

NICOLA MARSH

Girl in a Vintage Dress

MODERN™ tempted

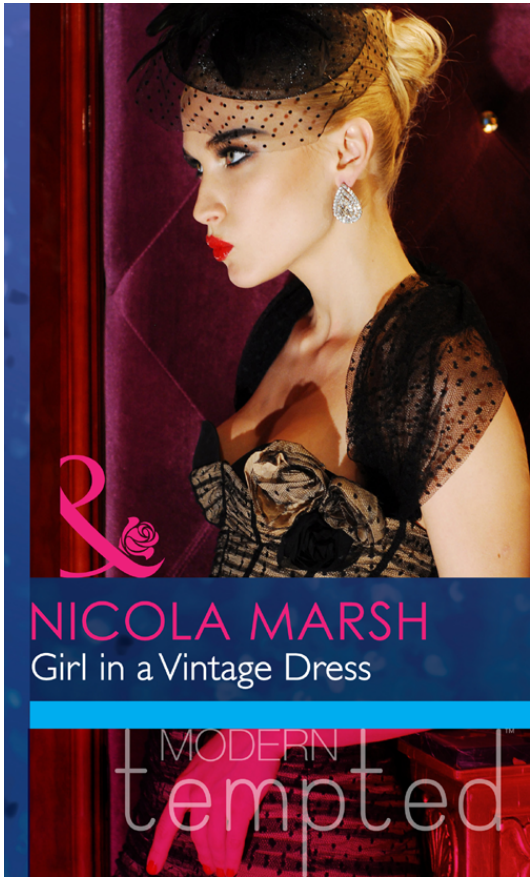
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Аннотация

Facing the past, one vintage heel at a time… Polished, in control, complete with crimson lippy, the fabulously vintage Lola Lombard excels at hiding behind her armour of clothes, hair, make-up and attitude. But will two events challenge her barely held-together poise? Organising a hen do for a terrifyingly sophisticated gaggle of hens has her shaking in her seamed stockings.And how can she fend off the curiosity of the bride's blue-eyed, dripping-with-cool brother, who sees too quickly through her armour and wants to find out more…? Will sparks – and the hens' feathers – fly? If you like Carole Matthews or Sarra Manning, you'll love this.

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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

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** for the latest news of her books.

Also by Nicola Marsh

Wedding Date with Mr Wrong
Marrying the Enemy
Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?
Interview with the Daredevil
Deserted Island, Dreamy Ex!
Wild Nights with her Wicked Boss
Overtime in the Boss's Bed
Three Times a Bridesmaid…
Married: For Business or Pleasure?
A Trip with the Tycoon
Two Weeks in the Magnate's Bed

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Girl in a Vintage Dress
Nicola Marsh



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For my sister-in-law Deb,
the queen of retro chic.
Here's to a future of fabulous frocks,
snazzy shoes and catch-ups over coffee.

CHAPTER ONE

THE moment Chase Etheridge turned into Errol Street the fine hairs on the back of his neck snapped to attention.

Bad enough driving through North Melbourne, the suburb he'd once called home, but this particular street held more than long suppressed memories.

Errol Street encapsulated everything he'd run from, everything he'd rather forget.

Yet here he was edging through traffic, searching for a parking spot, trying to concentrate on the road and obliterate the memories running through his mind like a rerun of a B grade movie.

Riding his bike down to Arden Street to watch his beloved Kangaroos footy team train, walking to the local primary school, picking up Cari from a friend's: not bad memories so much as snapshots of his past. A past where he'd raised Cari and taken on far too much responsibility from a young age. A past filled with making school lunches, correcting homework and cooking dinners. A past where he hadn't had a chance to be a kid.

Though some good had come out of it. Cari adored him and the feeling was mutual. He'd do anything for his sister, the sole reason he was here.

Easing his Jag into a prime parking space, he ignored the uncharacteristic twist of nerves in his gut. Him, nervous?

Laughable, as any of his employees at Dazzle would attest to.

Make millions? Take the entertainment industry by storm? Be the best in the business? Could do it with his eyes closed. He didn't have time to be nervous yet striding up a rejuvenated Errol Street, packed with trendy cafés and boutiques and far removed from the street he remembered, he couldn't help but feel a touch anxious.

If being back here wasn't bad enough, strolling into some fancy schmancy vintage shop with the aim of organising his sister's hen's night was enough to send a shiver of dread through the hardest of men.

His mobile beeped and he answered a text message from his PA, one eye on his smartphone, the other on the shopfronts until he spotted his destination.

Go Retro.

Written in candy cane pink in a curly font against a backdrop of shoes and hats and lipsticks, he'd rather be anywhere else but he had business to conduct and that was one thing he did well.

Firing off another message to Jerrie, he nudged the door open with his butt and entered the shop, mentally calculating profit margins and new dates in response to his uber efficient PA's next question.

A tiny bell tinkled overhead but he didn't look up, frowning as Jerrie emailed him the updated guest list for tonight's modelling agency launch.

'Excuse me.'

He held up a finger, not ready to be interrupted while dealing with this latest problem.

'We don't allow mobile phones in here.'

He should've known. A shop dealing in retro stuff would live in the Dark Ages.

'Just give me a minute—'

'Sorry, Retro rules.'

Before he could argue the phone was plucked out of his hands and he finally glanced up, ready to blast the cheeky shop assistant.

'How dare you…'

The rest of his rebuttal died on his lips as his angry glare clashed with the biggest, softest brown eyes he'd ever seen, fringed in illegally long eyelashes that added to an air of fragility.

Not many people stood up to him let alone a five foot six curvaceous blonde who looked as if she'd stepped out of the fifties with her hair pinned up in curls and held back by a headband the same polka dot material as her rock and roll dress.

'I dare because I'm the owner, and rules are rules.'

She pocketed his smartphone, hiding it in the side pocket of a voluminous skirt and having the audacity to smile.

'You'll get it back when you leave. Now, is there anything I can help you with?'

Frowning, he was on the verge of demanding his phone back and marching right back out of here, Cari's hen's night or not, when he caught a glimmer of fear behind those lashings of

mascara.

For all her boldness in playing enforcer, the owner of all this frippery didn't like playing the big, bad boss. Something he could identify with so he settled for thrusting his hands into his pockets and glancing around, seeing the place for the first time.

Riotous colour assaulted his senses: fake pink roses stuck on black pillbox hats, orange and teal gloves spilling out of floral boxes, emerald feather boas draped over satin clad mannequins and primrose paisley scarves only a small sampling of the merchandise cramming every nook and cranny of the store.

To his discerning eye, which much preferred sleek modern lines in everything from furniture to fashion, this place was his worst nightmare.

'Can I help you with something specific? An item of clothing? Accessories? A special something for your wife?'

'I don't have a partner,' he said, a blinder of a headache building behind his eyes as he stared at the incredible visual assault of florals and flounces and feathers, glitter and gowns and gaudy baubles that twinkled beneath the muted down-lights, the only concession to the twenty-first century in the entire place.

'Oh. Right. Well, we cater to all types,' she said, a hint of amusement in her low tone as she sized him up and he puffed up in indignation.

'I'm not here for *me.*'

'Nothing to be ashamed of. You're welcome to try on anything you fancy.'

He gaped before snapping his jaw shut. He'd been mistaken for many things in his lifetime; a cross dresser wasn't one of them.

'Are you always this forward with your customers?'

'Only the recalcitrant ones.'

Her encouraging smile lit up her face, adding a sparkle to her eyes and transforming her from simply pretty to beautiful.

'Well, I hate to burst your sales pitch bubble but the women I date don't doubt my masculinity so I'd appreciate it if you did the same.'

She blushed, her smile fading as she looked away, but not before he'd seen that same flicker of vulnerability he'd glimpsed before.

The women he knew, professionally, socially, never showed vulnerability. They were confident: in their talents, in themselves, women who knew what they wanted and weren't afraid to go out and grab it with both hands. This woman was as far from those women as he was from his past yet there was something about her that intrigued him on an intrinsic level.

He'd always trusted his gut instincts and right now, they were telling him to find out what made her tick before he hired her.

She cleared her throat. 'Right, now that we've established you're not in the market for a nineteen-twenties tangerine tea gown, what can I help you with?'

The corners of his mouth twitched as she continued to eye him dubiously, as if she still wasn't convinced he wouldn't slip

into a tulle petticoat when she wasn't looking.

'I heard you did birthday parties.'

She nodded, the huge curl pinned over her forehead wobbling.

'That's right. We can do make-overs, photos, dress ups, the works. Women love it.'

She paused, her lush red-slicked lips curving into a coy smile.

'Some men too.'

He found himself smiling back, when in fact he wanted to say, *Enough with doubting my masculinity already*.

'Would that sort of thing transfer across to a hen's night?'

Her eyes lit up. 'Of course. A few hours of fun for the bride-to-be—'

'I was thinking more along the lines of a week.'

One perfectly plucked eyebrow arched. 'A week?'

'That's right.'

He strolled around the shop, picking up a sparkly hair clip here, a spotted scarf there, not seeing the attraction personally but knowing Cari would adore everything about this place.

And what Cari wanted he'd provide. She was the only person who'd stuck by him all these years and if it hadn't been for her when he was growing up… He suppressed a shudder.

'Let me get this straight. You want me to run a week long hen's party?'

'Uh-huh.'

He stopped at the counter, covered in baskets of womanly paraphernalia and brochures, staggered by the amount of *stuff*

draped over every available surface.

'That's impossible.'

'Nothing's impossible,' he said, watching her fiddle with a mannequin, adjusting the wide belt, smoothing the skirt. 'I checked the charges on your website. I'm willing to double your hourly rate and pay for all transport costs.'

Her eyes widened and, already knowing his offer was too good to refuse, he continued. 'And as CEO of Dazzle, who I'm sure you've heard of, I'm willing to personally recommend you for upcoming events needing something fresh in the way of fashion.'

She stared at him with those big brown eyes, an unwavering stare that made him strangely uncomfortable.

When she didn't jump at his offer immediately, he had to move onto Plan B: cajole.

There his plan hit a snag: he didn't even know her name and knew if he asked now he'd lose serious ground.

'So what do you say?'

She straightened, tossed her blonde ringlets over her shoulders with a flick of her hand and pinned him with a glare that spoke volumes before she opened her mouth.

'Thanks for the offer but my answer's no.'

CHAPTER TWO

LOLA didn't take kindly to being bossed around. She'd had enough of it growing up from her Miss Australia finalist mother and catwalk model sister.

Wear the boot cut jeans, not the slim fit.

Don't wear the A-line skirt; it makes your bum look big.

Use the coral lipstick, not the pink, you look washed out.

Bossiness never failed to put her back up and the moment Mr Tall, Dark and Domineering had strutted into her domain, ignoring house rules, she'd been primed for battle.

Mobile phones didn't belong in Go Retro for a reason. Trying to recreate a vintage ambience was imperative to her business and considering those infernal devices weren't invented back then, she'd made it a house rule to not have them used in the shop that was her pride and joy.

She also hated their constant buzzing and ringing and clattering as people tapped at those miniature keypads as if their lives depended on it.

How anyone could be glued to a phone when surrounded by all this beauty… She trailed a hand over a velvet nineteen-forties vermillion ball gown, savouring the plush-ness, the timeless elegance, let her fingers skim a floral silk scarf she bet could tell a few stories about the necks it had been knotted around over the years.

She glanced at the diamanté shoe clips, the crimson lipsticks in different brands, the fascinators at jaunty angles on the classically dressed mannequins.

Every item had been lovingly chosen in the hope it would bring joy to its next owner in the same way it had brought her joy to discover it. Surrounded by all these wonderful treasures of the past, how could anyone not be tempted?

'I need an answer.'

Just like that she snapped out of her reverie and glared at the philistine who wouldn't appreciate vintage at its finest if it slithered off a mannequin and onto his rather impressive frame.

The same impressive frame that made her want to run and hide out in the back room and let Immy deal with him. His type scared the beejeebies out of her: slick, smooth, successful. Guys who had it all and knew how to wield their many God-given talents. Guys who could use their looks and success to bedazzle a girl like her. Guys like Bodey.

Annoyed she'd let her past creep into the present, and doubly annoyed that she'd showed a glimmer of her fear when this guy had strutted in here as if he owned the place, she squared her shoulders.

So he thought he could boss her into accepting his deal by throwing money around and sweetening it with a personal recommendation?

He had that look about him, the look of a man used to getting his own way: designer, from the top of his perfectly cut

chocolate-brown hair to the bottom of his Italian loafers and his five-figure charcoal suit cost more than the entire front display.

As for Dazzle, of course she'd heard of them. Anyone who lived in Melbourne knew of the entertainment company's formidable reputation. You wanted something to make your event special? Dazzle did it, from jugglers to fire-eaters to international rock bands.

So he was the CEO? Figured. A guy like him would be used to throwing his weight around and never accepting a knock-back. Well, there was a first time for everything.

He wanted an answer? She had one for him, as soon as she phrased it in more ladylike terms than the ones running through her head, something along the lines of *stick it*.

Her disdain for his high-handedness must've shown for he rubbed a hand over his face and when it dropped, his haughty expression had been replaced by a rueful smile.

'Look, I'm sorry for barging in here and blustering. It's a sign of a desperate man.'

With those devastatingly blue eyes, charismatic smile and smoother-than-honey voice, she seriously doubted this guy had ever been desperate in his life.

Taking her silence as encouragement to continue, he held his hands out to her in supplication.

'My sister's getting married. She's this incredible, infuriating, adorable bundle of contradiction and I owe her a lot. She deserves the best and she loves this old stuff so I thought I'd organise this

as a surprise.'

Great. If those baby-blues twinkling with sincerity weren't bad enough, the hint of a sweet guy beneath his steely tone as he sang his sister's praises undid her resolve to tell him where he could shove his crazy offer.

'When's she getting married?'

'Six weeks. A no frills private affair, which is why I want to spoil her with this.'

'No bridesmaids to organise it?'

He shook his head. 'She hasn't got the time for all that *faff* apparently. Too busy.'

His guilty look-away glance implied he knew all too well what that was like and the fact he was taking time out to organise a hen's night for his sister when it was probably the last thing on his all important phone's calendar made a big impression.

As if his six-two lean frame and blue eyes and charming smile hadn't already done that.

'She's a corporate lawyer: driven, obstinate, workaholic.'

She hazarded a guess the bride-to-be wasn't the only one in his family to boast those qualifications.

'She's always loved this old stuff and when I caught her flipping through a magazine last week, sighing over some charm school article run by a vintage shop owner in England, I thought it'd be a great wedding gift.'

Okay, she admitted it. His sister sounded like a perfect candidate for a Go Retro party. But that was just it. She'd done

birthday parties, a few hours of escapism for ladies who shared her passion. She'd garnered rave reviews but this guy wasn't talking an afternoon. He wanted to hire her for a week?

'Cari would really love this a hell of a lot more than any espresso machine or matching iPads, my only other gift ideas.'

He smiled again and this time, something unwelcome fluttered in her chest.

'So what do you say?'

She'd been set on saying no but his sincerity had got to her. From his description of his sister, she had this image in her head of a corporate businesswoman caught up in her whirlwind career, not having time to have a proper wedding with all the trimmings.

If this was the only luxury she'd get, a week out of her busy schedule to be pampered with a Go Retro hen's party she'd never forget, how could she say no?

As for his personal recommendation, no matter how hard she tried to ignore the mortgage papers strewn across her desk out the back, she couldn't. With the economy in a downslide, skyrocketing interest rates and conservative consumer spending were killing her business, despite its funky edge and appealing website and quality merchandise. If Go Retro didn't start making a bigger profit she'd have to shut up shop and that was one thing she couldn't even think about.

She'd worked too hard and too long to make her dream come true. No way would she give it up for the sake of pride.

Not wanting to give in too easily she named a price triple her

hourly rate multiplied by seven, expecting him to barter.

He didn't.

'I can write you a cheque or wire the deposit directly into your business account now.' His lips quirked. 'If you'll give me back my phone, that is.'

His gaze dropped to her hips and she gripped the counter, trying not to squirm.

She may have lost weight since her teenage years and learned to highlight her good assets while minimising the bad but having her body scrutinised, especially by a hot guy, never failed to make her old inadequacies flare.

Were her hips too wide? Her waist too thick? Her butt too big? While the vintage fashion she embraced made the most of her curves, having a guy like him study her made her want to duck behind the counter.

She'd had her fair share of admiring glances from men before: it was what could develop from those glances that had her skittish despite being in the place she felt most comfortable.

'You do have it hidden away in that skirt of yours? Or have you performed some fancy trick and confiscated it for good?'

Her hand dived into her deep pocket and fumbled around for it, eager to hand it over and stop that potent blue-eyed gaze burning a hole in the metallic threaded eyelet lace of her favourite full-skirted polka dot dress.

'Here.'

As she handed it over their fingers brushed and a jolt akin to

an electrical surge shot up her arm and zapped her in places that hadn't been zapped in a long, *long* time.

Not good.

The guys she occasionally dated were as far removed from this guy as her vintage dress from his designer suit. Arty guys, musicians, laid-back guys who liked a Bohemian lifestyle far removed from the pressures of modern life.

Those were the type of guys who attracted her. Not career-driven, wealthy guys who could schmooze anyone into doing anything with their natural charms.

She should know. She'd tried one on for size once and was still wishing she'd got a refund while she could.

'Thanks.'

If that brief touch of fingertips hadn't been bad enough, his genuine smile made her knees quake ever so slightly and she hid her nerves behind snappiness.

'I don't even know your name,' she said, fiddling with the baskets of hair clips on the counter, rearranging them in carefully constructed disorder.

'Chase Etheridge.'

He held out his hand and she swallowed, silently cursing her stupidity. Of course he'd want to do the polite thing and shake hands. Something she could've coped with at any other time but hot on the heels of her bizarre reaction a few moments ago? Trouble.

'Lola Lombard.'

‘Lovely name.’

His gaze locked on hers and held. ‘Beautiful.’

And as she reluctantly placed her hand in his, and his fingers curled over hers, firm and warm and comforting, she almost believed for a fleeting second she was.

CHAPTER THREE

IN DESPERATE need of a calming cup of chamomile tea, Lola had just flicked the kettle switch on when Imogen breezed back in from her break, her face flushed as she clasped her hands to her chest.

'Was that *the* Chase Etheridge just leaving?'

She craned her neck, trying to get a last glimpse while Lola wrinkled her nose, more than happy to see the back of him.

'What was he doing here? He is sooo hot! Melbourne's most eligible bachelor for the third year running. No wonder, with those blue eyes, all year round tan, great smile, broad chest, cute butt—'

'Enough all ready.'

The last thing she needed right now was for her co-worker to list the guy's impressive attributes. Sadly, she'd noted them in minute detail herself and her nerves hadn't recovered despite him exiting the building.

Imogen sighed, her green eyes twinkling as she clapped her hands. 'Spill. What was he doing here?'

For a moment she wanted to tease her best friend but no way would Immy believe for one second that Chase was here on anything other than business. As if a guy like him would be interested in a girl like her for any other reason.

'He wants to use our services.'

'I can help service—'

'His sister's getting married and he wants Go Retro to do the hen's night.'

'Cool.'

Imogen edged into the tiny kitchen, grabbed her favourite 'I'm too sexy' mug and placed it next to hers. 'While you're weaving your magic with the hen and her posse, I'll entertain Chase.'

Imogen did a little shimmy as she spooned decaf into her cup. 'This is going to be fun.'

'It is,' Lola said, biting back a smile. 'Though this gig's a bit different.'

'How so?' Imogen added a shoulder wiggle to her hip shimmy. 'Does Chase need me to sleep over? Do some serious preparation for the hen's night? Because I'll do it, you know. I'm that kind of gal, totally dedicated to getting the job done whatever's required and—'

'Not you. Me.'

Lola often had to interrupt her friend mid-sentence otherwise the simplest of questions elicited a five minute long response.

This time, she enjoyed the confusion crinkling Immy's brow.

'You?'

The kettle clicked off and she poured boiling water into their cups.

'I'm the one that'll be staying over.'

Immy's jaw dropped, her mouth a perfect crimson glossed circle.

Enjoying her friend's momentary silence—it wouldn't last long—she dangled the chamomile bag.

'Apparently he's willing to pay for the privilege of having Go Retro run a week-long hen's party for his sis, no expenses spared, so while I'm doing that you'll be running the shop here.'

Imogen snapped her mouth shut into a mutinous line.

'Come on, Immy, we're a team. I run the workshops, you run this place when I'm not around. It works.'

The corners of Imogen's mouth twitched. 'Yeah, I know, but the thought of you rather than me getting up close and personal with that scrummy bachelor of the year makes me greener than Kermit.'

'I won't be getting up close and personal with anyone.'

Let alone an overconfident, overbearing workaholic who wouldn't know a hatbox from a pin curl. They had absolutely nothing in common and the fact she was even thinking along these lines meant she needed to get back to work before Immy made her more nervous.

And she was nervous, terrified in fact, for she'd agreed to meet Chase in a few hours to run through a proposed itinerary.

Her nerves had nothing to do with a lack of confidence in her work and everything to do with her irrational, erratic physical reaction to a guy who made her pulse race just by looking at her.

Imogen winked and tapped the side of her nose.

'Sure, you're going to concentrate on work and forget the fact Melbourne's hottest bachelor is looking over your shoulder. Just

think, all those one on one consultations to ensure the hen's party runs smoothly, all those late night meetings, all those cosy chats to—'

'Don't you have mannequins to dress?'

Imogen's grin widened. 'Oh yeah, you're just dying to do this.'

She was dying all right but not for the reason Immy thought. While this may be just another job on paper the reality was far different. People like Chase, who moved in moneyed circles, had different expectations to the rest of them. What if the service she provided wasn't good enough? What if she wasn't good enough?

And that was bothering her the most, that she'd be found wanting in the same disheartening, discouraging, confidence sapping way she had been every day growing up.

'Want some help planning your wardrobe?'

Lola took a sip of tea and sighed with pleasure. 'Don't you mean the wardrobe for the party?'

Imogen cupped her mug and raised an eyebrow over the rim.

'Honey, you're likely to run into the sexiest guy in Melbourne on a regular basis for a week straight. Who cares what dress ups the brats play around with? It's you who needs to dazzle.'

Dazzle.

Her hands trembled as she clutched her cup more tightly. The thought of meeting Chase at Dazzle, his workplace, in a few hours set loose a bunch of rampaging butterflies on speed in her belly.

Taking a few sips of her soothing tea and finding it did nothing

for her increasingly prevalent nerves she tipped the rest in the sink and rinsed the cup.

'Can you hold the fort for the next hour while I nip upstairs and do some serious planning for this party?'

'Sure, it'll be good practice for when I hold the fort on my own for a week while you're swanning around with chiselled Chase.'

'It's not like that,' she said, managing a wry smile at the thought of her swanning around with a guy like Chase.

Imogen cocked a hip as she leaned against the fridge. 'Then what's it like?'

'I'll let you know by the end of the week,' she said, her grin widening as Immy stuck out her tongue, the sound of childish smooching noises following her as she headed for the stairs.

Chase stared at his computer screen, trying to assimilate an inordinate amount of nonsensical information from the Go Retro website in an effort to be prepared for this meeting with Lola.

But the harder he tried to concentrate, the more the words blurred before his eyes, his attention constantly snagged by a small picture of Go Retro's proprietor in the top right hand corner.

A scoop-necked cherry dress cinched at the waist hugged her hourglass figure in all the right places, her hair falling in soft golden waves around a heart-shaped face dominated by those big brown eyes and ruby-slicked lips.

She looked incredible; and the picture didn't do her justice.

Lola Lombard in the flesh was something else.

He should know. He'd spent the last few hours replaying their encounter: the way her lips pursed when she wasn't pleased, the feisty way she'd snatched his phone, the nervous flick of her tongue when she damped her lips when their fingers touched.

She was *so* not his type but there'd been a moment in that shop, surrounded by all those bows and whistles he'd wanted her to be.

The intercom on his desk buzzed and he clicked back onto his home screen. Lola Lombard had distracted him enough for one day.

'What is it, Jerrie?'

'Your sister to see you.'

'Send her in.'

He loved the way Cari dropped by to see him despite her manic schedule and today he was especially glad. She may not want a fancy wedding but he'd make sure she enjoyed his gift.

He stood and made it halfway across his office before she strode into the room, her black business suit creaseless, her hair and make-up immaculate for someone who'd hit the courts ten hours earlier.

He'd always been immensely proud of Cari and all she'd achieved and while she was getting married he couldn't help but wonder if she was slotting in her marriage among the rest of her appointments in the meticulous diary she kept.

'Hey, sis. Glad you could make it.'

He kissed her cheek, smiling when she barely paused en route to his desk, where she started searching it.

'Where's this surprise you mentioned on the phone?'

'Ah…so that's why you dropped in. And here I was, thinking you missed seeing your amazing brother who you haven't had time for all week.'

'I don't have time for this so cut to the chase.'

She tempered her brisk tone with a cheeky smile, the same one she'd given him every time she used the well worn phrase; she'd been telling him to cut to the chase for a long time now.

'Fine. I won't bore you with details so here's the low-down.'

He perched on his desk, enjoying himself immensely. 'You know how you've cleared your schedule for a month for the wedding?'

'Yeah, I don't know how Hugh talked me into that.' She blew out an exasperated little huff but the corners of her mouth curving into a smile belied her belligerence. Hugh Hoffman was the only guy who'd come close to taming his strong-willed sister and it had been nothing short of a miracle that he'd coerced her into taking a whole month off from her precious job.

'I've talked to Hugh and he's given me the go-ahead to snaffle a week of your time.'

She frowned and glared at him over the top of her rimless spectacles.

'Not that Hugh has any say in what I do and how I spend my time, but what are you raving on about?'

Grinning, he spun around his computer screen. 'I'm throwing you a hen's party, sis. Not just a night, a whole week's worth.'

'You're insane…' The rest of her protest died on her lips as she focused on the screen, the spark of interest obvious as she caught sight of the Go Retro home page.

'Wow, check out those clothes,' she murmured, edging closer to the screen, squinting to get a better look.

'You will be,' he said, pulling up two chairs so they could sit. 'I know you love this old stuff and you'd never take time out to check it out yourself so I'm kidnapping you and that ratbag motley crew you call friends and locking you away in my Mount Macedon place for a week, with Go Retro throwing you a hen's bash you'll never forget.'

Dragging her gaze away from the screen, she stared at him with wide eyes.

'I take it back. You're not insane. You're certifiable. How on earth… Where did you get the idea… I don't believe this…'

He laughed at her lack of words, something his garrulous sister never had a problem with.

'Consider it my wedding present to you.'

He jerked his thumb at the screen, relieved when she bought his distraction. She'd honed that death glare to a fine art as a kid and it had been perfected with age. 'You and Hugh have everything, so this is a special something you'd never buy yourself.'

When she didn't speak, trepidation shot through him. Cari was his only sibling, the only person on the planet he truly cared about and he'd do anything to make her happy.

She'd done so much for him growing up: giving him a home, some semblance of family, when their parents were too busy indoctrinating their students rather than caring for the kids they had waiting futilely for them at home every night.

How many nights had they made macaroni cheese together, studied together, watched Tom and Jerry reruns until sleep had claimed them and their folks still hadn't made it home from Melbourne University? Too many and their closeness was as much about enforced dependency as blood ties.

'Come on, sis, say something.'

This time when she looked at him, every muscle in his body relaxed, for those weren't tears of anger in her eyes. They were tears of joy.

'This is the most brilliant gift anyone has ever given me and I can't thank you enough.'

She launched herself into his arms and hugged him until he could barely breathe, the two of them laughing as they disentangled.

'So I get to play dress ups with all that gorgeous gear for a week?'

'Yeah, and a whole bunch of other stuff, which I'll tell you about once I get the itinerary straight with Lola.'

'Lola?'

He deliberately kept his tone devoid of any emotion; too little too late if Cari's quirked eyebrow was any indication.

'Lola Lombard, the owner. She'll be running your hen's party.'

Cari's astute gaze bored into him. 'Can't believe a woman who owns a shop like that would take a week out of her schedule to run a private party.'

'It's part of her business, running parties.'

Along with her sideline of pilfering phones and distracting men.

'Uh-huh.' Cari tapped her bottom lip with a perfectly manicured fingernail. 'Why do I get the feeling you're not telling me everything?'

'Because you're naturally suspicious?'

Swivelling the screen back towards him, he shut down the notebook.

'So now you know the big secret you can head back to your glass office in the sky and sue a few more corporations.'

When she opened her mouth to protest, he held up a finger.

'But remember, a fortnight from today, get ready to party.'

With a rueful smile, she patted his cheek and sailed out the door, her fingers already glued to her smartphone as she checked for emails from clients.

They were so alike: busy, driven, ambitious, thriving on the challenge of business at a high level.

The lawyer and the CEO; as far removed from their parents, the English Lit professors, as could be.

He often wondered if that was what drove them—the unspoken urge to be nothing like the parents who hadn't given a toss about them.

It sure had spurred him on, to enter an industry filled with fun and parties and light-heartedness, as far removed from his sterile childhood and his parents' academic snobbery.

Not that he and Cari ever discussed it. Instead, they paid the obligatory visits at birthdays and Christmases, made perfunctory small talk with the people who were more strangers than family, before escaping for another few months.

Though not a strained visit went by without him wishing they'd show some interest: in his career, his success, his life. Futile wishes, considering his folks continued to be absorbed by their students, their timetables and themselves, in that order.

Whatever the motivation driving himself and Cari he was proud of how far they'd come and, swiping a hand over his face, he flipped up the screen with the other, instantly drawn to Lola's picture again.

Time to concentrate on more important matters; like seeing what luscious Lola Lombard could come up with for Cari's hen's party.

And getting a grip on why she held such an unwanted fascination for him.

CHAPTER FOUR

LOLA clutched her monstrous cerise crushed velvet holdall against her chest as she strode along Collins Street.

While the Dazzle offices might be at the elegant bustling *Paris* end of the street, walking through the central business district after dark always made her nervous.

The fairy lights strung through tree branches twinkled as commuters rushed past her, heading for the underground train stations, oblivious to their surroundings, caught up in the rat race.

She eased her grip on her bag and tucked it under her arm, her fear receding. Being a business drone like these commuters was far scarier to her than any imagined bogeymen lurking in the shadows.

She hated that lifestyle: the pace, the relentlessness, the frenetic whirlwind to be bigger and better and brighter than everyone else.

She'd tried it once, had been caught up in it against her will. After all, what choice did she have when her mum was a former Miss Australia finalist and her sister a catwalk supermodel?

They'd dragged her along to countless parties and Fashion Weeks and make-up launches, no doubt hoping some of that glamour would rub off on her, the lacklustre fat Lombard of the trio.

While she'd enjoyed the fashion shows and make-up

giveaways, she didn't belong in that world and never would. The fake-ness, the schmoozing, the air kisses while everyone sized up everyone else behind their backs… Nah, she'd leave that to people who thrived on it, like her gorgeous waiflike sister Shareen—yeah, she was that famous she had a single name, like Cher and Madonna—and her mum, Darla, who still graced the glossy magazines every few weeks.

The sad thing was, she could now match them for poise and fashion-consciousness yet they rarely acknowledged her transformation, they were so caught up in their own lives. And what was worse? That she still cared what they thought, after all this time.

Just once, she'd like her mum to say, *Darling, you look gorgeous*, a compliment often thrown out to Shareen. The closest she got these days was, 'That's an interesting outfit,' which was better than nothing but not a patch on what she wanted, what she deserved.

Annoyed at dredging up memories guaranteed to sap her confidence, she picked up the pace and as she reached the offices of Dazzle, enclosed in a modern glass monstrosity reaching for the sky, she knew Chase Etheridge belonged in the group of go-getters she'd just shouldered through.

He oozed class that money couldn't buy, an innate assurance evident in those slashed cheekbones, square jaw and sensual mouth.

The way he'd barged into her shop, overpowering her personal

space with his brand of charisma, never doubting for a second she'd fall in line with his plans… Yeah, he had confidence to burn and, despite her private vow made a long time ago to never fall for the falseness of that glamorous world, she found herself looking forward to seeing him again.

Irritated, she marched through the glass doors, ignoring the inevitable stares from business drones leaving the building.

She was used to the stares, used to people taking a second look when she walked past. Hadn't she cultivated this image for that very reason all those years ago, turning her personal penchant for vintage into a unique look all her own?

She liked being admired, liked standing out from Shareen and Darla and the more people complimented her the further she honed her image to the point where she never stepped out of her bedroom without her retro mask in place.

Lola Lombard was striking, different, distinctive and a far cry from frumpy, mousy Louise Lombard who'd slunk in her gorgeous family's footsteps, wishing she could be just like them.

The ten second ride in a supersonic elevator made her ears pop and, increasingly grumpy she strode along the plush thirtieth floor corridor and into the flashy Dazzle offices.

She'd expected glitz to the max but the understated elegance of the place surprised her: cinnamon carpet, mushroom walls and a simple mahogany front desk bordered on antique. The whole front office had an old world charm rather than the modern slant she'd expected after meeting Chase and her misconception

rattled her. What other surprises did Chase Etheridge hide up his Armani sleeves?

A suitably sleek receptionist glanced up as she approached and to her credit the woman didn't balk or stare at her appearance, offering a genuine smile instead.

'Hi, you must be Lola. Chase is expecting you. Last door on the left; go straight in.'

Acutely aware of her nineteen-fifties dress next to the receptionist's black Dolce and Gabbana power suit, she headed off down the hallway where Miss D&G had pointed.

She hesitated outside a monstrous ebony door, wishing she didn't have to do this. Then she remembered that latest mortgage rise notification and her teetering finances, took a deep breath and raised her fist to knock.

Her knuckles had barely grazed the door when it opened and she bit back a wistful sigh.

Because that was how seeing Chase again made her feel: pensive, yearning for something she knew wasn't good for her yet craved anyway. Kind of like her favourite double choc fudge brownies.

'Glad you could make it.'

As if she'd had any choice. Apart from her dire financial straits, the minute he'd barged into Go Retro he would never have taken no for an answer; he was that kind of guy.

'I've got a rough presentation for you to take a look at.'

'Great, come on in.'

He opened the door wider but didn't move and as she slid past him she could've sworn a bolt of electricity zapped her. How else could she explain her wobbly knees and shaky hands and boneless spine?

Striding across the office as if she was used to being in fancy executive suites every day of the week, her eyes widened when she neared the desk, a gargantuan glass and chrome concoction that would've served half a call centre.

It was covered with fancy gadgets and neat document stacks, with a gleaming stainless steel pen holder housing gold pens. A laptop as thin as a wafer sat side by side with a huge PC screen bigger than her television.

The desk spoke volumes about Chase: modern, efficient, smooth. So what did her chipped, scratched antique roll top say about her?

'Have a seat.'

Oh-oh. She'd expected him to retreat behind his well organised desk and leave her a welcome few metres away on the other side. Instead, he gestured to a low ochre suede sofa nearby —a sofa without matching chairs, which meant he'd be sitting next to her, nice and cosy, while she gave her presentation.

When he cast a quizzical glance she perched on the edge of the sofa, smoothing her full skirt before delving into her bag for her notes, concentrating on gathering her documents and trying not to stiffen when he sat next to her, so temptingly close.

'Looks like you've got an office in that bag.'

'I like to be prepared,' she said, yanking the folder from her bag and brandishing it like a protective shield.

'Let me guess. You were in Girl Scouts.'

His mouth kicked into a teasing smile and she swore her heart kicked back.

'Not a chance.'

She'd been too busy traipsing around after her sister as a kid, fetching costumes and tights and mascara wands, hanging around backstage killing time at countless talent and fashion shows. While she'd loved the clothes she'd hated the condescending pity stares from people in the industry who knew she was Shareen's fat baby sister.

Exasperated she'd let more memories distract her at a time like this, she flipped open the folder.

'This is a very basic outline of the week, which I'll flesh out later…'

The rest of her pitch faded into oblivion as he leaned towards her to look at the folder, his shoulder brushing hers and setting off a bunch of internal fireworks that rocketed and pinwheeled and spiralled until she was dizzy.

This out of control physical reaction to a guy who embodied everything she didn't like was crazy, a purely hormonal reaction for a girl who hadn't had a date in a while. Okay, a long while.

Whatever the reason, it didn't make this any easier and, gritting her teeth against blue-eyed, wicked, smiling, rich rogues, she rattled the paper and stabbed her finger at the first point.

'The gist of the hen's party is pampering for the bride-to-be, including manicures, pedicures, facials, massages, makeovers. Then I throw in deportment lessons, etiquette, dance and home-style cooking classes.'

Chase snorted and she raised an eyebrow.

'The thought of Cari in the kitchen, let alone cooking anything beyond microwaving a frozen dinner is mind-boggling.'

'She doesn't cook at all?'

Lola never understood how anyone couldn't at least scramble eggs or make a basic chicken salad. She loved the warmth of a well-used, well-loved kitchen: the aromas, the fresh herbs, the spices, the fun of throwing stuff together and creating a delicious surprise.

Guess that explained why she'd been the size of a blimp growing up and her mum and sister never ventured to the fridge for more than to grab iced water and a lettuce leaf.

Chase grinned and once again her heart performed some weird dance ritual halfway between tap and mambo.

'Cari's a take-out kind of gal.'

He pointed at her presentation. 'So the cooking? This I've got to see.'

Her heart did a final pirouette and sank into the splits as she realised what that meant.

'You'll be at the house?'

A slight frown creased his brow and she silently cursed her abrupt question complete with horrified undertone.

'We'll see. I have enough work here to keep me busy so I'll be staying in town most likely.'

The guy had *two* houses? She could barely afford the mortgage on one. Another reason why she was here—the thought of her precious two bedroom Californian bungalow a street away from Go Retro being ripped away from her was too much to bear.

She'd put it up as collateral when she'd gone from leasing the Errol Street storefront to buying it as an investment in her business and now that interest rates were on the rise and consumer spending was down and Go Retro wasn't doing so well…

Panic flared, lurching from the darkest recesses where she clamped down on it on a daily basis, doing everything in her power to make Go Retro a roaring success and saving her business, her livelihood and her home.

'I've got a penthouse not far from here, but get away to the Mount Macedon house when I can.'

'Great.'

Her response sounded forced and before he could pick up on it, she rushed on. 'I'll need to know if there are any food allergies, that sort of thing.'

He nodded and slipped his trusty smartphone from his jacket pocket, tapping away at the miniature keyboard with his thumb.

'Onto it.'

His rudeness grated—stupid darn technology—and she wanted to rattle him.

'With the itinerary I've planned, including two six-course dinner parties, I might need to stay over two nights out of the seven.'

As if he'd care. He'd be ensconced in his glass tower in the city, giving her carte blanche to his mansion at Mount Macedon. And while his blasé attitude to his wealth annoyed her, she had to admit she couldn't wait to check out his country mansion.

'I'll make sure to be there those nights,' he said, his eyes twinkling with mischief and, to her mortification she blushed, only serving to increase his amusement as his mouth curved into a teasing smile.

Great, now he'd think she couldn't handle a little light-hearted flirtation.

The problem wasn't the flirting as much as the guy doing it. For a woman who hated his lifestyle and all it stood for—superficiality at its finest—she sure wasn't averse to the man himself.

Gathering her documents along with her wits, she shoved them back into the folder and stood.

'Well, that'll do for the preliminaries. I'll email you something more formal next week.'

'Sounds good.'

He stood and glanced at his watch. 'I need to be somewhere.'

Bristling at his careless dismissal, she squared her shoulders.

'I'll get out of your way then.'

Her frosty tone raised both his eyebrows.

'Actually, if you're not doing anything I'd love you to join me.'

If the sofa wasn't pressing against the back of her knees she would've crumpled into an embarrassing heap.

Speechless, she searched her brain for a polite refusal, something to mask her total shock he'd actually asked her out.

'There's some fashion designer/modelling agency launch, might be good PR for you to meet some people? They're always looking for a new angle for these shindigs, could be good for your business.'

His phone beeped and he cast a quick glance at it and grimaced.

'Plus you'll be doing me a huge favour seeing as I've just heard the media will be there and if I turn up to these things single they're always writing gutter rubbish about me the next day.'

'When you put it that way, how can a girl refuse?'

Her sarcasm wasn't lost on him and he shot her an apologetic glance while tapping a response on that infernal phone.

'Look, I really think it'll be a beneficial business opportunity for you and I offered to introduce you to suitable contacts as part of our deal.'

Hitting send on his phone, he finally gave her his full attention and, as the impact of those startling blue eyes and sensual lips curved, she almost wished he'd return to his phone.

'As for helping me out of a tight spot by being my date for a few hours, consider it your good deed for the day.'

Hating how he'd railroaded her, she folded her arms. 'Maybe

I'm not feeling so charitable today.'

With his eyes crinkling adorably at the corners, he leaned towards her and she held her breath, bombarded by an incoming sexy male she had no hope of handling.

'Come on, Lola. My reputation is in your hands.'

She snorted, the corners of her mouth tugging into a reluctant smile. 'I have a feeling your reputation was shot long before I came along.'

'Ouch.'

He clasped his hands to his heart while hers gave a suspicious twang; enough of a wake up call to never take anything he said seriously. Chase schmoozed for a living, knowing the right thing to say for any occasion.

However much he turned on the charm she had to realise it was as natural to him as breathing and not read too much into it, something she'd been guilty of before. Sometimes having dreams of a white picket fence and home cooked meals and a bundle of adorable kids wasn't so helpful, especially when smooth-talking guys like Bodey who she dated more than a few times started to look like a prospective groom.

'Shall I take your silence as agreement?'

She shook her head at his good-natured persistence. 'You can take my silence as musing time filled with misgivings.'

'But you'll do it anyway, right?'

She hated accepting help from anyone, least of all a guy like Chase who she suspected of having *strings* attached to his offer

but she couldn't bypass the opportunity to put Go Retro front and centre with fresh contacts. New business meant a much needed cash injection and it wouldn't be smart to rely on pride alone to save her.

While her head screamed no, her hopeful heart already strutted alongside him, proud to be his date for a few hours.

Exhaling on an exaggerated sigh, she shrugged. 'Why not?'

Giving a much needed boost to her business and playing Chase's arm candy for an evening? She could think of worse ways to spend a few hours.

'Thanks, you're a lifesaver,' he said, brushing a quick kiss on her cheek, already distracted by an incoming call while she stood there, reeling.

Not from the quick thank you peck as much as how it made her feel.

As if she wanted a lot more where that came from.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE moment Lola stepped into the strategically lit loft she knew she'd made a mistake.

This was *so* not her scene.

Rake-thin models, slick corporate suits, elite sport stars, the cream of Melbourne's A-list mingled and schmoozed and air kissed in a scene so reminiscent of her past she froze.

But this party wasn't the worst of it. Oh, no, the car ride from Dazzle to here with Chase flirting with practised determination had shot her nerves to pieces before she set foot in this place.

Some hotshot party she could handle. It was handling the hotshot himself that had her in a real tizz.

Chase cast a quick concerned glance her way before placing a hand in the small of her back and gently propelling her into the throng, nodding and smiling like a professional but moving all the while, determinedly cutting a path to the other side of the loft where a quiet pocket of low slung leather sofas framed an L-shaped corner.

Grateful for the reprieve while she regrouped her shattered resistance to sexy, smooth, utterly gorgeous guys, she sank onto a sofa.

'Would you like a drink?'

What she would like was to get the hell out of here and away from him but the thought of her skyrocketing mortgage and

dwindling bank account forced her to smile and nod.

'Sure, a lime soda would be great.'

He saluted. 'Coming right up.'

He headed for the bar, as trendy and sleek as the loft's occupants, running the length of one wall. Chase blended with the hip crowd, another gorgeous guy in a designer suit with a winning smile and a trillion dollar bank account. He fitted in while she stood out like a pin curl on a twenty-first century model.

She glanced down at her skirt, at the hint of tulle petticoat peeping out from beneath, loving the fullness it created, the fun flare, the white polka dots stark against an ebony background.

Dresses like this spoke to her. They whispered stories of the beautiful women who'd worn them many decades earlier, of a time when women's curves were embraced, not ridiculed. Such a special era…and so far removed from the present to be laughable.

Looking around at the stylish women in the crowd, swathed in head to toe clingy black, she doubted they'd ever had to battle bullies at school who'd tormented them over their lunch boxes, count calories under a beauty queen mother's watchful eye or hide backstage and pretend to be another lackey at a supermodel sister's catwalk show.

Not that she was jealous exactly but she envied them their carefree 'togetherness', as if they knew their place in the world, taking for granted their easy self-assurance.

She'd worked hard for her confidence, worked at it on a daily

basis; with every wave of the mascara wand over her naturally pale lashes, with every tuck of her curls, with every slash of her signature Crash Crimson lipstick, she put together an image to the world. An image that showed a confident businesswoman who loved anything vintage, who enhanced her assets and made the most of the curves she'd once hidden.

But sitting here in this trendy loft, surrounded by Melbourne's A-list, she recognised her confidence was as brittle as her bank balance.

And it was all because of the man striding through the crowd towards her, that roguish smile directed solely at her, unsettling her far more than the hip crowd.

'Here you go.'

Chase appeared from the left and handed her a drink. 'Everything okay?'

'Why wouldn't it be?'

He studied her face and she quickly schooled it into the bright, bubbly mask she used to greet customers.

'You were looking mighty pensive when I was grabbing these.'

He'd been watching her? She tried to hide her surprise. In a room of wall to wall revealing outfits and glamorous women he'd been eyeing her?

'Guess I've just revealed my hand,' he said, his smile rueful as indecision flashed across his face for a second then cleared.

Before she knew what was happening, he'd taken hold of her hand in a firm, warm grip that sent excitement ricocheting

through her.

'I have to tell you, Lola, you fascinate me.'

If she'd been any other girl, a whole host of witty replies would've tripped from her lips, making him laugh and easing the awkwardness of the moment.

As it was, she sat there, stunned, hoping her jaw hadn't dropped as she frantically searched for a suitable response other than, *Say it again*.

She hated feeling this uncertain, this panicky. It reminded her of being put on the spot countless times in her past when she never had the right reply or frustratingly thought up something witty to say hours later.

Chase made her nervous and she'd spent an eternity battling her anxiety in social situations, honing her confident mask to project an assured image to the world and enhance her business. Sadly, the more attention Chase paid her, the more cracks appeared in that carefully constructed mask.

To her relief, he smoothed over her gauche-ness with a slow, sexy smile that tied her tongue into a thousand more knots.

'I know you think I'm crazy for saying that after only meeting you earlier today but I'm blunt in business and it tends to spill over into other areas of my life.'

He paused, squeezed her hand gently before lifting it to his lips and brushing a soft kiss across the back of it. 'You'll get to know that about me.'

She would?

As her hand tingled with the delicious touch of his lips, she reacted how she always did in a situation like this.

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