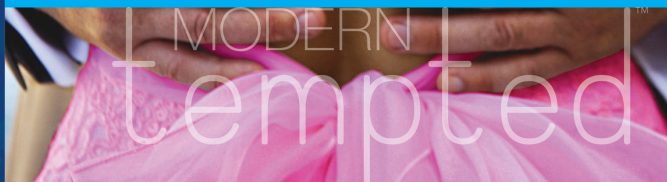




LUCY KING

The Best Man for the Job



# **Lucy King**

## **The Best Man for the Job**

### **Аннотация**

The wedding guest from her past...For Celia Forrester, Marcus Black – her brother's best friend – was always totally off limits. Especially after The Night That Nearly Happened. It was years ago, but Celia remembers it for all the worst reasons! But now Marcus is back in the picture – he's the best man at her brother's wedding and more gorgeous than ever!It's all kinds of inappropriate, but giving in to temptation looks as if it's the best way for Celia to get Marcus out of her system. But their one night comes with consequences. And this time it won't be fifteen years until they have to face them...but nine months!

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**The problem was right now she wasn't feeling in the slightest bit sensible or levelheaded. She was feeling reckless. Wild. Weirdly out of control.**

All because of Marcus—because she wanted him. God, she wanted him. Had done for years, but had always thought it one-sided. Now, though, she knew it wasn't. She could feel the attraction burning between them—fierce, mutual and utterly irresistible.

It had been so long since she'd had sex. Even longer since she'd had good sex. And with the amount of practice he'd had he'd be very good at it, she was sure.

She was under no illusions about what he was. She might have been wrong about some things, but she knew he enjoyed playing the field. She knew he didn't do commitment, didn't do long-term—which suited her fine because she didn't want either from him. She just wanted to explore this sizzling chemistry, because for one thing it would undoubtedly give her proper closure and for another who was she to fight with such a force of nature?

'Well?' he said, and the tension radiating off him suggested that he was finding it as hard to cling on to his self-control as she was.

‘You know those scruples of yours?’ she said, her voice low and husky.

‘What about them?’

‘Do they include anything concerning friends’ younger sisters now?’

‘Nope.’

‘Good,’ she said as fire licked through the blood in her veins and her heart thundered wildly. ‘Then how about we finish what we started?’

### **Dear Reader**

One of my favourite fictional relationships is that of *Much Ado About Nothing*’s Beatrice and Benedick. Ah, the ‘merry war’, with its wicked banter, sharp wit and biting disdain that hides something so much more ... What’s not to love?

So what do you get when you throw together an uptight workaholic who can’t stand gorgeous laid-back charmers and a gorgeous laid-back charmer who can’t stand uptight workaholics? Animosity! And when there’s enough chemistry to blow up a science lab ...? Sparks! Throw in a botched attempt at seduction when they were in their teens and fifteen years of denial, and it turns into a whole lot of fun.

Well, not for Marcus and Celia, perhaps—\*evil laugh\*—but definitely for me to write, and I hope for you to read!

*Lucy x*

The Best Man

for the Job

Lucy King



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

**LUCY KING** spent her formative years lost in the world of Mills & Boon<sup>®</sup> romance when she really ought to have been paying attention to her teachers. Up against sparkling heroines, gorgeous heroes and the magic of falling in love, trigonometry and absolute ablatives didn't stand a chance.

But as she couldn't live in a dream world for ever she eventually acquired a degree in languages and an eclectic collection of jobs. A stroll to the River Thames one Saturday morning led her to her very own hero. The minute she laid eyes on the hunky rower getting out of a boat, clad only in Lycra and carrying a three-metre oar as if it was a toothpick, she knew she'd met the man she was going to marry. Luckily the rower thought the same.

She will always be grateful to whatever it was that made her stop dithering and actually sit down to type Chapter One, because dreaming up her own sparkling heroines and gorgeous heroes is

pretty much her idea of the perfect job.

Originally a Londoner, Lucy now lives in Spain, where she spends much of her time reading, failing to finish cryptic crosswords, and trying to convince herself that lying on the beach really *is* the best way to work.

Visit her at [www.lucykingbooks.com](http://www.lucykingbooks.com)

**Other Modern Tempted™ titles by Lucy King:**

ONE NIGHT WITH HER EX

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**This and other titles by Lucy King are available in eBook format from [www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)**

For my editor, Megan. Thank you for your always invaluable insight and advice!

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### Extract

#### ONE

Ten minutes after the vicar had pronounced her brother and his fiancée man and wife and the register had been signed, Celia Forrester stood on the steps of the altar of the pretty Shropshire church and braced herself for the moment she'd been dreading all day.

In terms of things she'd rather not do, on a scale of one to ten, going to the gym hovered at the two mark. Pulling an all-nighter at work ranked around a four. Dinner à deux with her father, an eight.

Having to take Marcus Black's arm and walk down the aisle beside him, however, hit a ten.

Up until about a couple of hours ago she'd thought she'd escaped. As Dan's best friend—and consequently, best man—Marcus had been expected some time yesterday afternoon, but to the consternation of everyone apart from her he hadn't shown up. Her brother had muttered something about a missed flight and a possible arrival in time for the reception but, in all honesty, Celia had been too relieved to pay much attention.

All she'd been able to think was that she had a stay of execution and that, with any luck, by the time Marcus got there—if he got there at all—she'd have indulged in the gallon of champagne she needed to handle the horribly edgy and deeply

uncomfortable effect he had on her, should she be unable to implement her customary plan A and avoid him.

She'd had no problem with following Lily—the other bridesmaid and Zoe's sister—and her brand-new fiancé, Kit, down the aisle alone. She was good at doing things alone, and she'd been more than happy about the delay in having to talk to too-gorgeous-for-his-own-good, serial womaniser and general thorn in her side Marcus Black. Quite apart from the unsettling way he made her feel, he loathed her as much as she loathed him and no doubt he would be expressing it at the first available opportunity, namely the church, so who could blame her for savouring any delay to the moment?

But then a couple of hours ago, when the three of them had been sitting in the spare room of Zoe's parents' farmhouse with rollers in their hair and tacky nails, news had reached them that Marcus had made it after all, and just like that the Get-Out-of-Jail-Free-card feeling she'd been holding onto had blown up in her face.

The degree of shock and disappointment that had rocked through her had surprised her. Then her skin had started prickling, a rush of heat had swept through her and she'd instantly felt as though she were sitting on knives.

She'd managed to hide it, of course, because firstly she was used to hiding the way he made her feel, and secondly today was a happy one that was all about Dan and Zoe and not in the slightest bit about the trouble she had with Marcus, but it had been hard.

Even harder when she and Lily had entered the church behind Zoe and she'd seen him standing next to Dan at the altar, looking tall, dark and smoulderingly gorgeous in his morning suit.

But she'd done it, and she'd continue to do so because fifty pairs of eyes were trained on the proceedings and so right now she didn't have the option of giving him a cool nod and then blanking him. She was simply going to have to suck it up and accompany him down the aisle.

In approximately thirty seconds.

The organist began belting out Widor's Toccata and as Dan and Zoe turned and stepped away from the altar, their smiles wide and unstoppable, Celia pulled her shoulders back and plastered a smile of her own to her face.

She wouldn't let him get to her, she told herself, adopting the unusual strategy of channelling serenity and inner calm. She wouldn't think about the struggle she'd had throughout the ceremony resisting the constant temptation to keep looking in his direction, especially when she could feel his eyes on her. Nor would she dwell on the way that, despite her deep disapproval of him and his clear loathing of her whenever they met, he somehow managed to turn her into someone she didn't recognise, addling her brain, making a mockery of her intellect and rendering her body all soft and warm and fluttery.

No, she'd simply rise above the inconvenient and highly irritating attraction and get on with the job. She could ignore the heat of him, the mouth-watering scent of him and the invisible

thread of attraction that seemed to constantly pull her towards him. She could bury the desire to drag him off somewhere quiet, press herself against him and let chemistry do its thing. Of course she could. She had done so for years, ever since the night, in fact, he'd tried to get her into bed. For a bet.

Besides, it was, what, thirty metres between the altar and the heavy oak door, so all she had to do was keep a smile on her face and her mouth shut and not let him get to her. After that, during the inevitable photo session and then the reception, which was to be mercifully short, she'd do what she always tried to do and avoid him. Simple.

Taking a deep breath and steeling herself, she glanced up at him to find him looking down at her with those wickedly glinting blue eyes that had seduced legions of women over the years.

'Shall we?' he said, a faint smile playing at the mouth that had given her an annoying number of sleepless nights over the years, as he held out his arm.

'Why not?' she said coolly, taking it.

See? This was fine. She barely noticed the hard muscles of his forearm beneath her fingers. And so what if his elbow was now pressed up against her breast and the feel of him, the heat of him, would be making her heart beat hard and fast and her body tingle if she let it? All that was relevant right now were the five stone steps she had to negotiate in heels three inches higher than she normally wore, and she needed to concentrate.

'Ready?' he asked, his deep, lazy voice tightening her stomach

muscles and making her cling onto his arm a little tighter for a second. Just in case she stumbled, of course.

‘Couldn’t be readier.’

Reassuring herself that in five minutes or so this would all be over and she’d be free of him, Celia glanced down and lifted the longer back of her dress so it didn’t catch on a heel.

‘Those shoes look lethal,’ he murmured as they descended the first step.

‘They are.’

‘And spiky.’

‘That too.’

‘Appropriate.’

And just like that, despite all that serenity and inner calm she’d been striving for, her intention to keep her mouth shut evaporated. ‘Good of you to make it, by the way,’ she said a touch acidly.

‘I nearly didn’t.’

‘So what held you up?’ she asked, once she’d safely navigated the remaining steps and could relax her grip on Marcus’ arm. ‘Unable to prise yourself away from an overly clingy lover? Or a pair of them perhaps? Surely it couldn’t have been a trio?’

She felt him tense and wondered fleetingly if her barb had stung. Then decided it couldn’t have because for one thing his many and varied bedroom exploits were no secret, and for another they’d traded mild insults like this for years and it had never seemed to bother him before. Nevertheless she kind of

wished it had because it would be satisfying to know she got to him the way he got to her.

‘You know something?’ he said, shooting her a slow stomach-melting smile. ‘I rustled up that ash cloud especially because I knew it would wind you up.’

‘My word, you literally do have a God complex,’ she said, annoyed beyond measure that he of all people should still be the only man ever to melt any of her internal organs. ‘Why am I not surprised?’

‘Lucky you’re always there to smack me down.’

‘It’s my sole purpose in life.’

‘Really?’ he murmured. ‘I thought your sole purpose in life was work.’

‘I excel at multitasking.’

‘Of course you do. Heaven forbid you should fail at anything.’

‘I try not to.’

They began proceeding down the aisle at a pace that would have had a snail overtaking them. In crackling silence, until Marcus said conversationally, ‘You know, I’m rather amazed you’re here.’

Celia kept her smile firmly in place. ‘Oh? Why?’

‘I wouldn’t have thought that you’d have been able to drag yourself away from your desk.’

‘It’s my brother’s wedding.’

‘Nice to know there are some things that take priority. I kept expecting your phone to go off during the service.’

She bristled and her jaw began to ache with the effort of maintaining the smile. So she worked hard. Big deal. 'I'm not a complete workaholic.' Well, not to such an extent she'd forgo something as important as this.

'No?'

'No,' she said firmly, choosing to ignore the fact that she had spent much of the morning on her phone, dealing with calls to and from the office and a string of emails that couldn't wait.

'I read about that pharmaceutical merger of yours going through. Congratulations.'

Despite the indignation Celia couldn't help feeling a stab of pride because the six months she'd spent pushing that deal through had been the toughest of her working life so far, yet she and her team had done it, and now the partnership she'd been working towards for what felt like for ever was that tiny bit closer.

'Thank you,' she said demurely, ignoring the way his body kept brushing against hers and sent thrills scurrying through her. 'And I heard you'd sold your business.' For millions, according to the gossip magazine she'd picked up and flicked through at the hairdresser's a fortnight ago, which had been light on detail about the sale and heavy on speculation about what one of London's most eligible bachelors was going to do with all his money and free time.

'I did.'

'So what are your plans now?'

'Do you really want to know?'

Not really, because she'd willingly bet her lovely two-bedroomed minimalist flat in Clerkenwell that she knew what he'd be doing for the foreseeable future. What he did best, but even better. 'I'm guessing it'll involve partying till dawn with scantily clad women.'

'Am I really that much of a cliché?'

'You tell me.'

'And spoil the fun you have baiting me?'

'You think I find it fun?'

He raised an eyebrow as he glanced down at her. 'Don't you?'

Celia thought about it for a second and decided that, as she didn't know exactly what to attribute the thrill she always got from winding him up to, 'fun' would do. 'OK, perhaps,' she conceded. 'Just a little. But no more than you do.'

'Well, I'm all for equality.'

'Yes, so the tabloids say,' she said witheringly as the interview with one of his conquests that she'd read in that magazine popped into her head. Apparently he was intense, smouldering and passionately demanding in the bedroom, and sought the same from whoever he was sharing it with. Which was something she could really have done without knowing because now she did it was alarmingly hard to put from her mind.

'You know, Celia, darling, you have such low expectations of me I find I can't help wanting to live down to them.'

Before she could work out what he meant by that he turned away and directed that devastating smile of his at a couple of

women at the end of a pew on Dan's side, and as she watched them blush she mentally rolled her eyes. How very typical. That was Marcus all over. Lover of women. Literally. Lots of women.

But not her. Never her. Not that she thought about that night fifteen years ago when she'd been so desperate to lose her virginity to him. Much.

'What's with the death grip?'

Celia blinked and snapped her train of thought away from the treacherous path it would career down if she let it. 'Huh?'

'On the flowers. What did they do? What did they say? Because I know from personal experience that it doesn't take much.'

Celia glanced down at the beautiful bouquet of pink roses and baby's breath that matched her dress and saw that her knuckles were indeed white, and she mentally swore at herself for letting him get to her.

She really had to relax because if she didn't she'd never make it to the door with her nerves intact. This walk down the aisle was taking for ever. What with the way Dan and Zoe kept stopping to talk to people in the pews, they were progressing at about a metre an hour and she wasn't sure how much longer she could resist the temptation to push past the bride and groom and make a run for it.

'The flowers haven't done anything,' she said, taking a couple of deep calming breaths and surreptitiously rolling her shoulders in an effort to release some of her tension.

‘Am I to take it, then, that you don’t really approve of Dan and Zoe?’

Celia stilled mid-roll and stared at him for a moment, unable to work out where that had come from because Zoe was the best thing that had ever happened to Dan, as she’d told him after supper last night just before giving him a big hug and wishing him luck. ‘Why on earth would you think that?’

‘Because you spent the entire ceremony looking like you wished you were somewhere else.’

Oh. She hadn’t wanted to be anywhere else. She’d wanted Marcus to be somewhere else, preferably on another planet, but she’d thought she’d managed to hide that. Clearly she’d been wrong. ‘I’m surprised you noticed.’

‘Oh, I noticed,’ he murmured, his gaze drifting over her and making her skin feel all hot and tingly and tight. ‘You look beautiful, by the way.’

That was the trouble with him, she thought irritably as she stamped out the heat with every ounce of self-control she had. Just when she felt like slapping him, he went and said something charming. ‘Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘And you look very handsome,’ she said, because he did and it would be churlish to ignore the fact. More handsome than usual if that were possible.

‘My, my, a compliment,’ he said softly. ‘That’s a first.’

‘Yes, well, don’t get too used to it.’

‘I won’t.’

They advanced another agonisingly slow couple of paces, then stopped, and he said, ‘So you do approve?’

‘Of Dan and Zoe?’

‘Well, I know you don’t approve of me.’

‘I approve wholeheartedly,’ said Celia with a serene smile. ‘Of them.’

‘They’re good for each other.’

She nodded. ‘They are.’

‘And are your parents behaving?’

She narrowed her eyes at her parents, who were accompanying each other down the aisle in stony silence and about as far apart as it was possible to get given the width restriction of the aisle, which was pretty much par for the course. ‘Just about.’

‘And how’s work?’

Insane. ‘Work’s fine.’

‘Then what is there to be so tense about?’

‘Tense?’ she asked, blowing out a slow breath. ‘Who’s tense?’

‘You are. If it isn’t the wedding, it isn’t your parents and it isn’t work, I might be inclined to think it’s me.’

‘Hah. As if.’

Off they set again, and this time, thank heavens, it looked as though the end was in sight because Dan and Zoe had run out of guests to chat to and the great oak door was being opened and Celia could practically taste freedom.

‘Admit it,’ he said softly, his voice so warm and teasing that it

did strange things to her stomach, 'I make you feel tense.'

'You don't make me feel anything,' she said, her pulse drumming with the need to get out of here and away from him.

'Oh, Celia, you break my heart.'

'I didn't know you had one. I thought it was another part of your anatomy entirely that kept you alive.'

'So cruel.'

'I dare say you'll survive.'

'I dare say I shall.'

And then, thank God, they stepped out into the July sunshine and she felt as if she could suddenly breathe again. She dragged in some air and blinked as her eyes became accustomed to the brightness after an hour in the church, then she took her hand from Marcus' arm and stepped away.

She didn't miss the strength of it. Or the heat of him. It was blessed relief that was sweeping through her. Of course it was, because what else could it be when the whole past ten minutes had been a nightmare she never wanted to repeat?

'Right,' she said, looking up at him with a bright smile and shading her eyes from the sun. 'Well. Thank you for that.'

'Any time.'

'So I'm going to congratulate the happy couple and mingle.' And then she was going to find the champagne and down as much of it as she could manage.

'Good idea.'

'I guess I'll see you later.'

‘I guess you will.’

And with the thought that despite the conventional conversational closer hell would probably freeze before either of them sought the other out, Celia gave him a jaunty wave and off she went.

\* \* \*

Marcus watched Celia kiss and hug her brother and new sister-in-law in turn, then laugh at something Dan said, and his eyes narrowed. Ten minutes in her company and already he was wound up like a spring. He wanted to punch something. Wrestle someone. Anything to relieve the tension that she never failed to whip up inside him.

Standing there in the warm summer sunshine while people streamed out of the church, he shoved his hands in his pockets and resisted the urge to grind his teeth because this was supposed to be a happy day and the last thing anyone wanted to see was a grim-faced best man.

But it was hard to relax when all he could think was, how the hell did Celia do it? And why?

Generally he had no trouble getting on with the opposite sex. Generally women fell over themselves for his attention and once they'd got it went out of their way to be charming. But she, well, for some reason she'd had it in for him for years and he'd never really been able to work it out.

On the odd occasion he'd pondered the anomaly, usually after one of their thankfully rare yet surprisingly irritating encounters,

he'd figured that it seemed to boil down to the number and frequency of women that flitted in and out of his life, but he didn't see why that should bother her. The last time he checked it was the twenty-first century, and where he came from men and women could sleep with whomever they liked without censorship.

And so what if he enjoyed the company of women? he thought darkly, watching her peel away to take a phone call. He worked hard and he played hard. He was single and in his prime and he liked sex. He never promised more than he was willing to give and when relationships, flings, one-night stands ended there were never any hard feelings. The women he dated didn't appear to object, so who could blame him for taking advantage of the opportunities on offer?

Well, Celia could, it seemed, but why did she disapprove of him so much? Why did she care? What he got up to was none of her business. As far as he was aware he'd never hooked up with any of her friends so she couldn't have a grudge about that. And it certainly wasn't as if she were jealous. She'd made it very clear she didn't want to have anything to do with him the night he'd made a pass at her years ago and had been very firmly rebuffed.

So what was her problem? And more to the point, what was his? What was it about her that got under his skin? Why couldn't he just ignore her the way he ignored everything he didn't need to be bothered with? Why, with her, did he always feel the urge to respond and retaliate?

Marcus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose as the questions rattled round his head, and thought that he could really do with a glass of champagne if he stood any chance of making it through the reception.

‘Is there any particular reason you’re scowling at my sister?’

At the dry voice of the groom and his best friend, who’d evidently managed to drag himself away from his new wife and had stealthily materialised beside him, Marcus pulled himself together.

‘Nope,’ he said, snapping his gaze away from Celia and switching the scowl for his customary couldn’t-give-a-toss-about-anything smile.

‘Sure?’

He nodded and widened his smile because there was no way on earth he was going to let Dan in on the trouble he had with Celia. ‘Quite sure. Congratulations, by the way.’

Dan grinned. ‘Thanks.’

‘Great ceremony.’

‘The best. And thanks for being my best man.’

‘No problem. I’m glad I made it in time.’ He’d bust a gut over the past couple of days to get here—and whatever Celia thought it had had nothing to do with over-clingy lovers—and he might be knackered, but he wouldn’t have had it any other way because he and Dan had been good friends for nearly twenty years.

‘So am I,’ said Dan, and then he asked, ‘So why the thunderous expression? What’s up?’

Marcus shrugged. 'Just trying to remember my speech.'

Dan shot him a knowing look that held more than a hint of amusement. 'Sure you aren't ruminating about the lack of single women here?'

Oddly enough—when it was generally the first thing he ascertained at any kind of social gathering—searching for likely conquests this afternoon hadn't crossed his mind. 'Maybe a bit,' he said, largely because Dan seemed to be expecting it.

'Sorry about that, but we wanted to keep the wedding small.'

'No problem.'

'Has it been a while, then?'

'Six months.'

Dan's eyebrows shot up. 'Wow. Because of...what was her name again?'

'Noelle.' As the memory of his last girlfriend, who'd turned into a complete psycho stalker, flashed into his head he shuddered. 'And yes.'

Dan grunted in sympathy. 'I can see how after everything she did you'd be a bit wary, but, come on, six months? That must be a record.'

'Not one I'll be boasting about.'

'No,' agreed Dan. 'Why would you?'

'Quite.'

'And not one you'll be breaking today, I should think,' Dan mused.

'What makes you say that?'

‘Celia’s the only single woman here.’

‘Is she?’

‘And judging by the way you were looking at her just now I’m guessing she’s not a likely target.’

Marcus inwardly recoiled. Celia? A target? As if. He couldn’t stand her. And as she could stand him even less, even if he were insane/deluded/drunk enough to make a pass at her again, which he most certainly was not, in all likelihood he’d get a knee to the groin.

‘Didn’t we just clear that up?’ he muttered, really not wanting to dwell on that particular outcome.

‘Not very satisfactorily.’ Dan rubbed a hand along his jaw and frowned, as if in contemplation. ‘You know, Zoe mentioned she thinks you do it a lot.’

‘Do what?’

‘Scowl at Celia.’

‘Do I?’

Dan nodded. ‘Pretty much every time you come into contact, apparently.’

‘Oh.’

‘So what’s with the two of you? Why the friction? What did she do to you?’

Interesting that Dan thought it would be that way round when everyone else would have automatically assumed he’d be the one to blame. ‘She didn’t do anything to me,’ he said with a casual shrug. Apart from reject him. Resist him. Ignore him. Avoid him.

And drive him bonkers by getting to him when he'd never had any trouble not letting her get to him before. 'We just don't get along. That's all. Sorry.'

'No. Well, she is something of an acquired taste, I'll grant you.'

One that he'd briefly acquired when he'd been an angry and out-of-control teenager but wouldn't be acquiring again, so he hummed non-committally and sought to change the subject. 'Zoe looks radiant,' he said, watching the bride smiling and chatting, happiness shimmering all around her like some kind of corona.

'She does,' said Dan with the kind of pride in his voice Marcus couldn't ever imagine feeling, which was just as well because marriage was not for him. 'She also has a different take on it.'

'A different take on what?'

'You and Celia.'

Marcus frowned. So much for changing the subject. And what was Dan doing, making it sound as if he and Celia were a thing when they were anything but? 'Does she?'

'Yes.'

'Right.'

'Want to know what she sees between the two of you?'

Not particularly. 'Knock yourself out.'

'Chemistry. Tension. Denial.'

Huh? Marcus reeled for a moment, then rallied because Zoe was wrong. Totally wrong. 'She sees a lot,' he said, keeping his expression poker.

'She does.'

‘Too much.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘What makes her such an expert anyway?’

‘She’s made an art out of reading people. She’s generally right.’

‘Not this time.’

Dan shot him a shrewd look. ‘She reckons it’s like that kid analogy,’ he said.

‘What kid analogy?’ asked Marcus, although he wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

‘The one about pulling the pigtails of the girl in class you fancy.’

At the odd spike in his pulse Marcus shifted uncomfortably. ‘It’s nothing like that,’ he said, wondering what the hell the brief leap in his heart rate was all about.

‘If you say so.’

‘Celia deeply disapproves of me, and I—’ He stopped because how could he tell his best friend that he thought his sister was an uptight, judgemental, workaholic pain in the arse? ‘Anyway, wouldn’t it bother you?’ he said instead, although now he thought about it perhaps the question came fifteen years too late.

‘You two together?’

Marcus nodded. ‘Hypothetically speaking, of course. I mean, she’s your sister and I’m not exactly a paragon of virtue.’

‘It wouldn’t bother me in the slightest,’ said Dan easily. ‘Celia’s perfectly capable of looking after herself and, actually, if I was going to issue a big-brother kind of warning I’d probably be

issuing it to her.’

‘Why?’

‘She’s a tough nut to crack.’

‘One of the toughest,’ Marcus agreed, because she was, and not only because she was the only nut he’d wanted but had never managed to crack. Not that he thought about that night much because, after all, it had been years.

‘She’d drive you to drink trying.’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘And that would be a shame.’

‘Just as well you don’t have to worry about me, then, isn’t it? Although I do think you ought to be worrying about Zoe,’ he added, now just wanting this oddly uncomfortable conversation to be over. ‘She’s been cornered by your mother and a couple of your aunts.’

‘So she has,’ said Dan, that smile on his face widening as his gaze landed on his wife. ‘I’d better rescue her.’

‘Off you go, then.’

Dan must have caught the trace of mockery in his voice because he stopped and shot him a look. ‘One of these days it’s going to happen to you, you know.’

‘What is?’

‘Love and marriage.’

Marcus shook his head and laughed. ‘Not a chance.’ He valued his freedom far too much, and anyway, he’d seen what love could do. The pain it could bring. The tragedy it could result in. He’d

been part of the fallout.

Dan arched an eyebrow. 'Too many women, too little time?'  
'You said it.'

'If you really believe that then you're going to end up like my father, heading for sixty and still chasing anything in a skirt.'

'That's a risk I'm prepared to take.'

Dan laughed and clapped him on the back. 'One day, my friend, one day,' he said, then set off for Zoe, leaving Marcus standing there frowning at Celia and thinking, Chemistry, tension and denial? What a load of crap.

## TWO

Three hours later, Celia had worked her way through one cup of tea, two glasses of champagne, a dozen of the most scrumptious mini sandwiches and petit fours she'd ever eaten and a hefty piece of wedding cake. She'd survived the photo session, listened to the short yet witty speeches, and had had conversations with everyone except Marcus and her father.

The reception so far had been beautiful. The weather was behaving, the sky a cloudless blue, the sun beating down gently, a perfect example of one of those heavenly yet rare English summer days. Zoe's parents' garden, with its immaculate lawn, colourful and fragrant borders and sharply clipped hedges was an idyllic setting for a small, tasteful, traditional wedding celebration. The music coming from the string quartet sitting beneath the gazebo drifted languidly through the warm air and mingled with the happy hum of chatter, so enchanting and

irresistible that every now and then couples came together and swayed along.

She had to admit that, even to an unsentimental person such as herself, the romance of the afternoon was undeniable. She could feel it winding through her, softening the hard-boiled parts of her a little and making her feel uncharacteristically dreamy. Even her parents seemed to have been caught up in it, appearing to have reached a sort of unspoken truce and, although not talking, no longer shooting daggers at each other from opposite ends of the garden. Her brother looked happier than she'd ever seen him and his bride sparkled like the champagne that had been flowing so wonderfully freely.

Yet as mellow as she was feeling and as much as she liked her brand-new sister-in-law, Celia couldn't help wishing Zoe were more of a people person. If she were, there'd have been several hundred guests at the reception instead of the fifty or so that were milling around the garden.

And OK, so as bridesmaid and sister of the groom she wouldn't have been able to wriggle out of the photo session either way and she'd still have had to steel herself against the weight and strength of Marcus' arm around her waist and the heat of his hand on her hip as they posed, but at least she'd have been able to ignore him after that.

As it was, though, guests were thin on the ground and she couldn't be more aware of him. Everywhere she looked there he was in her peripheral vision, smiling and chatting and generally

making a mockery of her efforts to blank him from her head.

Despite the fact that she'd positioned herself about as far from him as possible, for some reason, he was utterly impossible to ignore. Not that she hadn't tried, because she had. A lot. In fact, she'd used up practically all of her mental and emotional energy trying, and as a result she hadn't really been able to concentrate on anything. She kept losing track of conversations. Kept finding herself gravitating towards him. Every time she told herself to get a grip and hauled herself back on track his laugh would punctuate the air and she'd have to battle the urge to whip her head round to see what was amusing him.

All afternoon the people she'd been talking to had looked at her closely and asked if she was all right before edging off presumably in search of less ditzzy company, and she really couldn't blame them.

It was driving her nuts. She abhorred ditz. And she hated the way she was being so easily distracted now when she'd always prided herself on her single-mindedness and her ability to focus.

Why was she having such trouble with the effect Marcus had on her today when she generally managed to keep it under control? Why couldn't she blank him out as she usually did? Why did she keep trying to get a glimpse of him whenever she heard the sound of his voice, and then sighing wistfully when she did?

What was wrong with her? What was this weird sort of ache in her chest? And more importantly right now, she thought, her attention switching abruptly from Marcus and the strange effect

he was having on her equilibrium, how was she going to deflect her father, who'd clearly clocked the fact that she was on her own and was bearing down on her, no doubt intending to launch into his usual spiel about her career, her lack of a husband and the direct correlation between the two?

As the pathetic—and pointless—need for his approval surged up inside her the way it always did and briefly smothered her confusion at the way her emotions were running riot this afternoon, Celia cast around for a conversation to join, a guest to corner, anything to avoid him and his own particular brand of paternalism, but she was on her own. The nearest little group contained Marcus, who unbeknownst to her had circulated into her vicinity and from the sounds of it was entertaining for Britain, and that made it a no-no.

Or did it?

As her brain raced through the very limited options open to her Celia made a snap decision. Oh, what the hell? He might not be her greatest fan but Marcus was within grabbing distance, and nothing could be worse than having to suffer her father's prehistoric ideas and deep disappointment when it came to his one and only daughter.

Aware that her father was fast approaching and there was no time to lose, Celia reached out and clamped her hand on Marcus' arm. He went still, then turned, surprise flickering across his face. Ignoring the sizzle that shot through her from the contact, Celia looked up at him in what she hoped was a beseeching

fashion and said softly, 'Help me? Please?'

\* \* \*

Well, well, well, thought Marcus, glancing down to where she was clutching his arm and then shifting his gaze to her face, which bore a sort of pleading expression he'd never have associated with her. Who'd have thought? Celia Forrester, a control freak extraordinaire, staunchly independent and so uptight she was in danger of shattering, a damsel in distress. Actually asking for help. His help. She must be desperate.

Resisting the temptation to shake his head in astonishment, he excused himself from the people he'd been talking to, intrigued despite himself by the urgency in her voice and the despair in her expression. 'Why? What's up?' he asked.

'My father.'

He flicked a glance over her shoulder and saw that Jim Forrester was indeed making a beeline for her. And it was making her jumpy. Which wasn't entirely surprising. 'I see,' he murmured with a nod. 'What help do you want?'

'I need small talk.'

'What's it worth?'

She stared at him for a second. 'What do you mean, what's it worth?'

He grinned because had she really expected him not to take full advantage of having the upper hand? 'Exactly that.'

She narrowed her eyes at him. 'What do you suggest?'

'How about asking me nicely? Then again. And again.'

She gaped. Then snapped her mouth shut and frowned. ‘You want me to beg?’

His smile deepened at her discomfort and he had to admit that there was something rather appealing about having Celia in his debt with this brief and strictly one-off foray into chivalry, should he agree to it. ‘The idea has merit, don’t you think?’

She glared at him, her eyes flashing with indignation, but a second later the attitude had gone and she shrugged. ‘Fine,’ she said flatly as she started to turn away. ‘Forget it. You go back to doing whatever you were doing. I can handle Dad.’

And for some reason Marcus found himself inwardly cursing while now feeling like the biggest jerk on the planet. She might be a pain in the neck, but he knew how difficult she found her father and he knew how much she loathed him, which meant that she was desperate.

And maybe a little vulnerable.

‘Look, sorry,’ he muttered, frowning slightly at the flare of a weird and deeply unwelcome kind of protective streak, because Celia was the last person who needed protecting and the last person he’d ever consider vulnerable. ‘I can do small talk.’

She stopped mid-turn and looked up at him. ‘Really?’

‘Of course.’

‘What do you want in return?’

‘Nothing.’

She arched an eyebrow sceptically, switching back to the Celia he knew and could handle. ‘Seriously?’ she said.

‘Seriously.’

‘Then thank you,’ she said a bit grudgingly, which he supposed was only fair.

‘You’re welcome.’

‘Celia,’ boomed her father behind her and he saw her jump. Wince. Brace herself.

But she recovered remarkably well and after taking a deep breath turned and lifted her cheek for her father’s kiss. ‘Dad, you remember Marcus Black, don’t you?’ she said, stepping back to include him in the conversation.

‘Of course,’ said Jim Forrester, flashing him a smile that was probably calculated to be charming but in a couple of years could easily stray into sleazy, and holding out his hand. ‘How are you?’

‘Good, thanks,’ said Marcus, shaking it and then letting it go. ‘You?’

‘Excellent. Great speech.’

‘Thank you.’

‘So how’s business?’

‘Quiet.’

Jim’s eyebrows shot up. ‘I heard it was doing well. So what happened? Hard times?’

He smiled as he thought of the relief he’d felt when he’d signed those papers and released himself from the company that he’d devoted so much of his time and energy to. ‘Couldn’t be better.’

‘Marcus sold his business, Dad,’ said Celia.

‘Oh, did you? Why?’

‘The thrill of beating the markets had worn off,’ he said, remembering the strange day when he’d sat down in his office, stared at the trading screen flickering with ever-changing figures and, for the first time since he’d set up the business, just couldn’t be bothered. ‘It was time to move on.’

‘You burnt out,’ said Celia, looking at him in dawning astonishment, as if she couldn’t believe he was capable of working hard enough to reach that stage.

‘Nope,’ he said. ‘I decided to get out before I did.’

‘So what are your plans now?’ asked Jim.

‘I have a few things in the pipeline. Some angel investing. Some business mentoring. I’d also like to set up a kind of scooping-up scheme for able kids who slip through the system and are heading off the rails, which gives them opportunities other people might not.’

He caught the flash of surprise that flickered across Celia’s face and a stab of satisfaction shot through him. That’s right, darling, he thought dryly. Not partying till dawn with scantily clad women. At least, not only that. And perhaps not every night.

‘Philanthropic,’ said Jim with a nod of approval. ‘Admirable.’

It wasn’t particularly. It was just that he’d been given a chance when he’d badly needed it and he simply wanted to pay it forward. ‘I’ve done well,’ he said with an easy shrug, ‘and I’d like to give something back.’

‘Let me know if I can help in any way.’

Jim had a divorce law practice so it was doubtful, but one

never knew. 'I will, thanks.'

'I'm up for partnership, Dad,' said Celia, and Marcus thought her voice held a note of challenge as well as pride.

'Are you?' said her father, sounding as if he couldn't be less interested.

'I'll know in a few months.'

'That's all very well and good,' Jim said even more dismissively, 'but shouldn't you be thinking about settling down?'

Marcus felt Celia stiffen at his side, and guessed that this was a well-trodden and not particularly welcome conversation. 'I enjoy my job, Dad,' she said with a sigh.

Her father let out a derisive snort. 'Job? Hah. What nonsense. Corporate lawyer indeed. There are enough lawyers already, and I should know. You should be married. Homemaking or whatever it is that women do. Giving me grandchildren.'

Dimly aware that this was in danger of veering away from small talk and into conversational territory into which he did not want to venture, moment of chivalry or no moment of chivalry, Marcus inwardly winced because, while he hadn't seen Celia's father for a good few years, now it was coming back to him that as far as unreconstructed males went one would be pushed to find one as unreconstructed as Jim.

Going on what Dan had said over the years their father had never had much time for Celia's considerable intellect or any belief in her education, as had been proven when Dan had been sent to the excellent private school Marcus had met him at while

she'd been sent to the local, failing comprehensive.

Now it was clear that Jim had no respect for the choices she'd made or the work she did either, but then over the years Marcus had got the impression that the man didn't have much respect for women in general, least of all his wife and daughter. He certainly didn't listen to either.

'And one day I'd like to be doing exactly that,' she said, pulling her shoulders back and lifting her chin, 'but there's still plenty of time.'

'Not that much time,' said Jim brutally. 'You're thirty-one and you haven't had a boyfriend for years.'

Celia flinched but didn't back down. 'Ouch. Thanks for that, Dad.'

'How are you ever going to meet anyone if all you do is work? I blame that ambition of yours.'

'If my ambition is to blame then it's your fault,' she muttered cryptically, but before Marcus could ask what she meant Jim suddenly swung round and fixed him with a flinty look that he didn't like one little bit.

'You married?' he asked.

Marcus instinctively tensed because for some reason he got the impression that this wasn't merely a polite enquiry into his marital status. 'No.'

'Girlfriend?'

'Not at the moment.'

'Then couldn't you sort her out?' said Jim, with a jerk of his

head in his daughter's direction.

Celia gasped, her jaw practically hitting the ground. 'Dad!'

Marcus nearly swallowed his tongue. 'What?' he managed, barely able to believe that this man had basically just pimped out his daughter. In front of her.

'Take her in hand and sort her out,' Jim said again with the tact and sensitivity of a charging bull. 'Soften her up a bit. You have a reputation for being good at that and with the business gone and your future projects not yet up and running you must have time on your hands.'

'Stop it,' breathed Celia, red in the face and clearly—and understandably—mortified.

Not that Marcus was focusing much on her outraged mortification at the moment. He was too busy feeling as if he'd been hit over the head with a lead pipe. He was reeling. Stunned. Although not with dismay at Jim's suggestion. No. He was reeling because an image of taking Celia into his arms and softening her up in the best way he knew had slammed into his head, making his pulse race, his mouth go dry and his temperature rocket.

Suddenly all he could think about was hauling her into his arms and kissing her until she was melting and panting and begging him to take her to bed, and where the hell that had come from he had no idea because she didn't need sorting out. By anyone. Least of all him. And even if he tried he'd probably get a slap to the face.

God.

Running his finger along the inside of his collar, which now felt strangely tight, Marcus tried to get a grip on his imagination and keep his focus on the conversation instead of the woman standing next to him. The woman who couldn't stand him.

'I don't think that's a very good idea,' he muttered hoarsely and cleared his throat.

'Of course it isn't a good idea,' said Celia hotly.

'Why not?' said Jim with an accusatory scowl, as if he, Marcus, was being deliberately uncooperative. 'She might be a bit of a ball-breaker but she's not bad-looking.'

'Hello?' said Celia, waving a hand in front of her father's face. 'I am here, you know.'

Marcus knew. Oh, he knew. And not just that she was only a foot away. It was as if Jim had unlocked a cupboard in his head and everything he'd stuffed in there was suddenly spilling out in one great chaotic mess.

To begin with, not bad-looking? Not bad-looking? That was the understatement of the century. She was gorgeous. All long wavy blond hair, eyes the colour of the Mediterranean, full pink lips and creamy skin. A tall hourglass figure that made his hands itch with the need to touch her. A soft, gorgeous, curvy exterior behind which lay a mind like a steel trap, a drive that rivalled his own and a take-no-prisoners attitude that was frighteningly awesome.

Today, in a pink strapless dress and those gold high-heeled sandals with her hair all big and tousled and her make-up dark

and sultry, she looked absolutely incredible. Sexy. Smouldering. And uncharacteristically sex kittenish.

It was kind of astonishing he hadn't noticed before. Or maybe subconsciously he had. The minute she'd walked into the church and he'd laid eyes on her, hadn't everyone else pretty much disappeared? Hadn't it taken every drop of his self-control to keep his jaw up, his feet from moving and his mind on the job?

With hindsight it was a miracle he'd managed to get down that aisle without dragging her off into the vestry. He'd felt her touch right through the thick baratheca of his sleeve and it had singed his skin and tightened every muscle in his body. The scent of her had scrambled his brain and the proximity of her had heated his blood. As for the pressure of her breast against his elbow, well, the lust that that had aroused in him had nearly brought him to his knees.

If he hadn't been so deeply in denial he'd have had bad, bad thoughts about her. In a church, for heaven's sake.

He'd told himself that it was exhaustion messing with his head, which, come to think of it, was the excuse he always made when it came to the irrational and inappropriate thoughts of her that occasionally flitted through his mind.

But it wasn't exhaustion. It was denial, pure and simple. Because how could he be so in thrall to someone who clearly didn't feel the same way about him? How could he be so weak?

So was that what bothered him so much about her, then? The one-sided attraction and the back-seat position it put him in? Was

the fact that he'd never stopped wanting her the reason why the way she constantly judged him and always found him lacking pissed him off so much?

Despite what she thought of him he fancied the pants off her, which meant that, despite his protests to the contrary earlier, Zoe had been right. On his side at least, there was chemistry, tension and, up until about a minute ago, a whole heap of denial.

And as denial was now apparently not an option he might as well admit that her rejection of him still stung despite the fact that it had happened years ago. She was the one who had got away, and that was why she got to him, why he always retaliated when she launched an attack on him.

'So what do you think?' said Jim, interrupting the jumble of thoughts tangling in his head. 'Would you be up for the challenge?'

'He thinks you're insane, Dad,' said Celia fiercely. 'And so do I. I know I'm a disappointment to you but, for goodness' sake, this has to stop. Now.'

Actually, with the realisation that he wanted her, what Marcus thought was that he was suddenly bone-deep tired of the animosity that she treated him with. It had been going on for years, and he was sick of not knowing what it was about or where it came from.

After spending so long in denial it was surprising just how clearly he could see now. His vision was crystal, and he wanted answers. So whether she liked it or not he was going to get them

before the afternoon was through.

‘Want to go and get a drink?’ he muttered, figuring that there was no time like the present and that with any luck she’d consider him the lesser of the two evils in her vicinity right now.

‘I thought you’d never ask.’

### THREE

Oh, God, thought Celia, lifting her hands to her cheeks and feeling them burn as she abandoned her horror of a father and trailed in Marcus’ wake. How on earth was she going to recover from this? Would she ever get over the mortification and the humiliation? Not to mention the mileage that Marcus would get out of that disaster of a conversation. Her father might not know it but he’d given him ammunition to last him years.

How could he have suggested she needed sorting out? She’d always known he didn’t have much time for her career and that he thought she ought to be stuck in a kitchen, barefoot and pregnant, but he’d never expressed it so publicly before.

And in front of Marcus of all people.

What must he be thinking?

Well, no doubt she’d be finding out soon enough because given their history what were the chances he’d let such a scoop slide? Practically zero, she thought darkly as a fresh wave of mortification swept through her. He probably couldn’t wait to get started.

But that was fine. She’d survive whatever taunts he threw her way. She always did. And this time she didn’t really have

any choice, as she'd known the minute she'd elected to go with him instead of staying with her father. She'd made the split-second decision on the basis that by actually living in the twenty-first century Marcus was the marginally more acceptable of the two, but with hindsight maybe she should have just fled to the bathroom instead and to hell with the weakness that that would have displayed.

As they reached the bar Celia pulled herself together because she had the feeling that she'd need every drop of self-possession that she had for the impending fallout of what had just happened.

'What would you like?' he asked.

'Something strong,' she said, not caring one little bit that it was only five in the afternoon. She needed the fortification. 'Brandy, please.'

'Ice?'

Diluted? Hah. 'No, thanks.'

Marcus gave the order to the barman and the minute she had the glass in her fingers she tossed the lot of it down her throat. And winced and shook her head as the alcohol burned through her system. 'God.'

He watched her, his eyes dark and inscrutable, and Celia set her glass on the bar and kind of wished he'd just get on with it because her stomach was churning and she was feeling a bit giddy.

Although now she thought about it his eyes lacked the glint of sardonic amusement he usually treated her to and his face

was devoid of the couldn't-care-less expression it normally wore when they met. In fact she got the odd impression that he wasn't thinking about her father or that conversation at all, which made her think that perhaps he wasn't planning to launch a mocking attack on the pathetic state of her love life just yet.

So what was he going to do? And more to the point, what was she going to do, because she could hardly stand here looking at him for ever, could she? Even though deep down she wouldn't mind doing just that because he was, after all, extremely easy on the eye.

A rogue flame of heat licked through her and she wondered not for the first time what things would be like between them if the antagonism didn't exist. Kind of secretly wished it didn't because he was still looking at her as if trying to imprint every detail of her face onto his memory, and every cell of her body was now straining to get up close and personal to him and the effort of resisting was just about wiping out what was left of her strength.

'Want to take a seat for a bit?' he murmured, and she snapped out of it because, honestly, what was wrong with her today?

Deeply irritated by her inability to control either her thoughts or her body, Celia pulled herself together and focused. Yes, she'd just had a pretty uncomfortable experience, but what was she, eighty? Besides, she was on edge and restless, as if a million bees were swarming inside her, and she needed to lose the feeling. 'I'm going to take a walk,' she said, gripping the edge of the bar

and bending down to undo her shoes.

‘I’ll join you.’

No way. ‘I’d rather be alone.’

‘I’d like to talk to you.’

She glanced up. ‘What about?’

‘You’ll see.’

‘No, I won’t.’

He tilted his head and smiled faintly. ‘Don’t you think you owe me for helping you out back there?’

Had he helped her out? She didn’t think so, although that wasn’t his fault. ‘I thought you said you didn’t want anything in return for your help.’

‘Humour me.’

Straightening and dangling her shoes from the fingers of one hand, Celia didn’t see why she should humour him in the slightest, but maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea because on reflection she’d made some pretty inaccurate assumptions about him today. Therefore she owed him at least one apology, and it would probably be less humiliating to do that on the move when she’d have an excuse to keep her eyes on the ground on the lookout for random tree roots waiting to trip her up.

‘OK, then,’ she said coolly. ‘Let’s walk.’

‘This way?’ he said, gesturing in the direction of the walled kitchen garden that would at least afford them privacy for the talk he wanted to have and the apology she had to give.

‘Fine.’

They set off across the lawn and as the chatter of the guests and the music faded Celia felt her coolness ebb and her awareness of him increase. He was so tall, so broad and so solid and every time his arm accidentally brushed hers it threw up a rash of goosebumps over her skin and sent shivers down her spine.

She sorely regretted taking off her shoes. They might be tricky to walk in, particularly over grass, but they'd added inches. Without them she felt strangely small despite the fact that she was well above average height, and a bit vulnerable, which, as she was the least vulnerable person she knew, was as ridiculous as it was disconcerting.

She tried to distract herself by mentally formulating an apology that would let her keep at least a smidgeon of dignity, but it was no use. She couldn't concentrate on anything except the man walking beside her. There was something so different about him at the moment. He seemed unusually tense. Controlled. Restrained. Maybe even a bit dangerous...

Which was utterly absurd, she told herself firmly, shaking her head free of the notion. Not to mention idiotically fanciful. Marcus wasn't dangerous. No. The only danger here was her because with every step she took away from the safety of the crowd she could feel the pressure inside her building and her self-control slipping.

'You can relax, you know,' he murmured, shooting her a quick smile that flipped her stomach and unsettled her even more.

Suddenly totally unable to figure out how to handle the

situation, she fell back on the way she'd always dealt with him and shot him a scathing look. 'No, I can't.'

'Why not?'

'You have to ask?'

'Clearly.'

She stopped. Planted a hand on her hip and glared at him, all the tension and confusion whipping around inside her suddenly spilling over. 'Oh, for goodness' sake, just get on with it, Marcus.'

'Get on with what?' he asked, drawing to a halt himself, a picture of bewildered innocence.

'The "talk" you wanted to have. Come on, you must be dying to gloat about the sorry state of my love life, not to mention all the other things my father said.'

He thrust his hands in his pockets and looked at her steadily. 'I'm not going to do that.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Yeah, right. Why change the habit of a lifetime?'

Marcus pulled his hands from his pockets and shoved them through his hair while sighing deeply. 'Look, Celia,' he said, folding his arms across his chest and pinning her to the spot with his dark gaze. 'How about we try a ceasefire on the hostilities front?'

For a moment she just stared at him because where on earth had that come from? 'A ceasefire?' she echoed, as taken aback as if he'd grabbed her and kissed her. 'Why?'

'Because I'm sick of it.'

She blinked, now blindsided by the weariness in his voice as well. ‘You’re sick of it?’

‘Aren’t you?’

She opened her mouth to tell him she wasn’t. But then she closed it because hadn’t she been wishing the animosity between them didn’t exist only minutes ago? ‘Maybe,’ she conceded. ‘A bit.’

‘I suggest a truce.’

‘And how long do you think that would last? Five minutes?’

‘Let’s try and give it at least ten.’

‘For the duration of the “talk”?’

‘If you like.’ He tilted his head and arched a quizzical eyebrow. ‘Think you could do that?’

Celia didn’t really know what to think. A ceasefire? A truce? Really? Was it even possible after fifteen years of animosity?

Maybe it was. If Marcus was willing. She could be civil, couldn’t she? She generally was. So with a bit of effort she could manage it now. Particularly since, despite herself, she was kind of intrigued to know what he wanted to talk to her about. And besides, she didn’t like the way he was making her sound like the unreasonable one here. She wasn’t unreasonable at all, and she’d prove it.

‘Why not?’ she said, tossing him a cool smile from over her shoulder and continuing towards the kitchen garden.

\* \* \*

Well, that had gone a lot more easily than he’d expected,

thought Marcus, going after her. He'd anticipated much more of a battle, much more withering sarcasm and scathing retort, but then perhaps that conversation with her father had knocked her confidence a bit. Not that she'd ever dream of showing it, of course.

Nevertheless a mortified, confidence-knocked Celia was novel. Intriguing. More alluring than it probably should have been. As was a chat without all the acrimony, he reminded himself swiftly, which was the main point of this little exercise.

'So I'm imagining that wasn't quite the way you were intending the conversation with your father to go when you asked for my help,' he said once he'd caught up with her.

Celia snapped her gaze to his and shot him a look of absolute horror. 'Not exactly.'

'So much for small talk.'

She shook her head as if remembering the conversation in all its awful glory, and winced. 'I still can't believe he said all that stuff about, well, you know, sorting me out and things.'

'Nor can I.' Although, to be honest, he was now so aware of her, it was pretty much all he could think about. That and getting to the bottom of why she detested him so much.

'I'm so sorry.'

'Why? It's not your fault.'

'I guess not, but, still, he put you in an awkward position.'

'I doubt mine was as awkward as yours.'

'Probably not.'

‘Nor is it your fault your father’s stuck in the Dark Ages.’

‘No, but that doesn’t make it any easier to bear.’

They reached the kitchen garden and he held open the gate. Celia brushed past him, making all the nerve endings in his body fizz and his pulse race as her scent slammed into him.

‘Where does it come from?’ he asked, just about resisting the urge to take advantage of her proximity and pulling her into his arms because that was not what this was about.

‘His attitude?’

He nodded and followed her down the path that bisected the garden, watching the sway of her body that was exaggerated by the flimsy fabric of her dress and ignoring the punch of lust that hit him square in the stomach.

Celia shrugged and sighed, then bent to look at the label stuck in the earth in front of a row of something leafy and green. Her hair tumbled down in long golden waves and Marcus found himself scanning the garden for a soft piece of ground he could pull her down to.

‘Who knows?’ she said, and he dragged his attention back to what she was saying. ‘The fact that he was a doted-on only child? That he had a stereotypical fifties mother? Or was he simply born a chauvinist?’

‘Why do you put up with it?’ he said, clearing his throat and determinedly shoving aside the images of Celia writhing and panting beneath him, her dress rucked up around her hips and her body arching against him.

She straightened, swept her hair back with a twist and looked at him. ‘I don’t have any choice. He’s still my father even though I’m never going to be what he thinks I should be.’

‘Which is no bad thing,’ he said, briefly trying to imagine Celia as a housewife and failing.

‘I agree. I can’t cook. I don’t have a clue where my iron is and I haven’t used a Hoover since my last day at university.’

‘Yet you still want his approval?’

She nodded. ‘Stupidly. I always have. Although I really don’t know why I still bother. I mean, he barely knows you yet he admires you in a way he’s never admired me even though he’s known me for thirty-one years. We work in similar fields, for goodness’ sake, yet he’s never offered me help. Whatever I achieve he’ll never think it amounts to as much as marriage and a family would. Which is ironic, really, when you think about how badly he screwed his up.’

‘Is his attitude to women why your parents divorced?’

She shook her head. ‘I think that was mainly because of his many, many affairs. But the attitude couldn’t have helped.’

‘So what did you mean when you said your ambition was his fault?’

‘Exactly that. The divorce hit me hard. Despite what he’d done I adored him. When he moved out I spent quite a lot of my time at school pathetically crying in the bathrooms. As a result I was bullied.’

That odd protective streak surged up inside him again and he

frowned. ‘Badly?’ he asked, pushing it back.

‘Not really. Small-scale stuff. But one day I’d had enough and decided to channel my energies into studying instead of blubbing my eyes out.’

‘Is it a coincidence you’re a lawyer?’

She arched an eyebrow and shot him a quick smile. ‘What do you think?’

‘I think Freud would have a field day.’

‘Very probably.’

‘But why corporate law? Why not divorce law?’

‘Experiencing it once—even though sort of vicariously—was quite enough,’ she said with a shudder.

Marcus watched her as she began to walk further along the path and thought that, while he did think she had a problem with her work-life balance, her drive and focus when it came to her career were admirable. She’d worked hard and deserved everything she had. ‘What you’ve achieved is impressive,’ he said, reaching her with a couple of long, quick strides. ‘Especially with so little encouragement.’

She glanced over at him, surprised. ‘Thanks.’

‘You deserve everything you have.’

‘Wow,’ she said slowly. ‘I never thought I’d hear you say that.’

‘Neither did I.’

They continued in silence for a moment. Celia brushed her hand over a planter full of lavender and a faint smile curved her lips, presumably at the scent released.

‘Anyway, you haven’t always had it easy, have you?’ she said.

‘No,’ he said, although he’d got over the death of his parents and the trouble he’d subsequently had years ago.

‘So you’ve done pretty impressively too.’

Funny how the compliment warmed him. The novelty of a sign of approval after so many years of the opposite. Or maybe it was just the sun beating down on the thick fabric of his coat.

‘Thanks,’ he muttered.

She turned to look at him and her expression was questioning.

‘Why am I telling you all this anyway?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Must be the brandy.’

‘Must be.’

‘I don’t need sorting out, you know.’

‘Of course you don’t.’

‘I don’t need rescuing.’

‘I know.’

She shot him a quick smile. ‘I definitely don’t need to see my father for at least a decade.’

‘A century, I should think.’

At the fountain that sat in the middle of the garden they turned left and carried on strolling down the path, passing raspberry nets and then runner-bean vines that wound up tall, narrow bamboo teepees before stopping at a bench that sat at the end of the path amidst the runner beans.

‘I’m sorry, Marcus,’ she said eventually.

He frowned, not needing her continued apology and not really liking it because, honestly, he preferred her fighting. ‘So you said.’

‘No, not about that,’ she said with a wave of her hand. ‘I mean about the things I implied you were going to do with your time now you’d sold your business. It was totally childish of me to suggest that you’d be partying with floozies. Your plans sound great. Different. Interesting.’

‘I hope they will be.’

‘I was wrong about that and I was probably wrong about why you were late getting here too, wasn’t I?’

‘Yup.’

‘No trio of clingy lovers?’

‘Not even one.’

‘Shame.’

‘It was.’

‘So what happened?’

‘I was in Switzerland tying up a few last details surrounding the sale of my company but was due to fly back yesterday morning. I should have had plenty of time, but because of the ash cloud my flight was cancelled, as were hundreds of others. By the time I got round to checking, all the trains were fully booked and there wasn’t a car left to rent for all the cash in Switzerland.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Found a taxi driver who drove me to Calais. From there I got on the train to cross the Channel, rented a car in Dover and drove

straight here.’

‘Oh.’ Celia frowned. ‘When did you sleep?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘You must be tired.’

Oddly enough he wasn’t in the least bit tired. Right now he was about as awake and alert as he’d ever been. ‘It’s not the first time I’ve gone twenty-four hours and I doubt it’ll be the last.’

‘You’re very loyal.’

‘Dan’s my best friend. Why wouldn’t I be?’

She shrugged and carried on looking at a point in the distance so that, he assumed, she didn’t have to look at him. ‘Well, you know...’

Something that felt a bit like hurt stabbed him in the chest but he dismissed it because he didn’t do hurt. ‘Maybe I’m not everything you think I am,’ he said quietly.

She swivelled her gaze back to his and sighed. ‘Maybe you aren’t.’

‘Just what did I do, Celia?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Why the hatred?’

‘I don’t hate you.’

He lifted an eyebrow. ‘No? Seems that way to me. You never pass up an opportunity to have a go at me. You judge me and find me lacking. Every time we meet. Every single time. So what I want to know is, what did I ever do to earn your disdain?’

She frowned, then smiled faintly. ‘I’ve just told you about my

father's relentless philandering and the misery it caused,' she said with a mildness that he didn't believe for a second. 'Can't you work it out?'

Ah, so it boiled down to the women he went out with. As he'd always suspected. But he wasn't going to accept it. It simply wasn't a good enough reason to justify her attitude towards him.

'Yes, I date a lot of women,' he said, keeping his voice steady and devoid of any of the annoyance he felt. 'But so what? All of them are over the age of consent. I don't break up marriages and I don't hurt anyone. So is that really what it's all been about? Because if it is, to be honest I find it pretty pathetic.' He stopped. Frowned. 'And frankly why do you even care what I do?'

Celia stared at him, her mouth opening then closing. She ran a hand through her hair. Took a breath and blew it out slowly. Then she nodded, lifted her chin a little and said, 'OK, you know what, you're right,' she said. 'It's not just that.'

'Then what's the problem?'

'Do you really want to know?'

'I wouldn't have asked if I didn't.'

'Well, how about you trying to get me into bed for a bet?' she said flatly. 'Is that a reasonable enough excuse for you?'

Marcus stared at her, the distant sounds of chatter and music over the wall fading further as all his focus zoomed in on the woman standing in front of him, looking at him in challenge, cross, all fired up and maybe a bit hurt.

'What?' he managed. What bet? What the hell was she talking

about?

‘The bet, Marcus,’ she said witheringly, folding her arms beneath her breasts and drawing his attention to her chest for a second. ‘You set about seducing me for a bet.’

As he dragged his gaze up to the flush on her face her words filtered through the haze of desire that filled his head and he began to reel. ‘That’s what’s been bothering you all these years?’ he said, barely able to believe it. ‘That’s what’s been behind the insults, the sarcastic comments and the endless judgement?’

She nodded. Shrugged. ‘I know it sounds pathetic but that kind of thing can make an impression on a sixteen-year-old girl.’

An impression that lasted quite a bit longer than adolescence by the looks of it, he thought, rubbing a hand along his jaw as he gave himself a quick mental shake to clear his head. ‘You should have told me.’

‘When exactly?’

‘Any point in the last fifteen years would have been good.’

She let out a sharp laugh. ‘Right. Because that wouldn’t have been embarrassing.’ She tilted her head, her chin still up and her expression still challenging. ‘In any case, why should I have told you?’

‘Because I’d have told you that there wasn’t a bet.’

She frowned. ‘What?’

‘There wasn’t a bet.’

‘Yeah, right.’

‘Really. I swear.’

She stared at him and the seconds ticked by as she absorbed the truth of it. ‘Then why did you say there was?’

Marcus inwardly winced at the memory of his arrogant, reckless, out-of-control and hurting teenage self. ‘Bravado.’

‘Bravado?’

‘I was eighteen. Thought I knew it all. When you pushed me away it stung. Battered my pride. It hadn’t happened before.’

‘I can imagine,’ she said dryly.

‘Your knock-back hit me hard.’

‘I find that difficult to believe.’

‘Believe it.’

‘You called me a prick-tease.’

Marcus flinched. Had he? Not his finest moment, but then there hadn’t been many fine moments at that point in his life. ‘I’m sorry. I wanted you badly. You seemed to want me equally badly. And then you didn’t. One minute you were all over me, the next you basically told me to get off you and then shot out through the door.’

‘It wasn’t entirely like that.’

‘No? Then what was it like? Why did you stop me that night?’

‘I was a virgin. I got carried away. And then I suddenly realised I didn’t want to lose my virginity to someone who’d probably be in bed with someone else the following night.’

‘I might not have been.’

Celia rolled her eyes. ‘Yeah, sure.’

And actually, there was no point denying it, she might well

be right. At eighteen, with the death of his father six months before and his mother's all-consuming grief that had left no room for a son who'd been equally devastated, and ultimately no room for life, he'd been off the rails for a while. The night of Dan's eighteenth birthday party, which had fallen on the anniversary of the date his father had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, he'd been on a mission to self-destruct, and he hadn't cared who'd got caught up in the process. In retrospect Celia had had a lucky escape. 'Well, I guess we'll never know.'

'I guess we won't.'

'I was pretty keen on you, though,' he said reflectively.

'Were you?'

'Yup. Even though you were Dan's sister and therefore strictly off-limits.'

'Not that off-limits,' she said tartly. 'If I hadn't put a stop to things we'd have ended up in bed.'

'No, well, I didn't have many scruples back then.' As evinced by the fact that following Celia's rejection he hadn't wasted any time in finding someone else to keep him company that night.

'And you do now?'

'A few. And you know something else?' he said, taking the fact that she was still standing there, listening, as an encouraging sign.

'What?'

'Despite everything that's happened between us over the years it turns out I still am pretty keen on you.'

FOUR

Just when Celia didn't think she could take any more shocks to the system, bam, there was another one.

She was still trying to get her head around the fact that Marcus thought that what she'd achieved with her career was impressive. That she'd got quite a large part of him badly, badly wrong. That there'd never been a bet and the enormity of what that meant. That ever since that night her attitude towards him—and men in general—had been fuelled by one tiny misunderstanding and could have been so very different if teenage angst hadn't got in the way.

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