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WINNING A GROOM
IN 10 DATES

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SOS: Convenient Husband Required

by

Liz Fielding
Winning a Groom in 10 Dates

by

Cara Colter



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by Liz Fielding

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SOS: Convenient Husband Required

by

Liz Fielding

Dear Reader

Welcome back to Maybridge, a town I created back in 1994. *SOS: CONVENIENT HUSBAND REQUIRED* is the sixth of my books to be set there (the full list is on my website), and if it existed it would undoubtedly be one of the most romantic places in Britain.

Along with the nearby city of Melchester, the villages of Little Hinton and Upper Haughton, I have created a world of my own from the places I grew up in. There's the river, the regenerated industrial areas, and the vibrant arts and crafts centre in a huge old coaching inn, with delightful boutiques around the cobbled courtyard.

May Coleridge comes from an old Maybridge family—the ones who lived in 'the big house'—but she fell in love with Adam Wavell, who comes from the other end of the social scale, when they were both in high school. Now the tables are turned. Adam is rich and powerful while May is about to lose everything. Adam can't quite escape his past, his family, or the memory of May's sweet kisses, no matter how hard he tries. Nor can he rid himself of the memory of his humiliation at the hand of May's grandfather. Or her coldness in the years since then.

He's sure that a temporary marriage of convenience will give him closure, but being close to May rekindles feelings he'd thought dead. Can a convenient marriage become something more?

Walk through the park with them and watch them fall in love all over again.

Warmest wishes

Liz

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

For my patient, long-suffering husband, who unfailingly keeps his sense of humour through all the crises, the rubbish meals when the deadline escapes me, and makes me believe on those horrible days when the confidence falters. He is my hero.

Chapter One

MAY COLERIDGE stared blankly at the man sitting behind the desk, trying to make sense of what he'd told her.

Her grandfather's will had been simplicity itself. Apart from the bequests to local charities, everything had been left to his only living relative. Her.

Inheritance tax would mop up pretty much everything but the house itself. She'd always known that would happen, but Coleridge House was the only home she'd ever known and now, because of a clause in some centuries old will, she was about to lose that too.

'I don't understand,' she said, finally admitting defeat. 'Why didn't you tell me all this when you read Grandpa's will?'

'As you're no doubt aware,' Freddie Jennings explained with maddening pomposity—as if she hadn't known him since he'd been a kid with a runny nose at kindergarten—'my great-uncle took care of your grandfather's legal affairs until he retired. He drew up his last will after the death of your mother—'

'That was nearly thirty years ago,' she protested.

He shrugged. 'Believe me, I'm as shocked as you are.'

'I doubt that. Jennings have been the Coleridge family solicitor for generations,' she said. 'How could you not know about this?'

Freddie shifted uncomfortably in his chair. 'Some of the Coleridge archives were damaged during the floods a few years ago. It was only when I applied for probate that this particular condition of inheritance surfaced.'

May felt as if she'd stepped into quicksand and the ground that she was standing on, everything that had been certain, was disintegrating beneath her feet. She had been so sure that this was a mistake, that Freddie has got his knickers in a twist over nothing, but it wasn't nothing. It was everything.

Everything she'd known, everything she'd loved was being taken away from her...

'The last time this clause would have been relevant was when your great-grandfather died in 1944,' he continued, as if that mattered. 'Your grandfather would have been told of the condition then.'

'In 1944 my grandfather was a fourteen-year-old boy who'd just lost his father,' she snapped, momentarily losing her composure at his attempt to justify their incompetence. 'And, since he was married by the time he was twenty-three, it wouldn't have been an issue.' And by the time it had become one, the stroke that had incapacitated him had left huge holes in his memory and he hadn't been able to warn her. She swallowed as an aching lump formed in her throat, but she refused to let the tears fall. To weep. 'People got married so much younger back then,' she added.

'Back then, there wasn't any alternative.'

'No...'

Her mother had been a beneficiary of the feminist movement, one of that newly liberated generation of women who'd abandoned the shackles of a patriarchal society and chosen her own path. *Motherhood without the bother of a man under her feet* was the way she'd put it in one of the many articles she'd written on the subject.

As for her, well, she'd had other priorities.

'You have to admit that it's outrageous, Freddie. Surely I can challenge it?'

'I'd have to take Counsel's opinion and even if you went to court there is a problem.'

'I think we are both agreed that I have a problem.'

He waited, but she shook her head. Snapping at Freddie wasn't going to help. 'Tell me.'

'There can be no doubt that this restriction on inheritance would have been explained to your grandfather on each of the occasions when he rewrote his will. After his marriage, the birth of

your mother, the death of your grandmother. He could have taken steps then to have this restriction removed. He chose to let it stand.'

'Why? Why would he do that?'

Freddie shrugged. 'Maybe because it was part of family tradition. Maybe because his father had left it in place. I would have advised removal but my great-uncle, your grandfather came from a different age. They saw things differently.'

'Even so—'

'He had three opportunities to remove the entailment and the Crown would argue that it was clearly his wish to let it stand. Counsel would doubtless counter that if he hadn't had a stroke, had realised the situation you were in, he would have changed it,' Freddie said in an attempt to comfort her.

'If he hadn't had a stroke I would be married to Michael Linton,' she replied. *Safely married*. That was what he used to say. Not like her mother...

'I'm sorry, May. The only guarantee I can give is that whichever way it went the costs would be heavy and, as you are aware, there's no money in the estate to cover them.'

'You're saying that I'd lose the house anyway,' she said dully. 'That whatever I do I lose.'

'The only people who ever win in a situation like this are the lawyers,' he admitted. 'Hopefully, you'll be able to realise enough from the sale of the house contents, once the inheritance tax is paid, to provide funds for a flat or even a small house.'

'They want inheritance tax *and* the house?'

'The two are entirely separate.'

She shook her head, still unable to believe this was happening. 'If it was going to some deserving charity I could live with it, but to have my home sucked into the Government coffers...' Words failed her.

'Your ancestor's will was written at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The country was at war. He was a patriot.'

'Oh, please! It was nothing but an arm twisted up the back of a philandering son. Settle down and get on with producing the next generation or I'll cut you off without a shilling.'

'Maybe. But it was added as an entailment to the estate and no one has ever challenged it. There's still just time, May. You could get married.'

'Is that an offer?'

'Unfortunately, bigamy would not satisfy the legal requirements.'

Freddie Jennings had a sense of humour? Who knew?

'You're not seeing anyone?' he asked hopefully.

She shook her head. There had only ever been one boy, man, who'd ever lit a fire in her heart, her body...

'Between nursing Grandpa and running my own business, I'm afraid there hasn't been a lot of time to "see" anyone,' she said.

'There's not even a friend who'd be prepared to go through the motions?'

'I'm all out of unattached men at the moment,' she replied. 'Well, there is Jed Atkins who does a bit for me in the garden now and then,' she said, her grip on reality beginning to slip. 'He's in his seventies, but pretty lively and I'd have to fight off the competition.'

'The competition?'

'He's very much in demand with the ladies at the Darby and Joan club, so I'm told.'

'May...' he cautioned as she began to laugh, but the situation was unreal. How could he expect her to take it seriously? 'I think I'd better take you home.'

'I don't suppose you have any clients in urgent need of a marriage of convenience so that they can stay in the country?' she asked as he ushered her from his office, clearly afraid that she was going to become hysterical.

He needn't have worried. She was a Coleridge. Mary Louise Coleridge of Coleridge House. Brought up to serve the community, behave impeccably on all occasions, do the right thing even when your heart was breaking.

She wasn't about to become hysterical just because Freddie Jennings had told her she was about to lose everything.

'But if you are considering something along those lines,' he warned as he held the car door for her, 'please make sure he signs a prenuptial agreement or you're going to have to pay dearly to get rid of him.'

'Make that a lose/lose/lose situation,' she said. Then, taking a step back, 'Actually, I'd rather walk home. I need some fresh air.'

He said something but she was already walking away. She needed to be on her own. Needed to think.

Without Coleridge House, she would not only lose her home, but her livelihood. As would Harriet Robson, her grandfather's housekeeper for more than thirty years and the nearest thing to a mother she'd ever known.

She'd have to find a job. Somewhere to live. Or, of course, a husband.

She bought the early edition of the local newspaper from the stand by the park gates to look at the sits vac and property columns. What a joke. There were no jobs for a woman weeks away from her thirtieth birthday who didn't have a degree or even a typing certificate to her name. And the price of property in Maybridge was staggering. The lonely hearts column was a boom area, though, and, with a valuable house as an incentive, a husband might prove the easiest of the three to find. But, with three weeks until her birthday, even that was going to be a tough ask.

Adam Wavell looked from the sleeping infant tucked into the pink nest of her buggy to the note in his hand.

Sorry, sorry, sorry. I know I should have told you about Nancie, but you'd have shouted at me...

Shouted at her. Shouted at her! Of course he would have shouted at her, for all the good it had ever done.

'Problem?'

'You could say that.' For the first time since he'd employed Jake Edwards as his PA, he regretted not choosing one of the equally qualified women who'd applied for the job, any one of whom would by now have been clucking and cooing over the infant. Taking charge and leaving him to get on with running his company. 'My sister is having a crisis.'

'I didn't know you had a sister.'

No. He'd worked hard to distance himself from his family.

'Saffy. She lives in France,' he said.

Maybe. It had taken only one call to discover that she'd sublet the apartment he'd leased for her months ago. Presumably she was living off the proceeds of the rent since she hadn't asked him for money. Yet.

Presumably she'd moved in with the baby's father, a relationship that she hadn't chosen to share with him and had now, presumably, hit the skids.

Her occasional phone calls could have come from anywhere and any suggestion that he was cross-examining her about what she was doing, who she was seeing only resulted in longer gaps between them. It was her life and while she seemed happy he didn't pry. At twenty-nine, she was old enough to have grown out of her wildness and settled down. Clearly, he thought as he reread the letter, he'd been fooling himself.

I've got myself into some real trouble, Adam...

Trouble. Nothing new there, then. She'd made a career of it.

Michel's family set their bloodhounds on me. They've found out all the trouble I was in as a kid, the shoplifting, the drugs and they've used it to turn him against me. He's got a court order to stop me taking Nancie out of France and he's going to take her away from me...

No. That wasn't right. She'd been clean for years...

Or was he still kidding himself?

A friend smuggled us out of France but I can't hide with a baby so I'm leaving her with you...

Smuggled her out of France. Ignored a court order. Deprived a father of access to his child. Just how many felonies did that involve? All of which he was now an accessory to.

Terrific.

One minute he'd been sitting in his boardroom, discussing the final touches to the biggest deal in his career, the next he was having his life sabotaged—not for the first time—by his family.

I'm going to disappear for a while...

No surprise there. His little sister had made a career of running away and leaving someone else to pick up the pieces. She'd dropped out, run away, used drugs and alcohol in a desperate attempt to shut out all the bad stuff. Following the example of their useless parents. Making a bad situation worse.

He'd thought his sister had finally got herself together, was enjoying some small success as a model. Or maybe that was what he'd wanted to believe.

Don't, whatever you do, call a nanny agency. They'll want all kinds of information and, once it's on record, Nancie's daddy will be able to trace her...

Good grief, who was the father of this child? Was his sister in danger?

Guilt overwhelmed those first feelings of anger, frustration. He had to find her, somehow make this right, but, as the baby stirred, whimpered, he had a more urgent problem.

Saffy had managed to get her into his office without anyone noticing her—time for a shake-up in security—but that would have to wait. His first priority was to get the baby out of the building before she started screaming and his family history became the subject of the kind of gossip that had made his—and Saffy's—youth a misery.

'Do you want me to call an agency?' Jake asked.

'An agency?'

'For a nanny?'

'Yes...No...'

Even if Saffy's fears were nothing but unfounded neurosis, he didn't have anywhere to put a nanny. He didn't even have a separate bedroom in his apartment, only a sleeping gallery reached by a spiral staircase.

It was no place for a baby, he thought as he stared at the PS Saffy had scribbled at the end of the crumpled and tear-stained note.

Ask May. She'll help.

She'd underlined the words twice.

May. May Coleridge.

He crushed the letter in his hand.

He hadn't spoken to May Coleridge since he was eighteen. She and Saffy had been in the same class at school and, while they hadn't been friends—the likes of the Wavells had not been welcome at Coleridge House, as he'd discovered to his cost—at least not in the giggly girls, shopping, clubbing sense of the word, there had been some connection between them that he'd never been able to fathom.

But then that was probably what people had thought about him and May.

But while the thought of the untouchable Miss Coleridge changing the nappy of a Wavell baby might put a shine on his day, the woman had made an art form of treating him as if he were invisible.

Even on those social occasions when they found themselves face to face, there was no eye contact. Only icy civility.

‘Is there anything I can do?’

He shook his head. There was nothing anyone could do. His family was, always had been, his problem, but it was a mess he wanted out of his office. Now.

‘Follow up on the points raised at the meeting, Jake.’ He looked at the crumpled sheet of paper in his hand, then folded it and stuffed it in his shirt pocket. Unhooked his jacket from the back of his chair. ‘Keep me posted about any problems. I’m going home.’

It took a kitten to drag May out of her dark thoughts.

Her first reaction to the news that she was about to lose her home had been to rush back to its shabby comfort—no matter how illusory that comfort might be—while she came to terms with the fact that, having lost the last surviving member of her family, she was now going to lose everything else. Her home. Her business. Her future.

Once home, however, there would be no time for such indulgence. She had little enough time to unravel the life she’d made for herself. To wind down a business she’d fallen into almost by accident and, over the last few years, built into something that had given her something of her own, something to live for.

Worst of all, she’d have to tell Robbie.

Give notice to Patsy and the other women who worked for a few hours a week helping with the cleaning, the cooking and who relied on that small amount of money to help them pay their bills.

There’d be no time to spare for the luxury of grieving for the loss of their support, friendship. Her birthday was less than a month away. *The* birthday. The one with a big fat zero on the end.

Yesterday that hadn’t bothered her. She’d never understood why anyone would want to stop the clock at ‘twenty-nine’.

Today, if some fairy godmother were to appear and offer her three wishes, that would be number one on the list. Well, maybe not number one...

But, while fairy godmothers were pure fantasy, her date of birth was a fact that she could not deny and, by the time she’d reached the last park bench before home, the one overlooking the lake that had once been part of the parkland surrounding Coleridge House, her legs had been shaking so much that she’d been forced to stop.

Once there, she’d been unable to find the will to move again. It was a sheltered spot, a sun trap and, despite the fact that it was the first week in November, pleasantly warm. And while she sat on this park bench she was still Miss Mary Louise Coleridge of Coleridge House. Someone to be respected.

Her place in the town, the invitations to sit on charitable committees were part of her life. Looked at in the cold light of day, it was obvious that it wasn’t her they wanted, it was the Coleridge name to lend lustre to their endeavours. And Coleridge House.

No one would come knocking when she didn’t have a grand room where they could hold their meetings, with a good lunch thrown in. An elegant, if fading house with a large garden in which to hold their ‘events’.

It was the plaintive mew of a kitten in distress that finally broke through these dark thoughts. It took her a moment to locate the scrap of orange fur clinging to the branch of a huge old beech tree set well back from the path.

‘Oh, sweetie, how on earth did you get up there?’

Since the only reply was an even more desperate mew, she got to her feet and went closer.

‘Come on. You can do it,’ she cooed, standing beneath it, hoping to coax it back down the long sloping branch that came nearly to the ground. It edged further up the branch.

She looked around, hoping for someone tall enough to reach up and grab it but there wasn’t a soul in sight. Finally, when it became clear that there wasn’t anything else for it, she took off her jacket, kicked off her shoes and, skirting a muddy puddle, she caught hold of the branch, found a firm foothold and pulled herself up.

Bitterly regretting that he'd taken advantage of the unseasonably fine weather to walk in to the office, Adam escaped the building via his private lift to the car park. He'd hoped to pick up a taxi at the rank on the corner but there were none waiting and he crossed the road to the park. It was a slightly longer way home, but there was less chance of being seen by anyone he knew.

Oblivious to the beauty of the autumn morning, he steered the buggy with one hand, using the other to call up anyone who might have a clue where Saffy was heading for.

His first action on finding Nancie had been to try her mother's mobile but, unsurprisingly, it was switched off. He'd left a message on her voicemail, asking her to ring him, but didn't hold out much hope of that.

Ten minutes later, the only thing he knew for certain was that he knew nothing. The new tenants of the apartment, her agent—make that ex-agent—even her old flatmate denied any knowledge of where she was, or of Michel, and he had no idea who her friends were, even supposing they'd tell him anything.

Actually, he thought, looking at the baby, it wasn't true that he knew nothing.

While the movement of the buggy had, for the moment, lulled her back to sleep, he was absolutely sure that very soon she would be demanding to be fed or changed.

Ask May. She'll help.

Ahead of him, the tall red-brick barley twist chimneys of Coleridge House stood high above the trees. For years he'd avoided this part of the park, walked double the distance rather than pass the house. Just seeing those chimneys had made him feel inadequate, worthless.

These days, he could buy and sell the Coleridges, and yet it was still there. Their superiority and the taint of who he was.

Asking her for help stuck deep in his craw, but the one thing about May Coleridge was that she wouldn't ask questions. She knew Saffy. Knew him.

He called Enquiries for her number but it was unlisted. No surprise there, but maybe it was just as well.

It had been a very long time since he'd taken her some broken creature to be nursed back to health, but he knew she'd find it a lot harder to say no face to face. If he put Nancie into her arms.

It is not high, May told herself as she set her foot firmly on the tree. All she had to do was haul herself up onto the branch and crawl along it. No problem...

Easy enough to say when she was safely on the ground.

Standing beneath the branch and looking up, it had seemed no distance at all. The important thing, she reminded herself, was not to look down but keep her eye on the goal.

'What on earth are you doing up there, Mouse?'

Sherbet dabs!

As her knee slipped, tearing her tights, she wondered how much worse this day could get. The advantage that she didn't have to look down to see who was beneath her—only one person had ever called her Mouse—was completely lost on her.

'What do you think I'm doing?' she asked through gritted teeth. 'Checking the view?'

'You should be able to see Melchester Castle from up there,' he replied, as if she'd been serious. 'You'll have to look a little further to your left, though.'

She was in enough trouble simply looking ahead. She'd never been good with heights—something she only ever seemed to remember when she was too far off the ground to change her mind.

'Why don't you come up and point it out to me?' she gasped.

'I would be happy to,' he replied, 'but that branch doesn't look as if it could support both of us.'

He was right. It was creaking ominously as she attempted to edge closer to the kitten which, despite her best efforts not to frighten it further, was backing off, a spitting, frightened orange ball of fur.

It was far too late to wish she'd stuck to looking helpless at ground level. She'd realised at a very early age that the pathetic, *Where's a big strong man to help me?* routine was never going to work for her—she wasn't blonde enough, thin enough, pretty enough—and had learned to get on and do it herself.

It was plunging in without a thought for the consequences that had earned her the mocking nickname 'Mouse', short for 'Danger Mouse', bestowed on her by Adam Wavell when she was a chubby teen and he was a mocking, nerdy, glasses-wearing sixth-former at the local high school.

Her knee slipped a second time and a gasp from below warned her that Adam wasn't the only one with a worm's eye view of her underwear. A quick blink confirmed that her antics were beginning to attract an audience of mid-morning dog-walkers, older children on their autumn break and shoppers taking the scenic route into the town centre—just too late to be of help.

Then a click, followed by several more as the idea caught on, warned her that someone had taken a photograph using their mobile phone. Terrific. She was going to be in tomorrow's edition of the *Maybridge Observer* for sure; worse, she'd be on *YouTube* by lunch time.

She had no one to blame but herself, she reminded herself, making a firm resolution that the next time she spotted an animal in distress she'd call the RSPCA and leave it to them. That wasn't going to help her now, though, and the sooner she grabbed the kitten and returned to earth the better.

'Here, puss,' she coaxed desperately, but its only response was to hiss at her and edge further along the branch. Muttering under her breath, she went after it. The kitten had the advantage. Unlike her, it weighed nothing and, as the branch thinned and began to bend noticeably beneath her, she made a desperate lunge, earning herself a cheer from the crowd as she managed to finally grab it. The kitten ungratefully sank its teeth into her thumb.

'Pass it down,' Adam said, his arms raised to take it from her.

Easier said than done. In its terror, it had dug its needle claws in, clinging to her hand as desperately as it had clung to the branch.

'You'll have to unhook me. Don't let it go!' she warned as she lowered it towards him. She was considerably higher now and she had to lean down a long way so that he could detach the little creature with the minimum of damage to her skin.

It was a mistake.

While she'd been focused on the kitten everything had been all right, but that last desperate lunge had sent everything spinning and, before she could utter so much as a *fudge balls*, she lost her balance and slithered off the branch.

Adam, standing directly beneath her, had no time to avoid a direct hit. They both went down in a heap, the fall driving the breath from her body, which was probably a good thing since there was no item in her handmade confectionery range that came even close to matching her mortification. But then embarrassment was her default reaction whenever she was within a hundred feet of the man.

'You don't change, Mouse,' he said as she struggled to catch her breath.

Not much chance of that while she was lying on top of him, his breath warm against her cheek, his heart pounding beneath her hand, his arm, flung out in an attempt to catch her—or, more likely, defend himself—tight around her. The stuff of her most private dreams, if she discounted the fact that it had been raining all week and they were sprawled in the muddy puddle she had taken such pains to avoid.

'You always did act first, think later,' he said. 'Rushing to the aid of some poor creature in distress and getting wet, muddy or both for your pains.'

'While you,' she gasped, 'always turned up too late to do anything but stand on the sidelines, laughing at me,' she replied furiously. It was untrue and unfair, but all she wanted right at that moment was to vanish into thin air.

'You have to admit you were always great entertainment value.'

‘If you like clowns,’ she muttered, remembering all too vividly the occasion when she’d scrambled onto the school roof in a thunderstorm to rescue a bird trapped in the guttering and in danger of drowning, concern driving her chubby arms and legs as she’d shinned up the down pipe.

Up had never been a problem.

He’d stood below her then, the water flattening his thick dark hair, rain pouring down his face, grinning even as he’d taken the bird from her. But then, realising that she was too terrified to move, he’d taken off his glasses and climbed up to rescue her.

Not that she’d thanked him.

She’d been too busy yelling at him for letting the bird go before she could wrap it up and take it home to join the rest of her rescue family.

It was only when she was back on terra firma that her breathing had gone to pot and he’d delivered her to the school nurse, convinced she was having an asthma attack. And she had been too mortified—and breathless—to deny it.

He was right. Nothing had changed. She might be less than a month away from her thirtieth birthday, a woman of substance, respected for her charity work, running her own business, but inside she was still the overweight and socially inept teen being noticed by a boy she had the most painful crush on. Brilliant but geeky with the family from hell. Another outsider.

Well, he wasn’t an outsider any more. He’d used his brains to good effect and was now the most successful man not just in Maybridge, but just about anywhere and had exchanged the hideous flat in the concrete acres of a sink estate where he’d been brought up for the luxury of a loft on the quays.

She quickly disentangled herself, clambered to her feet. He followed with far more grace.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked. ‘No bones broken?’

‘I’m fine,’ she said, ignoring the pain in her elbow where it had hit the ground. ‘You?’ she asked out of politeness.

She could see for herself that he was absolutely fine. More than fine. The glasses had disappeared years ago, along with the bad hair, bad clothes. He’d never be muscular, but he’d filled out as he’d matured, his shoulders had broadened and these days were clad in the finest bespoke tailoring.

He wasn’t just fine, but gorgeous. Mouthwateringly scrumptious, in fact. The chocolate nut fudge of maleness. And these days he had all the female attention he could handle if the gossip magazines were anything to judge by.

‘At least you managed to hang onto the kitten,’ she added, belatedly clutching the protective cloak of superiority about her.

The one thing she knew would make him keep his distance.

‘I take no credit. The kitten is hanging onto me.’

‘What?’ She saw the blood seeping from the needle wounds in his hand and everything else flew out of the window. ‘Oh, good grief, you’re bleeding.’

‘It’s a hazard I expect whenever I’m within striking distance of you. Although on this occasion you haven’t escaped unscathed, either,’ he said.

She physically jumped as he took her own hand in his, turning it over so that she could see the tiny pinpricks of blood mingling with the mud. And undoing all her efforts to regain control of her breathing. He looked up.

‘Where’s your bag?’ he asked. ‘Have you got your inhaler?’

Thankfully, it had never occurred to him that his presence was the major cause of her problems with breathing.

‘I’m fine,’ she snapped.

For heaven’s sake, she was nearly thirty. She should be so over the cringing embarrassment that nearly crippled her whenever Adam Wavell was in the same room.

‘Come on,’ he said, ‘I’ll walk you home.’

‘There’s no need,’ she protested.

‘There’s every need. And this time, instead of getting punished for my good deed, I’m going to claim my reward.’

‘Reward?’ Her mouth dried. In fairy tales that would be a kiss... ‘Superheroes never hang around for a reward,’ she said scornfully as she wrapped the struggling kitten in her jacket.

‘You’re the superhero, Danger Mouse,’ he reminded her, a teasing glint in his eyes that brought back the precious time when they’d been friends. ‘I’m no more than the trusty sidekick who turns up in the nick of time to get you out of a jam.’

‘Just once in a while you could try turning up in time to prevent me from getting into one,’ she snapped.

‘Now where would be the fun in that?’ he asked, and it took all her self-control to keep her face from breaking out into a foolish smile.

‘Do you really think I want to be on the front page of the *Maybridge Observer* with my knickers on show?’ she enquired sharply. Then, as the teasing sparkle went out of his eyes, ‘Don’t worry. I’m sure I’ll survive the indignity.’

‘Having seen your indignity for myself, I can assure you that tomorrow’s paper will be a sell-out,’ he replied. She was still struggling with a response to that when he added, ‘And if they can tear their eyes away from all that lace, the kitten’s owners might recognise their stray.’

‘One can live in hopes,’ she replied stiffly.

She shook her head, then, realising that, no matter how much she wanted to run and hide, she couldn’t ignore the fact that because of her he was not only bloody but his hand-stitched suit was covered in mud.

‘I suppose you’d better come back to the house and get cleaned up,’ she said.

‘If that’s an offer to hose me down in the yard, I’ll pass.’

For a moment their eyes met as they both remembered that hideous moment when he’d come to the house with a bunch of red roses that must have cost him a fortune and her grandfather had turned a garden hose on him, soaking him to the skin.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ she said, her insides curling up with embarrassment, killing stone dead the little heart-lift as he’d slipped so easily into teasing her the way he’d done when they were friends.

She picked up her shoes, her bag, reassembling her armour. But she wasn’t able to look him in the eye as she added distantly, ‘Robbie will take care of you in the kitchen.’

‘The kitchen? Well, that will be further than I’ve ever got before. But actually it was you I was coming to see.’

She balanced her belongings, then, with studied carelessness, as if she had only then registered what he’d said, ‘See?’ she asked, doing her best to ignore the way her heart rate had suddenly picked up. ‘Why on earth would you be coming to see me?’

He didn’t answer but instead used his toe to release the brake on a baby buggy that was standing a few feet away on the path. The buggy that she had assumed belonged to a woman, bundled up in a thick coat and headscarf, who’d been holding onto the handle, crooning to the baby.

Chapter Two

‘ADAM? What are you doing?’

‘Interesting question. Mouse, meet Nancie.’

‘Nancy?’

‘With an i and an e. Spelling never was Saffy’s strong point.’

Saffy Wavell’s strong points had been so striking she’d never given a fig for spelling or anything much else. Long raven-black hair, a figure that appeared to be both ethereal and sensual, she’d been a boy magnet since she hit puberty. And in trouble ever since. But a baby...

‘She’s Saffy’s baby? That’s wonderful news.’ She began to smile. ‘I’m so happy for her.’ The sleeping baby was nestled beneath a pink lace-bedecked comforter. ‘She’s beautiful.’

‘Is she?’

He leaned forward for a closer look, as if it hadn’t occurred to him, but May stopped, struck by what he’d just done.

‘You just left her,’ she said, a chill rippling through her. ‘She’s Saffy’s precious baby and you just abandoned her on the footpath to come and gawp at me? What on earth were you thinking, Adam?’

He looked back then, frowning; he stopped too, clearly catching from her tone that a grin would be a mistake.

‘I was thinking that you were in trouble and needed a hand.’

‘Idiot!’ For a moment there she’d been swept away by the sight of a powerful man taking care of a tiny infant. ‘I’m not a child. I could have managed.’

‘Well, thanks—’

‘Don’t go getting all offended on me, Adam Wavell,’ she snapped, cutting him off. ‘While you were doing your Galahad act, anyone could have walked off with her.’

‘What?’ Then, realising what she was saying, he let go of the handle, rubbed his hands over his face, muttered something under his breath. ‘You’re right. I am an idiot. I didn’t think.’ Then, looking at the baby, ‘I’m way out of my depth here.’

‘Really? So let me guess,’ May said, less than amused; he was overdoing it with the ‘idiot’. ‘Your reason for dropping in for the first time in years wouldn’t have anything to do with your sudden need for a babysitter?’

‘Thanks, May. Saffy said you’d help.’

‘She said that?’ She looked at the baby. All pink and cute and helpless. No! She would not be manipulated! She was in no position to take on anyone else’s problems right now. She had more than enough of her own. ‘I was stating the obvious, not offering my services,’ she said as he began to walk on as if it was a done deal. ‘Where is Saffy?’

‘She’s away,’ he said. ‘Taking a break. She’s left Nancie in my care.’

‘Good luck with that,’ she said. ‘But it’s no use coming to me for help. I know absolutely nothing about babies.’

‘You’ve already proved you know more than me. Besides, you’re a woman.’ Clearly he wasn’t taking her refusal seriously, which was some nerve considering he hadn’t spoken to her unless forced to in the last ten years. ‘I thought it came hard-wired with the X chromosome?’

‘That is an outrageous thing to say,’ she declared, ignoring the way her arms were aching to pick up the baby, hold her, tell her that she wouldn’t allow anything bad to happen to her. Ever. Just as she’d once told her mother.

She already had the kitten. In all probability, that was all she’d ever have. Ten years from now, she’d be the desperate woman peering into other people’s prams...

‘Is it?’ he asked, all innocence.

‘You know it is.’

‘Maybe if you thought of Nancie as one of those helpless creatures you were always taking in when you were a kid it would help?’ He touched a finger to the kitten’s orange head, suggesting that nothing had changed. ‘They always seemed to thrive.’

‘Nancie,’ she said, ignoring what she assumed he thought was flattery, ‘is not an injured bird, stray dog or frightened kitten.’

‘The principle is the same. Keep them warm, dry and fed.’

‘Well, there you are,’ she said. ‘You know all the moves. You don’t need me.’

‘On the contrary. I’ve got a company to run. I’m flying to South America tomorrow—’

‘South America?’

‘Venezuela first, then on to Brazil and finally Samindera. Unless you read the financial pages, you would have missed the story. I doubt it made the social pages,’ he said.

‘Samindera,’ she repeated with a little jolt of concern. ‘Isn’t that the place where they have all the coups?’

‘But grow some of the finest coffee in the world.’ One corner of his mouth lifted into a sardonic smile that, unlike the rest of him, hadn’t changed one bit.

‘Well, that’s impressive,’ she said, trying not to remember how it had felt against her own trembling lips. The heady rush as a repressed desire found an urgent response... ‘But you’re not the only one with a business to run.’ Hers might be little more than a cottage industry, nothing like his international money generator that had turned him from zero to a Maybridge hero, but it meant a great deal to her. Not that she’d have it for much longer.

Forget Adam, his baby niece, she had to get home, tell Robbie the bad news, start making plans. Somehow build a life from nothing.

Just as Adam had done...

‘I’ve got a world of trouble without adding a baby to the mix,’ she said, not wanting to think about Adam. Then, before he could ask her what kind of trouble, ‘I thought Saffy was living in Paris. Working as a model? The last I heard from her, she was doing really well.’

‘She kept in touch with you?’ Then, before she could answer, ‘Why are you walking barefoot, May?’

She stared at him, aware that he’d said something he regretted, had deliberately changed the subject, then, as he met her gaze, challenging her to go there, she looked down at her torn tights, mud soaked skirt, dirty legs and feet.

‘My feet are muddy. I’ve already ruined my good black suit...’ the one she’d be needing for job interviews, assuming anyone was that interested in someone who hadn’t been to university, had no qualifications ‘...I’m not about to spoil a decent pair of shoes, too.’

As she stepped on a tiny stone and winced, he took her by the arm, easing her off the path and she froze.

‘The grass will be softer to walk on,’ he said, immediately releasing her, but not before a betraying shiver of gooseflesh raced through her.

Assuming that she was cold, he removed his jacket, placed it around her shoulders. It swallowed her up, wrapping her in the warmth from his body.

‘I’m covered in mud,’ she protested, using her free hand to try and shake it off. Wincing again as a pain shot through her elbow. ‘It’ll get all over the lining.’

He stopped her, easing the jacket back onto her shoulder, then holding it in place around her. ‘You’re cold,’ he said, looking down at her, ‘and I don’t think this suit will be going anywhere until it’s been cleaned, do you?’

Avoiding his eyes, she glanced down at his expensively tailored trousers, but it wasn’t the mud that made her breath catch in her throat. He’d always been tall but now the rest of him had caught up and those long legs, narrow hips were designed to make a woman swoon.

‘No!’ she said, making a move so that he was forced to turn away. ‘You’d better send me the cleaning bill.’

‘It’s your time I need, May. Your help. Not your money.’

He needed her. Words which, as a teenager, she’d lived to hear. Words that, when he shouted them for all the world to hear, had broken her heart.

‘It’s impossible right now.’

‘I heard about your grandfather,’ he said, apparently assuming it was grief that made her so disobliging.

‘Really?’ she said.

‘It said in the *Post* that the funeral was private.’

‘It was.’ She couldn’t have borne the great and good making a show of it. And why would Adam have come to pray over the remains of a man who’d treated him like something unpleasant he’d stepped in? ‘But there’s going to be a memorial service. He was generous with his legacies and I imagine the charities he supported are hoping that a showy civic send-off will encourage new donors to open their wallets. I’m sure you’ll get an invitation to that.’ Before he could answer, she shook her head. ‘I’m sorry. That was a horrible thing to say.’

But few had done more than pay duty visits after a massive stroke had left her grandpa partially paralysed, confused, with great holes in his memory. Not that he would have wanted them to see him that way.

‘He hated being helpless, Adam. Not being able to remember.’

‘He was a formidable man. You must miss him.’

‘I lost him a long time ago.’ Long before his memory had gone.

‘So, what happens now?’ Adam asked, after a moment of silence during which they’d both remembered the man they knew. ‘Will you sell the house? It needs work, I imagine, but the location would make it ideal for company offices.’

‘No!’ Her response was instinctive. She knew it was too close to the town, didn’t have enough land these days to attract a private buyer with that kind of money to spend, but the thought of her home being turned into some company’s fancy corporate headquarters—or, more likely, government offices—was too much to bear.

‘Maybe a hotel or a nursing home,’ he said, apparently understanding her reaction and attempting to soften the blow. ‘You’d get a good price for it.’

‘No doubt, but I won’t be selling.’

‘No? Are you booked solid into the foreseeable future with your painters, garden designers and flower arrangers?’

She glanced at him, surprised that he knew about the one-day and residential special interest courses she ran in the converted stable block.

‘Your programme flyer is on the staff notice-board at the office.’

‘Oh.’ She’d walked around the town one Sunday stuffing them through letterboxes. She’d hesitated about leaving one in his letterbox, but had decided that the likelihood of the Chairman being bothered with such ephemera was nil. ‘Thanks.’

‘Nothing to do with me,’ he said. ‘That’s the office manager’s responsibility. But one of the receptionists was raving about a garden design course she’d been on.’

‘Well, great.’ There it was, that problem with her breathing again. ‘It is very popular, although they’re all pretty solidly booked. I’ve got a full house at the moment for a two-day Christmas workshop.’

Best to put off telling Robbie the bad news until after tea, when they’d all gone home, she thought. They wouldn’t be able to talk until then, anyway.

‘You don’t sound particularly happy about that,’ Adam said. ‘Being booked solid.’

‘No.’ She shrugged. Then, aware that he was looking at her, waiting for an explanation, ‘I’m going to have to spend the entire weekend on the telephone cancelling next year’s programme.’

Letting down all those wonderful lecturers who ran the classes, many of whom had become close friends. Letting down the people who’d booked, many of them regulars who looked forward to a little break away from home in the company of like-minded people.

And then there were the standing orders for her own little ‘Coleridge House’ cottage industry. The homemade fudge and toffee. The honey.

‘Cancel the courses?’ Adam was frowning. ‘Are you saying that your grandfather didn’t leave you the house?’

The breeze was much colder coming off the lake and May really was shivering now.

‘Yes. I mean, no...He left it to me, but there are conditions involved.’

Conditions her grandfather had known about but had never thought worth mentioning before the stroke had robbed him of so much of his memory.

But why would he? There had been plenty of time back then. And he’d done a major matchmaking job with Michael Linton, a little older, steady as a rock and looking for a well brought up, old-fashioned girl to run his house, provide him with an heir and a spare or two. The kind of man her mother had been supposed to marry.

‘What kind of conditions?’ Adam asked.

‘Ones that I don’t meet,’ she said abruptly, as keen to change the subject as he had been a few moments earlier.

The morning had been shocking enough without sharing the humiliating entailment that Freddie Jennings had missed when he’d read her grandfather’s very straightforward will after the funeral. The one Grandpa had made after her mother died which, after generous bequests to his favourite charities, bequeathed everything else he owned to his only living relative, his then infant granddaughter, Mary Louise Coleridge.

Thankfully, they’d reached the small gate that led directly from the garden of her family home into the park and May was able to avoid explanations as, hanging onto the kitten, she fumbled awkwardly in her handbag for her key.

But her hands were shaking as the shock of the morning swept over her and she dropped it. Without a word, Adam picked it up, unlocked the gate, then, taking her arm to steady her, he pushed the buggy up through the garden towards the rear of the house.

She stopped in the mud room and filled a saucer with milk from the fridge kept for animal food. The kitten trampled in it, lapping greedily, while she lined a cardboard box with an old fleece she used for gardening.

Only when she’d tucked it up safely in the warm was she able to focus on her own mess.

Her jacket had an ominous wet patch and her skirt was plastered with mud. It was her best black suit and maybe the dry cleaners could do something with it, although right at the moment she didn’t want to see it ever again.

As she unzipped the skirt, let it drop to the floor and kicked it in the corner, Adam cleared his throat, reminding her that he was there. As if every cell in her body wasn’t vibrating with the knowledge.

‘Robbie will kill me if I track dirt through the house,’ she said, peeling off the shredded tights and running a towel under the tap to rub the mud off her feet. Then, as he kicked off his mud spattered shoes and slipped the buckle on his belt, ‘What are you doing?’

‘I’ve been on the wrong side of Hatty Robson,’ he replied. ‘If she’s coming at me with antiseptic, I want her in a good mood.’

May swallowed hard and, keeping her eyes firmly focused on Nancie, followed him into the warmth of the kitchen with the buggy, leaving him to hang his folded trousers over the Aga, only looking up at a burst of laughter from the garden.

It was the Christmas Workshop crossing the courtyard, heading towards the house for their mid-morning break.

‘Flapjacks!’

‘What?’

She turned and blinked at the sight of Adam in his shirt tails and socks. ‘We’re about to have company,’ she said, unscrambling her brain and, grabbing the first aid box from beneath the sink, she said, ‘Come on!’ She didn’t stop to see if he was following, but beat a hasty retreat through the inner hall and up the back stairs. ‘Bring Nancie!’

Adam, who had picked up the buggy, baby, bag and all to follow, found he had to take a moment to catch his breath when he reached the top.

‘Are you all right?’ she asked.

‘The buggy is heavier than it looks. Do you want to tell me what that was all about?’

‘While the appearance of Adam Wavell, minus trousers, in my kitchen would undoubtedly have been the highlight of the week for my Christmas Workshop ladies...’ and done her reputation a power of good ‘...I could not absolutely guarantee their discretion.’

‘The highlight?’ he asked, kinking up his eyebrow in a well-remembered arc.

‘The most excitement I can usually offer is a new cookie recipe. While it’s unlikely any of them will call the news desk at *Celebrity*, you can be sure they’d tell all their friends,’ she said, ‘and sooner or later someone would be bound to realise that you plus a baby makes it a story with the potential to earn them a bob or two.’ Which wiped the suspicion of a grin from his face.

‘So what do we do now?’ he asked. ‘Hide at the top of the stairs until they’ve gone?’

‘No need for that,’ she said, opening a door that revealed a wide L-shaped landing. ‘Come on, I’ll clean up your hand while you pray to high heaven that Nancie doesn’t wake up and cry.’

Nancie, right on cue, opened incredibly dark eyes and, even before she gave a little whimper, was immediately the centre of attention.

May shoved the first aid box into Adam’s hand.

‘Shh-sh-shush, little one,’ she said as she lifted her out of the buggy, leaving Adam to follow her to the room that had once been her nursery.

When she’d got too old for a nanny, she’d moved into the empty nanny’s suite, which had its own bathroom and tiny kitchenette, and had turned the nursery into what she’d been careful to describe as a sitting room rather than a study, using a table rather than a desk for her school projects.

Her grandfather had discouraged her from thinking about university—going off and ‘getting her head filled with a lot of nonsense’ was what he’d actually said. Not that it had been a possibility once she’d dropped out of school even if she’d wanted to. She hadn’t been blessed with her mother’s brain and school had been bad enough. Why would anyone voluntarily lengthen the misery?

When she’d begun to take over the running of the house, she’d used her grandmother’s elegant little desk in her sitting room, but her business needed a proper office and she’d since converted one of the old pantries, keeping this room as a place of refuge for when the house was filled with guests. When she needed to be on her own.

‘Shut the door,’ she said as Adam followed her in with the buggy. ‘Once they’re in the conservatory talking ten to the dozen over a cup of coffee, they won’t hear Nancie even if she screams her head off.’

For the moment the baby was nuzzling contently at her shoulder, although, even with her minimal experience, she suspected that wasn’t a situation that would last for long.

‘The bathroom’s through there. Wash off the mud and I’ll do the necessary with the antiseptic wipes so that you can get on your way.’

‘What about you?’

‘I can wait.’

‘No, you can’t. Heaven knows what’s lurking in that mud,’ he replied as, without so much as a by-your-leave, he took her free hand, led her through her bedroom and, after a glance around to gain his bearings, into the bathroom beyond. ‘Are your tetanus shots up to date?’ he asked, quashing any thought that his mind was on anything other than the practical.

‘Yes.’ She was the most organised woman in the entire world when it came to the details. It was a family trait. One more reason to believe that her grandfather hadn’t simply let things slide. That he’d made a deliberate choice to keep things as they were.

Had her mother known about the will? she wondered.

Been threatened with it?

‘Are yours?’ she asked.

‘I imagine so. I pay good money for a PA to deal with stuff like that,’ he said, running the taps, testing the water beneath his fingers.

‘Efficient, is she?’ May asked, imagining a tall, glamorous female in a designer suit and four-inch heels.

‘He. Is that too hot?’

She tested it with her fingertips. ‘No, it’s fine,’ she said, reaching for the soap. ‘Is that common? A male PA?’

‘I run an equal opportunities company. Jake was the best applicant for the job and yes, he is frighteningly efficient. I’m going to have to promote him to executive assistant if I want to keep him. Hold on,’ he said. ‘You can’t do that one-handed.’

She had anticipated him taking Nancie from her, but instead he unfastened his cuffs, rolled back his sleeves and, while she was still transfixed by his powerful wrists, he took the soap from her.

‘No!’ she said as she realised what he was about to do. He’d already worked the soap into a lather, however, and, hampered by the baby, she could do nothing as he stood behind her with his arms around her, took her scratched hand in his and began to wash it with extreme thoroughness. Finger by finger. Working his thumb gently across her palm where she’d grazed it when she’d fallen. Over her knuckles. Circling her wrist.

‘The last time anyone did this, I was no more than six years old,’ she protested in an attempt to keep herself from being seduced by the sensuous touch of long fingers, silky lather. The warmth of his body as he leaned into her back, his chin against her shoulder. His cheek against hers. The sensation of being not quite in control of any part of her body whenever he was within touching distance, her heartbeat amplified so that he, and everyone within twenty yards, must surely hear.

‘Six?’ he repeated, apparently oblivious to her confusion. ‘What happened? Did you fall off your pony?’

‘My bike. I never had a pony.’ She’d scraped her knee and had her face pressed against Robbie’s apron. She’d been baking and the kitchen had been filled with the scent of cinnamon, apples, pastry cooking as she’d cleaned her up, comforted her.

Today, it was the cool, slightly rough touch of Adam’s chin against her cheek but there was nothing safe or comforting about him. She associated him with leather, rain, her heartbeat raised with fear, excitement, a pitiful joy followed by excruciating embarrassment. Despair at the hopelessness of her dreams.

There had been no rain today, there was no leather, but the mingled scents of clean skin, warm linen, shampoo were uncompromisingly male and the intimacy of his touch was sending tiny shock waves through her body, disturbing her in ways unknown to that green and heartbroken teen.

Oblivious to the effect he was having on her, he took an antiseptic wipe from the first aid box and finished the job.

‘That’s better. Now let’s take a look at your arm.’

‘My arm?’

‘There’s blood on your sleeve.’

'Is there?' While she was craning to see the mingled mud and watery red mess that was never going to wash out whatever the detergent ads said, he had her shirt undone. No shaky-fingered fumbling with buttons this time. She was still trying to get her tongue, lips, teeth into line to protest when he eased it off her shoulder and down her arm with what could only be described as practised ease.

'Ouch. That looks painful.'

She was standing in nothing but her bra and pants and he was looking at her elbow? Okay, her underwear might be lacy but it was at the practical, hold 'em up, rather than push 'em up end of the market. But, even if she wasn't wearing the black lace, scarlet woman underwear, the kind of bra that stopped traffic and would make Adam Wavell's firm jaw drop, he could at least *notice* that she was practically naked.

In her dreams...Her nightmares...

His jaw was totally under control as he gave his full attention to her elbow.

'This might sting a bit...'

It should have stung, maybe it did, but she was feeling no pain as his thick dark hair slid over his forehead, every perfectly cut strand moving in sleek formation as he bent to work. Only a heat that began low her belly and spread like a slow fuse along her thighs, filling her breasts, her womb with an aching, painful need that brought a tiny moan to her lips.

'Does that hurt?' he asked, looking up, grey eyes creased in concern. 'Maybe you should go to Casualty, have an X-ray just to be on the safe side.'

'No,' she said quickly. 'It's fine. Really.'

It was a lie. It wasn't fine; it was humiliating, appalling to respond so mindlessly to a man who, when he saw you in public, put the maximum possible distance between you. To want him to stop looking at her scabby elbow and look at her. See her. Want her.

As if.

These days he was never short of some totally gorgeous girl to keep him warm at night. The kind who wore 'result' shoes and bad girl underwear.

She was more your wellington boots kind of woman. Good skin and teeth, reasonable if boringly brown eyes, but that was it. There was nothing about her that would catch the eye of a man who, these days, had everything.

'You're going to have a whopping bruise,' he said, looking up, catching her staring at him.

'I'll live.'

'This time. But maybe you should consider giving up climbing trees,' he said, pulling a towel down from the pile on the rack, taking her hand in his and patting it dry before working his way up her arm.

'I keep telling myself that,' she said. 'But you know how it is. There's some poor creature in trouble and you're the only one around. What can you do?'

'I'll give you my cell number...' He tore open another antiseptic wipe and took it over the graze on her elbow. Used a second one on his own hand. 'Next time,' he said, looking up with a smile that was like a blow in the solar plexus, 'call me.'

Oh, sure...

'I thought you said you were going to South America.'

'No problem. That's what I have a personal assistant for. You call me, I'll call Jake and he'll ride to your rescue.'

In exactly the same way that he was using her to take care of Nancie, she thought.

'Wouldn't it be easier to give me his number? Cut out the middle sidekick.'

'And miss out on having you shout at me?'

First the blow to the solar plexus, then a jab behind the knees and she was going down...

'That's all part of the fun,' he added.

Fun. Oh, right. She was forgetting. She was the clown...

'My legs are muddy. I really need to take a shower,' she added before he took it upon himself to wash them, too. More specifically, she needed to get some clothes on and get a grip. 'There's a kettle in the kitchenette if you want to make yourself a drink before you go.'

She didn't give him a chance to argue, but dumped Nancie in his arms and, closing her ears to the baby's outraged complaint, shut the door on him.

She couldn't lock it. The lock had broken years ago and she hadn't bothered to get it fixed. Why would she when she shared the house with her invalid grandfather and Robbie, neither of whom were ever going to surprise her in the shower?

Nor was Adam, she told herself as, discarding what little remained of her modesty, she dumped her filthy shirt in the wash basket, peeled off her underwear and stepped under the spray.

It should have been a cold shower, something to quench the fizz of heat bubbling through her veins.

Since it was obvious that even when she was ninety Adam Wavell would have the same effect on her, with or without his trousers, she decided to forgo the pain and turned up the temperature.

Chapter Three

ADAM took a long, slow breath as the bathroom door closed behind him.

The rage hadn't dimmed with time, but neither had the desire. Maybe it was all part of the same thing. He hadn't been good enough for her then and, despite his success, she'd never missed an opportunity to make it clear that he never would be.

But she wasn't immune. And, since a broken engagement, there had never been anyone else in her life. She hadn't gone to university, never had a job, missing out on the irresponsible years when most of their contemporaries were obsessed with clothes, clubbing, falling in and out of love.

Instead, she'd stayed at home to run Coleridge House, exactly like some Edwardian miss, marking time until she was plucked off the shelf, at which point she would do pretty much the same thing for her husband. And, exactly like a good Edwardian girl, she'd abandoned a perfect-fit marriage without hesitation to take on the job of caring for her grandfather after his stroke. Old-fashioned. A century out of her time.

According to the receptionist who'd been raving about the garden design course, what May Coleridge needed was someone to take her in hand, help her lose a bit of weight and get a life before she spread into a prematurely middle-aged spinsterhood, with only her strays to keep her warm at night.

Clearly his receptionist had never seen her strip off her skirt and tights or she'd have realised that there was nothing middle-aged about her thighs, shapely calves or a pair of the prettiest ankles he'd ever had the pleasure of following up a flight of stairs.

But then he already knew all that.

Had been the first boy to ever see those lush curves, the kind that had gone out of fashion half a century ago, back before the days of Twiggy and the Swinging Sixties.

But when he'd unbuttoned her shirt—the alternative had been relieving her of Nancie and he wasn't about to do that; he'd wanted her to feel the baby clinging to her, needing her—he'd discovered that his memory had served him poorly as he was confronted with a cleavage that required no assistance from either silicon or a well engineered bra. It was the real thing. Full, firm, ripe, the genuine peaches and cream experience—the kind of peaches that would fill a man's hand, skin as smooth and white as double cream—and his only thought had been how wrong his receptionist was about May.

She didn't need to lose weight.

Not one gram.

May would happily have stayed under the shower until the warm water had washed away the entire ghastly morning. Since that was beyond the power of mere water, she contented herself with a squirt of lemon-scented shower gel and a quick sluice down to remove all traces of mud before wrapping herself in a towel.

But while, on the surface, her skin might be warmer, she was still shivering.

Shock would do that, even without the added problem of the Adam Wavell effect.

Breathlessness. A touch of dizziness whenever she saw him. Something she should have grown out of with her puppy fat. But the puppy fat had proved as stubbornly resistant as her pathetic crush on a boy who'd been so far out of her reach that he might as well have been in outer space. To be needed by him had once been the most secret desire shared only with her diary.

Be careful what you wish for, had been one of Robbie's warnings from the time she was a little girl and she'd been right in that, as in everything.

Adam needed her now. 'But only to take care of Saffy's baby,' she muttered, ramming home the point as she towelled herself dry before wrapping herself from head to toe in a towelling robe. She'd exposed enough flesh for one day.

She needn't have worried. Adam had taken Nancie through to the sitting room and closed the door behind him. Clearly he'd seen more than enough of her flesh for one day.

Ignoring the lustrous dark autumn gold cord skirt she'd bought ages ago in a sale and never worn, she pulled on the scruffiest pair of jogging pants and sweatshirt that she owned. There was no point in trying to compete with the girls he dated these days. Lean, glossy thoroughbreds.

She had more in common with a Shetland pony. Small, overweight, a shaggy-maned clown.

What was truly pathetic was that, despite knowing all that, if circumstances had permitted, May knew she would have still succumbed to his smile. Taken care of Saffy's adorable baby, grateful to have the chance to be that close to him, if only for a week or two while her mother was doing what came naturally. Being bad by most people's standards, but actually having a life.

Nancie began to grizzle into his shoulder and Adam instinctively began to move, shushing her as he walked around May's private sitting room, scarcely able to believe it had been so easy to breach the citadel.

He examined the pictures on her walls. Her books. Picked up a small leather-bound volume lying on a small table, as if she liked to keep it close to hand.

Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. As he replaced it, something fluttered from between the pages. A rose petal that had been pressed between them. As he bent to pick it up, it crumbled to red dust between his fingers and for a moment he remembered a bunch of red roses that, in the middle of winter, had cost him a fortune. Every penny of which had to be earned labouring in the market before school.

He moved on to a group of silver-framed photographs. Her grandparents were there. Her mother on the day she'd graduated. He picked up one of May, five or six years old, holding a litter of kittens and, despite the nightmare morning he was having, the memories that being here had brought back into the sharpest focus, he found himself smiling.

She might have turned icy on him but she was still prepared to risk her neck for a kitten. And any pathetic creature in trouble would have got the same response, whether it was a drowning bird on the school roof—and they'd both been given the maximum punishment short of suspension for that little escapade—or a kitten up a tree.

Not that she was such an unlikely champion of the pitiful.

She'd been one of those short, overweight kids who were never going to be one of the cool group in her year at school. And the rest of them had been too afraid of being seen to be sucking up to the girl from the big house to make friends with her.

She really should have been at some expensive private school with her peers instead of being tossed into the melting pot of the local comprehensive. One of those schools where they wore expensive uniforms as if they were designer clothes. Spoke like princesses.

It wasn't as if her family couldn't afford it. But poor little May Coleridge's brilliant mother—having had the benefit of everything her birth could bestow—had turned her back on her class and become a feminist firebrand who'd publicly deplored all such elitism and died of a fever after giving birth in some desperately inadequate hospital in the Third World with no father in evidence.

If her mother had lived, he thought, May might well have launched a counter-rebellion, demanding her right to a privileged education if only to declare her own independence of spirit; but how could she rebel against someone who'd died giving her life?

Like her mother, though, she'd held on to who she was, refusing to give an inch to peer pressure to slur the perfect vowels, drop the crisp consonants, hitch up her skirt and use her school tie as a belt. To seek anonymity in the conformity of the group. Because that would have been a betrayal, too. Of who she was.

It was what had first drawn him to her. His response to being different had been to keep his head down, hoping to avoid trouble and he'd admired, envied her quiet, obstinate courage. Her act first, think later response to any situation.

Pretty much what had got them into so much trouble in the first place.

Nancie, deciding that she required something a little more tangible than a ‘sh-shush’ and a jiggle, opened her tiny mouth to let out an amazingly loud wail. He replaced the photograph. Called May.

The water had stopped running a while ago and, when there was no reply, he tapped on the bedroom door.

‘Help!’

There was no response.

‘May?’ He opened the door a crack and then, since there wasn’t a howl of outrage, he pushed it wide.

The room, a snowy indulgence of pure femininity, had been something of a shock. For some reason he’d imagined that the walls of her bedroom would be plastered in posters of endangered animals. But the only picture was a watercolour of Coleridge House painted when it was still surrounded by acres of parkland. A reminder of who she was?

There should have been a sense of triumph at having made it this far into her inner sanctum. But looking at that picture made him feel like a trespasser.

May pushed open the door to her grandfather’s room.

She still thought of it as his room even though he’d long ago moved downstairs to the room she’d converted for him, determined that he should be as comfortable as possible. Die with dignity in his own home.

‘May?’

She jumped at the sound of Adam’s voice.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you, but Nancie is getting fractious.’

‘Maybe she needs changing. Or feeding.’ His only response was a helpless shrug. ‘Both happen on a regular basis, I understand,’ she said, turning to the wardrobe, hunting down one of her grandfather’s silk dressing gowns, holding it out to him. ‘You’d better put this on before you go and fetch your trousers.’ Then, as he took it from her, she realised her mistake. He couldn’t put it on while he was holding the baby.

Nancie came into her arms like a perfect fit. A soft, warm, gorgeous bundle of cuddle nestling against her shoulder. A slightly damp bundle of cuddle.

‘Changing,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he said, tying the belt around his waist and looking more gorgeous than any man wearing a dressing gown that was too narrow across the shoulders, too big around the waist and too short by a country mile had any right to look.

‘You knew!’

‘It isn’t rocket science,’ he said, looking around him. ‘This was your grandfather’s room.’

It wasn’t a question and she didn’t bother to answer. She could have, probably should have, used the master bedroom to increase the numbers for the arts and crafts weekends she hosted, but hadn’t been able to bring herself to do that. While he was alive, it was his room and it still looked as if he’d just left it to go for a stroll in the park before dropping in at the Crown for lunch with old friends.

The centuries-old furniture gleamed. There were fresh sheets on the bed, his favourite Welsh quilt turned back as if ready for him. And a late rose that Robbie had placed on the dressing table glowed in the thin sunshine.

‘Impressive.’

‘As you said, Adam, he was an impressive man,’ she said, turning abruptly and, leaving him to follow or not as he chose, returned to her room.

He followed.

‘You’re going to have to learn how to do this,’ she warned as she fetched a clean towel from her bathroom and handed it to him.

He opened it without a word, lay it over the bed cover and May placed Nancie on it. She immediately began to whimper.

‘Watch her,’ she said, struggling against the instinct to pick her up again, comfort her. ‘I’ll get her bag.’

Ignoring his, ‘Yes, ma’am,’ which was on a par with the ironic ‘Mouse’, she unhooked Nancie’s bag from the buggy, opened it, found a little pink drawstring bag that contained a supply of disposable nappies and held one out to him.

‘Me?’ He looked at the nappy, the baby and then at her. ‘You’re not kidding, are you?’ She continued to hold out the nappy and he took it without further comment. ‘Okay. Talk me through it.’

‘What makes you think I know anything about changing a baby? And if you say that I’m a woman, you are on your own.’

Adam, on the point of saying exactly that, reconsidered. He’d thought that getting through the door would be the problem but that had been the easy part. Obviously, he was asking a lot but, considering Saffy’s confidence and her own inability to resist something helpless, he was meeting a lot more resistance from May than he’d anticipated.

‘You really know nothing about babies?’

‘Look around you, Adam. The last baby to occupy this nursery was me.’

‘This was your nursery?’ he said, taking in the lace-draped bed, the pale blue carpet, the lace and velvet draped window where she’d stood and watched his humiliation at the hands of her ‘impressive’ grandfather.

‘Actually, this was the nanny’s room,’ she said. ‘The nursery was out there.’

‘Lucky nanny.’ The room, with its bathroom, was almost as big as the flat he’d grown up in.

May saw the casual contempt with which he surveyed the room but didn’t bother to explain that her grandfather had had it decorated for her when she was fifteen. That it reflected the romantic teenager she’d been rather than the down-to-earth woman she’d become.

‘As I was saying,’ she said, doing her best to hold onto reality, ignore the fact that Adam Wavell was standing in her bedroom, ‘the last baby to occupy this nursery was me and only children of only children don’t have nieces and nephews to practise on.’ Then, having given him a moment for the reality of her ignorance to sink in, she said, ‘I believe you have to start with the poppers of her sleep suit.’

‘Right,’ he said, looking at the nappy, then at the infant and she could almost see the cogs in his brain turning as he decided on a change of plan. That his best move would be to demonstrate his incompetence and wait for her to take over.

He set about unfastening the poppers but Nancie, thinking it was a game, kicked and wriggled and flung her legs up in the air. Maybe she’d maligned him. Instead of getting flustered, he laughed, as if suddenly realising that she wasn’t just an annoying encumbrance but a tiny person.

‘Come on, Nancie,’ he begged. ‘I’m a man. This is new to me. Give me a break.’

Maybe it was the sound of his voice, but she lay still, watching him with her big dark eyes, her little forehead furrowed in concentration as if she was trying to work out who he was.

And, while his hands seemed far too big for the delicate task of removing the little pink sleep suit, if it had been his intention to look clumsy and incompetent, he was failing miserably.

The poppers were dealt with, the nappy removed in moments and his reward was a great big smile.

‘Thanks, gorgeous,’ he said softly. And then leaned down and kissed her dark curls.

The baby grabbed a handful of his hair and, as she watched the two of them looking at one another, May saw the exact moment when Adam Wavell fell in love with his baby niece. Saw how he’d be with his own child.

Swallowing down a lump the size of her fist, she said, ‘I’ll take that, shall I?’ And, relieving him of the nappy, she used it as an excuse to retreat to the bathroom to dispose of it in the pedal bin. Taking her time over washing her hands.

‘Do I need to use cream or powder or something?’ he called after her.

'I've no idea,' she said, gripping the edge of the basin.

'Babies should come with a handbook. Have you got a computer up here?'

'A what?'

'I could look it up on the web.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake!' She abandoned the safety of the bathroom and joined him beside the bed. 'She's perfectly dry,' she said, after running her palm over the softest little bottom imaginable. 'Just put on the nappy and...and get yourself a nanny, Adam.'

'Easier said than done.'

'It's not difficult. I can give you the number of a reliable agency.'

'Really? And why would you have their number?'

'The Garland Agency provide domestic and nursing staff, too. I needed help. The last few months...'

'I'm sorry. I didn't think.' He turned away, opened the nappy, examined it to see how it worked. 'However, there are a couple of problems with the nanny scenario. My apartment is an open-plan loft. There's nowhere to put either a baby or a nanny.'

'What's the other problem?' He was concentrating on fastening the nappy and didn't answer. 'You said there were a couple of things.' He shook his head and, suddenly suspicious, she said, 'When was the last time you actually saw Saffy?'

'I've been busy,' he said, finally straightening. 'And she's been evasive,' he added. 'I bought a lease on a flat for her in Paris, but I've just learned that she's moved out, presumably to move in with Nancie's father. She's sublet it and has been pocketing the rent for months.'

'You're not a regular visitor, then?'

'You know what she's like, May. I didn't even know she was pregnant.'

'And the baby's father? Who is he?'

'His name is Michel. That's all I know.'

'Poor Saffy,' she said. And there was no doubt that she was pitying her her family.

'She could have come to me,' he protested. 'Picked up the phone.'

'And you'd have done what? Sent her a cheque?'

'It's what she usually wants. You don't think she ever calls to find out how I am, do you?'

'You are strong. She isn't. How was she when she left the baby with you?'

'I'd better wash my hands,' he said.

Without thinking, she put out her hand and grabbed his arm to stop him. 'What aren't you telling me, Adam?'

He didn't answer, but took a folded sheet of paper from his shirt pocket and gave it to her before retreating to the bathroom.

It looked as if it had been screwed up and tossed into a bin, then rescued as an afterthought.

She smoothed it out. Read it.

'Saffy's on the run from her baby's father?' she asked, looking up as he returned. 'Where did she leave the baby?'

'In my office. I found her there when I left a meeting to fetch some papers. Saffy had managed to slip in and out without anyone seeing her. She hasn't lost the skills she learned as a juvenile shoplifter.'

'She must have been absolutely desperate.'

'Maybe she is,' he said. 'But not nearly as desperate as I am right at this minute. I know you haven't got the time of day for me, but she said you'd help her.'

'I would,' she protested. 'Of course I would...'

'But?'

'Where's your mother?' she asked.

'She relocated to Spain after my father died.'

'Moving everyone out of town, Adam? Out of sight, out of mind?'

A tightening around his mouth suggested that her barb had found its mark. And it was unfair. He'd turned his life around, risen above the nightmare of his family. Saffy hadn't had his strength, but she still deserved better from him than a remittance life in a foreign country. All the bad things she'd done had been a cry for the attention, love she craved.

'She won't have gone far.'

'That's not the impression she gives in her note.'

'She'll want to know the baby is safe.' Then, turning on him, 'What about you?'

'Me?'

'Who else?' she demanded fiercely because Adam was too close, because her arms were aching to pick up his precious niece. She busied herself instead, fastening Nancie into her suit. 'Can't you take paternity leave or something?'

'I'm not the baby's father.'

'Time off, then. You do take holidays?'

'When I can't avoid it.' He shook his head. 'I told you. I'm leaving for South America tomorrow.'

'Can't you put it off?'

'It's not just a commercial trip, May. There are politics involved. Government agencies. I'm signing fair trade contracts with cooperatives. I've got a meeting with the President of Samindera that it's taken months to set up.'

'So the answer is no.'

'The answer is no. It's you,' he said, 'or I'm in trouble.'

'In that case you're in trouble.' She picked up the baby and handed her to him, as clear a statement as she could make. 'I'd help Saffy in a heartbeat if I could but—'

'But you wouldn't cross the road to help me.'

'No!'

'Just cross the road to avoid speaking to me. Would I have got anywhere at all if you hadn't been stuck up a tree? Unable to escape?'

That was so unfair! He had no idea. No clue about all the things she'd done for him and it was on the tip of her tongue to say so.

'I'm sorry. You must think I've got some kind of nerve even asking you.'

'No...Of course I'd help you if I could. But I've got a few problems of my own.'

'Tell me,' he said, lifting his spare hand to wipe away the stupid tear that had leaked despite her determination not to break down, not to cry, his fingers cool against her hot cheek. 'Tell me about the world of trouble you're in.'

'I didn't think you'd heard.'

'I heard but you asked where Saffy was... ' He shook his head. 'I'm sorry, May, I've been banging on about my own problems instead of listening to yours.' His hand opened to curve gently around her cheek. 'It was something about the house. Tell me. Maybe I can help.'

She shook her head, struggling with the temptation to lean into his touch, to throw herself into his arms, spill out the whole sorry story. But there was no easy comfort.

All she had left was her dignity and she tore herself away, took a step back, then turned away to look out of the window.

'Not this time, Adam,' she said, her voice as crisp as new snow. 'This isn't anything as simple as getting stuck up a tree. The workshop ladies have returned to the stables. It's safe for you to leave now.'

She'd been sure that would be enough to drive him away, but he'd followed her. She could feel the warmth of his body at her shoulder.

'I'm pretty good at complicated, too,' he said, his voice as gentle as the caress of his breath against her hair.

'From what I've read, you've had a lot of practice,' she said, digging her nails into her hands. 'I'm sure you mean well, Adam, but there's nothing you can do.'

‘Try me,’ he challenged.

‘Okay.’ She swung around to face him. ‘If you’ve got a job going for someone who can provide food and accommodation for a dozen or so people on a regular basis, run a production line for homemade toffee, is a dab hand with hospital corners, can milk a goat, keep bees and knows how to tame a temperamental lawnmower, that would be a start,’ she said in a rush.

‘You need a job?’ Adam replied, brows kinked up in a confident smile. As if he could make the world right for her by lunch time and still have time to add another company or two to his portfolio. ‘Nothing could be simpler. I need a baby minder. I’ll pay top rates if you can start right now.’

‘The one job for which I have no experience, no qualifications,’ she replied. ‘And, more to the point, no licence.’

‘Licence?’

‘I’m not related to Nancie. Without a childminding licence, it would be illegal.’

‘Who would know?’ he asked, without missing a beat.

‘You’re suggesting I don’t declare the income to the taxman? Or that the presence of a baby would go unnoticed?’ She shook her head. ‘People are in and out of here all the time and it would be around the coffee morning circuit faster than greased lightning. Someone from Social Services would be on the doorstep before I could say “knife”.’ She shrugged. ‘Of course, most of the old tabbies would assume Nancie was mine. “*Just* like her mother...” she said, using the disapproving tone she’d heard a hundred times. Although, until now, not in reference to her own behaviour.

‘You’re right,’ he said, conceding without another word. ‘Obviously your reputation is far too precious a commodity to be put at risk.’

‘I didn’t say that,’ she protested.

‘Forget it, May. I should have known better.’ He shrugged. ‘Actually, I did know better but I thought you and Saffy had some kind of a bond. But it doesn’t matter. I’ll call the authorities. I have no doubt that Nancie’s father has reported her missing by now and it’s probably for the best to leave it to the court to—’

‘You can’t do that!’ she protested. ‘Saffy is relying on you to get her out of this mess.’

‘Is she? Read her letter again, May.’

Chapter Four

THERE was the longest pause while he allowed that to sink in. Then he said, 'Is there any chance of that coffee you promised me?'

May started. 'What? Oh, yes, I'm sorry. It's instant; will that do?'

'Anything.'

The tiny kitchenette was in little more than a cupboard, but she had everything to hand and in a few minutes she returned with a couple of mugs.

'I'll get a blanket and you can put Nancie on the floor.'

'Can you do that?'

She didn't answer, just fetched a blanket from the linen cupboard, pausing on the landing to listen. The silence confirmed that the workshop coffee break was over but the thought of going downstairs, facing Robbie with her unlikely visitor, was too daunting.

Back in her sitting room, she laid the folded blanket on the floor, took Nancie from Adam and put her down on it. Then she went and fetched the teddy she'd spotted in her bag. Putting off for as long as possible the moment when she would have to tell Adam the truth.

'I know you just think I'm trying to get you to take this on, dig me out of a hole,' Adam said when she finally returned. Picking up her coffee, clutching it in front of her like a shield, she sat beside him on the sofa. 'But you really are a natural.'

'I think you're just trying to avoid putting off telling me the whole truth.'

'All I know is what's in Saffy's letter.' He dragged long fingers through his dark hair, looking for once less than the assured man, but more like the boy she remembered. 'I've called some of her friends but if she's confided in them, then aren't telling.'

'What about her agent?' she prompted.

'It seems that they parted company months ago. Her modelling career was yet another fantasy, it seems.'

May picked up the letter and read it again. 'She doesn't sound exactly rational. She could be suffering from post-natal depression. Or maybe having Nancie has triggered a bipolar episode. She always did swing between highs and lows.'

'And if she was? Would you help then?' He shook his head before she could answer. 'I'm sorry. That was unfair, but what I need right now, May, is someone I can trust. Someone who knows her. Who won't judge. Or run to the press with this.'

'The press?'

'Something like this would damage me.'

'You! Is that all you're worried about?' she demanded, absolutely furious with him. 'Yourself. Not Saffy? Not Nancie?'

Nancie, startled, threw out a hand, lost her teddy and began to cry. Glad of the chance to put some distance between them, May scrambled to her knees to rescue the toy, give it back to the baby. Stayed with her on the floor to play with her.

'The Garland Agency has a branch in Melchester,' she said. 'I suggest you call them. They've a world class reputation and I have no doubt that discretion comes with the price tag.'

'As I said. There are a number of problems with that scenario. Apart from the fact that my apartment is completely unsuitable. You've read Saffy's letter. They'll want details. They'll want to know where her mother is. Who she is. What right I have to make childcare arrangements. Saffy is on the run, May. There's a court order in place.'

'You must have some idea where she'd go? Isn't there a friend?'

'If anyone else had asked me that I'd have said that if she was in trouble, she'd come to you.' He stared into the cup he was holding. 'I did ring her a few months ago when there was a rumour

in one of the gossip mags about her health. Probably someone heard her throwing up and was quick to suggest an eating disorder. But she was bright, bubbly, rushing off to a shoot. At least that's what she said.' He shrugged. 'She was too eager to get me off the phone. And maybe I was too eager to be reassured. I should have known better.'

'She sounds almost frightened.'

'I know. I'm making discreet enquiries, but until I know who this man is I'm not going to hand over my niece. And I'm doing my best to find Saffy, too. But the last thing we need is a hue and cry.'

He put down the mug, knelt beside her.

'This time I'm the one up the drainpipe, Mouse, and it's raining a monsoon. Won't you climb up and rescue me?'

'I wish I could help—'

'There is no one else,' he said, cutting her off.

The unspoken, *And you owe me...* lay unsaid between them. But she knew that, like her, he was remembering the hideous scene when he'd come to the back door, white-faced, clutching his roses. It had remained closed to his knock but he hadn't gone away. He'd stayed there, mulishly stubborn, for so long that her grandfather had chased him away with the hose.

It had been the week before Christmas and the water was freezing but, while he'd been driven from the doorstep, he'd stayed in the garden defiantly, silently staring up at her room, visibly shivering, until it was quite dark.

She'd stood in this window and watched him, unable to do or say anything without making it much, much worse. Torn between her grandfather and the boy she loved. She would have defied her grandpa, just as her mother had defied him, but there had been Saffy. And Adam. And she'd kept the promise that had been wrung from her even though her heart was breaking.

She didn't owe him a thing. She'd paid and paid and paid...

'I can't,' she said, getting up, putting distance between them. 'I told you, I know no more than you do about looking after a baby.'

'I think we both know that your experience as a rescuer of lame ducks puts you streets ahead of me.'

'Nancie is not a duck,' she said a touch desperately. Why wouldn't he just take no for an answer? There must a dozen women who'd fall over themselves to help him out. Why pick on her? 'And, even if she were,' she added, 'I still couldn't help.'

She couldn't help anyone. That was another problem she was going to have to face. Finding homes for her family of strays.

There wasn't much call for a three-legged cat or a blind duck. And then there were the chickens, Jack and Dolly, the bees. She very much doubted if the Crown would consider a donkey and a superannuated nanny goat an asset to the nation's coffers.

'Why not, May?' he insisted. He got to his feet too, but he'd kept his distance. She didn't have to turn to know that his brows would be drawn down in that slightly perplexed look that was so familiar. 'Tell me. Maybe I can help.'

'Trust me,' she said. Nancie had caught hold of her finger and she lifted the little hand to her lips, kissed it. 'You can't help me. No one can.'

Then, since it was obvious that, unless she explained the situation, Adam wasn't going to give up, she told him why.

Why she couldn't help him or Saffy.

Why he couldn't help her.

For a moment he didn't say anything and she knew he would be repeating her words over in his head, exactly as she had done this morning when Freddie had apologetically explained the situation in words of one syllable.

Adam had assumed financial worries to be the problem. Inheritance tax. Despite the downturn in the market, the house was worth a great deal of money and it was going to take a lot of cash to keep the Inland Revenue happy.

‘You have to be married by the end of the month or you’ll lose the house?’ he repeated, just to be certain that he’d understood.

She swallowed, nodded.

She would never have told him if he hadn’t been so persistent, he realised. She’d told him that she couldn’t help but, instead of asking her why, something he would have done if it had been a work-related problem, he’d been so tied up with his immediate problem that he hadn’t been listening.

He was listening now. And there was only one thought in his head. That fate had dropped her into his lap. That the boy who hadn’t been good enough to touch Coleridge flesh, who’d shivered as he’d waited for her to defy her grandfather, prove that her hot kisses had been true, now held her future in the palm of his hand.

That he would crack the ice in May Coleridge’s body between the fine linen sheets of her grandfather’s four-poster bed and listen to the old man spin in his grave as did it.

‘What’s so important about the end of the month?’ he asked. Quietly, calmly. He’d learned not to show his thoughts, or his feelings.

‘My birthday. It’s on the second of December.’

She’d kept her back to him while she’d told him her problems, but now she turned and looked up at him. She’d looked up at him before, her huge amber eyes making him burn, her soft lips quivering with uncertainty. The taste of them still haunted him.

He’d liked her. Really liked her. She had guts, grit and, despite the wide gulf in their lives, they had a lot in common. And he’d loved being in the quiet, ordered peace of the lovely gardens of Coleridge House, the stables where she’d kept her animals. Everything so clean and well organised.

He’d loved the fact that she had her own kettle to make coffee. That there was always homemade cake in a tin. The shared secrecy. That no one but she knew he was there. Not her grandfather, not his family. It had all been so different from the nightmare of his home life.

But taking her injured animals, helping her look after them was one thing. She wasn’t the kind of girl any guy—even one with no pretensions to street cred—wanted to be seen with at the school disco.

But their meetings weren’t as secret as he’d thought. His sister had got curious, followed him and blackmailed him into asking May to go as his date to the school disco.

It had been as bad as he could have imagined. While all the other girls had been wearing boob tubes and skirts that barely covered their backsides, she’d been wearing something embarrassingly sedate, scarcely any make-up. He was embarrassed to be seen with her and, ashamed of his embarrassment, had asked her to dance.

That was bad, too. She didn’t have a clue and he’d caught hold of her and held her and that had been better. Up close, her hair had smelled like flowers after rain. She felt wonderful, her softness against his thin, hard body had roused him, brought to the surface all those feelings that he’d kept battened down. This was why he’d gone back time after time to the stables. Risked being caught by the gardener. Or, worse, the housekeeper.

Her skin was so beautiful that he’d wanted to touch it, touch her, kiss her. And her eyes, liquid black in the dim lights of the school gym, had told him that she wanted it too. But not there. Not where anyone could see them, hoot with derision...

They had run home through the park. She’d unlocked the gate, they’d scrambled up to the stables loft and it was hard to say which of them had been trembling the most when he’d kissed her, neither of them doubting what they wanted.

That it was her first kiss was without doubt. It was very nearly his, too. His first real kiss. The taste of her lips, the sweetness, her uncertainty as she’d opened up to him had made him feel like

a giant. All powerful. Invincible. And the memory of her melting softness in the darkness jolted through him like an electric charge...

'You need a husband by the end of the month?' he said, dragging himself back from the hot, dark thoughts that were raging through him.

'There's an entailment on Coleridge House,' she said. 'The legatee has to be married by the time he or she is thirty or the house goes to the Crown.'

'He's controlling you, even from the grave,' he said.

She flushed angrily. 'No one knew,' she said.

'No one?'

'My grandfather lost great chunks of his memory when he had the stroke. And papers were lost when Jennings' offices were flooded a few years ago...'

'You're saying you had no warning?'

She shook her head. 'My mother was dead long before she was thirty, but she thought marriage was an outdated patriarchal institution...' The words caught in her throat and she turned abruptly away again so that he shouldn't see the tears turning her caramel-coloured eyes to liquid gold, just as they had that night when her grandfather had dragged her away from him, his coat thrown around her. 'She'd have told them all to go to hell rather than compromise her principles.'

He tried to drown out the crowing triumph. That this girl, this woman, who from that day to this had crossed the road rather than pass him in the street, was about to lose everything. That her grandfather, that 'impressive' man who thought he was not fit to breathe the same air as his precious granddaughter, had left her at his mercy.

'But before the stroke? He could have told you then.'

'Why would he? I was engaged to Michael, the wedding date was set.'

'Michael Linton.' He didn't need to search his memory. He'd seen the announcement and Saffy had been full of it, torn between envy and disgust.

Envy that May would be Lady Linton with some vast country estate and a house in London. Disgust that she was marrying a man nearly old enough to be her father. 'Her grandfather's arranged it all, of course,' she'd insisted. 'He's desperate to marry her off to someone safe before she turns into her mother and runs off with some nobody who gets her up the duff.' She'd been about to say more but had, for once, thought better of it.

Not that he'd had any argument with her conclusion. But then her grandfather had suffered a massive stroke and the wedding had at first been put off. Then Michael Linton had married someone else.

'What happened? Why didn't you marry him?'

'Michael insisted that Grandpa would be better off in a nursing home. I said no, but he kept bringing me brochures, dragging me off to look at places. He wouldn't listen, wouldn't hear what I was saying, so in the end I gave him his ring back.'

'And he took it?'

'He wanted a wife, a hostess, someone who would fit into his life, run his home. He didn't want to be burdened with an invalid.'

'If he'd taken any notice of your lame duck zoo, he'd have known he was on a hiding to nothing.'

She shook her head and when she looked back over her shoulder at him her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks wet, but her lips were twisted into a smile.

'Michael didn't climb over the park gate when the gardener was looking the other way, Adam. He was a front door visitor.'

'You mean you didn't make him help you muck out the animals?' he asked and was rewarded with a blush.

‘I didn’t believe he’d appreciate the honour. He’d have been horrified if he’d seen me shin up a tree to save a kitten. Luckily, the situation never arose when he was around.’ A tiny shuddering breath escaped her. ‘You don’t notice creatures in distress from the back seat of a Rolls-Royce.’

‘His loss,’ he said, his own throat thick as the memories of stolen hours rushed back at him.

‘And mine, it would seem.’

‘You’d have been utterly miserable married to him.’

She shook her head.

‘You aren’t going to take this lying down, are you?’ he asked. ‘I can’t believe it would stand up in a court of law and the tabloids would have a field day if the government took your home.’

‘A lot of people are much worse off than me, Adam. I’m not sure that a campaign to save a fifteen-room house for one spoilt woman and her housekeeper would be a popular cause.’

She had a point. She’d been born to privilege and her plight was not going to garner mass sympathy.

‘Is that what Freddie Jennings told you?’ he asked. ‘I assume you have taken legal advice?’

‘Freddie offered to take Counsel’s opinion but, since Grandpa had several opportunities to remove the Codicil but chose not to, I don’t have much of a case.’ She lifted her shoulders in a gesture of utter helplessness. ‘It makes no difference. The truth is that there’s no cash to spare for legal fees. As it is, I’m going to have to sell a load of stuff to meet the inheritance tax bill. Even if I won, the costs would be so high that I’d have to sell the house to pay them. And if I lost...’

If she lost it would mean financial ruin.

Well, that would offer a certain amount of satisfaction. But nowhere near as much as the alternative that gave him everything he wanted.

‘So you’re telling me that the only reason you can’t take care of Nancie is because you’re about to lose the house? If you were married, there would be no problem,’ he said. He didn’t wait for her answer—it hadn’t been a question. ‘And your birthday is on the second of December. Well, it’s tight, but it’s do-able.’

‘Do-able?’ she repeated, her forehead buckled in a frown. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘A quick trip to the register office, a simple “I do”, you get to keep your house and I’ll have somewhere safe for Nancie. As her aunt-in-law, I don’t imagine there would be any objection to you taking care of her?’

And he would be able to finally scratch the itch that was May Coleridge while dancing on the grave of the man who’d shamed and humiliated him.

But if he’d imagined that she’d fling her arms around him, proclaim him her saviour, well, nothing had changed there, either.

Her eyes went from blank to blazing, like lightning out of a clear blue sky.

‘That’s not even remotely funny, Adam. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve got a house full of guests who’ll be expecting lunch in a couple of hours.’

She was wearing shabby sweats but swept by him, head high, shoulders back. Despite her lack of inches, the fact that her puppy fat hadn’t melted away but had instead evolved into soft curves, she was every inch the lady.

‘Mouse...’ he protested, shaken out of his triumph by the fact that, even in extremis, she’d turn him down flat. As if he was still a nobody from the wrong side of the tracks. ‘May!’

She was at the door before she stopped, looked back at him.

‘I’m serious,’ he said, a touch more sharply than he’d intended.

She shook her head. ‘It’s impossible.’

In other words, he might wear hand stitched suits these days instead of the cheapest market jeans, live in an apartment that had cost telephone numbers, be able to buy and sell the Coleridge estate ten times over, but he could never wash off the stink of where he’d come from. That his sister

had been a druggie, his mother was no better than she ought to be and his father had a record as long as his arm.

But times had changed. He wasn't that kid any more. What he wanted, he took. And he wanted this.

'It would be a purely temporary arrangement,' he said. 'A marriage of convenience.'

'Are you saying that you wouldn't expect...?'

She swallowed, colour flooding into her cheeks, and it occurred to him that if Michael Linton's courtship had been choreographed by her grandfather it would have been a formal affair rather than a lust-fuelled romance. The thought sent the blood rushing to a very different part of his anatomy and he was grateful for the full stiff folds of the dressing gown he was wearing.

She cleared her throat. 'Are you saying that you wouldn't expect the full range of wifely duties?'

Not the full range. He wouldn't expect her to cook or clean or keep house for him.

'Just a twenty-four seven nanny,' she continued, regaining her composure, assuming his silence was assent. 'Only with more paperwork, a longer notice period and a serious crimp in your social life?'

'I don't have much time for a social life these days,' he assured her before she could gather herself. 'But there are formal business occasions where I would normally take a guest. Civic functions. But you usually attend those, anyway.'

Nancie, as if aware of the sudden tension, let out a wail and, using the distraction to escape the unexpected heat of May's eyes, he picked her up, put her against his shoulder, turned to look at her.

'Well? What do you say?'

She shook her head, clearly speechless, and the band holding her hair slipped, allowing wisps to escape.

Backlit by the sun, they shone around her face like a butterscotch halo.

'What have you got to lose?' he persisted, determined to impose his will on her. Overwrite the Coleridge name with his own.

'Marriage is a lot easier to get into than it is to get out of,' she protested. Still, despite every advantage, resisting him. 'There has to be an easier solution to baby care than marrying the first woman to cross your path.'

'Not the first,' he replied. 'I passed several women in the park and I can assure you that it never crossed my mind to marry any of them.'

'No?'

He'd managed to coax the suggestion of a smile from her.

'Divorce is easy enough if both parties are in agreement,' he assured her. 'You'll be giving up a year of your freedom in return for your ancestral home. It looks like a good deal to me.'

The smile did not materialise. 'I can see the advantage from my point of view,' she said. 'But what's in it for you? You can't really be that desperate to offload Nancie.'

'Who said anything about "offloading" Nancie?' He allowed himself to sound just a little bit offended by her suggestion that he was doing that. 'On the contrary, I'm doing my best to do what her mother asked. It's not as if I intend to leave you to manage entirely on your own. I have to go away tomorrow, but I'll pull my weight until then.'

'Oh, right. And how do you intend to do that?'

'I'll take the night watch. The master bedroom is made up. I'll pack a bag and move in there today.'

Chapter Five

‘WHAT?’

The word was shocked from her.

May swallowed again, tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear in a nervous gesture that drew attention to her neck. It was long and smooth. She had the clearest ivory skin coloured only by the fading blush...

‘If we get married, people will expect us to live together,’ he pointed out. ‘You wouldn’t want the Crown Commissioners getting the impression that it was just a piece of paper, would you? That you were cheating.’

‘But—’

Before she could put her real objection into words, Nancie, bless her heart, began to grizzle.

‘What do I do now?’ he asked, looking at her helplessly. That, at least, wasn’t an act.

‘I think the fact that she’s chewing your neck is the clue,’ she said distractedly.

‘She’s hungry?’

‘Feeding her, like changing her nappy, is something that has to happen at regular intervals. No doubt there’s a bottle and some formula in that bag.’

She didn’t wait for him to check, but went into her bedroom, fetched the bag and emptied it on the table.

‘There’s just one carton. I wonder what that means.’

‘That we’ll probably need more very soon,’ he replied, picking up on her unspoken thought that it might offer a clue about how long Saffy intended to stay out of sight. Always assuming she was thinking that rationally.

‘Adam!’ she protested as she turned the carton over, searching for instructions.

‘I’m sorry. I can plan a takeover bid to the last millisecond, but I’m out of my depth here.’

‘Then get help.’

‘I’m doing my best,’ he replied. ‘If you’d just cooperate we could both get on with our lives.’

May was struggling to keep up a calm, distant front. She’d been struggling ever since he’d stood beneath the tree in the park. Used that ridiculous name.

Inside, everything was in turmoil. Her heart, her pulse were racing.

‘Please, Adam...’ Her voice caught in her throat. He couldn’t mean it. He was just torturing her... ‘Don’t...’

He lifted his hand, cradling her cheek to still her protest. His touch was gentle. A warm soothing balm that swept through her, taking the tension out of her joints so that her body swayed towards him.

‘It wouldn’t be that bad, would it, Mouse?’

Bad? How much worse could it get?

‘It seems a little...extreme,’ she said, resisting with all her will the yearning need to lean into his palm. Surrender everything, including her honour.

‘Losing your home, your business, is extreme,’ he insisted. ‘Getting married is just a piece of paper.’

Not for her...

‘A mutually beneficial contract to be cancelled at the convenience of both parties,’ he added. ‘Think of Robbie, May. Where will she go if you lose the house?’

‘She’s got a pension. A sister...’

‘Your business,’ he persisted.

The bank loan...

‘And what about your animals? Who else will take them in? You know that most of them will have to be put down.’

‘Don’t!’ she said, her throat so tight that the words were barely audible.

‘Hey,’ he said, pulling her into her arms so that the three of them were locked together. ‘I’m your trusty sidekick, remember? As always, late on the scene but ready to leap into action when you need a helping hand.’

‘This is a bit more than a helping hand.’

‘Hand, foot and pretty much everything in between,’ he agreed. ‘Take your pick.’

He was doing his best to make her laugh, she realised, or maybe cry.

Either would be appropriate under the circumstances. What would her mother have done? Spit in the devil’s eye? Or screw the patriarchal system, using it against itself to keep both her house and her freedom?

Stupid question. Heaven knew that she was not her mother. If she’d had her courage she’d be long gone. But all she had was her home. Robbie. The creatures that relied on her. The life she’d managed to make for herself.

As for breaking the promise to her grandfather, her punishment for that was built into the bargain of a barren marriage with a self-destruct date.

‘May?’ he prompted.

Decision time.

What decision...? There was only ever going to be one answer and, taking a deep breath, her heart beating ten times faster than when she’d climbed that tree, her voice not quite steady, she said, ‘You’re absolutely sure about this? Last chance.’

‘Quite sure,’ he replied, his own voice as steady as a rock. No hint of doubt, no suggestion of intestinal collywobbles on his part. ‘It’s a no-brainer.’

‘No...’ she said, wondering why, even now, she was hesitating.

‘No?’

‘I mean yes. You’re right. It’s a no-brainer.’

‘Shall we aim for something a little more decisive?’ he suggested. ‘Just so that we know exactly where we stand?’

‘You’re not planning on going down on one knee?’ she demanded, appalled.

‘Heaven forbid. Just something to seal the bargain,’ he said, taking his hand from her back and offering it to her.

‘A handshake?’ she said, suddenly overcome with the urgent need to laugh as she lifted her own to clasp it. ‘Well, why not? Everything else appears to be shaking.’

As his hand tightened around hers, everything stilled. Even Nancie stopped nuzzling and grumbling. All she could hear was her pulse pounding through her ears. All she could see were his eyes. Not the bright silver of the boy she’d known but leaden almost unreadable. A shiver ran through her as he closed the gap between them, kissed her, but then she closed her eyes and all sense of danger evaporated in the heat of his mouth, the taste of him and the cherished bittersweet memory flooded back.

It was different. He was different.

The kiss was assured, certain and yet, beneath it all, she recognised the boy who’d lain with her in the stable loft and kissed her, undressed her, touched her. And for a moment she was no longer the woman who’d subjugated her yearning for love, for a family of her own into caring for her grandfather, creating a business, building some kind of life for herself.

As Adam’s lips touched hers, she was that girl again and an aching need opened up before her, a dizzying void that tempted her to plunge headlong into danger, to throw caution to the winds and boldly kiss him back.

‘Oh...’

At the sound of Robbie’s shocked little exclamation, May stumbled back, heat rushing to her face.

That girl reliving the moment of guilt, embarrassment, pain when they'd been discovered...

'Robbie...'

'I thought I heard you come in earlier,' she said.

'I had a fall. In the park. Adam came to my rescue.'

'That would account for the kitten, then,' she said stiffly. 'And the trousers hanging over the Aga.'

'We both got rather muddy,' Adam said.

'I'm sure it's nothing to do with me what you were doing in the park,' Robbie said, ignoring him. 'But Jeremy is here.'

'Jeremy?' she repeated, struggling to gather her wits.

'He's brought the designs for the honey labels.'

'Has he? Oh, right...' Expanding honey production had been part of the future she'd planned and Jeremy Davidson had volunteered to design the labels for her.

'He's doing you a favour, May. You won't want to keep him waiting,' she said primly before turning to leave.

'Robbie, wait!' she began, then glanced at Adam, suddenly unsure of herself. She wanted to tell Robbie that the kiss had meant nothing. That it was no more than a handshake on a deal. Except when Robbie paused, her shoulders stiff with disapproval, the words wouldn't come.

'Go and see the man about your labels,' Adam urged, then nodded, as if to reassure her that she could go ahead with her plans. That she had a future. 'Leave this to me.'

'But Nancie...' She looked at the baby. It was easier than meeting his eyes, looking at Robbie.

'I'll bring her down in a moment.'

Adam watched as she stumbled from the room in her haste to escape her embarrassment and he could have kicked himself.

Most women in her situation would have leapt at the deal he'd offered, no questions asked, but her first response had been flat refusal, anger at his presumption, and that had caught him on the raw.

His kiss had been intended as a marker. A promise to himself that she would pay for every slight, every insult but, instead of the anticipated resistance, she had responded with a heat that had robbed him of any sense of victory. Only left him wanting more.

He did not want her.

He could have any woman he wanted. Beautiful women. The kind who turned heads in the street.

All he wanted from May Coleridge was her pride at his feet. And he would have it.

She had been his last mistake. His only weakness. Since the day he'd walked away from this house, his clothes freezing on his back, he'd never let anything, any emotion, stand in his way.

With his degree in his pocket, a mountain of debt to pay off, his mother incapable of looking after either herself or Saffy, the only job he had been able to get in his home town was in an old import company that had been chugging along happily since the days when the clipper ships brought tea from China. It wasn't what he'd dreamed of, but within five years he'd been running the company. Now he was the chairman of an international company trading commodities from across the globe.

His success didn't appear to impress May's disapproving housekeeper.

'It's been a while, Mrs Robson.'

'It has. But nothing appears to have changed, Mr Wavell,' she returned, ice-cool.

'On the contrary. I'd like you to be the first to know that May and I are going to be married.'

'Married!' And, just like that, all the starch went out of her. 'When...?'

'Before the end of the month.'

'I meant...' She shook her head. 'What's the hurry? What are you after? If you think May's been left well off—'

‘I don’t need her money. But May needs me. She’s just been told that if she isn’t married by her birthday, she’s going to lose her home.’

‘But that’s less than four weeks...’ She rallied. ‘Is that what Freddie Jennings called about in such a flap this morning?’

‘I imagine so. Apparently, some ancient entailment turned up when he took James Coleridge’s will to probate.’

The colour left her face but she didn’t back down. ‘Why would you step in to help, Adam Wavell? What do you get out of it?’ She didn’t give him a chance to answer. ‘And that little girl’s mother? What will she have to say about it?’

‘Nancie,’ he said, discovering that a baby made a very useful prop, ‘meet Hatty Robson. Mrs Robson, meet my niece.’

‘She’s Saffy’s daughter?’ She came closer, the rigid lines of her face softening and she touched the baby’s curled up fist. ‘She’s a pretty thing.’ Then, ‘So where is your sister? In rehab? In jail?’

‘Neither,’ he said, hanging onto his temper by a thread. ‘But we are having a bit of a family crisis.’

‘Nothing new there, then.’

‘No,’ he admitted. A little humility wouldn’t hurt. ‘Saffy was sure that May would help.’

‘Again? Hasn’t she suffered enough for your family?’

Suffered?’

‘I met her in the park. She was up a tree,’ he added. ‘Rescuing a kitten.’

She rolled her eyes. An improvement.

‘The only reason she told me her troubles was to explain why she couldn’t look after Nancie.’

‘And you leapt in with an immediate marriage proposal. Saving not one, but two women with a single bound?’ Her tone, deeply ironic, suggested that, unlike May, she wasn’t convinced that it was an act of selfless altruism.

‘Make that three,’ he replied, raising her irony and calling her. ‘I imagine one of May’s concerns was you, Mrs Robson. This is your home, too.’

If it hadn’t been so unlikely, he would have sworn she blushed. ‘Did she say that?’ she demanded, instantly on the defensive. ‘I don’t matter.’

‘You know that’s not true,’ he said, pushing his advantage. ‘You and this house are all she has.’

And this time the blush was unmistakable. ‘That’s true. Poor child. Well, I’m sure that’s very generous of you, Mr Wavell. Just tell me one thing. Why didn’t your sister, or you, just pick up the phone and call one of those agencies which supplies temporary nannies? I understand you can afford it these days.’

He’d already explained his reasons to May and he wasn’t about to go through them again. ‘Just be glad for May’s sake,’ he replied, ‘that I didn’t.’

She wasn’t happy, clearly didn’t trust his motives, but after a moment she nodded just once. ‘Very well. But bear this in mind. If you hurt her, you’ll have to answer to me. And I won’t stop at a hosing down.’

‘Hurt her? Why would I hurt her?’

‘You’ve done it before,’ she said. ‘It’s in your nature. I’ve seen the string of women you’ve paraded through the pages of the gossip magazines. How many of them have been left with a bruised heart?’ She didn’t wait for an answer. ‘May has spent the last ten years nursing her grandpa. She’s grieving for him, vulnerable.’

‘And without my help she’ll lose her home, her business and the animals she loves,’ he reminded her.

She gave him a long look, then said, ‘That child is hungry. You’d better give her to me before she chews a hole in your neck. What did you say her name was?’

‘Nancie, Mrs Robson. With an i and an e.’

‘Well, that’s a sweet old-fashioned name,’ she said, taking the baby. ‘Hello, Nancie.’ Then, looking from the baby to him, ‘I suppose you’d better call me Robbie.’

‘Thank you. Is there anything I can do, Robbie?’

‘Go and book a date with the Registrar?’ she suggested. ‘Although you might want to put your trousers on first.’

The kitchen was empty, apart from a couple of cats curled up on an old armchair and an old mongrel dog who was sharing his basket with a duck and a chicken.

None of them took any notice of him as he unhooked his trousers from the rail above the Aga and carried them through to the mud room, where the kitten had curled up in the fleece and gone to sleep. He hoped Nancie, jerked out of familiar surroundings, her routine, would settle as easily.

Having brushed off the mud as best he could and made himself fit to be seen in polite society, he hunted down May. He found her in a tiny office converted from one of the pantries, shoulder to shoulder with a tall, thin man who was, presumably, Jeremy, as they leaned over her desk examining some artwork.

‘May?’

She turned, peering at him over a pair of narrow tortoiseshell spectacles that were perched on the end of her nose. They gave her a cute, kittenish look, he thought. And imagined himself reaching for them, taking them off and kissing her.

‘I’ve talked to Robbie,’ he said, catching himself. ‘Put her in the picture.’

That blush coloured her cheeks again, but she was back in control of her voice, her breathing as she said, ‘You’ve explained everything?’

‘The why, the what and the when,’ he assured her. ‘I’ll give you a call as soon as I’ve sorted out the details. You’ll be in all afternoon?’

‘You’re going to do it today?’ she squeaked. Not that in control...

‘It’s today, or it’s too late.’

‘Yes...’ Clearly, it was taking some time for the reality of her situation to sink in. ‘Will you need me? For the paperwork?’

‘I’ll find out what the form is and call you. I’ll need your number,’ he prompted when she didn’t respond. ‘It’s unlisted.’

Flustered, May plucked a leaflet from a shelf above her desk and handed it to him. ‘My number is on there.’

For a moment they just looked at one another and he wondered what she was thinking about. The afternoons they’d spent together in the stables with him ducking out of sight whenever anyone had come near? The night when they had been too absorbed in each other to listen? Or the years that had followed...?

‘What are you doing?’ he asked, turning to look at the artwork laid out on the table.

‘What?’ He looked up and saw that she was still staring at him and her poise deserted her as, flustered, she said, ‘I’m choosing a label for Coleridge House honey. Do you know Jeremy Davidson? He’s head of the art department at the High School.’ Then, as if she felt she had to explain how she knew him, ‘I’m a governor.’

‘You’re a school governor?’ He didn’t bother to suppress a grin, and yet why should he be surprised? She’d been born to sit on charitable committees, school boards. In the fullness of time she’d no doubt become a magistrate, like her grandfather. ‘I hope you’ve done something about those overflowing gutters.’

‘It was my first concern.’ For a moment there was the hint of a smile, the connection of a shared memory, before she turned to Jeremy Davidson. ‘Adam and I were at the High School at the same time, Jeremy. He was two years above me.’

‘I’m aware that Mr Wavell is one of our more successful ex-pupils,’ he said rather stiffly. ‘I’m delighted to meet you.’

He was another of those old school tie types. Elegant, educated. A front door visitor who would have met with James Coleridge's approval. His manners were impeccable, even if his smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

'I have an Emma Davidson on my staff,' he said. 'I believe her husband is an art teacher. Is that simply a coincidence or is she your wife?'

'She's my wife,' he admitted.

'I thought she must be. You're on half term break, I imagine. While she's at work catching up with Saminderan employment law, you're here, playing with honey pot labels—'

'Was my wife. We're separated.' His glance at May betrayed him. 'Our divorce will be finalised in January.'

'Well, that's regrettable,' he said. 'Emma is a valued member of my organisation.'

'These things happen.'

So they did. But not fast enough to save May, he thought. Were they having an affair? he wondered. Or was she saving herself for the big wedding? Or was he waiting to declare himself until he was free?

Best put him out of his misery. 'Has May told you our good news?' he asked.

'Adam...'

She knew.

'We're getting married later this month,' he continued, as if he hadn't heard her.

Jeremy's shocked expression told its own story and, before he could find the appropriate words, May swiftly intervened.

'I can't decide which design I like best, Adam. What do you think?'

He waited pointedly until Davidson moved out of his way, then put his hand on the desk and leaned forward, blocking him out with his shoulder.

They were pretty enough floral designs with 'Coleridge House Honey' in some fancy script. About right for a stall at a bazaar.

'You produce handmade sweets too, don't you?' he asked her, looking at the shelf and picking up a fairly basic price list that, like the brochure, had obviously been printed on her computer. 'Is this all the literature that you have?'

She nodded as he laid it, with the brochure, beside the labels.

'There's no consistency in design,' he said. 'Not in the colours, or even the fonts you've used. Nothing to make it leap out from the shelf. Coleridge House is a brand, May. You should get some professional help to develop that.'

'Jeremy—'

'There's a rather good watercolour of the house in your bedroom. The country house, nostalgia thing would be a strong image and work well across the board. On labels, price lists and on the front of your workshop brochure.'

She looked up at him, a tiny frown creasing the space between her eyes.

'Just a thought.' With a touch to her shoulder, a curt nod to Davidson, he said, 'I'll call you later.'

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