

MARION
LENNOX

THE
LAST-MINUTE
MARRIAGE



Cherish

Marion Lennox

The Last-Minute Marriage

Аннотация

Peta and Marcus had a wonderful whirlwind wedding - but their vows are a sham: it's a marriage of convenience! Now billionaire Marcus Benson is showering his bride with gifts and offering a life of luxury. Surely that would be a dream come true for penniless Peta? No! Peta wants him - not gifts or money! She's startled to realize she's falling in love with her convenient groom. But Marcus has built impenetrable walls around his heart. Has Peta got what it takes to knock them down?

Содержание

They were left alone. The lights were dim.	5
The Last-Minute Marriage	7
CONTENTS	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	33
CHAPTER THREE	59
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	61



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THE
LAST-MINUTE
MARRIAGE

Cherish

They were left alone. The lights were dim.

He was standing in the hallway, holding a girl in his arms—his bride—and she was gazing up at him with eyes that were luminescent, trembling, sweetly innocent.

She was so desirable. And she was his wife! He could kiss her right now....

“Cut it out,” she told him, jerking her face back from his and jiggling in his arms. “Marcus Benson, put me down. Right now.”

“I thought—”

“I know what you thought. I can read it in your eyes.”

“Peta...?”

“I knew you’d want something.” She bounced and wriggled some more and he was forced to set her down.

“I don’t want anything.”

She fixed him with an old-fashioned look. “You’re saying you don’t want to take me to bed?”

There was nothing he’d like better.

A wedding dilemma:

What should a sexy, successful bachelor do

if he’s too busy making millions to find a wife?

Or if he finds the perfect woman, and just has to

strike a bridal bargain....

The perfect proposal:

The solution? For better, for worse, these grooms in a hurry have decided to sign, seal and deliver the ultimate marriage contract....



Look out for our next **CONTRACT BRIDES** story, coming next month in **Harlequin Romance®**! **A Wife on Paper** by **Liz Fielding #3837**

The Last-Minute Marriage

Marion Lennox

CONTRACT BRIDES

From paper marriage...to wedded bliss!



CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

EPILOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

MARCUS BENSON shoved open the fire-escape door—and ran straight into Cinderella.

Marcus running into anyone was unusual in itself. The influence of the Benson Corporation reached throughout the international business community, and Marcus, at its head, was a man held in awe. Bumping into people was unheard of. A path usually cleared before him.

It wasn't just power, wealth and intellect contributing to the aura surrounding him. He was in his mid-thirties, tall and superbly fit, with jet-black hair and striking, hawklike features. His charisma and influence were such that women's magazines were unanimous in declaring him to be America's most eligible bachelor.

And Marcus was likely to stay that way.

Well, why not? His experience of family life had been a disaster. His time in the armed forces had taught him loyalty and friendship, but loyalty and friendship had ended in tragedy. So Marcus Benson was a man who walked alone.

But that was before he met Peta O'Shannassy.

And Peta's kids, dogs, cows and catastrophe.

He didn't see that now, though. All he saw was a kid who reminded him oddly of Cinderella.

But Cinderella should be in her castle kitchen, tending the fire.

Hungry. Wasn't that how the story went? Surely she shouldn't be eating her lunch on the landing of a New York fire-escape.

Maybe Marcus was making a few assumptions. He assumed this was Cinderella. He assumed it was lunch. In reality, all Marcus saw was a spilled yellow drink, a flying bagel, and, underneath, a tattered kid with bright chestnut curls and skimpy clothes.

So maybe she wasn't Cinderella.

Who, then? A street kid? She was wearing shorts, a frayed T-shirt and battered sandals. His first impression was of a waif.

His second sensation was horror as waif—and lunch—fought for balance, lost, and tumbled to the next landing.

What had he done?

He'd been in too much of a hurry. There weren't enough hours in the day for Marcus Benson. He had people waiting.

They'd have to wait. He'd just knocked a kid down half a flight of stairs. She was crumpled in a heap on the next landing, looking as if she wasn't going anywhere.

It seemed an eternity while she slid, but in fact it was two or three seconds at most. The next moment, Marcus was brushing the bright curls away from her face. Trying to see the damage.

Again he had to do a rethink. She wasn't a street kid—or not the type that he recognised.

She was clean. Sure, she was covered in what remained of her bagel and her milkshake, but her mop of curls were soft to touch. Her shorts and her T-shirt were freshly laundered under the mess

he'd made, and she was...

Cute?

Definitely cute.

She wasn't a kid.

Maybe she was about twenty, he thought. Her eyes were closed but he had the impression that it wasn't unconsciousness that was causing her eyelids to stay shuttered. There was a sense of exhaustion about her, as if she was closing her eyes to shut out more than the pain and shock of the moment. Dark shadows smudged deeply under her eyes. She was thin. Far too thin.

His first impression solidified. Cinderella.

Her eyes fluttered open. They were wide green eyes, deep and questioning. Pain-filled.

'Don't move,' he said urgently and she focused on his face, questioning.

'Ouch,' she whispered.

'Ouch?'

She appeared to consider.

'Definitely ouch,' she said at last, and the strain in her voice said she was trying hard to make light of something that was worse than just ouch. She didn't move; just lay on the steel-plated landing as if she was trying to come to terms with a catastrophe that was just one of a series. 'I guess I spilled my milkshake, huh.'

'Um...' He looked down to the next flight of steps. 'Yeah. Definitely.'

'And my bagel?' Her accent was Australian, he thought. It was

warm and resonant, with a tremor behind it. From shock? From pain?

But she was worried about her bagel. He smiled at that, albeit weakly. If she was worried about her bagel, chances were that she wasn't suffering injuries that were life-threatening.

'I'd imagine your bagel is at ground level,' he told her. 'It'll have turned into a lethal missile by now.'

'Oh, great.' She closed her eyes again and his impression of exhaustion deepened. 'I can see the headlines. Australian drops New Yorker with jelly-loaded bagel. I'll probably get sent to prison-for-terrorists on the first flight out of here.'

'Hey.' It was too much. Marcus Benson, who seldom—well, never, in fact—let himself get involved, put his hand on her cheek in a gesture of comfort. Good grief. He'd blasted her down a flight of stairs. He'd ruined her lunch. He'd hurt her—and she was trying to turn it into a joke.

'Australian Braining New Yorker with Bagel is the least of our legal worries,' he told her. 'How about Corporate Idiot Shoves Australian Downstairs?'

She opened one eye and looked up at him. Cautiously. 'You mean I can sue?'

'For at least the cost of a bagel,' he told her, and his words produced a smile.

It was a great smile. A killer smile. Her eyes were deeply green and they twinkled, as if it was their permanent state. Maybe she wasn't twenty, he thought. Maybe she was older. With a smile

like that... Well, a smile like that took practice.

He'd never seen a smile like it.

But he couldn't stop and think about a woman's smile. Or he shouldn't. He was in a rush. The reason he'd used the fire stairs was that he was in a hurry. The lift had jammed at just the wrong time. His assistant would be waiting at street level, checking her watch. He had a deal to close.

But he couldn't just leave this kid here.

He lifted his cellphone. 'Ruby?' he snapped as his assistant answered.

'Marcus.' This was a busy day, even for the super-efficient Ruby, and his assistant sounded worried. 'Where are you?'

'I'm on the fire-escape. Can you come up, please? I have a situation.'

As he tucked his phone back into his jacket he found himself suppressing a grin. A situation on the fire-escape. That'd have Ruby having kittens all the way up. Ruby was efficient but things like...well, situations on fire-escapes were unusual, even for Ruby.

She'd cope, he thought. Ruby always coped. But until the cavalry arrived he needed to focus on the girl.

'Are you hurt?' he asked, and found she was staring straight up at him now, both her eyes fully open. She'd rolled over on to her back. There was a dollop of jelly wedged under her curls near one ear, and he had the weirdest desire to wipe it away...

Heck, cut it out, Benson, he told himself. This was getting

personal. He didn't do personal. That was what Ruby was for.

But apparently the waif didn't want his attention just as much as he didn't wish to offer it. 'Thank you for asking,' she said politely. 'But I'm fine. You can go away now.'

He blinked. 'I can go away?'

'You're in a rush. I sat in your way. You've squashed my bagel, you've spilled my milkshake and you've hurt my ankle, but hey, it's my fault. I'm—'

'You've hurt your ankle?'

'It appears,' she said with cautious dignity, 'to be hurt.'

He checked her out. Her legs were long and tanned and smooth. Really long, in fact, and really tanned, and really smooth. They were great legs. It was incongruous that they ended up with shabby leather sandals that looked as if they came from a welfare shop.

The shoes weren't the only jarring note. One ankle was puffing while he watched.

'Hell.'

'Hey! It's me who's supposed to swear. Why don't you just go away so that I can?'

'Don't let me stop you.'

'A lady doesn't swear in front of a gentleman,' she told him, lifting her ankle so she could see it. Mistake. She winced and let it drop. Cautiously. But still the determination was there to move on. Ignoring pain. 'While I might not be a lady, by the look of the suit you're wearing, you must be a gentleman,' she managed.

‘That’s about the most gentlemanly suit I’ve ever seen.’

Here they were again. Talking about him. He found himself glancing down at his Armani suit and thinking, Yeah, that’s all it took. Wear a suit that cost a few thou’ and bang, you’re a gentleman.

Even if he did toss kids downstairs.

‘I’m really sorry,’ he told her, and she nodded as if she’d been waiting for it.

‘I wondered when we’d get around to that.’

She took him aback. It wasn’t just her accent that was unusual, he decided. It was everything about her. She was hurting—hurting badly. He could see it behind her eyes. But she wasn’t letting on. She was sassy and smart, and she wanted him to disappear so she could swear in private. Or do whatever she had to do in private.

‘Is it only your ankle that’s hurting?’ he asked.

‘Isn’t that enough?’

‘I guess it is.’ He touched her foot, lightly probing, and saw that it hurt. A lot. ‘That was quite a fall.’

‘You thumped out of there hard.’

‘I guess I did.’

‘I’m fine,’ she said, and he knew that, though she was trying to keep things light, there was a load of bitterness behind the words. ‘Leave me be.’

‘That ankle might be broken.’

‘Yeah, with my luck...’ She broke off and seemed to try to

haul herself together. She even managed to produce that smile again. Almost. ‘No. Don’t worry. It’d be hurting more if it was broken.’

‘Can I help you inside?’ He motioned to the door he’d just come from.

‘To the offices of Charles Higgins?’ Her eyebrows hiked up in mock incredulity. ‘Attila in there wouldn’t let me sit on her settee and eat my bagel. You think she’ll let me sit on her settee now I’m covered with banana milkshake?’

‘I guess she wouldn’t,’ he said, his voice a trifle unsteady. Attila... He knew exactly who she was talking about. Charles Higgins’s secretary.

‘You were waiting to see Charles?’

‘Yeah.’

Marcus knew Charles Higgins. The man was sleaze. A king-sized ego with the morals of a sewer rat. Because of renovations—the same renovations that were causing problems with the lifts now—Marcus had been forced to share a corporate washroom with Charles Higgins for the last few weeks. But that was as far as their relationship went. The man’s brains were in his balls. He had a reputation for dealing dishonestly with dishonest money.

Marcus owned this building. He might lease part of it to Higgins but it didn’t mean he had to like the man.

He couldn’t understand for a minute what business this girl would have with a slime-ball of a lawyer like Higgins.

‘You had an appointment?’

‘At ten this morning. Three hours ago.’ She was still lying on the landing, her fingers tentatively probing her ankle. ‘Attila keeps fobbing me off. Finally I was so hungry I dived out and got lunch and Attila told me I’d have to eat out here. Enter you.’

That made sense. Higgins’s secretary, a woman of indeterminate years and with a bosom like plate armour, had a reputation for being nastier than Higgins himself. If that was possible.

‘You know...’ It was a crazy conversation. Any minute now Ruby would arrive and rescue him, but meanwhile maybe he could give her a bit of advice. It couldn’t hurt. ‘You know, maybe if you want to talk to high-powered New York lawyers, then maybe shorts and T-shirt and scruffy sandals aren’t going to cut it.’

‘Scruffy...’ She probed her ankle and winced yet again but she was able to focus on what he was saying. ‘You’re saying my sandals are scruffy?’

‘Yes,’ he said firmly, and he almost got that smile again. Not quite. She was in real pain, he thought. Where on earth was Ruby? ‘Scruffy is a polite way of describing them, really.’

‘They’re my aunty’s.’

‘Um...good?’

‘She’s dead,’ the girl said as if that explained all. It didn’t. But he had to say something.

‘Oh,’ he said and this time he definitely got the smile.

It was worth working for. It was a great smile.

‘I brought corporate clothes,’ she told him. ‘I’m not silly. But I’ve come from Australia. I came in a hurry because my aunt was dying, but I did pack decent clothes. Unfortunately the airline is playing keepings-off with them.’

‘Keepings-off?’

‘I put my clothes on the plane in Sydney. I put me on the plane in Sydney. I got off the plane here, but clearly my suitcase fell out somewhere around Hawaii. So now someone in Hawaii’s wearing my good, Charles-facing suit while I’m forced to wear the only clothes I have. I had one pair of decent shoes but I was stupid enough to use the same pavement as a New York mutt with poor choice in toilet placement. With ten minutes to make it here, Aunt Hattie’s sandals were all I had.’

‘You didn’t think of buying something else?’ he asked, and that was a mistake. He’d shoved her down the stairs, he’d hurt her, and she’d reacted with humour. Now, though, he got a blaze of anger that made him take a step back.

‘Yeah. Toss a little money at the problem and it’ll go away. Of course. What’s money for? Just like Charles. You leave your mother with Peta until it looks like you’ll inherit; then you haul her over to the other side of the world. Economy class. When she’s dying! Even when you can afford all this! Only you don’t really want her. You dump her in some appalling nursing home to die alone, making sure you get her to change her will first...’ She bit her lip and the wash of pain across her face was dreadful.

‘Um... I don’t have a mother,’ he said cautiously and the anger

exploded even more.

‘Of course you don’t. I wasn’t talking about you. I was just grouping you.’

‘Categorising me?’

‘Yes.’

‘I see.’ He didn’t. In fact, he didn’t have a clue what was going on. Her anger was palpable and he needed to break through it in order to get some... Well, some order.

‘Who’s Peta?’ he asked.

‘Me.’ She glowered.

‘You’re Peta? Hi. I’m Marcus.’

She wasn’t about to be distracted.

‘I can do without the introductions. I haven’t finished being angry yet.’

His eyebrows hiked. ‘I’m sorry. But... Peta?’

‘My dad wanted a boy,’ she snapped, recovering momentum. ‘And will you be quiet when I’m letting off steam? You and Charles and Attila the Hun in there, you judge. You think just because I’m not wearing an Armani suit—yeah, I can tell it’s Armani, I’m not stupid, no matter how patronising you sound—that I don’t matter. I’ll never get to see Charles. I’ve used the last of my money to care for and bury Hattie, and if I don’t get to see him...’ She gave a deep, raspy breath, the pain and the shock of the last few minutes finally surfacing to the point where they couldn’t be hidden.

She’d been using her anger as a barrier, Marcus realised, and

it wasn't working. Whatever was behind was breaking through.

'This is stupid,' she whispered. 'You don't give a toss, and anyway, you'll have a secretary like Attila in there, and even if I threaten to sue the pants off you, you'll just turn to your secretary and say fix it. Keep her away from me...'

'I wouldn't...'

But of course he would.

'Mr Benson?' a voice said behind them and it was Ruby. His cool, unflappable assistant to whom he handed life's problems. Life's hiccups. The personal stuff. 'Is there a problem, Mr Benson?' Ruby said smoothly. 'How can I help?'

Ruby was wonderful. She was the answer to Marcus Benson's prayers.

Somewhere in her indeterminate post forties, a stout and sensibly dressed Afro-American, Ruby gave off the aura of someone's mother or someone's aunt. She was neither.

Nor did she have any secretarial qualifications. She had been an obscure, unnoticed clerk in Marcus's vast financial empire when he'd found her almost by accident seven or eight years back. Marcus had been trying to juggle a Japanese delegation, a team of lawyers after his blood, and a posse of journalists and photographers from Celebrity-Plus Magazine. His highly qualified secretary had wilted under pressure.

In desperation he'd gone to the outer office and called for anyone—anyone!—who could speak even a little Japanese.

To his astonishment Ruby had risen ponderously to her feet.

She'd studied a little Japanese at night school, she'd told him, and he'd expected nothing. But what he'd got... In twenty minutes she'd charmed the Japanese businessmen and organised an on-site lunch, she'd diverted the reporters with vouchers to a nearby exclusive wine bar, and she was calmly taking notes while Marcus coped with the lawyers. And when he appeared flummoxed she even suggested priorities.

Her priorities were always right. Marcus had never looked for another assistant. Ruby didn't move fast. She was unflappable, and she was worth diamonds. More than diamonds. Now she assessed the situation at a glance, she figured what Marcus wanted and she proceeded to provide it.

'If Mr Benson has hurt you, we'll do everything in our power to rectify it,' she told the girl. 'Mr Benson has an appointment right now which must be kept, but I can help.' She gave Marcus an enquiring look—a look they both knew—which asked whether she should be sympathetic. She got a nod. A distinct nod and a smile. The combination of nod and smile was Marcus's sign language for go all out to be nice.

And Marcus meant it. He was feeling really guilty here. If Ruby could make things better for this chit of a girl, then it'd be worth losing his precious assistant for half a day.

'I'll take you to the local medical facility and let someone see that ankle,' Ruby was saying as Marcus backed away a little. Letting her take charge. 'We'll replace your damaged clothes. I'll buy you a decent meal and I'll organise a cab to take you home.'

Is that okay?’

Marcus’s face cleared. It sounded good to him. Generosity would definitely help here. There was still the niggles of guilt, but Ruby would assuage it.

But it seemed they were not to be let off so easily. Or maybe they were being let off too easily.

‘Thank you.’ Peta pushed herself into a sitting position. She glanced from Ruby to Marcus and back again. Her face had shuttered, showing no pain, no anger...just nothing. It was a defence, Marcus realised. A shield.

‘Thank you but I don’t need help,’ she told Ruby, with another half glance at Marcus that said, Yeah, hadn’t she been right all along? Here was his secretary ready to sweep his problems under the carpet. Peta’s look said she knew exactly the type Marcus was—the type who decreed when life got too difficult, pay someone.

Her look also said the sooner she was shot of him the better she’d like it.

‘I’m not going to sue, and my problems are not your problems,’ she told them both. ‘I have an appointment to see Mr Higgins. He’s running hours late as it is. If I leave now he’ll say I missed my appointment and I can’t afford to do that. So thank you, but I’ll stay here. Filthy or not. I can’t afford to lose this chance.’

‘Mr Higgins won’t see you like that,’ Ruby told her, blunt as ever, and Marcus’s face tightened.

‘I’ve already told her that. I doubt if he’ll see her at all.’

Ruby’s lips pursed, acknowledging that he might be right. ‘But

if she has an appointment...’

‘You know Charles, Ruby. He’s not about to let Peta anywhere near his corporate offices looking like this.’

‘Hey, excuse me,’ Peta said cautiously, looking up at the two heads talking over her. ‘Can I join in this conversation?’

‘Of course.’ Marcus’s brows snapped together as Ruby’s eyes widened. The waif wasn’t a victim, then.

‘He has to see me,’ Peta was saying. ‘I have an appointment.’

‘An appointment with Charles means nothing if he figures there’s the least chance you might not be able to pay,’ Marcus told her. ‘And pay well.’

‘He has to see me,’ she repeated. ‘He’s my cousin.’

Silence while they took that on board.

‘Charles Higgins is your cousin?’ Ruby asked, and Peta nodded. She didn’t look too pleased about it, though. In fact, she looked as if she’d prefer the relationship didn’t exist.

‘He is. Worse luck.’

‘But you have to make an appointment to see him?’ Marcus didn’t understand.

‘Yes.’

‘You’re running really late, Mr Benson,’ Ruby said warningly, but Marcus had heard enough.

To say he disliked Charles Higgins would be an understatement. He detested the man. The word around town was that the man was utterly unscrupulous. He and his equally unscrupulous associates had rented office space here when

Marcus had been in Europe; Marcus had been really annoyed that the man had been granted a twelve-month lease, and given the least excuse Higgins was out of here. He was trying to manoeuvre it now. But meanwhile... This girl would get nowhere with him. He knew that.

So did Ruby. He could read it in her face.

So, the best thing they could do for this girl was to clean her, feed her and give her a ride back to whatever cheap accommodation she was using.

But...

But.

He'd hurt her. He'd made her life difficult when it was already impossible. He could see that. There was real desperation in her eyes.

He knew enough of Charles Higgins to guess that the girl would be being screwed. He had no idea how—all he knew was that it was true. She was alone and bereft and he'd hurt her.

She expected him to throw his assistant at her and leave her to face the wolves alone.

Damn, he couldn't do it. He couldn't.

'Ruby, can you reorganise my afternoon?' he said, and he said it as though every word was being dragged out of him. As if he couldn't believe what he was saying.

Not seeing this deal through this afternoon might well cost him thousands. But it couldn't be helped. When Marcus made a decision the decision was made—and his decision was made

right now.

‘If you’ll set everything back a few hours, I’ll take Peta over,’ he told Ruby. And then, as his assistant’s eyebrows hit her hairline, he clinched it.

‘I’ll face Charles Higgins with her.’

‘You...’

Marcus was left in no doubt of what she thought of him. She was still seated, with Marcus and Ruby speaking over the top of her. She was still—waif-like? Her mop of chestnut curls was tousled and wild, her freckled nose was completely free of make-up and that dollop of jelly was still there. And so was her antagonism towards him. Peta stared up at him and he thought ruefully that he might as well be Charles Higgins himself. Was it the suit? he wondered. Or the presence of his assistant? Tokens of power... Whatever, there was no doubting that she was looking at him with contempt, as if such an action as he proposed was just a figment of his imagination.

‘Why not?’ he demanded. He looked from Peta to Ruby and found their expressions matched. Both women were looking at him as if he’d lost his mind.

‘The project is important,’ Ruby murmured, but he thought he detected a trace of a smile behind her normally expressionless eyes.

‘I know. I’m trusting you to keep things on ice until I can take over again.’

‘And when will that be?’

‘A couple of hours.’

‘Let’s keep you clear until tomorrow,’ Ruby suggested and there was no mistaking the laughter now. ‘You might find ankle-fixing and clothes-shopping and lawyer-facing takes a bit longer than you think.’

‘Um... Maybe you can do the ankle fixing and the shopping,’ he said, suddenly uneasy. ‘Then I can take her in to see Charles.’

‘No!’ Astonishingly, Ruby shook her head in definite disagreement. ‘No, Mr Benson, I shouldn’t do that. This is a fine gesture on your part and it’d be unfair of me to take over.’

‘Ruby...’

‘Hey.’ Still seated beneath them, Peta was catching her breath. Catching her dignity. Sort of. ‘There’s no need for any of this. I told you. I don’t need help.’

‘If you need to face Charles then you need help,’ Marcus told her and Ruby nodded.

‘Take his advice, miss,’ she said gently. ‘You’re Australian?’

‘Yes, but...’

‘If I was in Australia, then I’d take your advice on your territory,’ she said. ‘But this is corporate America. There’s no one more at home in this territory than Marcus Benson. You put yourself in his hands and you’re putting yourself in the hands of an expert.’

‘I don’t want to be in anyone’s hands.’

‘You truly think you can get what you want without me?’ Marcus demanded and she faltered.

‘To be honest...’

‘To be honest, what?’

‘To be honest, I don’t think I can get what I want anyway,’ she admitted. ‘I was a fool to come. But I need to try.’

‘So if you’ve come all this way,’ Marcus said, his tone becoming gentler, ‘why not give yourself the best chance you could possibly have? Take my advice.’

‘Put myself in your hands?’

‘That’s right.’

She stared up at him, bemused, and he gazed back down. Astonishingly, her eyes were bright and challenging. Her chin tilted upward, somehow defiant. She might look bereft but she certainly didn’t act bereft. She had spirit, Marcus thought appreciatively. And courage.

It seemed she also had the sense to know when to concede. ‘Okay.’ She swallowed. ‘Okay.’

Ruby beamed. Marcus Benson’s assistant, it seemed, was enjoying this. Enjoying this a lot. ‘You do exactly what Mr Benson says,’ Ruby told her, and Peta gave her a rueful smile.

‘I’m not much good at doing what anyone tells me.’

‘Then be tactful,’ Ruby told her and his assistant even had the temerity to chuckle. ‘Maybe it’ll be good for both of you. Okay. I’m off to save the world—or your deal, Marcus—while you two front the awful Charles. I know which I’d rather. Good luck.’

‘Um...do you employ her?’ Peta asked as Ruby disappeared down the fire-escape with an airy wave. Ruby had come to work

this morning looking tired, but now she was practically bouncing down the fire-escape.

‘I acquired Ruby,’ he said, watching her disappear. ‘By accident. Sort of like getting hit by a bus.’

‘You really like her.’ Peta’s face had focused. All at once she seemed really interested. Her distrust backed off a pace.

‘I don’t do like,’ he told her. ‘I’m a businessman.’

‘So if Ruby threatened to quit...’

‘I’d raise heaven and earth to keep her,’ he admitted. ‘Of course I would. As I said, I’m a businessman.’

First the ankle. Which she intended to ignore.

‘My ankle’s just a bit bruised. It’s no problem.’

‘Your ankle’s puffing while we watch.’

‘I’ve done worse than this and lived without a doctor. I’ve come too far and time’s too important to waste any in a doctor’s waiting room.’

‘You won’t have to wait. Put your hands around my neck and I’ll carry you...’

‘You? Carry me? What, are you crazy? I’ll be sorry for myself with a strained ankle; you’ll be a cripple for life.’

‘I can carry you.’

‘No one carries me. Ever.’ She hauled herself up against the stair rail and took two tentative hops.

It clearly hurt. A lot.

‘Peta...’

‘No.’

Enough. ‘Yes,’ he told her. And, although he’d never done such a thing in his life, he stepped forward and hoisted her into his arms.

She weighed nothing.

‘Do you ever eat?’ he demanded, stunned, and she gave an indignant wriggle.

‘Eat? Are you kidding? Of course I do. Except when corporate businessmen throw my lunch downstairs. Put me down.’

‘No.’ Maybe she wasn’t too thin, he decided, tightening his grip. Maybe there were curves—just where there should be curves. She smelled good. She felt...good.

Inane. It was a stupid response but he couldn’t help it.

‘Are we catching the lift?’ she demanded and he stared down into her overbright eyes.

‘No. We’ll take the stairs.’

‘You’ll drop me.’

‘I won’t drop you.’

‘I’ll do more damage than a bagel if I hit anyone below.’

‘I won’t drop you.’

‘No one’s ever carried me before,’ she said, and to his astonishment she stopped her indignant wriggle and suddenly relaxed. ‘Good grief.’ Her green eyes twinkled. ‘Okay. Let’s do it. Maybe I’ll even like it.’

‘Maybe.’

‘And if you burst a blood vessel we’re going to an emergency department after all.’

‘So we are,’ he said faintly and held her a little tighter. ‘So we are.’

She had him intrigued. Her reaction when she saw his car intrigued him as well. Robert, his chauffeur, was waiting at street level. He must have been pre-warned by Ruby. He didn’t blink an eyelid when he saw his boss approach with his strange burden and by the time Marcus reached the car the back door was already open.

Peta, however, was less than ready to enter a black limousine with tinted windows.

‘Holy cow. I’m not getting in that thing.’

‘You’re sounding like a country hick,’ Marcus told her and she glared at him.

‘Yeah, well, you sound—or look—like a mafia boss. I know which I’d rather be. Chauffeurs. Limousines. Tinted windows, for heaven’s sake.’

‘I need them tinted. I work in this car.’

‘Right.’ She hesitated, removing her arms from around his neck, and as she did he was aware of a sharp jab of loss. She’d put her arms around him for security but it had felt...good. But she wasn’t thinking about the sensations he was feeling. She was doing some forward projections. ‘No one can see in. How do I know if I get in this car I won’t end up in concrete shoes?’

Enough. ‘Robert, help me put her in the car—with force, if necessary,’ he told his bemused chauffeur. ‘And open the blasted windows! Mafia... Good grief!’

Then there was the medical clinic—a personalised service only available to New York’s mega-rich. Peta was almost hornswoggled.

‘You just roll in here and someone sees you?’ They were waiting for X-rays and the chairs they were sitting in were luxurious leather. Gorgeous!

‘Of course.’

‘There’s no of course about it,’ she snapped. ‘If I’d had this when Hattie...’ She took an angry breath. ‘Could Charles Higgins afford this sort of place?’

‘If the rent he pays is any indication, of course he can.’

‘I’ll kill him,’ she muttered and sat back and glowered the entire time her leg was bandaged.

‘You’re lucky. It’s not broken but it’s still badly bruised,’ she was told by the attendant doctor. ‘Stay off it. The nurses will fit you with crutches.’

Fine. Obviously still angry and with Marcus silent by her side, she hobbled her way to reception. And grew angrier still when Marcus paid.

‘I can pay.’

‘I’m very sure you can’t,’ Marcus told her gently. ‘It was my fault. Let me.’

‘Money,’ she whispered. ‘It solves everything. As long as you can screw the world to get more of it.’

Then there was the little matter of her clothes. With Peta safely resettled in his mafia car, Marcus directed Robert to Fifth

Avenue.

‘I just need a wash and I’ll be fine,’ she told him, but he shook his head.

‘No. Charles is never going to admit you into his office looking like this.’

‘But—’

‘But nothing. It’s stupid going back there now to wait for a reception you’re not going to get. Let me help.’

Let him help more. He couldn’t believe he was doing this. Was he crazy?

He didn’t get involved—he never got involved—and for him to make this offer...

She had no expectations of him, he thought. He could back away right now. There’d be no repercussions. He’d never hear from this woman again.

But he couldn’t. He stared down at the defiance in her face, and he saw the trace of desperation behind the defiance. There was no way he could walk.

He wanted to help. Come what may. For the very first time in many, many years, Marcus Benson wanted to be involved.

CHAPTER TWO

MARCUS thought he knew women. Marcus was wrong. And so was the shop where he took Peta.

One of the women he'd dated had told him once that the shop stocked fabulous business clothes but Peta hobbled in and looked around in suspicion. The shop assistants reacted the same way.

They smiled at Marcus. They were cautiously and patronisingly polite to the waif he had in tow.

Still, they were here for clothes. Not for pleasantries. Marcus didn't have time to mess around.

'Can you fit Peta out in something corporate?' he asked the assistant and Peta flashed him a look of annoyance.

'That makes me sound like a Barbie doll. Let's dress her in Corporate today.'

'Don't you want me to help you?'

'No.'

'Peta...'

'All right.' As the assistant searched the racks for something suitable she flashed him a look that was half apology, but the defiance was still there. 'I know. You're being really nice. I'm being really stupid. But this feels...wrong.'

'It's sensible. Just do it.'

'Try this,' the assistant said, with a bright smile at Marcus. Peta was ignored. She held the suit up against Peta, but it was Marcus

who was clearly expected to make the decision.

He might have, but he never got the chance. As the girl smiled across at Marcus, Peta lifted the price tag.

She yelped.

Marcus doubted if he'd ever heard a woman yelp before but she yelped. She pushed the suit away and stared at him as if he'd lost his mind.

'What, are you crazy?'

'What do you mean?'

'Look at the price. I can't afford this.'

'I'm paying. I told you. I ruined your clothes.'

'Yeah, you spilled my drink over my five-buck shirt and you're intending to replace it with stuff that costs three thousand dollars?' She fended off the suit some more. 'Three thousand dollars! Look, this seemed a really nice idea, and I'm delighted to have a bandage on my ankle and these neat crutches, but suddenly it's out of hand. You've done enough. I can't take any more. Can I leave? Now?'

She was backing towards the door.

'You won't get in to see Charles,' Marcus warned. He watched the conflicting emotions play over her face and felt the same conflict himself. He'd been enjoying himself, he decided. It wasn't half bad—millionaire playing benefactor to very attractive waif. But the waif was supposed to be grateful. She was supposed to smile sweetly and acquiesce.

This was like Cinderella saying the glass slipper didn't fit. Or

didn't look right.

She was still backing, no mean feat on brand-new crutches, and the conflicting emotions were giving way to overriding distress. 'I just have to deal with Charles my own way,' she muttered.

'You agreed to do this.'

'I was stupid. I must have hit my head on the way down the stairs. So now, somehow, I'm standing in a swish store with a guy who has more money than I'll ever dream about—and he's offering to spend enough money on a suit to feed my family for a year.'

'Your family?'

Her face shuttered even more, and the pain intensified. 'I don't need to talk about my family. I'm out of my depth. I need to leave. I'm sorry.' She backed a bit more until she was balancing in the doorway. 'I'm sorry. Thank you very much for all you've done.'

'Peta...'

'I can't do this. I can't.'

He caught her three doors down. She'd tried to move fast but she was on crutches.

He'd followed. Of course he'd followed, even though he was unsure why he was still intent on helping. But he let her have a little space until she cooled down.

She was forced to cool down. Her anger could only carry her so far before the pain in her ankle caught up with her. He watched her slow. He saw her steps falter as if she was unsure where to

go from here.

He saw her shoulders slump. Saw the despair catch up.

And when he caught her... As he put a hand on her shoulder and turned her around to face him, he wasn't surprised to see tears welling behind those lovely eyes.

The tears stopped the moment he touched her. She swiped her cheek and pulled back. Swaying dangerously. He put out his hands to steady her but she backed some more.

'Leave me alone.'

'I'm sorry.'

'You shouldn't be sorry. You were trying to be nice.'

He carefully pushed away the urge to play fairy godfather some more. He tried to put himself in her place. It was hard, but maybe he could manage it.

Once upon a time he'd been dependant, too, and he knew how much harder it was to take than give. It was just... In the last few years there had been so many takers.

Peta was a novelty. But he could adjust.

'I was a bit insensitive,' he managed. 'I had this idea that I could help. And I'd like to.'

'You can't.'

'I can, you know,' he said softly. 'It would be my privilege. If you let me.'

'Yeah, toss money.' Another angry swipe at tears she clearly despised and an angry sniff. 'It's all you know how to do.'

'I'm sorry.' He was stymied. He didn't have a clue what was

happening. How had he got himself in this situation?

He could just stop. He had no reason to persist.

Why did he?

He had no idea what this woman wanted with Charles Higgins. He had no idea whether he could help her.

All he knew was that he wanted to know more.

‘Can we start again, please?’ he asked, and she sniffed once more and stared up at him, her face loaded with suspicion.

‘Start again?’

‘I’ve driven into this like a blunderbuss,’ he admitted. ‘I have no idea what’s going on. I want to help. I don’t even know why I want to help but I do.’ He reached out and touched her hand. He didn’t hold. He simply touched.

He knew that she still had the urge to run. He had it himself.

‘Tell me what you need,’ he told her. ‘What can I do to help? Right now.’

She took a deep breath. Regrouped. Around them were a bustle of Fifth Avenue shoppers—smartly dressed women, suited businessmen. Marcus fitted right in.

Peta didn’t fit in at all. But she obviously wasn’t thinking of her appearance. She stared at him for a while longer and then made a confession—as if she was forced to admit something she was ashamed of.

‘I need something to eat,’ she told him.

‘You’re hungry?’

‘I lost my bagel—remember? I didn’t have breakfast and

that was my lunch. And then I need a ticket on the subway to the backpacker's where I have my things. I need to stay until tomorrow—for Aunt Hattie's funeral. But that's it. I was stupid to try to see Charles. I just want... I think now that I just want to go home.'

'Right.' He nodded, aware all the time that she was poised for flight. 'Okay. I'll organise you transport. But let me feed you first. No.' He shook his head as she backed again and he gave a rueful smile. He knew what she was thinking. At long last he was getting the idea. Money didn't impress this woman. Money made her want to run. 'There's a great deli nearby and it's not expensive. It's simple food but it's good. Concede at least that I owe you a meal. Can you cope with me for a little while longer?'

She stared up at him, seemingly bemused. She balanced on her crutches while she surveyed him. Her green eyes were suddenly thoughtful.

It wasn't the sort of look he was accustomed to receiving from the women he moved with. To say it disconcerted him was putting it mildly.

'You must think I'm really ungrateful,' she said at last, and it was so far from what he was really thinking that he blinked.

'I don't. Let me feed you.'

'Like something in a cage at the zoo?'

He smiled. 'I'm sorry. That was badly phrased. Share a meal with me. Please.'

'Out of charity?'

‘Out of my need to give you recompense.’

She stared at him for a long moment—and in that moment something shifted. The Cinderella image receded still further. There was a strength here, he realised. A latent force.

She was out of her depth. She wasn’t sure what was happening to her right now, but this was a woman who would normally be in charge of her world.

Things were out of control but she was still fighting.

He’d be lucky if she’d agree to have a meal with him.

But she did, and he was aware of an absurd surge of gratitude as she did the thanking. ‘Thank you,’ she told him. ‘I’d like that.’ ‘So would I.’ And he meant it.

The deli he took her to was one he hadn’t eaten at for years, but still he knew it. The proprietor, a big man in his late sixties, greeted him with pleasure.

‘Well. If it isn’t the great Marcus come to patronise this humble establishment...’

‘Cut it out, Sam,’ Marcus growled and Sam grinned.

‘Yeah, right. To what do we owe this honour?’ He glanced at Peta and his wide smile was a welcome all by itself. ‘A lady. Of course. And a lady of taste. I can sense that already. I bet you could wrap yourself around one of my specials and not even think about counting calories.’

‘I bet I could.’ In the face of Sam’s friendliness she seemed to finally relax—just a smidgeon. ‘Tell me what’s good.’

‘What’s good? In this establishment everything’s good. Tell

you what...’ He cast a sideways glance at Marcus and got an almost imperceptible nod for his pains. Sam’s deli was famous in this city and his reputation was richly deserved. He sensed what people needed and he provided it. You came to Sam’s for comfort food and friendliness and good humour. Sam provided it in bucketloads. ‘Why don’t I bring you my specials?’ he told them. ‘My lunch works. You sit back, think of nothing except what you need to talk about and let me worry about your meal. It’s what I do best.’

Think of nothing except what they needed to talk about...

It seemed there was nothing to talk about. Or Peta didn’t seem to think there was. The food that Sam brought them was wonderful: a vast, steaming bowl of clam chowder— Sam’s speciality, handed down from his grandma, who’d invented clams herself, he told them—and some sort of corn flapjacks that were truly spectacular.

It was good food. No. It was great food, Marcus conceded, and he found himself wondering why it had been so long since he’d been here. He sat back, enjoying the food but also enjoying the buzz. The place was full of students and young mothers and academics and artists who looked as if they didn’t have a buck to their name. All of them were attacking their food the same way Peta was. This was food to be relished at every mouthful.

And while she ate, he found himself thinking of the date he’d been on last night. Elizabeth was a corporate lawyer—a good one. She was smart and sophisticated and beautiful. But she’d

toyed with her salad, she'd drunk half a glass of wine and refused dessert.

Her beautiful waistline came at a cost, Marcus had thought, and though she'd invited him up to her magnificent apartment afterwards for coffee, coffee was all they'd had. He'd felt no desire to take things further.

But now...sitting on the far side of the table and watching Peta devour her chowder and relish every mouthful of her flapjacks, he thought he'd rather have this contented silence than smart conversation. Genuine enjoyment.

'What?' she demanded suddenly, and he looked a question.

'I beg your pardon?'

'You're looking at me like I'm an interesting kind of bug. I don't like it.'

'You're Australian,' he told her. 'What do you expect?'

'You've never met an Australian?'

'Not one who likes clam chowder as much as you do.'

'It's the best.' She smiled up at him and he blinked. Whew!

That smile was enough to knock a man sideways.

Where had it come from? It was a killer smile. Wide and white and there was a dimple right at the corner of her mouth...

Yeah, right. Get a grip, Benson, he told himself. You need involvement here like a hole in the head.

He needed any involvement like a hole in the head.

'You want to tell me why you need to see Charles Higgins?' he asked and her smile faded. He was aware of a sharp stab of

regret. Damn, he shouldn't have mentioned it.

But it was why they were here. It was important. And, to tell the truth, he was intrigued.

This girl had just knocked back a gift of a three-thousand dollar suit. Just like that. Would any other woman he knew do that? It wasn't as if it had come with strings. It would have been a gift, pure and simple.

'You might have knocked me down, but it was partly my fault,' she told him, and it was as if she'd read his thoughts. 'I don't want to be beholden. To anyone. You spend three thousand bucks on a suit for me and I'll feel sick about it for the rest of my life. And Charles will know it's a front.'

'Charles knows you?'

'I told you. He's my cousin.'

'Then why...?'

She could see where his thoughts were heading and she was way ahead of him.

'You think because I'm family I should have an entrée with him.'

'Something like that.'

'I'm over here because my aunt died,' she told him. 'Charles's mother. I spent the last few days sitting by Aunt Hattie's bedside. I haven't seen Charles. Hattie is due to be buried tomorrow. Charles may or may not come to the funeral. He's certainly not paying for it.'

'So...' He took a wild guess. 'You're not a close family?'

‘I’m a very close family,’ she told him, and took another mouthful of her flapjack. Difficult conversation or not, she wasn’t forgetting that she was truly enjoying this food. But her voice, when she spoke again, held more than a trace of bitterness. ‘I’m so close I’m practically glue,’ she added. ‘Good old Peta. She’ll do the right thing. The family thing. But not Charles.’

‘So why do you need to see him?’

She took a deep breath. She seemed to brace herself. Her fork was set down and her chin tilted in a gesture he was starting to recognise.

‘Aunt Hattie and my father owned half our family farm each,’ she told him. ‘My father left us his half when he died ten years back, and the agreement was always that Hattie would do the same. She hasn’t. She’s left her half to Charles. So I need him...’ Her voice faltered then, as if accepting the sheer impossibility of what she was about to suggest. ‘I need him to agree not to sell it. To let me farm it until...until I’m free.’

‘Free?’

She looked up at him and her eyes were blind with a pain he couldn’t begin to understand. ‘The farm is all I have,’ she told him. ‘It can’t mean anything to Charles. It’s just money. He must see that to do anything but let me live there would be desperately unfair.’ She bit her lip and then picked up her soda, trying desperately to move past a pain that seemed well nigh unbearable. ‘But that’s nothing to do with you. Charles is my cousin. My problem. You’ve given me a feed. Now I’ll clean

myself as best I can, go back and try to face him one more time—and if I can't I'll go home. But at least I'll have tried.'

He couldn't bear it. The look of pain. The defiance. David and Goliath, and Goliath was Charles Higgins... She had to let him take the next step with her. 'You can't face him alone,' he told her.

'Of course I can.'

'There's no of course about it,' he growled. 'Charles is a slime-ball. Maybe he's different with family but he's still a slime-ball. Okay, I might be off the track with my offer of three-thousand-dollar suits but my instincts are right. We'll get you something neat to wear and I'm coming in with you. I might not get you more than an interview but I can get you that.'

'How?'

'For a start, I own the building he rents office space in.'

She stared. 'You're kidding.'

'I'm not. Regrettably. I've already decided not to renew his lease when it expires but he doesn't know that. I can apply pressure.'

'But...'

'Finish your soda,' he told her, aware at the back of his mind of his total amazement that he was doing this. That he was getting more and more involved. 'We mustn't keep Charles waiting now, must we?'

They did the dress thing again, but this time Marcus had the sense to keep it simple. They headed to a moderately priced department store and Marcus stood back while Peta chose a

neat skirt and blouse and strappy sandals. She looked great, Marcus decided, and then wondered: Why do women wear three-thousand-dollar suits when they can look just as good in far cheaper clothes?

But maybe that wasn't fair. Maybe Peta wasn't any woman. She'd look great in anything, he thought, as Robert drove them back to Higgins's office.

The only problem was that she was a bit pale. Her hands were clenched so tightly that he could see the white in her knuckles. But she was still determinedly keeping up conversation as they made their way past Central Park.

'It's Central Park I most wanted to see,' she told him. 'Ever since I was a little girl I dreamed of riding around Central Park.'

'You're a country girl?'

'I told you—we live on a farm. I milk cows for a living.'

We? Who?

It didn't matter. Did it?

She was expecting a courteous, impersonal reply. He had to fight to find one. Somehow. 'So...you live on a farm yet you dream of coming to New York to ride a horse?'

'It's a different kind of riding.' She gave a hesitant smile and he saw that her hands were still clenched. He had to fight back the urge to lift them—to forcibly unclench them. 'John Lennon loved this park,' she was saying. 'Jackie Kennedy loved this park. All these people that I've only read about.'

'You admired Jackie O?'

‘The lady had class.’

‘And John Lennon?’

‘Oooh, those glasses were sexy.’

‘Really?’ he said faintly and was rewarded by a chuckle. Her hands, he noticed with satisfaction, were finally starting to relax. ‘So who else do you think of as sexy?’ he asked. ‘Just John? Paul? George? How about Ringo?’

‘Ringo was sexy,’ she agreed. ‘Really sexy. When I see the old clips I think he’s cuteness personified. But now every time I hear him I think of Thomas the Tank Engine. It’s a bit disconcerting.’

‘I imagine it might be.’

She was so different. How had his day been hijacked? he wondered. How had this happened? Instead of making plans and signing million-dollar deals, he was discussing the sexiness of Thomas the Tank Engine.

And enjoying it.

But then they were pulling up outside the offices where Charles presumably lay waiting, and her hands clenched white again.

‘Don’t sweat it,’ Marcus told her and he surprised himself by placing a hand over her much smaller one. The touch surprised them both. It was as if a frisson of electricity ran between them, warm, intimate and somehow immeasurably comforting. ‘I’m right behind you,’ he heard himself saying. ‘Every step of the way.’

Miss Pritchard—alias Attila the Hun, Charles’s secretary—

was her normal appalling self. Peta stepped out of the lift and she saw her coming and sighed. She didn't even pretend to be courteous.

‘What do you want?’

‘I'm here for my appointment,’ Peta said, trying to keep her voice steady. ‘It was for ten this morning.’

‘Mr Higgins had a moment free at two,’ the woman said, her disdain obvious in her intonation. ‘But you weren't here. He has no more appointments available until late next week.’

‘Then could you ask Mr Higgins if he'll make an appointment free for me,’ Marcus said, his lazy drawl making the woman's face jerk from Peta to the man following behind. The man who, until now, had stood in the background and had not been noticed. Marcus. ‘I believe the lease for this office space is soon up for renegotiation,’ Marcus drawled. ‘As landlord I expect a certain professional standard of my tenants. Peta had an appointment at ten this morning and she's still waiting. To have disgruntled clients hanging around my office space is not what I wish in my buildings.’

He motioned to a chair. ‘Peta, if you'd like to sit down...’ He gave the secretary a glimmer of a mockery of his smile—the sort of smile that had made many a business opponent come close to bursting a blood vessel in entirely appropriate anxiety. ‘We'll wait,’ he told the woman. ‘Tell Mr Higgins that we're here and we'll wait for as long as it takes.’

Attila's eyes had been flat and cold before. Now, suddenly,

they looked like those of a goldfish. A goldfish that was swimming over an unplugged hole. There were very few people in this city who weren't aware of Marcus's power. It was legendary. 'But...'

'Just tell him,' Marcus said wearily. 'I'd like to get this over quickly. I hope Mr Higgins feels the same.'

It appeared Mr Higgins did. Five minutes later they were ushered apologetically into the great man's presence.

To say Peta was tense was an understatement. This interview was overwhelmingly important to her, Marcus thought. The look on her face as she walked into Charles's office said she intended to be calm, practical and efficient.

She obviously hadn't counted on the store of anger that must have been walled up for so long that the moment she saw her cousin it could do nothing but burst.

Charles was seated behind a vast mahogany desk. Before he could stand, Peta had stalked across and slammed her hands palm downward on the gleaming surface, so hard she made the in-tray jump.

'You uncaring toad,' she spat, and Marcus blinked in astonishment. But Peta was obviously past caring.

'You brought Hattie over here and she came because she thought you loved her. She hoped you loved her. But you didn't. You abandoned her.' Peta's voice was loaded with contempt and with icy rage. 'She could have died at home. With me. With Harry. With people who loved her. But you told her you wanted

her here. You conned her into coming where she knew no one. How could you?’

‘My relationship with my mother has nothing to do with you,’ Charles snapped. The man was in his late thirties, florid, wearing a three-piece suit that was as sleazy as it was expensive, and he was obviously deeply disdainful of the woman before him. ‘I have no idea what you want from me, Peta, or why you’ve bothered with this appointment.’ He cast an uneasy glance at Marcus and then looked back at Peta. It was apparent that Marcus was the only reason he’d agreed to see her—the only reason he didn’t get up now and push her out the door. ‘Or how you’ve dragged Mr Benson into this.’

‘No one drags me anywhere,’ Marcus said softly. He hauled up a chair and sat, with the air of a man who was here for the entertainment.

‘This is family business,’ Charles told him, and Marcus gave him his very nicest smile.

‘Consider me Peta’s family. I’ve just elected myself. Peta, I hate to mention it but I don’t think haranguing Charles on his mistreatment of his mother—justified as it may be—is going to achieve a lot. Let’s just cut to the chase and get out of here. This place makes me nervous.’

Charles flushed. ‘You don’t have to stay.’

‘I’m with the lady. Peta, say what you need to.’

Peta bit her lip. She half turned towards him and Marcus was waiting for her. He met her look and he sent her a silent message.

Settle. Anger's not going to achieve anything. What's important?

Peta caught it. She fought for control, taking a deep breath. Moving forward.

'The will...' she began.

'Ah, yes.' Charles had had time to do a regroup, too. 'The will.' With another nervous glance at Marcus, Charles settled deeper into his leather chair. His huge desk was guaranteed to intimidate the most influential of clients, and he clearly had no intention of moving from behind its protective distance. 'What on earth do you have to say about my mother's will?'

'Hattie meant to leave her half of the farm to me.'

'Not so, cousin.' Charles even smirked.

Why do I want to hit him? Marcus thought, and he had to force himself to stay still. To stay an uninvolved bystander.

'Hattie lived at the farm for all her life,' Peta was saying. 'We all have. Everyone except you. You left twenty years ago. But the farm paid for your education. For your travel.' She gazed around the opulent office. 'I bet it subsidised this. Your costs have already bled us dry. You've taken half our profits for ever. It's crazy that she left her half of the farm to you.'

'I'm her son.'

'But we've subsidised you with so much already and she knew I can't afford to buy you out. That it'd force me to sell.'

'That's not my problem.'

'No.' She took a deep breath, obviously forcing herself to stay

calm. ‘No, it’s not. And it shouldn’t be. All I’m asking... All I’m asking is that you’ll hold on to your half of the farm—let me keep farming it—until Harry’s of age.’

‘Harry being...’ He almost sneered but then appeared to remember that Marcus was watching and turned it somehow into a vaguely supercilious smile. ‘Harry being how old?’

‘Twelve.’

Twelve. In the background Marcus frowned, absorbing the information. It didn’t fit—did it? Surely Peta wasn’t old enough to have a twelve-year-old son?

Maybe he should have asked more questions.

‘We need to stay on the farm until Harry’s eighteen,’ Peta was saying, almost pleading. ‘Charles, you know how important the farm is to us all.’

‘It was never important to me.’

‘It paid for your education. It let you be what you wanted and I want Harry to have that choice, too. And it’s a really good investment,’ she told him. ‘I’m more than happy for you to keep taking half the profits, and the land is growing more valuable all the time.’

‘I’ve checked,’ he told her. ‘It’d sell for a fortune now. Because it’s near the sea it can be cut up into hobby farm allotments. You own half. We both stand to make a killing.’

‘We love the farm.’

‘Get over it. I’m selling.’

‘Charles—’

‘Look, if that’s all you have to say...’ He eyed Marcus with disquiet, obviously still wondering how on earth Marcus came to be involved. ‘You’re wasting my time.’

Peta swallowed. Her hands clenched and unclenched. But, looking on, Marcus saw the moment she realised the futility of pleading. He saw her shoulders sag.

He saw her accept defeat.

And it hurt. It hurt him as well as the girl he was watching. Why did he want to hit someone? Not just someone. Charles. The urge was almost overwhelming.

But Peta had moved on. To the next important thing. ‘Will you come to Hattie’s funeral tomorrow?’ she whispered.

‘Funerals aren’t my scene.’

‘Hattie was your mother.’

‘Yeah.’ Another sneer. ‘And she’s dead. I’m over it, just like you should be. And, as soon as the funeral’s over, the farm’s on the market. It’d be on the market today if it wasn’t for that clause.’

‘Clause?’ Marcus queried.

This was the sort of negotiation he was good at. He’d learned from long practice that it was better not to jump in early—to simply sit back, listen and absorb. Focus on essentials. And probe everything.

Charles flashed him an annoyed glance. ‘My mother put a stupid codicil in her will. I left before the lawyer finished, and she did it...’

‘Tell me about it,’ Marcus said gently and Charles glowered.

‘It’s none of your business.’

‘Tell me about it.’

‘If I’m married then I inherit,’ Peta said, obviously distressed. ‘It makes no sense. Just before Hattie left to come here, I went out with one of the local farmers. Twice. It was enough to make Hattie think about me getting married. As if I could. But she thought... Well, she worried about me, my Auntie Hattie. She thought I’d spend my life caring for the family and not myself. So she must have thought she’d push. By putting in a stupid clause at the end. If I’m married then I’ll inherit. But it’s not an option.’

‘What—never?’

‘In a week?’ She gave a bitter laugh. ‘Hattie... Well, she was terminally ill. She was a bit muddled, even before she left Australia. That was probably how Charles persuaded her to come. She’d have worried about me, but she was here in New York, alone, and Charles would have pushed her hard to leave him the farm. So she wrote a will leaving everything to Charles, but apparently, after Charles left her alone with the lawyer, she added a codicil. The codicil says if I’m married within a week of her dying then the farm reverts to me. But... A week? Maybe she meant a year. Maybe... Well, who knows what she meant, but she said a week. That’s by Wednesday.’ She turned to her cousin again, her eyes dulled with the knowledge of what he would say. She already knew.

‘Charles, please.’

‘Just leave. You’re wasting my time.’ Charles rose, smoothed

his already too smooth waistcoat and walked around to the door. He was really overweight, Marcus noticed. Short. Pompous. A slime-ball. It was as much as he could do not to flinch as the little man stalked past him to open the door.

‘I’m sorry she’s wasted your time, Mr Benson,’ Charles told him. ‘I’m sorry she’s wasted mine. Go back to the farm, Peta, where you belong. Enjoy it for the last few weeks before it’s sold. But get used to it. It’s on the market the moment the week is up.’

‘I’m sorry I wasted your time.’

They’d been silent as they rode the lift to ground level. They emerged on to the street to brilliant sunshine and Peta blinked as if she couldn’t believe sun could exist in a place such as this.

‘I assume the farm is worth a lot,’ Marcus said mildly, and she blinked again.

‘What? Oh, yes. You heard what he said. It is.’

‘So you’ll be well off?’

‘Split...no. I won’t be well off.’

‘Do you have any professional training?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Do you have a career?’

‘Yes. I’m a farmer.’

A farmer. He might have known. Of course. ‘Can you get a job somewhere? Farming?’

‘Are you kidding? With four kids? Who’s going to take me on?’

‘Four kids?’ he said cautiously, and she shrugged as if it was

none of his business. As indeed it wasn't.

Or it shouldn't be.

'Look, I said I'm sorry.' She took a deep breath. 'Okay. Enough. You've been really nice to me. Much nicer than I possibly could have hoped for. I've come over here and I've been with Hattie while she died. Thanks to you, I've seen Charles and I've asked him what I had to ask. I knew it was hopeless but I had to try. For the boys. Now I'm planning to bury my Auntie Hattie with all the love that I can, and then I'll get on an aeroplane and return to Australia. There's an end to it.'

'You have four kids?' He was stuck in a groove, he thought, but had to know. How old was she? Twenty-five? Twenty-six?

Four kids.

His eyes moved involuntarily to her waistline and he thought, no. No way.

She saw his gaze shift. 'What are you staring at?'

'Your figure,' he admitted with a rueful smile. 'You've held up pretty well for four kids.'

Her eyes widened. She looked stunned. And then her face, which had looked strained to the point of breaking, suddenly creased into laughter. A gorgeous chuckle rang out, making others on the pavement turn and stare.

She had the loveliest smile. The loveliest laugh.

'You're thinking I'm a single mum with four kids?'

'Well...'

'They're my brothers,' she told him. 'Daniel, Christopher,

William and Harry. Twenty, eighteen, fifteen and twelve in that order. All students. The farm supports them all.' She caught herself. 'Or, I guess, I support them all. They help. They're great kids but it's mostly over to me. Until now. Now I guess the capital will pay for their education but heaven knows where we'll live. The university vacations are four months long. That's when we're a family. And Harry loves the farm so much. It'll break his heart if we have to leave.'

Silence. Marcus stared at her in disbelief.

Four brothers? She was supporting four brothers?

Good grief! So great a load on such slim shoulders. He winced and she managed a smile. Her laughter had gone again. The burden was back in place.

'I've said it before. It's my problem. Not yours.'

'You could always marry.' His voice was still faint with shock and she gave a rueful smile.

'By Wednesday? I don't think so. It was a crazy codicil made by a confused old woman who would have been desperate to make things right for everyone. Which was always going to be impossible.' She took his hand in hers and shook—a warm, firm handshake that was a shake of dismissal. 'Thank you very much for helping me, Mr Benson. You've done more than enough and I'm really grateful. Goodbye.'

And that was that. She turned and manoeuvred her crutches away from him, limping down the pavement, which was crowded with late afternoon shoppers.

She stood out, he thought, and it wasn't just her crutches. In truth, it wasn't her crutches at all. It was her flame hair. Her figure. The lovely curve of her slender neck. And her strength. The way she braced her shoulders, as if expecting to be struck.

It was so like David and Goliath, he thought again, but she had no slingshot. She had no weapon of any kind.

He stood and watched her go. He'd been dismissed. She was asking nothing of him.

She was on her own.

He couldn't bear it. He didn't have a clue what he was doing—what he was saying—but he knew only that he had to do it.

'Peta, stop,' he called, and she paused and half turned towards him.

'Yes?' She had the air of someone who'd already moved on. She looked slight and pale and somehow almost ethereal. As if any moment she'd vanish.

She could, he realised. He had this one moment to prevent it or she'd be gone and he need never see her again.

Which was what he wanted—wasn't it? He didn't get involved. He never got involved. He'd made a vow a long time ago and he'd never been tempted to break that vow.

Until now. Until the choice was to break the vow or to watch Peta take the next few steps and take her burden back to Australia.

He didn't even know what her burden was. He hardly knew her. He had a corporate deal to stitch up; he had a date tonight

with a woman most men would kill to be seen with; he had a life in New York...

Peta was watching him, her pixie face questioning. Waiting. Waiting for release so she could disappear.

He couldn't give her that release. And there was only one way to stop her disappearing.

'There is a way you can be married by Wednesday,' he called, and the shoppers around them paused in astonishment.

Peta paused in astonishment.

'How?' she called, but maybe she hadn't called it. Maybe her voice was a whisper. They were twenty yards apart and there were people between. He saw her lips move. He saw the thought in her eyes that he was holding her up for nothing.

But he wasn't. He knew what he had to say and when he said it, it sounded right. Even inevitable.

'You can marry me.'

CHAPTER THREE

SHE couldn't believe what she'd heard. One minute she was looking defeat and despair in the face. This was the end of the world as she knew it. Tomorrow she'd have to bury Aunt Hattie with all the love and honour she deserved, trying to block out the hurt caused by this appalling last will. Then she'd climb on to an aeroplane and go home to face the boys and tell them that she didn't have a clue what their future held.

As opposed to...what?

As opposed to facing the man twenty yards away from her and trying to make sense of his crazy statement.

'I beg your pardon?' she said at last and there was general laughter among the passers-by. Marcus's words hadn't just shocked Peta. More than one person had stilled to listen—to hear her response to this fascinating question.

'He's asking you to marry him, love,' an elderly woman told her. 'He looks a good sort of catch. I'd think about it if I were you.'

'She's young,' someone else proffered. 'Plus she's pretty. She's got plenty of time to play the field.'

'No, but look at that suit,' the older woman retorted. 'The guy's obviously loaded. You do it, love, but don't go signing one of them pre-nup agreements. You take him for all he's worth.'

'Pretty funny proposal, if you ask me,' someone else said. 'You

think she's got leprosy or something, that he has to stay two shops away from her to ask her to marry him?'

'Your girl got leprosy?' someone else demanded. 'Is that why the crutches?'

Even Marcus smiled at that.

So did Peta. It's a joke, she thought. It's a joke in appalling taste, but it's a joke for all that.

'Thanks,' she called, with what she hoped was a vestige of dignity. 'It's a very nice proposal but I have a funeral to go to, and then a trip home to Australia. I can't fit you in.'

'I'm serious, Peta.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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