It wasn’t the waiter’s fault he’d been dealing with non-stop hold-ups on the Portsea project all day.

Attending this shindig was the last thing he wanted to do but it had been six months since he’d stepped into the CEO role, six months since he’d tried to rebuild what had once been Australia’s premier property developer, six months of repairing the damage his dad had inflicted.

The waiter glanced over his shoulder and tugged nervously at his bow tie. ‘You better see for yourself.’

Annoyed at the intrusion, he signalled to his deputy, who saluted at his ‘stepping out’ sign, and followed the waiter to a small annexe off the main foyer, where the official launch of the Portsea project would take place in fifteen minutes.

‘She’s in there.’

*She?*

He took one look inside the annexe and balked.

‘I’ll take it from here,’ he said, and the waiter scuttled away before he’d finished speaking.

Squaring his shoulders, he tugged at the ends of his dinner jacket and strode into the room, eyeballing *the problem*.

Who eyeballed him back with a defiant tilt of her head, sending loose shoulder-length blond waves tumbling around her heart-shaped face.

She wore a smug smile along with a flimsy blue cocktail dress that matched her eyes.

He hoped the links around her wrists and ankles were the latest eccentric fashion accessory and not what he thought they were: chains anchoring her to the display he had to unveil shortly.

‘Can I help you?’

‘I’m counting on it.’

Her pink-glossed lips compressed as she sized him up, starting at his Italian handmade shoes and sweeping upwards in an all-encompassing stare that made him edgy.

‘Shall we go somewhere and discuss—?’

‘Not possible.’

She rattled the chains at her wrist and the display gave an ominous wobble.

‘As you can see, I’m a bit tied up at the moment.’

He winced at her pitiful pun and she laughed.

‘Not my best, but a girl has to do what a girl has to do to get

results.’

He pointed at the steel links binding her to his prized display.

‘And you think chaining yourself to my company’s latest project is going to achieve your objective?’

‘You’re here, aren’t you?’

What *was* this? Some kind of revenge?

He frowned, searching his memory banks. Was she someone he’d dated? A business associate? Someone he’d slighted in some way?

If she’d gone this far to get his attention, she wanted something. Something he’d never give, considering the way she’d gone about this.

He didn’t take kindly to threats or blackmail—or whatever *this* was.

Having some bold blonde wearing a dress that accentuated rather than hid her assets, her long legs bare and her toenails painted the same silver as her chains, bail him up like this ... no way in hell would he cave to her demands.

She wanted to sell him prime land? Put in a tender for a job? Supply and interior decorate the luxury mansions on the Portsea project?

Stiff. She’d have to make an appointment like everyone else. This kind of stunt didn’t impress him. Not one bit.

She chose that moment to shift her weight from one leg to the other, rattling the chains binding her slim ankles, drawing his attention to those long bare legs again ...

His perfectly male response annoyed him as much as the time he was wasting standing here.

‘You wanted to see *me* specifically?’

‘If you’re Rory Devlin, CEO of the company about to ruin the marine environment out near Portsea, then, yep, you’re the man.’

His heart sank. Since he’d taken over the reins at Devlin Corp six months ago he’d borne the brunt of every hippy lobbyist and environmentalist in town. None that looked quite as ravishing as the woman before him, but all of them demonstrating the same headstrong fanaticism.

Eco-nuts like her had almost derailed the company. Thankfully, he had a stronger backbone than his father, who’d dilly-dallied rather than making firm decisions on the Port Douglas project last year.

Devlin Corp had ensured the rainforest in far North Queensland would be protected, but that hadn’t stopped zealot protestors stalling construction, costing millions and almost bankrupting the company in the process.

If he hadn’t stepped in and played hardball he shuddered to think what would have happened to his family legacy.

‘You’ve been misinformed. My company takes great pains to ensure its developments blend with the environment, not ruin it.’

‘Please.’ She rolled her eyes before focussing them on him with a piercing clarity that would have intimidated a lesser man. ‘I’ve researched the land you develop—those flashy houses you dump in the middle of nowhere and sell for a small fortune.’

She strained against her chains as if she'd like to jab him in the chest, and his gaze momentarily strayed to hers before her exasperated snort drew his attention upwards.

'Your developments slash trees and defile land and don't give a rat's about energy conservation—'

'Stop right there.'

He crossed the room to stand a foot in front of her, feeling vindicated when she had to tilt her head back to look up at him, and annoyed when a tantalising fragrance of sunshine and fresh grass and spring mornings wrapped around him.

'You're misinformed as well as trespassing. Unlock yourself. Now.'

Tiny sapphire flecks sparked in her eyes before her lips curved upwards in an infuriatingly smug smile.

'Can't do that.'

'Why?'

'Because you haven't agreed to my terms yet.'

He shook his head, pressing the pads of his fingers against his eyes. Unfortunately, when he opened them, she was still there.

'We do this the easy way or the hard way. Easy way: you unlock yourself. Hard way: I call Security and they use bolt cutters to humiliate you further.'

Her eyes narrowed, not dimming in brilliance one iota.

'Go ahead. Call them.'

Damn, she knew he was bluffing. No way would he draw attention to her and risk the shareholders getting curious.

‘Give me the key.’

He took a step closer, deriving some satisfaction from the way she inhaled sharply and wriggled backwards before he realised his mistake.

He’d wanted to intimidate her; he’d ended up being an inch away from her.

‘Make me.’

Her tongue darted out to moisten her bottom lip and he stared at it, shaken to the core by the insane urge to taste those lips for himself.

Hell.

He never backed down—ever. He’d taken on every challenge thrust upon him: changing schools in his mid-teens so he could be groomed to take over Devlin Corp one day, ousting his layabout father from the CEO role, stepping up when it counted and dragging an ailing company out of the red and into the black.

She wanted him to capitulate to her demands?

As if.

‘I’m not playing this game with you.’

He used his frostiest, most commanding tone. The one he reserved for recalcitrant contractors who never failed to delay projects. Predictably, it did little for the pest threatening to derail his evening.

She merely smiled wider.

‘Why? Games can be fun.’

Exasperated beyond belief, his fingers tingled with the urge

to throttle her.

Dragging in deep, calming breaths, he stared at the model of Portsea Point, the largest project he'd undertaken since assuming CEO duties.

He needed this project to fly. Needed it to be his biggest, boldest success to push the company back to its rightful place: at the top of Australia's luxury property developers.

If he could nail this business would flood in, and Devlin Corp would shrug off the taint his father had besmirched the company with in his short stint as CEO.

Failure was not an option.

He glanced at his watch and grimaced. The unveiling would take place in less than ten minutes and he needed to get rid of this woman pronto.

Thrusting his hands into his pockets and out of strangling distance, he squared his shoulders and edged back to tower over her.

'What do you want?'

'Thought you'd never ask.'

His gaze strayed to her glossed lips again and he mentally kicked himself.

'I want a little one-on-one time with you.'

'There are easier ways to get a date.'

Confusion creased her brow for a second, before her eyes widened in horror.

'I don't want a *date* with you.'

She made it sound as if he'd offered her some one-on-one time with a nest of vipers.

'Sure? I come highly recommended.'

'I bet,' she muttered, glancing away, but not before he'd seen the flare of interest in her eyes.

'In fact, I can give you the numbers of half the Melbourne female population who could verify exactly how great a date I am and—'

'Half of Melbourne?' She snorted. 'Don't flatter yourself.'

Leaning into her personal space, he savoured her momentary flare of panic as she eased away.

'You're the one who wanted one-on-one time with me.'

'For an interview, you dolt.'

Ah ... so that was what this stunt was about. An out-of-work environmentalist after a job.

He had two words for her: *hell, no*. But against his better judgement he admired her sass. Most jobseekers would apply through an agency or harass his PA for an appointment. Not many would go through this much trouble.

He crooked his finger and she warily eased forward. 'Here's a tip. You want an interview? Don't go calling your prospective boss nasty names.'

'Dolt isn't nasty. If I wanted nasty I would've gone with bast—'

'Unbelievable.'

His jaw ached with the effort not to laugh. If his employees had half the chutzpah this woman did Devlin Corp would be

number one again in next to no time.

‘What do you say? Give me fifteen minutes of your time and I’ll ensure you won’t regret it.’

She punctuated her plea with a toss of her shoulder-length blond hair and once again the tempting fragrance of spring outdoors washed over him.

He opened his mouth to refuse, to tell her exactly what he thought of her underhand tricks.

‘I don’t want to disrupt your Portsea project. I want to help you.’

She eyeballed him, her determination and boldness as attractive as the rest of her.

‘In the marine environmental field, I’m the best there is.’

Worn down by her admirable persistence, he found himself nodding.

‘Fifteen minutes.’

‘Deal.’

Her triumphant grin turned sly. ‘Now, if you don’t mind fishing the key out of its hiding spot, I’ll get out of your way.’

‘Hiding spot?’

Her gaze dropped to her cleavage.

Jeez, could this evening get any crazier?

‘Uh ... okay.’

He’d reached a tentative hand towards her chest when she let out a howl of laughter that had him leaping backwards.

‘Don’t worry, I’ve got it.’

With a few deft flicks of her wrists she'd slipped out of her chains and kicked the ones around her ankles free.

'You set me up.'

He should have been angry, should have cancelled her interview on the spot. Instead he found himself watching her as she deftly wound the chains and stuffed them into a sparkly hold-all she'd hidden under the table, wondering what she'd come up with next to surprise him.

'I didn't set you up so much as have a little fun at your expense.'

She patted his chest. 'I snuck a peek at you earlier in the ballroom and it looked like you could do with a little lightening up.'

Speechless, he wondered why he was putting up with her pushiness. He didn't take that from anyone—ever.

She pressed a business card into his hand and the simple touch of her palm against his fired a jolt of awareness he hadn't expected or wanted.

'My details are all there. I'll call to set up that interview.'

She slung her bag over her shoulder, the rattle of chains a reminder of the outlandishness of this evening.

'Nice to meet you, Rory Devlin.'

With a crisp salute she sauntered out through the door, leaving him gobsmacked.

## CHAPTER TWO

GEMMA SHULTZ strode from the ballroom, head held high, success making her want to do a little shimmy.

With Rory Devlin boring holes in her back with his potent stare, she waited until she'd rounded a corner before doing a triumphant jig.

She'd done it. Scored an interview with the high-and-mighty CEO of the company threatening to tear her family's land apart.

An interview she had every intention of nailing.

The project to build luxury mansions out at Portsea would go ahead, she had no illusions about that, but the moment she'd heard about it she'd headed back to Melbourne with the sole intention of ensuring Devlin Corp didn't botch the beachside land she'd always loved.

Crazy, when she had no room for sentiment in her life these days, but that land had been special, the only place she'd ever felt truly comfortable in her topsy-turvy teenage world.

It was her dad's lasting legacy. A legacy her mum had upped and sold without consulting her.

Her neck muscles spasmed when she thought of her immaculately coiffed mother, who valued grooming and designer clothes and social standing, a mother who had barely acknowledged her after her dad died.

Though she'd never doubted Coral's love for her dad, she'd

often wondered why the society princess had married a cabinet-maker. While her folks had seemed devoted enough, Gemma hadn't been able to see the attraction. Her dad had spent his days holed up in his workshop while Mum attended charity events or garden parties.

No surprise how Coral had viewed her passion for mud-pies, slugs and rats as pets. Though she had to give her mum credit: she'd never stopped her from being a tomboy, from trailing after her dad like an apprentice. They hadn't had a lot in common but they'd been a close family; it hadn't been till later, when she'd turned fourteen and her dad had died, that a yawning chasm had developed, a distance they hadn't breached since.

People started filtering from the ballroom into the annexe and she bit back a grin. She'd bet Mr Conservative was hovering over his precious display, ensuring she hadn't scratched it with her chains.

Laughter bubbled up from within and she slapped a hand across her mouth to prevent a giggle escaping. The look on Rory Devlin's face when he'd caught sight of her chained to his display ... priceless didn't come close.

She'd hazard a guess no one ever stood up to the guy. He had an air of command; when he snapped his fingers people would hop to it.

She'd been counting on the element of surprise, had wanted to railroad her way into an interview to show him exactly who he was dealing with.

Her toes cramped and she slipped out of the three-inch heels she hadn't worn in two years: the last time she'd been home and her mother had insisted she attend a charity ball for sick kids.

She couldn't fault the cause, but having to swap her denim for chiffon and work boots for stilettos had been unbearable. Though she'd been thankful she'd kept the outfit, for no way would she have gained access to the Devlin Corp shindig unless she'd looked the part.

She'd timed her entrance to perfection, waiting until a large group bearing invitations had gathered at the door before inveigling her way in by tagging along.

No one had questioned her. Why would they, when her mum would have forked out a small fortune for her blue designer dress and matching shoes?

The rest had been easy, and with her objective achieved she almost skipped down to the car park where she'd left the battered car she'd picked up from the airport earlier today.

She had no idea how long she'd be in town for, no idea how long it would take to ensure her dad's land wasn't pillaged by the corporate giant.

For now, the ancient VW would have to do. As for lodgings, she had one destination in mind.

Come first thing in the morning she'd confront Coral, demanding answers—like what had possessed her mum to sell the one place in the world she valued most?

Gemma awoke to the pale pink fingers of a Melbourne dawn

caressing her face and a scuttling in the vicinity of her feet.

She yawned, stretched, and unkinked her neck stiff from sleeping on her balled-up jacket, squinting around her dad's workshop for the culprit tap-dancing near her toes.

Noise was good. Noise meant scrabbling mice or a curious possum. It was the silent scuttlers—like spiders—she wasn't too keen on. She might be a tomboy but arachnids she could do without.

A flash of white darted under the workbench and she smiled. How many times had her pet mice got loose in here? Too many times to count, considering she'd left the door open to let them have a little freedom.

Her dad had never complained. He'd spent eons searching for them, affectionately chastising her while promising to buy new ones if Larry, Curly and Mo couldn't be found.

Her dad had been the best, and she missed him every second of every day. He'd died too young, his heart giving out before she'd graduated high school, before she'd obtained her environmental science degree, before she'd scored her first job with a huge fishing corporation in Western Australia.

Her dad had been her champion, had encouraged her tomboy ways, had shown her how to fish and catch bugs and varnish a handmade table.

He'd fostered her love of the ocean, had taught her about currents and erosion and natural coastal processes. He'd taken her snorkelling and swimming every weekend during summer,

introducing her to seals and dolphins and a plethora of underwater wildlife she hadn't known existed.

They'd gone to the footy and the cricket together, had cycled around Victoria and, her favourite, camped out under the stars on his beachside land at Portsea.

The land her mum had sold to Rory Devlin and Co.

Tears of anger burned the backs of her eyes but she blinked them away. Crying wouldn't achieve a thing. Tears were futile when the only place she'd ever felt safe, content and truly at home had been ripped away. The only place where she could be herself, no questions asked, away from scrutinising stares and being found lacking because she wasn't like other girls her age.

She'd dealt with her grief at losing her dad, and now she'd have to mourn the loss of their special place too. Not fair.

As she glanced around the workshop, at her dad's dust-covered tools, the unfinished garden bench he'd been working on when he died, his tool-belt folded and stored in its usual spot by the disused garden pots, her resolve hardened.

Now the land was gone, memories were all she had left. They'd been a team. He'd loved her for who she was. She owed him.

Unzipping her sleeping bag, she wriggled out of it and glanced at her watch. 6:00 a.m. Good. Time for her mum to get a wake-up call in more ways than one.

To her surprise, Coral answered the door on the first ring. 'Gemma? What a lovely surprise.'

Coral opened the door wider and ushered her in, but not before

her sweeping glance took in Gemma's crushed leisure suit that had doubled as pyjamas, her steel-capped boots and her mussed hair dragged into a ponytail.

As for last night's make-up, which she'd caked on as part of her ruse, she could only imagine the panda eyes she'd be sporting.

A little rattled her mum hadn't commented on her appearance, or the early hour, she clomped inside and headed for the kitchen, about the only place in their immaculate South Yarra home she felt comfortable in.

'You're up early.'

Coral stiffened, before busying herself with firing up the espresso machine. 'I don't sleep much these days.'

'Insomnia?'

'Something like that.'

A flicker of guilt shot through her. She remembered her mum pacing in the middle of the night after her dad had died, but she'd been too wrapped up in her own grief to worry.

That was when the first chink in their relationship had appeared.

Coral had always been self-sufficient and capable and in control, and she had handled Karl's death with her usual aplomb. While she'd cried herself to sleep each night for the first few months, her mum would stride around the house at all hours, dusting and tidying and ensuring her home was a showpiece.

It had been a coping mechanism, and when the pacing had eventually stopped she'd thought Coral had finally adjusted to

sleeping alone, but considering the early hour and the fact her mum was fully dressed, maybe her sleep patterns had been permanently shot?

‘Coffee?’

Gemma nodded. ‘Please.’

‘Have you come straight from a work site?’

There it was: the first foray into critical territory, a territory Gemma knew too well. How many times had she borne her mum’s barbs after her dad died?

*Have you washed your hair?*

*Can’t you wear a dress for once?*

*No boy’s going to ask a tomboy to the graduation ball.*

She’d learned to tune out, and with every dig she’d hardened her heart, pretending she didn’t care while wishing inside she could be the kind of daughter Coral wanted.

‘I actually got in last night.’

Coral’s hand stilled midway between the sugar bowl and the mug. ‘Why didn’t you stay here?’

‘I did. I bunked down in Dad’s workshop.’

Horror warred with distaste before Coral blinked and assumed her usual stoical mask. ‘You always did feel more comfortable out there.’

‘True.’

Gemma could have sworn her mum’s shoulders slumped before she resumed bustling around the kitchen.

*Why did you do it?* It buzzed around her head, the question

demanding to be asked, but she knew better than to bail Coral up before her first caffeine hit of the day. She'd clam up or storm off in a huff, and that wouldn't cut it—not today. Today she needed answers.

‘How long are you here for?’

*As long as it takes to whip Rory Devlin's butt into shape.*

Devlin's butt ... bad analogy.

An image of dark blue eyes the colour of a Kimberley sky at night flashed into her mind, closely followed by the way he'd filled out his fancy-schmancy suit, his slick haircut, his cut-glass cheekbones.

At six-four he had the height to command attention, but the rest of the package sold it. The guy might be a cold-hearted, infuriating, corporate shark who cared for nothing bar the bottom dollar but, wow, he packed some serious heat.

She hated the fact she'd noticed.

‘I'm here for a job.’

She sighed with pleasure as the first tantalising waft of roasted coffee beans hit her.

Watching her mum carefully for a reaction, she added, ‘Out at Portsea.’

Coral's head snapped up, her eyes wide with fear. ‘You know?’

‘That you sold out? That you got rid of the one thing that meant everything to Dad?’

*To me?*

She slid off the bar stool and slammed her palms on the island

bench. ‘Of course I know.’

‘I—I was going to tell you—’

‘When? When I returned to Melbourne to build my dream home on that land? The home Dad helped me plan years ago? The home where I’d planned on raising my kids?’

Okay, so the latter might be stretching the truth a tad. She had no intention of getting married, let alone having kids, but the inner devastation she kept hidden enjoyed stabbing the knife of guilt and twisting hard.

Coral’s lips compressed into the thin, unimpressed line she’d seen many times growing up. ‘Sorry you feel that way, but you can’t bowl in here every few years, stay for a day, and expect to know every detail of my life.’

Shock filtered through Gemma’s astonishment. She had *every* right to know what happened to her dad’s land, but she’d never heard Coral raise her voice above a cultured *tsk-tsk* if they didn’t agree.

‘I’m not asking for every detail, just the important ones—like why you had to sell something that meant the world to me.’

Fear flickered across Coral’s expertly made-up face before she turned away on the pretext of pouring coffee.

‘I—I needed the money.’

She spoke so softly Gemma strained to hear it.

Coral—who wore the best clothes, used the most expensive cosmetics and lunched out daily—needed money?

‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’ she muttered, sorrow and regret

clogging her lungs, making simple inhalation impossible.

She wanted to explain why this meant so much to her, wanted her mum to understand how she'd travelled the world for years, never feeling as sheltered as she did at Portsea.

She wanted her mum to truly comprehend the vulnerabilities behind her tough-girl exterior, the deep-seated need for approval she'd deliberately hidden beneath layers of practised indifference.

She wanted her mum to realise her anger was about the loss of another childhood security rather than not being consulted.

She opened her mouth to speak but the words wouldn't come. Not after all this time. Not after the consistent lack of understanding her mum had shown when she'd been growing up. Why should now be any different?

When Coral turned around to face her she'd donned her usual frosty mask.

'I don't question your financials; I'd expect the same courtesy from you.' Coral handed her some coffee with a shaky hand, making a mockery of her poise. 'You're welcome to stay here as long as you like, no questions asked, because this is your home. But I won't tolerate being interrogated like a criminal.'

Instinctively Gemma bristled—until she realised something. She valued her independence, lived her own life and answered to no one. Including the mother she rarely visited. How would *she* feel if Coral landed on her doorstep demanding answers to sticky questions? She'd be royally peed off.

Some of the fight drained out of her and she gave a brisk nod, hiding behind her coffee mug. Besides, the damage was done. The land was sold and nothing could change that. She'd be better off focussing on things she could control, like ensuring Devlin Corp respected the beach while they built their mansion monstrosities.

'There's a spare key behind the fruit bowl.' Coral patted her sleek blond bob, an out-of-place, self-conscious gesture at odds with her air of understated elegance. 'I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, Gemma, but I'm glad you're here.'

By the time she'd recovered from her shock and whispered, 'Thanks ...' Coral had sailed out of the room.

## CHAPTER THREE

RORY flipped the rough-textured business card between his fingers. Recycled paper, no doubt, but there was nothing second-hand about the information staring him in the face.

He'd had the company's PI run a background check on Gemma Shultz last night, after she'd thrust her business card in his hand and exited his display like a queen.

He had to admit the results of the investigation surprised him as much as the woman had last night. She wasn't some crackpot lobbyist, hell-bent on delaying his project or, worse, ruining it.

Gemma Shultz was the real deal.

He ran his finger down the list: qualified as an environmental scientist at Melbourne University, spent a year at a major fishing company in Western Australia, specialising in marine conservation, two years working for a beachside developer in Spain, and the last few years freelancing for seaside construction companies keen on energy-saving and protecting the planet.

Impressive.

Not a hint of scandal among the lot: no throwing herself in front of bulldozers, no chaining herself to trees, no arrests for spray-painting corporate headquarters or flinging paint at fur-wearers.

Thank goodness. Bad enough she'd blackmailed him into giving her an interview. The last thing he needed was for the

media to get a whiff of anything untoward.

His dad had done enough while he'd been in charge, gracing the covers of magazines and the front pages of newspapers with a constant parade of high-profile women while living the high life.

It was a pity Cuthbert Devlin—Bert, to his friends, and there had been many hangers-on—had been more focussed on squandering money than on running the company entrusted to him.

Rory shuddered to think what would have happened if Bert hadn't abdicated in favour of chasing some model to Europe, though he had a fair idea.

Devlin Corp would have been driven into the ground and his grandfather's monumental efforts in building the company from scratch would have been for nought. And what *he'd* been trained to do from his teens would have meant nothing.

He still couldn't understand why Bishop Devlin had handed the reins to his recalcitrant son—not when he'd been groomed for the job for so long. Until his grandfather had explained he needed to give Bert a chance to prove himself, to see if his son was made of sterner stuff.

Rory loved his dad, faults and all, but he couldn't understand why anyone would pass up the opportunity of a lifetime to run a major company.

A small part of him had been glad his dad had botched the top job, because he'd known it was only a matter of time till he got his chance. Now he had that chance no way would he

let anything derail him—including a smart-mouthed, intelligent environmental scientist with seawater in her blood.

His intercom beeped and he hit the answer button. ‘Yes, Denise?’

‘Gemma Shultz to see you.’

‘Send her in.’

He threw her business card into the dossier and snapped it shut. Armed with more information than last night, he was prepared for a confrontation: on *his* terms. When the sassy blonde sauntered through his door he’d be ready.

Until the moment his door opened, she stepped into his office and his preparation of the last few minutes evaporated.

His gut inexplicably tightened at the sight of her in a staid black trouser suit and a basic white business shirt. Nothing basic about the way she wore it, though. The top two buttons were undone to reveal a hint of cleavage, and her fitted trousers accentuated her legs. Legs that ended with her feet stuck into work boots.

And what were those God-awful dangly things hanging from her ears? Dolphins? Whales? Burnished copper fashioned into cheap earrings that did nothing for her plain outfit.

His mouth twisted in amusement. Gemma Shultz was nothing if not original. She wore an off-the-rack outfit, no make-up, ugly shoes and horrid earrings. Yet she intrigued him.

He couldn’t fathom it.

She’d blackmailed her way into this interview and that had

had his back up from the start. He didn't like having his authority questioned, didn't like some upstart environmentalist bulldozing her way in with unethical tactics, but what made it infinitely worse was he couldn't for the life of him fathom why he'd agreed to this meeting.

What was it about this woman that had him so tetchy?

'We meet again.'

Rather than offering her hand for him to shake, she surprised him again by shrugging out of her jacket and draping it over the back of a chair, making herself completely at home. And making his hands clench with the effort not to yank it off the chair and insist she put it back on again, so he wouldn't have to notice the faint outline of a lace bra beneath the semi-transparent white cotton of her blouse.

Weren't environmentalists supposed to wear hessian sacks and hemp bracelets and dreadlocks?

Annoyed at his reaction, he mentally slashed her interview allotment by five minutes. The sooner he got rid of her, the sooner he could get back to what he did best. Building the best luxury homes Melbourne had ever seen.

'Considering your tactics last night, you left me no choice.'

A smug smile curved her lips, and in that moment he knew that whatever came of this meeting Gemma Shultz could become the bane of his existence if he let her.

'I half expected you not to follow through on your promise of an interview.'

‘I always keep my promises.’

He crossed his arms, recognised his defensiveness, and immediately uncrossed them. Only to find his hands itching to reach across the desk and see if her hair felt as silky-soft as it looked.

Damn, what was *wrong* with him?

She was nothing like the perfectly polished women he dated, with their trendy fashions and manicures and cleverly highlighted hair. Women who wouldn’t be caught dead in a cheap suit and work boots. Women who wore diamonds for earrings, not copper marine life. Why the irrational buzz of attraction?

‘Your fifteen minutes has been cut to ten. Start talking.’

Unfazed by his curtness, she pointed to his computer. ‘By now I’m sure you’ve researched me and found a virtual plethora of information. So how about we skip the formalities and cut to the chase?’

Intrigued by her forwardness, he nodded. ‘Which is?’

‘I want you to hire me for the Portsea project.’

‘And I want to buy the island next to Richard Branson’s—but, hey, we don’t always get what we want.’

Her eyes narrowed at his levity.

‘I’m the best in the business. Give me a month on the project and I’ll ensure every home you build is energy-efficient while maintaining viability in the surrounding environment and ensuring the beach is protected.’

‘I’ve already had consultants look over the project—’

‘Hacks.’

She leaned forward and planted her palms on his desk, her chest temptingly at eye level.

‘You’re a smart man. You know in the construction business it’s the bottom dollar that counts. That beach? Last on the priority list. Which is why you need me. I incorporate scientific knowledge with environmental *nous*.’ She straightened, shrugged. ‘I’m a specialist in the marine field. You’d be a fool not to hire me.’

After the public debacle his father had made of the Port Douglas project, the company and himself, if there was one thing guaranteed to push his buttons it was being seen as stupid.

He stood so fast his chair slammed into the filing cabinet behind him, and he leaned across his desk—within strangling reach.

‘I can assure you, Miss Shultz, I’m no fool. You’ve had your say. Please leave.’

She didn’t recoil or flinch or bat an eyelid and his admiration notched further.

‘Not till you’ve interviewed me.’

She sat, crossed her legs and rested her clasped hands on one knee.

‘You promised me an interview so start asking questions.’

Stunned by her audacity, he shook his head. ‘I can call Security.’

‘You won’t.’

Her blue eyes grew stony as she met his stonewalling gaze head-on. 'I've done my research too. You're new to this job. You want the best for Devlin Corp. Let's cut the small talk and use my remaining minutes here wisely.'

He fell into his seat and rubbed his forehead, where the beginnings of a headache were stirring.

Fine, he'd play this her way. He'd go through her little game for the next five minutes, then he'd personally escort her out and slam the door on headstrong, pushy women once and for all.

'Why don't you go ahead and tell me why a successful, headhunted, environmental scientist who has worked around the world wants to work on a Devlin Corp project?'

For the first time since she'd strutted in he glimpsed uncertainty as she tugged on an earring, before she quickly masked it with a toss of her hair.

'I like to diversify. The size of a project isn't important to me. It's the probable impact on the surrounding environment. And the Portsea project captured my attention for that reason.'

Her eyes glittered with unexpected fervour as she sat forward, her hands waving around to punctuate her words. 'Portsea's a gorgeous spot. Beaches along the Mornington Peninsula are special. You can't just dump a fancy-schmancy housing development in the middle of it and hope for the best.'

Increasingly frustrated that she saw him as some dollar-grabbing corporate raider, he had to cut this short.

'Contrary to your belief, Devlin Corp doesn't *dump* anything.'

When we take on a project of this magnitude we do extensive environmental studies—’

‘Done by consultants. So you’ve said.’

She waved away his explanation, leaving him gobsmacked for the second time in twenty-four hours.

‘I’m not besmirching your company’s reputation. All I’m asking for is forty-eight hours to head out to the site, collate my findings and present them to you.’

‘That’s all?’

She ignored his sarcasm, beaming as if he’d agreed to share CEO duties with her.

‘I promise you won’t regret it.’

‘I already do,’ he muttered, thinking he must be mad to contemplate giving in to her demands.

But something she’d said rang true: he’d hired consultants previously used by his dad, and while he couldn’t fault their findings he had to admit environmental outcomes weren’t his area of expertise.

The consultants presented their findings, he went ahead with the project regardless, and while no red flags had jumped out at him, how well had the consultants studied how the land lay, so to speak?

He had an expert in the field sitting in front of him, offering her services for two days. Businesswise, he’d be a fool to pass up expertise of that magnitude. Personally, he wanted to boot her out before she coerced him into anything else.

‘What do you say?’ She held up two fingers. ‘Two days is all I’m asking for.’

‘If I agree to this—’ her grin widened and he held up a hand to rein her in ‘—and it’s a big *if* at this stage, how much are you charging?’

She leaned forward as if to impart some great secret.

‘For you? Free.’

He reared back. He’d learned from a young age that if something looked too good to be true it usually was.

‘What’s the catch?’

She shrugged. ‘No catch.’

He glimpsed a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes, the pinch around her mouth, the fiddle with her earring.

‘Here’s the deal. If you tell me the truth about why this is so important to you, I’ll give you two days.’

She paled and he almost felt guilty for holding her over a barrel. Almost. For all the grief she’d put him through he should rejoice he’d finally gained the upper hand. No one got the better of him, but in twenty-four hours this woman had come close.

Indecision warred with yearning, before she finally sagged into her chair, the fight drained out of her.

‘My family owned that land.’

There she went again, flooring him without trying.

‘We bought it from the Karl Trust.’

She gnawed on her bottom lip. Her vulnerability was softening the hard shell he’d erected around his heart. Not from any grand

passion gone wrong but for the simple reason he didn't have the time or inclination for a relationship.

He dated extensively, squiring women to corporate events and charity balls and the theatre. But dating and getting involved in a relationship were worlds apart and he liked to keep it that way. He had one love in his life—Devlin Corp—and it suited him fine.

'Karl Shultz was my dad. The land had been in his family for a few generations, in trust. It meant a lot to us—him.'

Her slip-up told him all he needed to know. This land had personal value to her, which made him wonder why she'd let it be sold in the first place. Financial liability, most likely, but it wasn't his place to question her personal status.

'I get it. This land meant something to you and you want to ensure it's treated right.'

She clasped her hands so tight her knuckles stood out. Her reluctance to discuss anything deeper than superficialities was obvious.

'Something like that.'

She clamped her lips shut to stop herself from saying more but he'd heard enough.

'I'm a stand-up guy, Miss Shultz, and I value honesty. Especially in business.'

He held out his hand for her to shake. 'You've got yourself forty-eight hours to do your worst.'

Her answering smile made something unfamiliar twang in his chest.

‘Thanks, you won’t regret it.’

She placed her hand in his, her callused fingers skirting along his palm and creating a frisson of electricity that disturbed him as much as the urge to hold on longer.

‘And call me Gemma. I have a feeling we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other before this project is through.’

He opened his mouth to correct her, to reiterate it was two days only, but as she shook his hand and smiled at him as if he’d announced she’d won the lottery he couldn’t help but think seeing more of her might not be such a bad thing after all.

## CHAPTER FOUR

AS THE elevator doors slid open on the ground floor, and Gemma stepped into the elaborate glass-and-chrome foyer of Devlin Corp, she wrinkled her nose. The place was lit up like a Christmas tree, despite the gorgeous sun outside, and she'd hazard a guess those lights weren't dimmed at night. What a waste of electricity.

Not to mention the fancy flyers lying in discreet piles on strategically placed tables—way to go with conserving trees—and enough water coolers to irrigate an entire African village.

Maybe once she'd finished with the Portsea project good old Rory would let her overhaul his business.

Considering his perpetually bemused expression whenever she was around, she doubted it.

Exiting the glass monstrosity, she skipped down the marble stairs onto bustling Collins Street.

She'd hustled her way into that interview using bold tactics, and she intended on continuing to bombard Mr Conservative from left field.

He'd read up on her, from that folder sitting in front of him that he'd tried to slide under a pile of documents when she'd entered.

She'd expected nothing less from a go-get-'em businessman in his position, but he'd surprised her with his intuition. He'd picked up on why the land was important to her and laid out a

little blackmail of his own.

He'd left her no choice but to come clean about her reasons for wanting to be involved, but rather than criticism she'd seen understanding in those perceptive blue eyes.

He'd understood. Surprising. It made her like him a tad. Enough to wonder why a rich, successful, good-looking guy in his early thirties—her research had been thorough too—wasn't engaged or married or in a relationship.

She'd seen only a few internet hits of him in the glossies or newspapers. A guy like him should have had loads printed in the gossip columns, but there'd been surprisingly little bar a few pictures of the requisite arm-candy blondes/brunettes/redheads—stick-thin women in *haute couture* accompanying him to various corporate events.

For the CEO of Australia's biggest luxury property developer, she'd expected more enlightening hits. Interesting.

As she threaded her way through the corporate suits rushing down Collins Street, with everyone in a great hurry to get where they needed to be, she took the time to look around. It had been years since she'd strolled through her home city. Her flying visits usually consisted of work and a quick obligatory visit with her mum.

As much as she loved Melbourne's beautiful gardens and trams and café culture, she'd never really felt at ease here. Attending a private girls' high school had exacerbated her alien feelings. She'd had few friends once the girls had discovered she

enjoyed windsurfing and rock-climbing and camping more than sleepovers and manicures and make-up.

Throw in her love of physics and chemistry over art and literature, of participating in soccer games rather than tittering on the sidelines watching the local boys' school, and her classmates' shunning had been ensured.

She'd pretended she didn't care—had blissfully retreated to Portsea on the weekends, where she could truly be herself in a non-judgemental environment that nourished rather than criticized. But after her dad died and her relationship with her mum went pear-shaped, the insecurities her mother fed at home had festered at school, leaving her emotionally segregated from everyone.

She'd learned to shelter her emotions and present a blasé front to the world. A front that thankfully had held up in Rory Devlin's intimidating presence and gained her an opportunity to pitch. She had complete confidence in her abilities and knew once he'd heard her presentation he'd hire her.

Besides, she thought he had a soft spot. She'd seen the shift from cool businessman to reluctantly interested when she'd mentioned her family had owned the Portsea land. Who would've thought the guy had a heart? It humanised him and she didn't like that. Didn't like how it added to his appeal. He was a means to an end, nothing more.

The fact she hadn't been on a date in months had to be the reason she'd noticed how his eyes reminded her of a Santorini

sky, how his lips would tempt a nun to fantasise.

When they'd shaken hands her fingers had tingled with the residual zap, making her wonder what he'd do with those strong, masterful hands in the throes of passion.

Not good to be thinking along those lines. Not good at all.

She loved her job, threw herself into it one hundred percent, but moving from place to place had consequences: she didn't have time to form attachments to any guy.

If she were completely honest, she didn't have the inclination either. She socialised—dinner, drinks, the occasional movie—but no one had captured her attention for longer than a few dates. Leading a transient life suited her. Moving on to the next job site gave her the perfect excuse to not get emotionally involved.

Garett, her regular date for functions in London, had accused her of being deliberately detached, of putting up barriers against a deeper relationship. Probably true. She'd switched to a new date for the next business dinner.

She'd mulled over her reluctance to pursue a long-term relationship at length, and while it suited her to blame her work, she knew deep down she wanted what her mum had had: the complete love of a man who adored and one hundred percent accepted you.

Her dad had been patient, kind, generous with his time and affection, and completely non-judgemental. He had been the one person who truly understood her, and once he'd died her mum's rejection had only served to increase her feelings of being an

outcast.

The emotional walls she'd erected had been deliberate, a coping mechanism at the time, but they'd become such an ingrained part of her she didn't know how to lower them. Or didn't want to.

Letting a guy get too close, opening herself up to possible rejection again? Uh-uh. She might be many things, but a masochist wasn't one of them. Better to push them away before they shut her out. She'd learned that the hard way.

She had a brilliant job she adored, a freedom envied by her married colleagues, and the ocean—a place she could immerse and lose herself anywhere in the world. Why risk all that? No guy was worth it, not in her experience.

That buzz she'd experienced when Rory had shaken her hand? Nothing more than static from the posh rug in his office.

She bumped into a businessman, who shot her a filthy glare, and she apologised, sidestepped and picked up the pace, obliterating thoughts of a handsome millionaire—the least likely guy she'd be attracted to.

Rory stood on the crest and surveyed the endless indigo ocean stretching to the horizon.

Gemma's place.

That was how he'd started thinking of this stretch of beach, and he shook his head. He didn't have room for sentimentality in his life, and certainly not in his business, but there was something about her never-say-die attitude in regards to this land that

plucked at his heartstrings.

She'd gone to extreme lengths to gain his attention, and while he didn't approve of her methods he couldn't fault her enthusiasm. This place meant a lot to her. He'd granted her request to provide him with assessment findings to humour her, but he had to admit he was curious. Curious about her scientific skills, curious about her work ethic, and curious about what she'd do once he vetoed her findings.

The project was ready to go, excavation set to commence in a month, and he had every intention of getting it done on time. Houses were sold, shareholders had invested, sub-contractors had been hired. Amendments were doable at this stage, but anything else she might come up with? Pie-in-the-sky dreams.

A gunshot made him jump and he whirled around, squinting at the road where it had come from. When a dented pale blue VW rolled over the hill, and backfired again before pulling up next to his Merc in a cloud of dust, he stifled a grin.

Of course she'd drive a beat-up old banger; though how environmentally safe a car like that was remained debatable.

She tumbled out of the car, all long denim-clad legs and red jumper, a gaudy floral scarf fluttering in the wind and her plait unravelling as she hurried towards him.

'Sorry I'm late.'

He jerked a thumb in the direction of the vehicle. 'Car trouble?'

'How'd you guess?'

‘That thing belongs in a museum. Where’d you get it? Rent-a-Bomb?’

She blushed.

‘You know the emissions from that can’t be good for the environment?’

It was like waving a chainsaw in front of a greenie.

She squared her shoulders, her eyes flashing blue fire. ‘Considering some of us aren’t flush with funds like other people —’ her scathing glare encompassed him and the Merc ‘—we make do with what we’ve got.’

He opened his mouth to respond and she held up a finger.

‘As it so happens, they had nothing else available. Once I know how long I’m in town for I’ll be chasing up something more suitable. Satisfied?’

‘Immensely.’

Her eyes narrowed at his tongue-in-cheek response, but before she could flay him again he gestured to the land.

‘How long since you’ve been here?’

‘Five years.’

Her wistful sigh cut through his distraction.

‘That’s a long time to stay away from home.’

She angled her head away from him, but not before he’d glimpsed fleeting pain.

‘Work keeps me pretty busy.’

‘Same here.’

He knew exactly how many years she’d worked overseas, but

hearing her audible regret only exacerbated his curiosity. If she loved her job so much, her regret must be personal. He'd bet some jerk had done a number on her.

'Melbourne doesn't hold good memories for you?'

She reared back as if he'd poked her in the eye. 'What makes you think that?'

'Your time spent away, your defensiveness.'

He expected her to clam up. So of course she did the opposite, surprising him yet again.

'There's nothing much left for me here any more.'

She sank onto a nearby log, resting her elbows on her knees, her chin on her hands. He eyed the log warily and she raised an eyebrow at his pause.

'No bull-ants, no spiders—nothing to bite your butt.'

She blushed again, the faint pink staining her cheeks highlighting the blueness of her eyes, making him forget his five-thousand-dollar suit as he sat just to be close to her.

'Bad break-up?'

She shook her head, the addictive fragrance of spring mornings and sunshine he'd smelt when they'd first met wafting over him.

'Uh-uh. I just don't fit in here.'

'What about family?'

'My mum lives in South Yarra. We catch up occasionally. It's been five years since I've been to the beach here, but I made a flying visit to Melbourne two years ago and saw Mum then.'

She made it sound as if she'd flown in to have a root canal.

'You don't get on?'

'Something like that.' Her hand gestured to the vista before them in an all-encompassing sweep. 'She never understood how special this place was. My dad and I used to camp here. We did a lot of stuff together ...'

She trailed off and for one horrifying moment he thought she might cry. He didn't do tears, didn't know how to offer comfort, and he rushed on.

'I take it you didn't know she'd sold the land?'

'No.'

That one syllable held so much regret and rawness and retribution he almost felt guilty for delving.

'This means a lot to you.'

'You think?'

Her sarcasm, tinged with sadness, made him wish he hadn't probed for answers. If he'd kept this on a purely business level he wouldn't be feeling like the grinch that stole Christmas.

When it came to business, he didn't have time for a conscience. He didn't feel anything other than soul-deep satisfaction that he was doing what he'd been groomed to do: preserve his family legacy.

That was when it hit him.

Their situations were reversed. He'd been given an opportunity to continue his family legacy, to make it flourish, to stamp his flair, to make his mark.

How would he feel if his dad had run Devlin Corp into the ground or, worse, sold it off to the highest bidder? He'd be gutted. That was exactly how Gemma would be feeling.

'You came home especially for this, didn't you?'

'Yep.'

'You know I can't retract the sale or stop the project from going ahead?'

The moment the words spilled out of his mouth he wondered where they'd come from. He didn't owe her any explanations, but something in her defeated posture tugged.

'I wouldn't expect you to,' she said, derision curling her upper lip. 'I'm not some charity case.' She swivelled to face him, then fired back, 'You're a hard-headed businessman. I get it. All this? Gone. But if I can preserve one iota of this beauty, maybe the people who live here will appreciate it as much as we did.'

She ended on a little hitch of breath and leaped to her feet, dusting off a butt moulded temptingly by denim.

'Now, let's get to it.'

He stood, and before he'd realised what he was doing he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

'I'm willing to hear your ideas and keep an open mind.'

She allowed his hand to linger for a few long, tension-fraught seconds before she shrugged it off.

'Thanks. That's all I ask.'

She switched into business mode, the contrast intriguing him as much as her steely determination underlined with a thread of

vulnerability.

He'd never met anyone like her.

The businesswomen he worked with were only intent on climbing the corporate ladder, while the women he dated were poised, polished and excessively cool.

They never fought for a cause or were passionate about what they believed in. They didn't care about the environment unless a passing shower ruined their blow-dried perfection. They rarely wore skinny jeans or paisley scarves.

They were nothing like Gemma.

'The marine ecosystems in Port Phillip Bay need to be preserved.' Her eyes narrowed as they swept the horizon. 'Human-induced environmental changes, such as the mansions you're proposing to build along here, can contribute to the breakdown of sustainability.'

Although impressed by the passion shining in her eyes, he kept his tone light. 'You're trying to dazzle me with scientific speak.'

Her glare made him wish he'd kept his mouth shut.

'See these dunes below us? Destroying the vegetation in sand dunes lets the wind blow them away, increasing the coast's vulnerability to erosion.' She pointed to the scrubby bush a few feet in front of them. 'If you're building mansions behind us, you'll probably construct a sea wall along here.' She shook her head. 'Bad move. Seriously bad move. A sea wall built along a beach only protects the landward property, but ruins the beach by isolating sand behind the wall from the active beach system.'

This eventually leads to serious erosion problems, and eventually no beach exists in front of the wall ...’

Her voice faded but her eyes had lost none of their spark as they pinned him with ferocious accusation.

‘If this beach were left to erode naturally, without a sea wall, it would always be here.’

And her dad’s legacy would last for ever. She didn’t have to say it. It was evident in every line of her rigid body: in her defensive stance, her crossed arms, her upthrust chin daring him to disagree.

Her fervour, her passion for her cause was staggering.

‘No sea wall. Got it.’

One eyebrow arched in imperious disbelief. ‘You’re mocking me?’

Considering he’d noticed her clenched fists, he wouldn’t dare. ‘Honestly? Your dedication is impressive but plans are in place, houses are sold, this project is going ahead.’

*With or without your approval.* It was a comment he wisely confined to his head.

‘Houses? Don’t you mean luxury mansions worth millions? Millions designed to make your precious company mega-wealthy.’

‘You of all people know what land prices are worth along here. I’m just doing what any developer would do.’

‘Yeah, plunder the land,’ she muttered, her sagging shoulders the first sign of defeat.

‘Construction is going ahead.’ Feeling sorry for her, he softened his tone. ‘What would you suggest to facilitate environmental conscientiousness?’

He listened carefully as she outlined her plans for solar panels and double glazing and toilets flushed by tank water, trying not to be distracted as the wind toyed with the strands escaping her ponytail and flushed her cheeks.

When she’d finished, she stared at him with an eyebrow raised in question.

‘What do you think?’

‘Collate your ideas, back them up with documented research and be ready to present to my project managers day after tomorrow.’

Her eyes widened in disbelief. ‘You mean it?’

‘I’m not in the habit of saying things I don’t mean—’

She cut him off by flinging herself at him and wrapping her arms around his neck, that infernal scarf smacking him in the face.

He floundered, propriety dictating he unwind her arms and set her back, so as not to blur their business relationship. But by the time his brain processed what he should do it was too late.

His arms slid around her of their own volition, savouring her soft curves and the way she fitted into him.

He knew it was wrong, knew he shouldn’t do it, but he rested his cheek on the top of her head, buried his nose in her hair and inhaled, committing the fresh outdoor scent he’d associate with

her for ever to memory.

*For ever?*

It was the reality check he needed, and he quickly eased away, grateful when she laughed off their embrace as if it meant nothing.

‘Guess you can’t fault me for exuberance.’

His terse nod belittled the special moment they’d shared and he glanced at his car, desperate to extract himself from an already precarious situation. One more moment in her ‘exuberant’ company and goodness knew what he’d do.

‘Thanks for meeting me out here. I’ll have that presentation ready for you.’

‘Ring Denise and she’ll schedule a time.’

‘Great.’

He made a grand show of glancing at his watch, when in fact time meant nothing and he’d much rather spend the afternoon here than listen to a bunch of builders drone on about material costs.

‘You go.’ Her face softened. ‘I want to spend a few more minutes here.’

On her own.

He couldn’t give her the land back but he could give her the privacy she craved.

‘Sure, see you in a few days.’

‘Count on it.’

She smiled, and this time something beyond scary twisted in

the vicinity of his heart.

He did the only thing possible.

He bolted.

## CHAPTER FIVE

GEMMA waited until the purr of Rory's Mercedes faded before she found the nearest ti-tree and banged her forehead against it. Repeatedly. It didn't help.

She'd hoped it might knock some sense into her—or, better, eradicate the memory of flinging herself at Rory.

What had she been *thinking*?

That was the problem; she hadn't been thinking. She'd been so blown away by his offer to present her recommendations to the project managers logic had fled and she'd been running on pure emotion.

When it came to this place it had always been about emotion, and that was what hurt the most: the fact her mum hadn't realised its importance in her life—the haven it had provided to an isolated teenager. Or if she had she'd upped and sold it without consulting her regardless.

She rubbed her forehead, her rueful wince tempered by the incredible view. How many times had she camped here with her dad? Pitching tents, cooking sausages over an open fire, roasting marshmallows. Everything had been an adventure because her dad had made it so. He hadn't berated her for not brushing her hair or not wearing a dress or not playing with dolls. Her dad had understood her, and standing here in their spot she missed him more than ever.

She inhaled the briny air, its familiar tang infusing her lungs, releasing some of her residual tension. She'd always been more relaxed here, more at home. From the distinctive ti-trees to the grassy fringes, from the pristine sand to the untamed ocean, she'd never felt anything other than comfortable here. It was a feeling she could never replicate anywhere else—a feeling of righteousness, of oneness, that had been ripped away by a mother who had never understood.

Another major head-slapping moment. She'd divulged some of her family history to Rory. She should have known the familiarity and contentment of being here would loosen her lips. Her inhibitions too, going by that cringeworthy hug.

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